The Events in 1991

Abstract This chapter deals with the final blows against Yugoslavia as the state it once was and its eventual reduction to an extension of Serbian politics. From the point of legitimacy, one can see this as the height of Milošević political career, even if his power would be strong well beyond this year. Serbian forces attack eastern Croatia and sack the city of Vukovar as the first major hostilities between the two parts of the former Yugoslavia.

Keywords Milošević · Serbia · Croatia · Vukovar · Yugoslavia

Borisav Jovic stepped down as president of SFRY on 15 March 1991, when martial laws were turned down—something he advocated given the situation. By the same time, March 1991, Milošević had abandoned federalism (Plan A), instead of seeking to enlarge the Serbian-controlled territory (Plan B). He repeatedly called for "All Serbs in one state". The code for Plan B was the military line, *Vojna Linija*, which meant covertly arming the Serb *precani* communities, more about that to follow. On 25 March 1991, Milošević and Tudjman met in secret in Karadjordjevo and made up common plans for dividing BiH (Bosina and Herzegovina),

¹Mann (2005, p. 390). Precani basically means western Serbian settlements, e.g. in Croatia.

at the expense of Muslims, but reached no agreement.² Tudjman did not initially favour Croatian independence for pragmatic reasons: a former army general, he feared a JNA invasion. So while bargaining, he was covertly seeking arms and military advisers abroad (as Izetbegović in Bosnia did not). The longer the delay, the more he could arm. Croat emigres were important in funnelling money from the USA, Canada and elsewhere. In the émigré communities, more than in Croatia itself, Ustasha ideology lived on, especially the belief that defending Croatian independence required armed struggle.³ One could say that those Croats who did not want to be restructured under the Yugoslavian communist system emigrated from Yugoslavia, often with staunch nationalism in their habitus.

During 1990 and 1991, the Bosnian Serb areas had been provided with weapons by the Yugoslav Army, as part of the so-called RAM programme. The programme had been public knowledge since September 1991.4 The leading force was the military line where Ratko Mladić played a role, but with Milošević's knowledge.⁵ Mladić began to have increasing political leverage as the situation radicalised, which is noteworthy as he was no politician, but the restructured field opened up a new space of possibilities for him. According to Louis Sell, the political takeover of Tudjman's HDZ regime in Croatia was a major factor for this: "But it was Tudjman's HDZ regime, which the JNA viewed as a modern reincarnation of the murderous Ustasha that really made the generals see red".6 Further, weapon smugglers had travelled between all parties in Bosnia in the year before the outbreak of war selling weapons under the pretext that weapons had been sold to the other parties.7 It is alleged that this weapon smuggling extended right into the Bosnian Parliament. It was therefore not a question of small-scale traders flogging what they could, but of weapons deals in which members of the republic's Parliament were involved, partly the same people who

²Gagnon (2004, p. 103), Mann (2005, p. 381), Naimark (2001, p. 170), see also Donia and Fine (1994, p. 210), although without exact dates and places. [Tribunal update 68. Stipe Mesic's testimony, 16–21 March 1998].

³Mann (2005, p. 377).

⁴Udovicki and Stitkovac (1997, p. 179).

⁵Sell (2002, p. 123), Mann (2005, p. 390).

⁶Sell (2002, p. 122).

⁷Udovicki and Stitkovac (1997, p. 180).

had been responsible for throwing the country headlong into war.⁸ It was therefore common knowledge, more than half a year before the declaration of independence, that the Bosnian Serbs in particular were heavily armed.

