

# The Triumph of the Nation-State: Reflections on Yugoslavia Twenty Years After

Written by Sumantra Bose

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SUMANTRA BOSE, SEP 24 2011

Twenty years ago, the country known until then as Yugoslavia plunged into war. Over the next decade, a succession of armed conflicts on the territory of the “former Yugoslavia”—in Croatia from 1991 to 1995, Bosnia-Herzegovina from 1992 to 1995, and Kosovo in 1998-1999—would recurrently make headlines in the print, broadcast and electronic media of Europe and North America, and to a lesser extent the rest of the world. Almost no part of the former Yugoslavia escaped the demise of the Yugoslav idea and state unscathed. Slovenia witnessed a brief armed conflict between the Yugoslav federal army and Slovenian forces in the summer of 1991, and a decade later, in 2001, descent into civil war in Macedonia between the Macedonian government and insurgent groups among the country’s significant Albanian minority was narrowly averted. In 2000 Montenegro saw a tense stand-off between forces loyal to the Milosevic regime in Belgrade and those loyal to the Montenegrin government.

The “Highway of Brotherhood and Unity” (*Autoput Bratstvo i Jedinstvo*) connecting Zagreb and Belgrade was built in the early years of Titoist Yugoslavia as a showcase of the spirit of coexistence and solidarity animating the country resurrected from occupation, dismemberment and internecine violence after World War II. By the time I got to travel on it four decades later that spirit had vanished and the still sleek and impressive motorway led straight to the heart of the conflict that spelled the end of Yugoslavia. Travelling south-east from Zagreb along the highway, the peaceful and scenic countryside yielded after an hour and a half to a landscape of war. Burned villages, dynamited churches and sites of mass graves dotted that landscape. When I first visited in 1993, I was shocked by the scale of the destruction, stretching mile after mile just off the highway, whose erstwhile name now sounded like a cruel joke. When I recounted my experience to an Afghan friend back in New York, where I then lived as a graduate student at Columbia University, the friend, a former *mujahideen* fighter against the Soviets, remarked drily: “Sounds just like Afghanistan, brother.”

Between 1993 and 1995 I witnessed the conflict between Croats and Serbs in Croatia play out in a scenic area called western Slavonia, located two hours’ drive south-east of Zagreb, in a landscape of picturesque villages and tidy small towns set amidst gently undulating hills and rolling vineyards. This lovely setting provided an unlikely, almost surreal backdrop to a bitter armed conflict that had torn the area apart and turned its Croat and Serb inhabitants into enemies during the second half of 1991, following the nationalist Zagreb government’s declaration of independence from Yugoslavia. By early 1992 the fighting stalemated, leaving a quarter of Croatia’s territory in the hands of Croatian Serb rebels. In 1992 Western Slavonia was designated as United Nations Protected Area (Sector West), one of four such war zones in Croatia with a UN peacekeeping presence.

UNPA-West, as I remember it from those years, was a lively, even fascinating place. Battalions from Jordan, Nepal and Argentina made up the military contingent of the peacekeeping presence. Civilian UN employees from dozens of countries worked on mending relations between the area’s Croats and Serbs.

That proved to be an uphill task. The war had produced a deep fracture line in the local community and opened up a chasm of distrust and animosity between the area’s Croats and Serbs. There were many indications that the local population—about evenly split between Croats and Serbs with a sprinkling of other nationalities, especially Czechs—had formed a well-integrated, cohesive and perhaps harmonious community prior to the war. Now that

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community had disintegrated into polarised ethno-national communities who regarded each other with fear, suspicion and frequently, hatred. The normal ties between neighbours, workplace colleagues and friends had dissolved.

Of the zone's two sizeable towns, Daruvar had 10,483 Croat and 10,074 Serb citizens according to the last Yugoslav census conducted in 1991, while Pakrac had 12,813 Serbs and 9,896 Croats. Daruvar remained under Croat control, and the majority of its Serbs left during the fighting. The several thousand Serbs who stayed on in Daruvar lived an insecure existence and endured various forms of intimidation and harassment on a regular basis. Worse, practically all adults among them had been fired from their jobs, leaving their families with no livelihood beyond renting out parts of their houses to international personnel or, in the case of some young adults, working as interpreters for the international presence. Pakrac, meanwhile, had been literally split into two sections by intense fighting. The town changed hands several times during the hostilities and eventually, the frontline cut right through the town centre, a near-ruin of shell-pocked and bullet-scarred buildings. The Croat-held and Serb-held parts of this pretty Slavonian town were divided by three checkpoints— one manned by the blue helmets in the middle, with Croat “special police” and Serb militia checkpoints on either side. The debris of war, notably thousands of firebombed or dynamited houses, littered the surrounding countryside.

