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What Remained of Yugoslavia

Unfinished Peace

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, seven states have emerged where Yugoslavia once existed: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, and Kosovo. In a region of the world known for centuries for its unique ethnic and cultural plurality, more than four million people were shifted around in pursuit of the ideal homogeneous nation state.

The new map of the Balkans reflects the federal makeup of the former multinational state and all its shortcomings. When Yugoslavia broke apart, the national question again became acute, yet was left unresolved. This question seems somehow anachronistic in a coalescing Europe, but it still harbors a significant potential for unrest. Only the Slovenes and—with minor exceptions—the Croats and Montenegrins came out of the breakup with territorially consolidated state entities. The Serb people, however, were divided into three states. Serbia was not to include historic areas of Serb settlement in Croatia and lost its medieval center, Kosovo. The societies of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo became deeply divided ethnically and suffered severe economic setbacks. It cannot be thoroughly ruled out that border changes will occur in the future should the areas inhabited by Serbs or by Albanians unite to create larger nation states. Macedonia also suffers from the repercussions of Yugoslavia’s demise. Because of Greek objections the small country could not be recognized under its chosen name. In 1993, it was accepted for membership in the United Nations under the provisional name of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM). Since then Greece also blocked the admission of its small neighbor into the EU and NATO. Countless international attempts at mediation had failed before, in mid-2018, the parties eventually agreed to name the country Republic of North Macedonia. These examples show that the phase of independent nation-state building may not simply be skipped on the path to an integrated Europe.

On the surface, calm has been restored throughout the entire region. The main protagonists of the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s, presidents Milošević,
Tudjman, and Izetbegović, are dead and were replaced by a new generation of politicians. The worst excesses of nationalism have been fenced in, and progress is being made, if at very different speeds, in establishing democratic institutions, rule of law, and freedom of the press.

Except for the Serbian veto of Kosovo’s declared independence, the new states have formally recognized each other and publicly apologized for the war crimes committed. But even Serbia and Kosovo have started a process of normalization. Those individuals who shouldered the major political responsibility for “ethnic cleansing” were extradited to the ICTY in The Hague. Limited capacity made it impossible to try all but the most important defendants there, so the tribunal turned over the less prominent cases to the jurisdiction of the successor states. By December 2017, when the tribunal had concluded all 161 cases and was closed down, no suspect was still at large, including the Bosnian Serb general Ratko Mladić and Bosnian Serb President Radovan Karadžić.

There is also a glimmer of hope regarding the economic situation in the Balkans. The Yugoslav wars, followed by the international embargo against Serbia and Montenegro, caused immense damage, estimated to be well over $110 billion. The collapse of Yugoslavia also broke up a cohesive economic area into unproductive mini-economies, and the introduction of a market economy came at a high price. Severe hit by the global economic and financial crisis in 2007–2008, the region suffered from deep recession, shrinking employment, and declining income. A decade later, relevant economic data is pointing upward. But whereas growth rates nearly match the high rates of the eastern Central European EU accession countries, unemployment and brain-drain remains persistently high. Meanwhile, regional cooperation has been revived, for example through free trade agreements and common infrastructure projects. Although not all disputes stemming from secession have been settled, the relations between the countries have nearly normalized.

Only Bosnia-Herzegovina, the broken heart of Yugoslavia, could not be mended. Not only was it stipulated that institutions, currencies, and the armed forces be separated along ethnic lines, but this also became the case for languages, schoolbooks, and even restaurant menus. Everything is translated back and forth between Bosnian, Serbian, and Croatian, which is known in international newspeak simply as “BSC.” Children are taught in separate classrooms, where the spirit of community and communality is systematically drilled out of them. Those who do not agree with this new apartheid must live abroad or in internal emigration.

Postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina also left Europe with a political system in which Islam assumes an important role in public life. The formerly open-minded, tolerant Bosnian Muslim culture yielded to a systematic Islamization
from the top down. “The Islamic tradition is the foundation of the Bosnian people’s identity,” said the religious leader of the country, Reis-ul-Ulema Mustafa Cerić. “Without Islam . . . we are nothing and nobody.” A novelty in Bosnia-Herzegovina since the war is the presence of followers of fundamentalist Wahhabism, who maintain veritable strongholds in central Bosnia between the cities of Tuzla, Zenica, and Travnik. Overall, the strategy of Islamization has had mixed success. Although more veiled women now populate the streets, other religious practices, including the Koran studies, the prohibition of alcohol and pork, the introduction of Sharia, and daily prayers, have remained rather uncommon and seem to many to be superimposed and strange. At the end of the 1990s, only 5 to 10 percent of the adult men attended Friday prayers, and not even every tenth child participated in classes learning the Koran. Therefore it seems unlikely that Bosnia-Herzegovina will ever become an Islamic state.

**Titostalgia**

Since the political system underwent change, so did memory culture. However, the biographies of many people are still influenced by their earlier socialist socialization. Faced with deep social insecurity and uncertain prospects for the future resulting from the transformation, many seek refuge in the vision of an idealized past, be it out of political conviction, out of spite, or simply as a psychological reflex to help them cope with their new social environment. This yearning for the good days of long ago and for the old emotional hearth made Josip Broz one of the most beloved and respected personalities in the post-Yugoslav region. For his documentary *Tito among the Serbs for the Second Time*, the director Želimir Žilnik had a Tito double, dressed in a uniform and wearing sunglasses, stroll down the Belgrade’s central pedestrian zone in 1992. A man on the street beams at the sight of him: “You are back. Back then we had [only] one Tito. Now we have a dozen. It’s wonderful that you are back!”

