

## The Pre-war Strategic Situation in the Balkans from a Field Theory Perspective

**Abstract** The following is a short account of the events leading up to war in the Balkans, in particular in Bosnia. The intention and overall description in these few pages will help provide an example of the practical application of a *field theory perspective* to conflict, rather than describing the conflict in full. Some actors are chosen as examples for the purpose of theoretical explanation, even though there are others to focus on if one wants a complete historical account. Main actors as for example Slobodan Milošević and Franjo Tuđman are also presented in this chapter.

**Keywords** Balkans · Bosnia · Slobodan Milošević · Franjo Tuđman

Something which must be stressed in this discussion is that Bosnia is a relatively small country (51,129 square kilometre), about the size of Costa Rica.<sup>1</sup> The limited area is important to note. It therefore requires very few criminal elements to influence opinion to the point where people are prepared to carry out ethnic cleansing by directive or as a form of revenge. A system of informal criminal networks, involved in the

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<sup>1</sup> *CIA Factbook* (2017). <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/> [Visited 170509].

trafficking of people, weapons, drugs etc., was established as in all conflicts, with various actors using violent means to establish their territories (meaning here primarily not physical territory).<sup>2</sup> Partly, because of this professor, Mary Kaldor has described this form of conflict and this specific conflict as a new form of war. Kaldor thus writes that she has identified a new form of war which has emerged since the Cold War, involving more or less organised violence between different parties (often not states). The motives behind this phenomenon are many and varied.

As I put a theoretical perspective of my own on the conflict, I would like at this point to dwell a little on Kaldor's ideas, ideas which have met some criticism.<sup>3</sup> Her view of the informal economy as the driving force behind the war is essentially correct; she makes a fundamental point when highlighting the presence of the criminal world as an influential force. In bourdieuan terms, one could refer to a changing social field. That said, I would like to take issue with many of the theories she promotes. One problem is that history shows us plenty of examples of the fact that the parameters for the "new" wars already have existed and still exist; it is easy to recognise the phenomenon from history. The informal economy is not new, certainly not where war is being waged. People in the West today are used to regarding war as something that takes place between sovereign states. However, one does not need to look too far back in time to see the processes that Kaldor describes as part of just about every nation-building process that has occurred in Europe (this is probably also true for other parts of the world, but certainly holds generally throughout Europe). She highlights globalisation as a new contributing factor to this new type of war. It must be said that the consequences of war now have a more wide-ranging influence, but that this should affect events in a qualitatively new fashion remains to be proved. Breeding grounds for unrest have taken on a new significance within criminal circles, when all sorts of illegal transport make its way through the lawless country like electricity conducted through copper. There has,

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<sup>2</sup>For an interpretation see Kaldor (1999, p. 105).

<sup>3</sup>Krampe (2010).

however, always been interest shown by criminal groups to fill the vacuum left by a (failed) state; therein lies nothing new.<sup>4</sup>

Kaldor focuses often on the Napoleonic Wars, which were essentially state-controlled, and consequently her studies contain a large number of clausewitzian references. She also focused on the state entity in his analyses, for which he in turn received a fair amount of criticism.<sup>5</sup> What also occurred during the Napoleonic Wars was that Westphalian Europe, in many regards what remained of the Europe of the Middle Ages, was struck from the map. Territorially cohesive areas came to dominate, ruled over by a power often concentrated in one person, such as a king or emperor.<sup>6</sup> The period clearly encompasses the little-discussed history of the losers of the time, revealing the struggle of the small nations against the large national states, and this applies equally to the course of events that not only Kaldor described as state-directed war. There is therefore cause to exercise caution when one generalises, because contradictions can remain hidden in examples chosen. However, to speak in qualitative terms of new forms of war is just as unwise as stating that revolutions occur during war.<sup>7</sup> It is certainly true that Kaldor makes many commendable points in her book, they predominate without question. What I do take objection to is the intractable desire to discover something new when there exists little foundation for the theory. Talking about a new type of war is going too far, because the distinction made hardly warrants such a conclusion. On the other hand, Kaldor presents a reasonably adequate picture of how violent conflict, with states as just one of many actors on the stage, has manifested and continues to manifest itself.