Unsurprisingly, each side had its own narrative of the cyclone of violence that had hit western Slavonia, in which the other side was the aggressor. In fact, brutalities including massacres had been committed by belligerents on both sides, with paramilitary gangs the worst offenders. The narrative of victimhood was particularly strong on the Croat side. Voices of moderation did exist, especially among local Serbs who realised the vulnerability of their community's situation, but they were marginalised in an abnormal and toxic environment. The local Croat political and military leaders were interested not in *rapprochement*, but in regaining the part of western Slavonia under rebel Serb control—a thumb-shaped sliver of territory inhabited by about 15,000 Serbs, stretching south from Pakrac to the Sava river and the border with north-western Bosnia, barely a half-hour drive away.

The grassroots perspective from this small-town and rural area in the deep interior of the south Slav lands helped me to realise that chances of de-escalation and compromise were practically non-existent. The Zagreb regime headed by Franjo Tudjman was single-mindedly intent on regaining the territories of Croatia under rebel Serb control and its military was preparing for an offensive to realise that goal, with diplomatic and material support from the United States. The western Slavonian Serbs were by and large not “extremist” but a rather frightened and bewildered lot, but they were under the thumb of an intransigent rebel Serb leadership based in Knin, a small town located in one of the other three UN “Protected Areas” in Croatia. Meanwhile, as the stalemated conflict in Croatia festered on towards its grim *denouement* in 1995, Bosnia-Herzegovina next door was in the grip of an inferno of violence.

But a regional context of ethno-national war and perverse apex leaderships were not the only problems. The local fabric of coexistence had been so badly damaged in areas like western Slavonia that it was beyond repair. A few years after my western Slavonian experiences, I worked intensively in Bosnia-Herzegovina on a research project on the post-war situation there and came to the same conclusion in Mostar, the divided city in southern Bosnia-Herzegovina which I studied closely. The end of Yugoslavia spelled the end not just of a multinational state, but of any prospect of a viable multinational society at a local level in the war-torn lands of former Yugoslavia.

Sure enough, the pristine and uncompromising ideal of the nation-state triumphed in Croatia. In May 1995 Croatian military and special police units launched a pincer offensive, codenamed Operation Flash, that in a couple of days overran the rebel Serb enclave in western Slavonia. About 80 percent of the enclave's 15,000 residents fled the offensive into Serb-held north-western Bosnia, and later that summer I watched in the formerly Serb-held part of Pakrac as the UN organised transport that took hundreds more away to new lives as refugees in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia. Operation Flash was a precursor to a much bigger Croatian offensive in August 1995, Operation Storm, that retook two of the other three rebel Serb areas in Croatia and generated up to 200,000 refugees. In western Slavonia, the Croatian Serb family in whose house I stayed during my sojourns there—in the town of Daruvar—finally gave up on their precarious existence and moved to Vojvodina, the province in northern Serbia, after agreeing a house exchange with an ethnic Croat family there. That Croat family's ancestors had lived for centuries in northern Serbia, just as this Serb family in Daruvar traced their roots in central Croatia to 400 years.

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Was all this avoidable? It is obviously difficult to say. The institutional failure of Titoist Yugoslavia re-awakened slumbering demons in its society, notably a dormant history of inter-group violence. But external factors also played a role in precipitating and worsening the Yugoslav tragedy. The early decision of key international players—particularly the European Community (EC) in autumn 1991—to sanction the break-up of Yugoslavia and support the transformation of its internal federal borders into international frontiers between sovereign states effectively settled the issue at the juridical level.

Unfortunately, transforming a multinational country with a complicated history of inter-group relations into a collection of nation-states proved to be a far from easy process. That is why the international peacekeeping operation in Croatia met a more or less ignominious end, and why Bosnia-Herzegovina—demographically and culturally a microcosm of the diversity of former Yugoslavia—remains fragile and disunited after fifteen years of internationally led and engineered state-building.

Relations between the region's largest states, Serbia and Croatia, have improved substantially in recent years, and this is a welcome development. Yet the nation-state paradigm continues to pose problems for stability and lasting normalisation in the region, as exemplified by the cases of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. Nor can the post-Yugoslav states look, individually or collectively, to Brussels for a magic-wand solution to their assortment of problems, the accession to the European Union of Slovenia in 2004 and the likely accession of Croatia in 2013 notwithstanding. EU membership has not resolved the problems of other post-communist states in the Balkans. The current crisis of the EU makes it even more likely that the primary impetus to shared security and socio-economic reconstruction in the former Yugoslavia will have to come from a renewed spirit of cooperation and solidarity within the region itself. Such a spirit, and agenda, is some way off as yet.

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