Slovenes and Yugoslavia: A Historical Necessity or a Historical Mistake?

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Introduction

In light of the bloody disintegration of the state, the other nations that once belonged to the common state could, of course, also ask themselves the question of Yugoslavia being a historical necessity or a historical mistake.

It has long been believed, and many still think so today, that Slovenes were the ones who broke up Yugoslavia. That belief is false. However, it is true that the current Slovene view of Yugoslavia, particularly the political one and to some extent the one held by historians, is derived from the thesis that Yugoslavism was a sort of temporary solution, something that helped the Slovenes get through the difficult times, until they were able to return to where they belonged, i.e. to the so-called Europe. The historical image differs. Slovenes believed in Yugoslavia; they put a lot of energy, money and political effort in its democratisation. Both leading politicians, the priest Dr Anton Korošec and the Communist Edvard Kardelj were true Yugoslavs and both saw Yugoslavia in an ideological connotation: Korošec saw it as a guarantee that his party, in agreement with the court and Serbian parties, would be able to absolutely control Slovenia and regulate it according to Catholic principles, while Kardelj was convinced that the main thing that held Yugoslavia together was socialism and that it could decay without it - which is precisely what happened in the end.
Austrian Yugoslavism and Entry into the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes
(Kingdom of Yugoslavia)

Until the second half of the 1980s, all the thoughts or even national programmes of Slovenes in one way or another prejudiced the solution to the national issue within Yugoslavia. Yugoslav ideas did, however, differ and even contradicted one another. During World War I and practically until the end of the war, Slovene politicians believed in the possibility that they could solve the national issue within Austria-Hungary. Their main political programme was trialism, the idea of uniting Austro-Hungarian Southern Slavs into an independent state under the Hapsburgs. Thus instead of a dualist monarchy a trialistic one was to be created. This plan was neither realisable nor realised for a number of reasons. Moreover, in international circumstances Slovenes were never considered a “historical” nation and even the rare foreign experts on the intricate national issue in Austria-Hungary prior to World War I did not pay much attention to Slovenes and did not consider them to be crucial in a potential reorganisation of the monarchy. The journalist Robert William Seton Watson, who was considered the best expert on the Hapsburg Monarchy and had great influence on the decisions of the British government, in 1911 spoke in favour of trialism without Slovenes. Later on he changed his mind and in 1914 tried to prove to the British government that no solution to the Yugoslav issue would be complete if it overlooked the Slovenes.

Nevertheless, at home Slovene politicians had very little influence on the Yugoslav option that would exclude Austria-Hungary. The most important role, the so-called role of Piedmont (after the region that had succeeded to unite Italy), was held by Serbia. This role resulted from its position: Serbia was an autonomous state, a member of the Entente Powers and had a military force; all of this enabled its domination in the unification process. Serbian government already revealed its intentions at the beginning of the war, on 7 December 1914 with the Niš Declaration, in which, in addition to liberation, it proclaimed the war aim of the unification “of all our unfree brothers, the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes”. By doing so, it demonstratively surpassed its historical programme of 1849 (the so-called Garašanin's Nacertanije), that is, the aspiration to unite all Serbs in a single state. Russian tsarist diplomats warned Serbian politicians not to create such a state (i.e. Yugoslavia), in which the Serbs as a nation and Orthodoxy as a religion would have the
relative majority, but in which various other nations in relation to them and other religions in relation to Orthodoxy would form the majority together, as this could drag Serbia into the kind of crisis experienced by tsarist Russia during the war. The Niš Declaration made no mention of the internal organisation of the state, which created the legitimate fear that the Serbs wished to do what they had done after the Balkan Wars with Vardar Macedonia, use the annexation ("prisajedinjenje", as they called it) merely to expand their territory. They were not quite clear as to where they were headed, seeing how at the beginning of the war the Serbian geographer Jovan Cvijić had to show the military commanders, Prince Regent Alexander and the Prime Minister all the areas in which Yugoslav nations lived on a map, on the basis of which they then defined their war aims and included Slovenes in them. This was also largely due to the persuasion of Niko Zupanič, a Slovene ethnographer, who lived in Belgrade and ran the local museum.