Early in 1991, Milošević and the Slovenian leader Milan Kučan declared each nation's right to follow its own path, an agreement which put Croatia in a difficult position as they were not a part of the agreement but bordered to both of the countries—or rather both parts of Yugoslavia. On 25 June 1991, Slovenia and Croatia declared their independence from the Yugoslav Federation. 10 This in itself was the manifest defeat of Yugoslavia as a political system and also for the rules of the social field of politics in the geographical arena of ex-Yugoslavia. Earlier that same month in a statement made in Belgrade, the US Secretary of State, James Baker, had announced support for a united Yugoslavia.¹¹ EU countries such as Austria, Germany, Hungary and Denmark actively supported Slovenia's and Croatia's efforts to gain independence during the spring and summer of 1991. 12 France and Great Britain maintained a more reserved stance, so the EU was far from united on the issue—but in the end it was the active, positive element, not the passive, more muted group that won. The parties thus received different messages from the EU and the USA, which conferred legitimacy for both camps, separatist and federalist alike. The ten-day-long war in Slovenia ended on 8 July 1991. 13 Serbia had no border with Slovenia and neither were there any Serbian minorities in the republic, both factors contributing to Slovenia coming out of the conflict relatively unscathed. Added to this was the fact that the Slovenian forces were relatively strong for a small constituent republic. The absence of Serbs in Slovenia was also something that prevented Milošević from claiming areas of the republic,

⁸ "Rovosi u dusi" Zehrudin Isakovic. Vreme 911216, p. 24.

⁹Sell (2002, p. 128).

¹⁰Donia and Fine (1994, p. 218).

¹¹Donia and Fine (1994, p. 220).

¹²Woodward (1997, p. 219). It should be noted here that the split within the EU was quite marked, with countries like France and Great Britain opposing the separatist line. Ibid., p. 223.

¹³Stitkovac (1997, p. 159).

but overall there was a great deal that indicated that a war with Slovenia would not be a particularly successful venture.

The Brioni Accord signed on 7 July 1991 was a form of armistice after the short Slovenian War. The accord was sanctioned by a significant part of the international community, including the EU and the USA. The agreement recognised Slovenia's independence. This, however, invalidated the legitimacy of all those within the Yugoslav Army who had been willing to take up the cause of Yugoslav unity. There was now no longer either international or national support for the idea. Slovenia's independence rendered Yugoslavia an army that now had separatism, bloody or non-violent, as the only alternative. 14 It so happened, however, that the strongest separatist forces in Croatia and Serbia were not interested in peaceful solutions, which was also no secret to anyone. The army was thus driven into the hands of the politicians who were willing to conduct their policies using violence to achieve their aims in line with their habitus. To describe the political actions of the countries involved as unwise and showing lack of judgement would be an understatement. Milošević was able to exploit this effect to strengthen his grip on the Yugoslav Army. On his part, it demonstrated a skilful exploitation of the actions of other actors, and his knowledge of the local field was overwhelmingly the same as that of the international community.

The Badinter Commission was formed in August 1991, when it became clear that in one way or another Yugoslavia would become partitioned. The Commission's purpose was to ensure this happened in the most fitting manner. It directed that an official referendum should be held in Bosnia, ensuring that the three main ethnic groups should be strongly represented in the voting process. ¹⁵ The intention of the EU and the Commission was questioned by the Bosnian Serbs. From a Bosnian Serbian perspective were the EU not even an actor on the field and thus lacked field specific capital, which is needed for legitimacy. That the EU disposed of other types of capital was of course clear but power is certainly not always followed by legitimacy.

¹⁴Woodward (1997, p. 223). See also Sell (2002, p. 146).

¹⁵Donia and Fine (1994, p. 238). See also Sell (2002, p. 163).

As it has been pointed out by Mann, "the biggest opposition parties were even more nationalist than Milošević". 16 This is true and that's the reason why Milošević could go as far as he could and still win a lot of the confidence of the people—he didn't appear all to extreme even if he went in that direction—the social field was tilting towards a new logic of practice. Still, the blame was still very much on Milošević. He was disposed for opportunism. There was little reason for him to go against the grain and oppose the radical currents which one instead could pick up on and use to build power on. Mann also points out that pre-election surveys showed that important issues for the people was the communist legacy, the economy, living standards, good international relations but also the defense of the nation.¹⁷ The political agenda of the voters looked rather normal for a civil society, at least more civil than the agendas of the parties in Serbia. What can be said is that the demand of defence of the nation—which is perfectly in order to demand—got a dark side in that the definition of the borders westward was a part of the contemporary political discussion. It is not given that defence of the nation is a defensive stance. Despite that Milošević by far had the strongest position on the political field, he did not use it to moderate the political climate; instead, he did go with the flow of the field as a true opportunist in order to maximise his influence.