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<sup>4</sup>A theoretical use of the terms state and nation would have lent Kaldor's research the depth that it currently lacks. Neither in Yugoslavia nor during the nation-building processes of the 1700s and 1800s can the term state be said to have been more of a driving force for violence than the term nation.

<sup>5</sup>van Creveld (1991) and Keegan (1993).

<sup>6</sup>Foreign enclaves deep in the realm disappeared. An example of this is Avignon in the centre of France, many German free cities disappeared, in fact, only four free cities remained of the countless numbers that existed before the Napoleonic Wars.

<sup>7</sup>In addition, it must be stated that Kaldor's closing chapter, which presents a vision of a cosmopolitan world order, is at the expense of historical experience. When Kaldor encourages the reader to incline towards outstanding researchers such as Zygmunt Bauman and Norbert Elias on one side or the author herself on the other, then the choice easily falls in favour of the overwhelming force of evidence presented by the former. The two former are not pessimistic because it pleases them. Their pessimism is founded on a sound knowledge of mankind and its history.

Demonstrating theory using empirical examples is not the same as an empirical application of the theory. It is worth differentiating here; if the lead up to the conflict in former Yugoslavia had been understood in field theory terms at both the strategic and tactical level then the scenario may well have had a different character—it is even possible that the course of events would have unfolded in a different way. A related approach, though not the same, to the events has been taken by the researcher V.P. Gagnon. He has picked up a somewhat poststructuralist view when he writes that:

Elites who are highly dependent on the existing structures of power, and for whom change would mean a total loss of access to and control over resources, will be much more willing to pursue strategies that are extremely destructive to society overall.<sup>8</sup>

This holds some truth and certainly in the example of Yugoslavia. But society must present a social space, which allows those strategies to be used in a legitimate way. Furthermore, the actors must be structured so that they actually take the opportunity to use this space of possibilities which the structure of society present. In short, both the actors and society need a certain structure, otherwise, the violent scenario does not play out. This is the closest to a law we can come. If it was not for the play between society and actors then such a case as the one in Yugoslavia would play out more often than it does. Michael Mann is also preoccupied with the question of responsibility:

If a few bad guys were responsible, how did they acquire such magical powers of coercion and manipulation? And were they quite so coherent in their planning; so in charge of events? After all, atrocities were committed by thousands of persons, and many more thousands stood around, either egging them on or doing nothing to stop them.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, he does not—compared to Gagnon but certainly not compared to this text—venture very much into the structuralism

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<sup>8</sup>Gagnon (2004, p. 29).

<sup>9</sup>Mann (2005, p. 360).

explanations. Nevertheless, the question is valid and fits well into the perspective of social field theory. Nationalism in various forms was not an unknown phenomenon in Yugoslavia, which came into being after the First World War.<sup>10</sup> Often nationalism is placed in a political right corner, in opposition to, for example, communism. However, nationalism does not hold any values, which make it a given rightist entity. Nationalism is about power and can be a tool in anyone's hand as long as legitimacy is granted. Nationalism was present in communist countries, even the official communistic architecture contained nationalistic features.<sup>11</sup> In both countries, the issue of nationalism was complex, both having a population consisting of many different national identities. In Yugoslavia, the situation was further complicated by the fact that the official war heroes, the partisans revered from recent history, were intimately associated with the nation. Furthermore and more importantly, they were associated with communist ideology since the partisan movement—the People's Liberation Movement (*Narodnooslobodilački pokret, NOP*)—was after all Marxist. When communist ideology lost its legitimacy after 1989, the prestige (symbolic capital) enjoyed by the partisan movement also disappeared. The state of Yugoslavia had to a large extent built its legitimacy on this now-eroded ideological foundation. Yugoslavian nationalism was not very strong, which can easily be explained by the fact that it was a state with many nations, i.e. not a national state but a state with nations. In Yugoslavia, alternatives lay just below the surface, especially in the form of the earlier defeated movements in Serbia and Croatia. Yugoslavian nationalism had problems finding any support as there were alternatives with stronger roots. An outstanding opportunity to fill the political vacuum with new forms of capital therefore presented itself for those prepared to take it after the fall of the Eastern Bloc: powerful nationalist forces fuelled by crisis and approaching anarchy boosted by the fall of communism. This structural change of the world political order was important for the way Yugoslavia was structured, as for all of Eastern Europe.