Oscillation between the Greater Serbia programme, also called the “small one” when its territory was compared with that of the Yugoslav one, and the “great” Yugoslav programme was present in Serbian politics until the end of the war. Particularly so because the disintegration of Austria-Hungary and the creation of new states in its territory was not considered very likely until October 1918 or contradicted the policy of Entente countries and because many Serbian politicians refused to subjugate Serbianness to Yugoslavism and even later on continued to equate the two. In general, they were less directed to the north towards the Slovenes than towards Bosnia and Herzegovina and towards Dalmatia and the Croatian territories populated by the Serbs; but above all they were directed to the east, beyond Pécs in Hungary and Timișoara in Romania (their never-ending aspiration to conquer Aegean Macedonia and gain access to the sea in Thessaloniki was not an option because of their alliance with Greece).

With the exception of politically promoted hatred towards Serbia during World War I, Slovenes harboured positive Yugoslav sentiment at least from the Balkan Wars at the beginning of the 20th century and until the 1980s. The leading Slovene newspapers followed the actions in the battlefields during the Balkan Wars closely and, especially in the First Balkan War, expressed sympathy for the Serbs and Bulgarians (with Macedonians included). In the Second Balkan War Slovene politicians and newspapers sided with the Bulgarians and were critical of Serbia; what they regretted above all was that the former alliance had been broken up. The idea of connecting Southern Slavs with the Bulgarians fell through with World War I as the latter once again found themselves on
the opposite side from the Serbs, although there was no shortage of different federal and confederal combinations either between both wars or during World War II, all the way to 1948.

Slovenes said goodbye to the Austro-Hungarian Yugoslavism forever and through the one-month State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs, which had been founded by Austro-Hungarian Southern Slavs after the disintegration of Austria-Hungary, became part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, the later Kingdom of Yugoslavia. A milestone change of power occurred on 29 October 1918 when the Croatian Parliament in Zagreb severed the national and legal ties with Austria-Hungary, annulled the Croatian-Hungarian agreement of 1868 and declared the formation of the State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs. That very day, at a mass demonstration in Ljubljana, which was attended by some 30,000 people, Slovenes too joined the new state.

The State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs was not internationally recognised and only lasted a month. It was a short-lived and transitional solution at a time when Austria-Hungary was disintegrating. Circumstances in the internal and foreign policy of the time did not offer any great chances for its survival. It was followed by the Yugoslav national unification, which was carried out on 1 December 1918 at a special ceremony. The delegation of the State of SCS (its political representation, called Narodno vijeće) came to Belgrade and attended the unification ceremony. It directed the so-called address to the Serbian Prince Regent Alexander. It stated that the Slovenes, Croats and Serbs of Austria-Hungary had performed an overthrow, temporarily founded an independent national state and immediately expressed their desire for unification with Serbia and Montenegro “into a unified national state of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, which would encompass the entire, continuous ethnographic territory of the Southern Slavs.” It also declared that the monarchy with King Peter and Prince Regent Alexander is unconditionally accepted as the form of government, but that a constituent assembly would later decide on it. The “unified state”, i.e. the centralist regime, was likewise accepted unconditionally. The address concludes with the exclamations: “Long live his Royal Highness King Peter! Long live your Royal Highness! Long live our entire united Serbian-Croatian-Slovene nation!” In his reply (Proclamation of the Creation of the Kingdom of SCS) Prince Regent accepted the address from the delegation of Narodno vijeće in a pompous style, referring to the actions of his ancestors and the Serbian nation, stating: “on behalf of His Highness, King Peter I, I declare the unification of Serbia with the provinces of the independent State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs into a unified Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.” Additionally, he
emphasised the unity of the state, its centralist and monarchic form as a given fact. Following the principle of compromise unitarism, the new state was to be a constitutional, parliamentary and democratic state of “the nation with three names” headed by the Karadjordjević dynasty. At the end of December the Prince Regent’s action – which de facto terminated the existence of the Kingdom of Serbia – was subsequently confirmed by the Serbian Assembly. Due to its centralist nature, the unification of 1 December was welcomed with mixed feelings and with different opinions of parties and groups and of the more prominent individuals; Zagreb even witnessed demonstrations and shooting from armed groups of soldiers, yet the prevailing emotion was nevertheless enthusiasm. “Our Austro-Hungarian reality has drunkenly rolled itself under the Karadžorđević throne like an empty beer bottle into a garbage can”, was how the Croatian writer Miroslav Krleža described this unification. A few years later, in 1923, the Slovene journalist Fran Erjavec described the emotions of Slovenes upon the unification with these words:

“Slovenes are in favour of Yugoslavia without reservations, as that is simply dictated to them by the most primitive political reasoning. They cannot aspire to go back to Italy or even Austria or Hungary for political, national and economic reasons, since their position in these countries would be hopeless and would mean national suicide; furthermore, they cannot aspire to a completely sovereign Slovene state, because there are too few of them and due to its exposed geographical location such a small Slovene state would shortly fall prey to the imperialist aspirations of one neighbour or another. For this reason it is also clear that any anti-national movement is impossible among Slovenes, because it could never have any realistic goal. Slovenes must therefore see their place and their future only in Yugoslavia and nowhere else, at least under the present circumstances. This is something that every Slovene knows, feels and acknowledges sincerely regardless of political or world beliefs. Of course, it is likewise clear that Slovenes cannot settle for just any Yugoslavia, for a state is not an end in itself, but only a means for nations to achieve certain goals. Slovenes had not fought for Yugoslavia in different ways for over half a century for Yugoslavia itself, but in order to achieve and realise the political, cultural, economic and social aspirations defined within it, which could only be achieved in their own national state”.

The over twenty years of experience of Slovenes with the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was of a mixed nature: it had preserved the existence of at least the central part of the nation, while
the minorities in Fascist Italy (it had been given one third of Slovene territory and around 300,000 citizens of Slovene descent by the Treaty of Rapallo) and Austria were oppressed and assimilated. On the other hand, the extreme eastern part of Slovenia, Prekmurje, which belonged to the Hungarian part of the monarchy, was for the first time in history directly connected to the mother country. In Yugoslavia Slovenes were given informal cultural autonomy with education carried out in the Slovene language and the university; they became strengthened economically but failed to achieve political autonomy. The undemocratic system (for a few years even a dictatorship by King Alexander), great social distress of the population and the external pressure from Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany (in 1938, after Anschluss, the annexation of Austria, Germany expanded its borders to the Karavanke mountains, to Slovenia) failed to bring hope that Yugoslavia would be able to remain a protector of the nation. Despite this, during the war Slovenes once again opted for Yugoslavia, only this time for a federal and socialist one. The decisive contribution to this was made by the National Liberation Struggle, in which the Slovene partisan army became a part of the Yugoslav partisan army led by Josip Broz-Tito.

Socialist Yugoslavia

The concept and the shaping of Slovenia in the second, federal and socialist, Yugoslavia, popularly called AVNOJ Yugoslavia (after the second session of the Anti-Fascist Council of the National Liberation of Yugoslavia, at which it had been founded on 29 November 1943), was no longer in the hands of priests and Catholic politicians, but Communists. For establishing international relations, the thesis on solving the national issue within the context of the class issue was taken into account. This had a number of consequences, even the (renewed) centralist system, which began to soften as late as in the 1960s. Regardless of the above, it can be said that in AVNOJ Yugoslavia Slovenes obtained and developed the statehood of their republic from a declarative, yet constitutional right to self-determination, including the right to secession, in 1946/47, to a (con)federal status under the constitution of 1974.

Parting

The parting with Yugoslavism began in the 1980s, with the economic crisis. The latter was an important reason. The feeling that Slovenia was lagging behind was growing stronger,
since, according to data at the disposal of the authorities, the purchasing power of Slovenes, which in the mid-1970s amounted to 80% of the purchasing power of Austrians, had in the mid-1980s dropped to 45%. Yet that was only one side of the coin. Mutual familiarity grew worse and stereotypes and prejudice were being strengthened. Nationalism was on the rise. Information systems began operating mostly within the republics. Slovenes started viewing Yugoslavia with increasingly mixed feelings. This was also conditioned by the disappearance of the fear of the former great enemies, the Germans and the Italians, and with the increasing fear of the aggressive Serbian politics. With the Yugoslav crisis increasing, Slovene views became homogenised.