In the new millennium, the appeal of this idol has not changed much for people. Antique shops, souvenir stands, and street vendors offer a wide assortment of artifacts from industrial mass culture that are linked to a nostalgia for better times: retro-fashion, keyrings, cigarette lighters, pens, postcards, T-shirts, socks, and busts with Tito’s image. There are Tito parties and Tito doubles, Tito cooking classes and a federation of Tito societies. In Slovenia, it is very popular to take nostalgic trips on the Blue Train. Each day people sign their names in the guestbook at the house in Kumrovec where Josip Broz was born. To those living in a present full of disappointment and uncertainty, Tito appears as the incarnate positive, as the indefinable good. The idealization and romanticization of an irretrievable past consolidate in the focus on this
one man to become a type of retrospective utopia and the antithesis of the problem-ridden future.

Yet there will be no return to Yugoslavia. Article 142 of the Croatian constitution reads: “It is prohibited to initiate any procedure for the association of the Republic of Croatia into alliances with other states if such association leads, or might lead, to a renewal of a South Slavic state community or to any Balkan state form of any kind.” In Croatia and its neighboring countries, “Yugo-nostalgia” has become a damning label to stigmatize all things yesteryear and morally suspect, even though usually this nostalgia does not express a yearning for the return of the old regime but for the return “of an era of peace and a united, open, and tolerant country,” claims the writer Rada Iveković. “Suddenly all this national classification started, which was thoroughly foreign to us,” explained a journalist. She found it totally “incomprehensible how people should so classify others or themselves and even invoke an association with a certain past, with some history.”

The younger generation no longer has personal memories of Yugoslavia and did not even consciously experience the war. When a feeling of solidarity arises among the fraternal foes, as it sometimes does, then it is usually of a folkloric nature, not a political one. One example was when Marija Šerifović from Serbia won the 2007 Eurovision Song Contest in Helsinki due in part to the enthusiastic support she received from all of the neighboring countries of the former Yugoslavia. Many young people have never left their country, so that the horizon of their experience ends at the respective national borders, while older generations reminisce about how wonderful the times were when the red passport of Yugoslavia opened all border gates.

European Perspectives

Amid unified Europe, with its more than 512 million inhabitants, the post-Yugoslav region remains a blank spot on the political map at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The per capita prosperity of the Western Balkan candidate and potential candidate states is, at best, a third of that in the EU. This alone is a great motivation for many to join the EU. They want finally to be a part of the family of European peoples and to be viewed no longer as urchins and notorious troublemakers from the Balkans. As one journalist summarized: “Those of us from the other Europe . . . are always somewhat aware that, no matter how famous or successful we are, we are looked upon as children of communism, like people with a handicap who can never accept [the] rules of democratic, Christian, liberal, capitalist Europe.”

For the people of the Balkans, “Europe” invokes images and stirs imaginations in a way that coalesces into a shining new myth, capturing a wide spectrum of hopes and emotions. Visions of the future associated with
this magical term are diffuse and often completely unrealistic. However, “Europeanization” is presented as an objective barring any alternative, as promise, as fate. Actually, the European Union has indeed held out the prospect of full membership for all post-Yugoslav states, but under conditions that most of them will probably not be able to fulfill for many years. The first country to join the EU was Slovenia in 2004, followed by Croatia in 2013. The hurdles confronting the other countries are the slow development of institutions, sprawling corruption, and the continued discrimination against minorities. Along the lines of “we are acting as if we want to take them in, and they act as if they believe us,” each side still mutually reassures the other of the good will between them. In early 2018, the European Commission declared, within the framework of a new Western Balkans strategy, that Serbia and Montenegro could join the EU in 2025 if conditionality was met. The conditions include the strengthening of the rule of law, the transformation to a market economy, efforts to fight corruption, the establishment of good neighborly relations, and structural adjustments to enable acceptance of the Community acquis.

Yet the fervor about Europe continues unabated, just as it did throughout the entire twentieth century. Once again, postulates of national identity clash with those of European modernity, political parties and societies are divided into Westerners and traditionalists, and those mired in yesteryear depict their national culture as authentic and morally uncorrupt. Due to the paternalistic attitude of Americans and West Europeans, there is a good measure of ambivalence concerning a liberal market economy, foreign investment, Euro-Atlantic integration, and dealing with one’s own wartime past. For some, wrote the Bosnian magazine Dani, Europe is a “magic formula for peace, prosperity, freedom to travel, and free chance to work abroad,” while for others it represents nothing but “new slavery . . . known as West European democracy.” Even today, just as in the past, the postulates of progress and Europeanization are not fundamentally questioned. The only concern centers on choosing the proper path to “reasonably defend our identity, our cultural and spiritual values.” So, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the observation once made by a Bosnian intellectual still appears to be accurate: “Nothing is as it once was. And nothing is different.”