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<sup>10</sup>First called “Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes”.

<sup>11</sup>Kaldor (1999, p. 79). Mary Kaldor, like many others, has emphasised the importance of nationalism both in the Soviet Union and in Yugoslavia.

Both the Serbian Chetnik and the Croatian Ustasha movements had been suppressed by the conquering communist power. There was therefore a need to reinvent the cultural area, which was called Yugoslavia. It was a process about getting rid of the effects of decade long symbolic violence against the historic opposition to the fallen communist regime to which those who sympathised with Serbian and Croatian nationalist ideals could affiliate themselves with. In turn, the economic crisis that followed the collapse of the communist system also provided a fertile breeding ground for extremist ideas. As a result of the nationalist movements of their recent past, both countries were strong, and the Serbs' and Croats' unwillingness to share power in Yugoslavia, in a way that was acceptable to both, served to weaken the cohesion of the rather weak Yugoslav nationalism.<sup>12</sup> The period between the early 1980s with Tito's death and the early 1990s can be described as a period of ethnification in Yugoslavia, where, for example, promotion of Serbian symbols in Serbia became stronger over time. One can talk about a mobilisation of history for political purposes, a construction of the past.

It is important to point out that these nationalistic expressions could not be traced back over hundreds of years; they were not of ancient origin. It did not have its origins in conflicts inspired by cultural determinism. The reinvented opposition against Yugoslavia was founded in the Yugoslavia of the 1900s, which had seen so much criminality.<sup>13</sup> The ethnic cleansing of the type that occurred during the 1900s in Yugoslavia and in Bosnia in particular was not a necessary step in the national deconstruction and reconstruction processes, even in the Balkans. There were underlying factors, such as the nationalist movements mentioned above and the crimes committed during the Second World War, which bedded for the events of the 1900s.<sup>14</sup> These factors described the logic

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<sup>12</sup>For dissent between Serbs and Croats see also Naimark (2001, p. 140).

<sup>13</sup>Cohen (1993, p. 238). It is also emphasised here that hatred between ethnic groups did not exist before the Second World War. The Nazi Ustasha state should be mentioned as a major actor, as the Chetnik movement and the partisans but also the Albanian oppression of Serbs in the Italian controlled Kosovo.

<sup>14</sup>As a reference for someone who saw the crimes committed against the Bosnian Muslims as a religious issue: Pasha Mohamed Ali Taeharah. *An Introduction to Islamism*. Author House (2005, p. 24).

of practice, which the reinvented movements could draw legitimacy from. The logic of practice was no more precise than that ethnic cleansing was a viable alternative; it could then be expanded to new conflicts, as the one between Bosnians and Croats.

One can at this point question the relevance of stressing that opposition did not stretch back over hundreds of years. Certainly, there is a point in putting an end to the myth that a desire to wage civil war is something that lies in the genes of any people—it is an important factor, but if one is interested in the events of the 1900s, one cannot minimise the fact that the Second World War is part of the collective *habitus* even for those who didn't experience it. Of course, the exact implications of this depend on what kind of narrative the actors (collective or individual) are being fed. At the same time, the model supports a structural perspective that the actors are given the freedom to choose their own approach, regardless of the effect of the structure. It is likely that Yugoslavia would have fallen apart regardless of who held political power. However, without the conscious policies of Milošević and Tudjman, extreme violence would not have marked the course of events.<sup>15</sup> Discussing which one of them was foremost or more of a driving force is in this context immaterial, since it is not a question of apportioning guilt, but rather than stressing the dynamic inherent in the fact that at least two different political themes—one about centralise Yugoslavia under a single command and one about making Croatia autonomous—could paradoxically support each other.