The older generation, particularly the partisan one, still had an emotional attitude towards Yugoslavia. As in all the post-war decades it persistently defended Slovene interests, but could not imagine a Slovene future outside Yugoslavia. Serbian media and politics in particular created an entirely different impression of their views and declared them separatists. The view of the generation born during and immediately after the war, which had gradually begun to assume the leading positions, did not differ greatly. Such conviction (regardless of any potential individual doubts arising earlier) finally crumbled at the end of the 1980s.

In the 1980s, in the case of the younger generations, Yugoslav consciousness was present only in sports (especially football and basketball) and Yugoslav rock. For the male part of the population the main Yugoslav experience (a primarily bad one) was serving in the army. Traditional school excursions and matura graduation trips across Yugoslavia were redirected towards the West; the majority of the generation growing up never saw their capital and had no attitude towards Belgrade as the centre nor would they have recognised the Yugoslav Assembly in a photograph. Their values were also completely different. What prevailed in the case of Slovenes (regardless of generation) was economic “egotism” (which they were often reproached with), orientation towards the West, consumerism and the desire to modernise, which was to turn Slovenia into a post-industrial society as quickly as possible and make it equal to the developed European countries, including it in European integrations either together with Yugoslavia or without it. Nationalism (except in the work of intellectuals and later of politicians, to which it – as in the case of the Serbs – denoted a value in itself) was derived above all from the realisation that Yugoslavia was becoming a “drag” in the development tendencies of Slovenia. Slovene ambitions - though not overly emphasised in public - were clear - to remain the
strongest economic factor in Yugoslavia, to make good use of the advantages it offers, while at the same time increase the competitiveness in the capitalist markets, particularly of the neighbouring countries. Internally, Slovenia was very well aware of its role and importance in Yugoslavia and tried to maximally profit from it or through everyday economic processes compensate for that which the federation took from it with its administration. In proportion to the increasing doubt as to whether Yugoslavia (though highly influential in international circles) was truly willing to include itself in European integrations, which were vital to Slovenia, the doubt as to the reasonableness of its existence in an unchanged form was increasing too. After the fall of the bloc division and with the nationalist pressures of Serbia, the main objective: to attain the best position of Slovenia as possible within a (con)federally organised Yugoslavia, started to turn towards the concept of an independent Slovenia, especially in the case of the younger generations that came to power with the multi-party elections of 1990.

In the 1980s the mechanisms that held socialist Yugoslavia together started to come apart one by one. In 1980 Josip Broz - Tito passed away; as the person with the highest authority he embodied the three key functions: president of the party, president of the state and chief commander of the army. This was followed by the pan-Yugoslav Communist Party (League of Communists), which operated according to the so-called principle of democratic socialism. Its disintegration process was a lengthy one; it finally fell apart at the beginning of 1990 at the 14th Special Congress. The only one left was the Yugoslav People’s Army, which tried to keep Yugoslavia together by force and hence intervened in Slovenia in June 1991. This intervention in fact signified the beginning of the end. Yugoslavia disintegrated in blood.

The separation of Slovenia and Yugoslavia was decisively influenced by the difference in views on:
- Yugoslavia (either a union of independent states or a unified state, which in time would become a one-nation state with the formation of a Yugoslav nation);
- social system (either a democratic multi-party parliamentary system or the preservation of the dominance of one party with constitutional privileges);
- economic system (either the introduction of market legality and the pluralism of property or the preservation of a formally self-governing economy with undefined social property, but in reality one that is orchestrated by the government).
All three issues already appeared in various forms in previous decades, but due to numerous external and internal reasons they erupted in the 1980s. Slovene efforts to reform Yugoslavia were elsewhere understood as wishing to tear it down. It never received adequate support at the right time nor was there ever a unification of forces that could reform the state and lead it to the European Union as a whole or at least achieve its peaceful disintegration, without bloodshed.

In the mid-1980s, when the civil society in Slovenia strove for the basic right to freedom of expression, the federal authorities, all of the republics and the majority of Yugoslav press united against it.

When this society demanded there be state control over the army, civilian military service and the constitutional language and other rights for soldiers, it (and with it the Slovene government of the time) incurred the anger of the Yugoslav People’s Army.