Another political actor who temporarily rose to some power, Vojislav Šešelj, had experimented with founding a party the year before, 1991. He did form SRP (*Stranka Srpskog Jedinstva*; *The Party of Serbian Unity*) in 23 February 1991. Sešelj did among a host of other things threaten Croats in Vojvodina with expulsion and confiscations and that in no less prominent arena than in the Serbian Parliament. This was certainly a sign of a new political practice in coming. SRP, under the leadership of Vojislav Šešelj, did from its start work for the dissolution of Yugoslavia and a strong Serbian state with Serbia, Montenegro and Krajina within its borders according to the Karlobag–Karlovac–Virovitica formula. From its start, the SRP did form paramilitary units, as a part of its Chetnik modus operandi. They did first fight in the Croatian war and later in Bosnia-Hercegovina.

¹⁶Mann (2005, p. 371).

¹⁷Mann (2005, p. 372).

¹⁸Thomas (1999, p. x).

¹⁹Kerenji (2005, p. 376).

²⁰Stojanovic (2000, p. 465).

²¹Stojanovic (2000, p. 470).

In August, war broke out between Serbia and Croatia. The sacking of the city Vukovar was a brutal affair with high causalities on all sides. The JNA did expectedly side with Serbia, or in other words: "The war in Croatia fully revealed the teaming up of the Serbian and the army leaderships, and turned JNA into an instrument of the Serbian regime's policy". 22 It is important to note that the army was very much associated with the communist party, which Milošević was the heir of. For example had JNA a representation of its own in The League of Communists of Yugoslavia, which only the Yugoslav republics had representation in.²³ The army was thus integrated into the politics and had power at stake; if the system dissolved, then the army would lose power: "The party domination over the army resulted in the ideological organisation of the JNA, and, accordingly of the whole defence system". 24 Still, despite the army's intentions, it didn't exercise enough control to actually have its soldiers to turn up, which also is an indicator of the lack or popular support in Serbia for a war in Croatia. The Yugoslav Army was short of 18 divisions at the start of the Croatian War. The shortage was the result of desertion and a refusal to report for military service. TV meanwhile served to legitimise local nationalism and blinker out moderating opinion.²⁵ In fact, 50-85% of Serbs called up to fight in Croatia didn't show up.²⁶ This is a circumstantial evidence that the war in Croatia but also to an extent in Bosnia was more of a top-down war than a bottom-up war.²⁷ But then again, few wars are forced upon the political leadership by the population. Knowledge of this could have made psychological operations of value at this stage, certainly as it is not the question of direct military intervention which would have been impossible at this stage. One can always discuss the value of PSYOPS, but in the end it is an empirical question if it is of value on the given situation or not.

The sacking of Vukovar in Eastern Croatia did also include paramilitary forces, not only the army. The most notorious was *Arkan's Tigers*. Arkan was the leader of the football hooligans of the Red Star. These

²²Hadzic (2000, p. 527).

²³Pesic (1996, p. 44).

²⁴Hadzic (2000, p. 514).

 $^{^{25}}$ For example, Miloševic (1997, p. 108). For more on the recruiting problem: Sikavica (1997, p. 142).

²⁶Gagnon (2004, p. 109).