However, in Milošević's case, one can say that his policy of radicalisation was the foundation of the power base, he later established in Serbian politics. From having held a strong, but not unique, position with communist leanings in Parliament, he became the leading Serbian politician with a strongly nationalist manifesto.<sup>16</sup> From Milošević's rise to power in 1987, the media in Belgrade was very much in his hand, at

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<sup>15</sup>Naimark (2001, p. 139). See also Donia and Fine (1994, p. 11). The claim is made that the Second World War was the first occasion when ethnic cleansing occurred in Bosnia.

<sup>16</sup>This is described more fully by Sell (2002). Particularly Chap. 2 for Milošević's radicalisation programme and rise to power and Chap. 3 for when the agenda takes a more violent form.

least up to 1990. Milošević was among the most prominent leaders of the Communist Party during the late 1980s, but he also saw the perceived rift between Serbian interests and communism. Some observers have thought that “communism was viewed as the thing that was weakening the Serbs’ position”.<sup>17</sup> Another observer has written that Milošević “seemed to stumble almost by accident on the nationalistic card in April 1987, in the small town of Kosovo Field, next to the famous battlefield”.<sup>18</sup> He followed up with his speech at Gazimestan—the battlefield 600 years ago of mythic proportions in Serbian history. “Six centuries later we are once again in battles, and facing battles. They are not armed battles, though the possibility cannot be excluded”.<sup>19</sup> Milošević had clearly adopted a more nationalistic approach, which was in line with the currents of politics in all of Eastern Europe at the time. He had already been one of the actors able to decide the agenda, but now as the *producer* for national politics, he listened attentively to the views prevalent in the strong *consumer* currents of Serbian politics at the time, which (greatly) enhanced his position. To be fair towards Milošević, one should mention that although he had consecrating power on at least the Serbian political field, there were also other political actors who encouraged extremism. The poet and the then not really active in politics Vuk Drašković, for example, raised the provocative question in 1989 “where are the Western borders of Serbia, and how far do they extend?”<sup>20</sup> In this case, there is structuring structures at work with a political field steering actors into certain behaviour who in their turn structure the field—mutually strengthen each other. In addition, Milošević was more important than Tudjman, because Serbia was to a marked degree the cement holding Yugoslavia together—not least because the capital city

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<sup>17</sup>Pavlaković (2005, pp. 2, 16).

<sup>18</sup>Mann (2005, p. 369). I do not mean that the Balkans have a stronger willingness to embrace myths than for example Western Europe. I state that there were myths in play—and probably still are—and that is the state of most cultures. See (Todorova 2005, p. 153).

<sup>19</sup>Quoted in Mann (2005, p. 370).

<sup>20</sup>Stojanović (2000, p. 462).



lay in Serbia. If Serbia did not recognise the union, then there would be little incentive for it to hold together, so what happened in Serbia then mattered very much more than what happened in Croatia. These two politicians have been described as Tudjman being the more “fanatical nationalist” and Milošević as the opportunistic one.<sup>21</sup> It is also true that Tudjman had a stronger position in Croatia than Milošević had in Serbia. A position built on Tudjman and this party HDZ: “dictating a political discourse of authoritarianism and xenophobic nationalism”.<sup>22</sup> Tudjman had a background of radical nationalism, serving two terms in jail due to Croatian nationalistic activity.<sup>23</sup> Robert Hayden discusses Tudjman’s view on nations and nationalism in the terms that the view could easily be flipped into being a racist view of looking at nations.<sup>24</sup> This in its turn gives a greater understanding of how the coming ethnic cleansings in Croatia came about.