In the beginning of the 1990s, when Slovenia suggested a confederal organisational model, Croatia was the only one to support it. Serbia strove for democracy of the principle “one person, one vote”, which was supported by western diplomats, especially American ones, who considered Slobodan Milošević a modern reformatory politician, at the same time forgetting that in Yugoslavia the principle of universal democracy led to a unitarist state. All of the other republics were either against Slovene proposals or were confused and without a concept of their own. It was only just before the state disintegrated, when international conflicts in Croatia were already taking place, when Milošević was realising the concept of Greater Serbia, when national authorities - including the Federal Presidency - were completely blocked, when no one believed in Yugoslavia anymore, with the exception of a few diplomats who were used to such thoughts from the time of the bloc division, Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina were willing to agree to a sort of asymmetrical federation.

When Slovenia stood up for economic reforms it was (too) weakly supported by the reformatory powers across Yugoslavia. The Federal Premier, Ante Marković, was greatly supported by the western countries, but did not have enough political authority to execute the reforms. As all the premiers before him, he succumbed to the pressure of the undeveloped states and agreed to the demands of Serbia for a special status (which Serbian politicians had already obtained in the mid-1980s). Despite his focus on reform, he saw Yugoslavia as a convoy, in which speed must be adapted to the slowest ship. In exchange for economic reforms, Marković demanded a concentration of economic and political power, i.e. centralism.
When Slovenia renounced the party state and socialism at the end of 1989 and opted for free multi-party elections, it was labelled a counterrevolution and the army leadership began preparing a new scenario, who knows which in a row, for its submission.

Slovenia was therefore forced to leave Yugoslavia by the circumstances, the increasing gulf between it and the developed countries, but above all by the inability of Yugoslavia to democratise and modernise itself and ensure national rights for its nations. It was a combination of liberal ideas and national emotion that created enough mass energy in Slovenia for the set goals to be achieved. However, their realisation was crucially made possible above all by international changes. An important element in the psychosocial image of Slovenes was surely the disappearance of the fear of its enemies of past centuries, the Germans and Italians, and at the same time a sense of threat from the Serbs (which was not based on national hatred but on different concepts of development).

Political and social changes in the 1980s took place within a context of the global crisis of Communism, the downfall of the bipolar division of the world and the Soviet Union, and the deep political, international and economic crisis in Yugoslavia. Without these external changes, the process, which Slovenes poetically name “the Slovene Spring”, would probably have ended with a defeat of the alternative movements, a squaring off with the opposition and a forced departure of the reformist authorities in Slovenia from the political scene. In the process of attaining independence and in the case of military conflicts, circumstances were in favour of Slovenia. Federal pressure was strong enough to unite the politicians and the population, but not so strong as to cause new rifts. Slovenia was able to stop the attack of the YPA with a combination of police and military actions, precise analyses of events in the army, which was still ethnically mixed and in which substantial chaos was present, by informing the world public and the diplomatic service, and with other measures. The Serbian political top, headed by Milošević, with cooperation from some of the leading officers of the YPA, decided to realise the concept of Greater Serbia and was hence no longer interested in the existence of Yugoslavia and in keeping Slovenia in it. Under the pressure of public opinion in its states, the European Community became engaged just in time; it was shocked by the conflicts on European soil. At that time the conflict between Serbia and the YPA on one side and Slovenia on the other had already been replaced by an international conflict, truly fatal for Yugoslavia, between the Serbs and Croats, which ultimately buried the state. While the European Community had engaged itself in Slovenia, the scenes from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina became
a trivial matter and did not have great psychological impact on the political decisions of European and world statesmen, who were for a long time afterwards unable to find the right solution to the bloody war in the territory of the former Yugoslavia.

On the whole, living in the kingdom and in the socialist Yugoslavia gave Slovenes a positive balance. There were many bad or questionable things, from centralism and unitarism to the downsides of the revolution, which in its core nevertheless ensured social justice. In the uncertain times of territorial division and the pressure from German and Italian imperialism, the first Yugoslavia provided Slovenes with a chance for survival. In the second Yugoslavia the position of Slovenia was the result of the National Liberation Struggle and the fact that Slovenes, as part of the Yugoslav anti-Fascist movement, ended the war on the side of the anti-Fascist coalition. Primorska became an integral part of the newly-founded republic and Slovenia was given access to the sea. Without its status as one of the six republics with the right to self-determination, including the right to secession, the grounds for the attainment of independence would not have had any real legal basis.