²⁷Gagnon (2004, p. 51).

hooligans were the core of his "Tigers". ²⁸ Arkan had personal contact with Milošević, and Arkan made no secret of his contacts with the state security in Serbia.²⁹ The Cetniks under Šešelj also had their own force, and Šešelj made gory statements as: "We must cut the Croats' throats, not with a knife but a rusty spoon". 30 This complemented with the Chetnik paramilitary group White Eagle's leader Mirko Jovic who said, "We are not only interested in Serbia but in a Christian, Orthodox Serbia, with no mosques or unbelievers [...] I am all for the clearing operations". 31 The Chetniks were armed by the JNA and Arkan's Tigers by the Ministry of Interior of Serbia.³² Vuk Drašković' SPO also had a paramilitary group the "Serbian Guard" which was formed in 1991 and also saw combat.³³ Ironically, Croatian Police captured Arkan in November 1990 in Croatia but happened to release him to Belgrade in June 1991, just before the war started.³⁴ Fighting did not only occur in eastern Croatia, but also in the Serb-dominated Krajina in Croatia. Croatia lost control of Krajina between June and December 1991. The intention for the local Serbs was to make it a part of the reformed Yugoslavia.³⁵

Acting fast, Germany formally recognised Croatia on 23 December 1991. Neither the EU as an institution nor Germany individually did ensure that Croatia held to the guarantees made to the minorities living within Croatia's boundaries.³⁶ This was a signal to the Serbian minorities in Croatia—but also in Bosnia—that they would have to rely on the remnants of Yugoslavia, i.e. Serbia, rather than the international community for their security as violence already had been shown in full force in other parts of the now defunct state of Yugoslavia. This threatening situation for Serbs was what Milošević had warned against earlier. He had been shown right—despite the fact that his reasoning had no

²⁸Colovic (1996, p. 386).

²⁹ Miljkovic and Hoare (2005, p. 205). Pavlakovic' (2005, p. 22).

³⁰Mann (2005, p. 392).

³¹Cited in Mann (2005, p. 392).

³²Mann (2005, p. 392).

³³Stojanovic (2000, p. 475). 12/13 March Draskovic released from prison. Thomas, p. x.

³⁴Gagnon (2004, p. 147).

³⁵Lukic' (2005, p. 55). The conflict in Krajina in 1992 did result in an estimate of 3000–6000 deaths. Tabeau and Bijak (2005, p. 198).

³⁶Woodward (1997, p. 226).

realistic foundation at the time but rather was propagandistic. By failing to put pressure on Croatia, the EU managed once again to strengthen the legitimacy of Milošević's policies and his position on the political field of Serbia in general (or parts of a Yugoslavian political field if one wants to define the social space as such). This was a legitimacy that he had previously lacked among many Serbs who earlier had been uncertain about him. This was also a decisive blow to the Serbian politicians who still sought a peaceful agenda by constitutional civil political means they found themselves stripped of their legitimacy as a result of having argued against Milošević's earlier preaching that the international community was against the Serbs. On the other hand, the war was polarising and popular support was not necessarily strengthened by making war on neighbours. Unsurprisingly, the war reduced Milošević's popularity. Faced by public opposition, in 1991 (and also 1993 due to Bosnia) he resorted to coercion. His formidable police powers ultimately swept demonstrators off the streets and closed down independent media on trumped-up charges.³⁷ Milošević marginalised and tried to silence the opposition in 1991.³⁸ One can discuss the media's role when it came to unleashing the more grievous events in the breakup of Yugoslavia. A lot of the papers, as Vreme, had a rather balanced view and some got in trouble for its criticism against Milošević. But when one looks at a social field, one should bear in mind that the vehicles of information differ between different social groups but also within general social classes, their way of distinction differs. TV Novosti was a weekly Serbian paper with the middle class and lower class as primary consumers. On 12 July 1991, one could read the following in it: "Concealed by the so-called 'Brioni Declaration', which in fact simply froze the Yugoslav Army disaster in Slovenia while obliging the army in Croatia to withdraw to barracks, leaving the Serb inhabited areas at the mercy of the new pro-Ustasha government—whose genocide intentions could not be doubted-it is hardly necessary to draw the parallel with the Yugoslav catastrophe of April 1941".39 The reference to the Second World War

³⁷Mann (2005, p. 373).