Presented with a specific empirical situation, the actors are given a horizon of possible courses of action to follow. In a radical situation such as a state of war, individuals will react within the framework in a way unique to that situation. This may mean that many in a civilised society react by, for example, fleeing to another country. But the underlying and radical cultural manifestation, which makes up part of an individual’s habitus, may lead to individuals either collectively or individually reacting violently; despite the fact that a short while ago to all appearances they could not be told apart from anybody else on the street. It concerns cultural dispositions, which are not always that easy to identify except in retrospect. The approach both differs from and has interplay with the concept of external shock. Researchers into military culture often subscribe to the widely held opinion that external shock is necessary to undermine the legitimacy of cultural norms.<sup>25</sup> It is therefore also likely that a trigger factor will be required if a change to cultural norms is to be effected.

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<sup>21</sup>Allin (2002, p. 22).

<sup>22</sup>Sekulic et al. (2006, p. 808).

<sup>23</sup>Sell (2002, p. 115).

<sup>24</sup>Hayden (1992, p. 663).

<sup>25</sup>Farrell (2005, p. 14).

However, one cannot be at all sure that structures within a culture (not the same as cultural norms) do not exist, which may well incline collective or particular individuals to violent behaviour. It should also be borne in mind that any intense experience will contribute to the forming of an individual's habitus. Violent events thus serve to stretch *the bounds of what for an individual is capable of* so that previously inaccessible violent agendas are afforded space. Christopher Browning's account of the action of the Reserve Police Battalion 101 in Poland is an example of this.

At this point, a résumé of field theory is useful. This states that those who really possess the power to change the *illusio* of the field, the actual definition of the field, are the actors with strong capital on the left-hand side of the field.<sup>26</sup> The left side of the field is the *autonomous* area, where the actors/institutions that play according to the field's own rule are to be found. On the right are the actors who follow rules other than those prescribed by the field. In the political field constituted by Yugoslavia, Milošević and Tudjman were by far and away the strongest political actors. Initially, they operated in the upper left quadrant of the field. By virtue of their prestige, they had the power to change the rules of the field. The nationalist agenda of both individuals lent legitimacy to their conduct of politics by violent, rather than peaceful means. The pursuance of policies using violent means was an unknown strategy for the left side of the field, at least until the most respected actors in the upper part of the left field began lending an air of legitimacy to violent tactics. One can compare with a statement regarding Iraq: "in the general's words, the ethnosectarian violence of 2006 had torn apart the very fabric of Iraqi society".<sup>27</sup>

A further consequence of Tudjman's and Milošević's actions was that if the most powerful actors on the left side of the field weakened the appeal of politics by constitutional means and further put force behind a violent approach, then this would affect the regard in which the remaining political actors were held. The actors who continued to choose the constitutional path found their prestige increasingly eroded, while those who altered their political approach in line with the new violent laws of the field found themselves rewarded—to say nothing of the actors who occupied a permanent position on the right side of the field.

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<sup>26</sup>Consecrating power, the laying on of hands, which certain powerful actors possess as a result of their prestige (symbolic capital) and/or their official position. These actors have the power to determine the value of other actors or positions on the field.

<sup>27</sup>Kilcullen (2009, p. 131).

It should be noted that the friction between the ethnic and the constitutional models was already discernible in Serbia at the time of the First World War, there being few with Yugoslavian inclinations among the Serbian intellectual elite.<sup>28</sup> This should be borne in mind, since Milošević's main political opponents in Serbia were also extreme Serbian nationalists like, for example, Vuk Drašković and Vojislav Šešelj.<sup>29</sup> The latter built the Chetnik movement into a fighting force when the violence began to take hold.<sup>30</sup> This may serve as a clear example of how a politician switches from a civil political agenda to one of violence, as a result of the political rules of the field changing. As one can see, there were underlying spaces of possibilities which opened up with the fall of the Eastern Bloc. Much of the political agenda reinvented a political field, which drew legitimacy from the field as it looked like before the communist era.

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<sup>28</sup> Behschnitt (1980, p. 233). See also Miller (1997, p. 179).

<sup>29</sup> Naimark (2001, p. 153).

<sup>30</sup> Sikavica (1997, p. 141).

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