

The EC is found wanting

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The Community is right to intervene in Yugoslavia. But its efforts so far have been derisory

With Yugoslavia fast sliding into civil war, it is right that the European Community should be making efforts to stem the bloodshed and

help find a peaceful solution to the country's future. The EC, with which Yugoslavia has trade links and which most Yugoslavs aspire to join one day, appears to be the only body which has the confidence of the majority of the republics to undertake such a task.

Yet the means so far employed by the Community for this purpose have been as derisory as those of the legendary Dutch lad who stuck his finger in the hole in the dike. The decision this week to increase the number of EC peace monitors from 50 to 150 and to extend their mandate to cover operations to areas in Croatia, where scores of Croats and Serbs have been killed over the past few days, can do little to stem the relentless tide of ethnic conflict.

Neither the EC nor anybody else can impose a solution on the Yugoslav people. But the EC must clarify its ultimate political objectives in offering its help; otherwise what is it doing in Yugoslavia at all? Is the aim still to preserve the Yugoslav federation as a single state or are the Community and the US now prepared to contemplate a break-up of the country and to forge links with its former constituent republics, such as Slovenia and Croatia, which have already declared their independence?

Opinions are clearly divided within the Community, reflecting historical alliances which should have no part in an objective analysis of the situation in Yugoslavia today. Chancellor Helmut Kohl of Germany and his Christian Democrat supporters appear to be anxious to recognise the independence of Croatia and Slovenia here and now, while President François Mitterrand of France continues to support Serbia's insistence on preserving a unified state.

"The era of great empires in the Balkans is over," Mr Mitterrand said after his recent meeting with Mr Kohl at which he apparently persuaded the German leader to delay any

move to recognise the independence of Slovenia and Croatia. But the snide reference to the Austro-Hungarian empire's domination of large parts of the Balkans, not to speak of Germany's support for the Croat nationalist movement during the second world war, was not lost on public opinion.

Even if Mr Mitterrand's suspicions of German empire-building were plausible, they would still not justify the maintenance of the present Yugoslav federation at all costs. What appeared to be a sensible policy only a few months ago has been overtaken by events and has become more and more unrealistic. It was understandable that other European countries did not want to see Yugoslavia break up in turmoil. Quite

the same language, Serbo-Croat, their separate identities and cultures have always been the most important factors in their make-up.

The grandiose concept of a union of south Slavs, which emerged from the ruins of the Austro-Hungarian empire in 1918 in the form of a "kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes", was flawed from the beginning. It was dominated by Serbia and, within 10 years, gave birth to the extreme Croat nationalist movement, the Ustasha, eventually installed as an independent regime by the Nazis after their occupation and dissolution of the Yugoslav kingdom in 1941.

The creation of a Croat nation state by the occupation forces led to a further serious deterioration in relations

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apart from the risk that such a conflict could spread to neighbouring countries, the wave of emigration set off by a civil war in a country of 24m could have alarming international implications.

Yet facts have to be faced. With the escalation of ethnic in-fighting from Kosovo to Slovenia and, even more seriously, to Croatia, which harbours a 12 per cent Serbian minority, it is now clear that Yugoslavia cannot be expected to survive in its present form. That should hardly come as a surprise when one looks at the country's history. The passionate support given by fans to (federal) Yugoslav football teams cannot be taken as a demonstration of true Yugoslav identity. There is no such thing as a real Yugoslav. He or she is either a Serb (36 per cent), a Croat (20 per cent), a Moslem (9 per cent), a Slovene (8 per cent), an ethnic Albanian (8 per cent), a Macedonian, a Montenegrin or a Hungarian. They become Yugoslavs only to outsiders. Though many of them speak

between Croats and Serbs, countless thousands of whom were murdered by members of the fascist regime, together with Jews and gypsies. It was not until after the liberation of Yugoslavia, thanks to the efforts of the Croat partisan leader, Tito, that Yugoslavia became, for some 35 years, anything like the unified state envisaged by its original founders in 1918.

Tito's prescription for the new Yugoslavia was an economically and culturally decentralised federation of six republics and two autonomous provinces under a centralised, multinational communist dictatorship. Nationalist ferment was never eliminated, but the power and personality of Tito, unconditionally backed by the Communist party and the army, gave him the authority to act as an effective arbiter between the various republics and ethnic groups. Tito's wartime achievements, his defiance of Stalin, his international standing as one of the leaders of the Non-Aligned Movement and the relative suc-

cess of his socialist market economic policies gave his regime a legitimacy that has eluded subsequent governments.

It needed a dictator of his stature to keep Yugoslavia together. After Tito's death in 1980, the system of collective presidencies and need for consensus between the regions have deprived the country of firm leadership. The deterioration of the economy has gone hand in hand with a revival of regional unrest. This was provoked in the first place in the ethnic Albanian-dominated province of Kosovo by the greater Serbian ambitions of Mr Slobodan Milosevic, the charismatic, populist Serbian leader, but soon spread to other regions.

The situation is now close to desperate. There is a complete stalemate between Croatia and Slovenia, which want their independence, and Serbia and Montenegro which are fundamentally opposed to anything less than the centralised federal system under the present constitution. Equally serious is Mr Milosevic's demand that, if any further decentralisation takes place, internal borders must be changed to bring the Serbian minority in Croatia into a greater Serbia.

No easy solutions exist. It seems clear, however, that while the maintenance of the present federation is unrealistic, it is not in the best interests of the various republics to go completely their own way. Their economic and political relations with the outside world, particularly the EC, would be best served if they continued to act as a single monetary and trading entity. This could be done within a looser confederation than the existing system and without fundamentally undermining their political autonomy. Even some adjustments of internal borders must not be ruled out if that can be done peacefully - a big 'if' - and lead to greater ethnic peace.

Apart from sending cease-fire observers and, possibly, some peace-keeping forces in the longer run, the EC could usefully apply itself to offering expert advice on a future constitution for a loose confederation of southern Slav states. The future shape of the Balkan region is, after all, of direct interest to a Community which is in the process of forging new relations with eastern Europe.



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