³⁸Gagnon (2004, p. 103).

³⁹Cited in Markovic (2000, p. 605).

is a clear way of giving legitimacy to a construction of history which prescribed a violent political agenda. Another example is *Illustronova Politika* which was a weekly Serbian paper with the middle class as target. On 30 July 1991, one could read in it: "Our motive is not to allow a repeat of 1941 when the Ustasha, the ancestors of today's HDZ, massacred the people here". ⁴⁰ Even here the references are clear: do not be a bystander if your people are harassed once again. Historical references were used like this to tap further capital into the agendas of those with political power.

Others reacted in other ways. The rather belligerent and nationalistic Drašković changed his agenda very much after the sacking of Vukovar. Drašković lost influence as he turned his political agenda around; he was not convincing as a liberal and old hardliners left. His habitus was not structured for such a turn. Drašković transformed as a politician and wanted peaceful means as political practice. Still, he wanted Croatia to cede areas both to Serbia and to BiH (in the latter case, it would be the ceding of Krajina from Croatia) (Fig. 7.1).

It should be emphasised that the dangerous political process described above occurred just before the war and sometime into it. The question of guilt for this process is not the most relevant, rather *how is it that X happens*. Regardless of intent, one must say that Tudjman, Milošević and many other actors were not status quo actors. Tudjman acted on behalf of his nationalism and Milošević on his own behalf.⁴⁴ There were as seen structural reasons for things to happen, but one must take both actors and structures into account to understand change in society. Some researchers have seen a security concern as the root of much of the violence in Bosnia.⁴⁵ There is some validity in that statement—as it puts emphasis on certain practices and also tries to go for a structural explanation in a reasonable way; even if it does not tell the complete story, not all security concerns result in war. With the changing structure after

⁴⁰Cited in Markovic (2000, p. 606).

⁴¹Mann (2005, p. 374).

⁴²Stojanovic (2000, p. 473).

⁴³Stojanovic (2000, pp. 463, 474).

⁴⁴For an argument about Tudjman and Milosevic not being status quo actors, but from a different perspective, see. Roe (2000, p. 386).

⁴⁵Dulić and Kostic (2010, p. 1067). I disagree that the events unfolding necessarily *needed* a perceived threat, but I do think that there was such a perception and that it contributed to the events. Ibid., p. 1069. There were more factors in play than just threats for these events to unfold.

The fall of structuring structure of the Cold War opens up new spaces of possibilities in the Yugoslavian political field

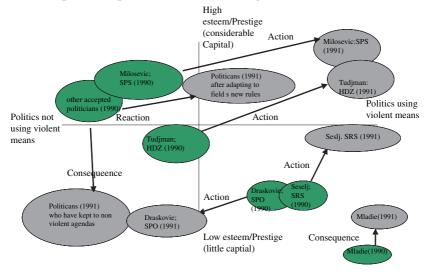


Fig. 7.1 A mind map of the political field of the crumbling Yugoslavia with some of its actors. The field above shows the positions of a number of key political actors on two different occasions. As a result of capital strong actors sanctioning violence as a political means, this method gains legitimacy in the political field

the Cold War, new possibilities opened up and some of the actors had a social disposition which eventually led to the political field changing and hostilities breaking out. There is thus little chance of influencing the process other than with firm, clear and forceful diplomacy. Sending troops in that phase could only have been done with Yugoslavian approval, and was something neither Tudjman nor Milošević would ever have sanctioned. The actual situation at the time was that there were no substantial ground forces available to send from either the EU or the USA, even if they had been given a hypothetical green light to deploy to Yugoslavia. The political field did not provide any viable alternative; when Yugoslavia begun to break up, Milošević's "all Serbs in one state" had resonance. 46

⁴⁶Stojanovic (2000, p. 466).

The scene was set both in Croatia and also in Bosnia for a violent near future. This was not very hard to perceive taken the turns the politicians in the former Yugoslavia had taken and the recent violent logic of practice of the same politicians.

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