

# From Lies to Crimes: The Milošević Switch from Communism to Nationalism as State Policy

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Being 70 years old, with a world war in between, Yugoslavia<sup>1</sup> needed more historical time to develop political pluralism, a rational and efficient economic system, stable democratic institutions and a democratic culture. That could have opened up the full potential of its wonderfully diverse people who, in the process, would, ideally, mature from subjects to citizens, socially conscious, responsible and active for the common good. Representing the polar opposite, nationalists and hard-line communists could not let that happen. The deliberately whipped up nationalism of the largest nation, the Serbs, brought to the fore the nationalism of the other nations, and tore the country apart in a brutal war for territorial expansion and domination. In Europe. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. To any person of today, educated, liberal-minded and brought up in the spirit of humanism, that must sound like a bad joke. Instead, it is a terrible reality that changed the political and demographic landscape of that part of Europe, killed more than 100,000 people, many in genocidal and other core international crimes, displaced millions, destroyed much of the results of previous generations' hard work, caused enormous economic damage in the Balkan region, brought the once respected Yugoslavia, and the Serbs in particular, into disrepute and annulled conditions for human development that had already existed. Nationalism did not bring 'Happiness to the State and the People' that indulged in it. It brought physical, moral, social and economic ruin and gratuitously undermined the well-being, creative capacity, prosperity and dignity of subsequent generations.

Nationalism, as the case of Yugoslavia yet again proved, is a tested recipe for poison. It never fails, and

<sup>1</sup> Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia ('SFRY'), a multinational and -religious federation of six republics: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia. Serbia had two autonomous provinces with large minorities: Albanians in Kosovo, Hungarians in Vojvodina.

always kills. That is why it is repeatedly *used*. So how did Slobodan Milošević<sup>2</sup> do it?

## 1. Adopting the Nationalist Programme – Death to Yugoslavia

The 1991–1995 fratricidal, genocidal war in Yugoslavia flew in the face of Europe's conviction that something had been learned from its difficult, bloody past. Is communism to blame? Or nationalism? Or are they, paradoxically, so related at their core that nationalism, with its destructive nature, automatically replaces communism? Does it lead to violence, and even to the commission of crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide?

By the 1990s, Yugoslavia's specific communist system<sup>3</sup> had also exhausted itself, no longer capable of generating growth. Instead of changing the system they kept trying to mend, the Yugoslav communist leaders caused a deep crisis, including a crisis of the state. The crisis was, nevertheless, surmountable. The Slovenian member of the Yugoslav Presidency Janez Drnovšek advised in 1990 that the country could come out of the crisis only through multi-party changes, further economic reforms and a stressed orientation towards Europe. The question of Yugoslavia, he said, would be settled on the problem of Kosovo, Serbia's southern province with a majority Albanian population. Going the way of united Europe

<sup>2</sup> Slobodan Milošević, President of Serbia 1990–1997; President of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) 1997–2000; President of League of Communists of Serbia, later Socialist Party of Serbia. He died in 2006 at The Hague, just before the end of his ICTY trial for crimes against humanity and war crimes in Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo, and genocide in Bosnia. After the close of the Prosecution case, the Judges upheld the charges finding sufficient evidence on which a reasonable Trial Chamber could convict him.

<sup>3</sup> A one party state with a centrally directed economy, the SFRY had an authentic revolution, and its own path to socialism which did not end in popular revolt as the regime had deeper roots and big support.

would bring “a more stable situation in Kosovo also, which would be acceptable to all those who live there. This can be reached through democratic dialogue”. He cautioned: An attempt to resolve the question of Kosovo through repression could become a constant source of inter-republican disputes and an obstacle to Yugoslavia’s path to Europe and the world. For us Yugoslavs, those prescient words bring a certain incurable sadness, today, in the aftermath of the Yugoslavia tragedy, with Kosovo as its first and its last act.

A 1989 effort by the Federal Prime Minister Ante Marković to implement economic policies leading out of the crisis and preserving Yugoslavia was met by already established Serbian nationalism, Milošević at its helm.

Opposing state organization other than a centralized federation under Serbian domination, Serbian nationalism was on the rise since the mid-1960s. It surged against the 1974 Constitution which to a great extent confederalized Yugoslavia. By the mid-1980s, the nationalists’ resistance, those outside of the Party and the masked ones within, turned into a categorical rejection of Yugoslavia because it was not, nor could it be, as they imagined, “Serbian Yugoslavia”, an expanded Serbia, the Serbs’ war booty. That is neither how nor why it was created, and the other Yugoslav nations would not accept that. Serbian nationalists then pushed their only programme: a Serbian state, encompassing all territories in which Serbs lived dispersed and intermixed with other Yugoslav nations. A Greater Serbia, in which all Serbs would live together, instead of Yugoslavia in which all Serbs already lived together, but, cried the nationalists, deprived of their rights, equality and national identity, economically exploited, humiliated and subjected to – genocide. All that despite the Serbs’ great sacrifices and crucial contribution to Yugoslavia’s creation and their, as was emphasized, unparalleled victimization, the World War II genocide of the Serbs at the hands of the Ustasha Nazi puppet regime in Croatia. Yugoslavia, the nationalists preached, was a Serbian illusion, it was imposed on them, a trap, and a terrible historical defeat. While all other nations gained something with Yugoslavia, the Serbs only lost. The time had come to right all wrongs, to protect and gather, once and for all, the suffering Serbs, both dead (“Serbia is where Serbian graves are”) and alive. A new genocide in Kosovo (and then Croatia and Bosnia) had to be prevented, swiftly and decisively.

Milošević, the leader of the Communist Party in Serbia, adopted this nationalist programme, and gave it the power it otherwise would not have.

The main opposition parties, formed in 1990, offered nothing other. Their leaders emerged from the intellectual circles that had formulated the aggressive, national-

istic agenda Milošević embraced. This consensus on the nationalist platform, and the media, enthroned Milošević as the leader of all Serbs in Yugoslavia. He pledged to make Serbia “whole” and “equal”, by stripping its two autonomous provinces, Kosovo and Vojvodina, of their broad autonomy under the 1974 Constitution. He vowed to protect all the Serbs. In the name of preventing a new genocide, he then led the Serbs into war against their own country and countrymen that could only be waged through mass expulsions, mass killing and other core international crimes because the true goal was securing territories empty of ‘Others’ for a Greater Serbia, as ethnically pure as possible.

## 2. Serpent in the Bosom – Words vs. Deeds

Milošević first had to eliminate the more reform-minded members of the Serbian Party and state leadership who believed that Yugoslavia was in the best interest of the Serbian people and that Serbian nationalism was its worst enemy. He triumphed in September 1987, at the 8th Session of the Party Central Committee, with the support of the closeted nationalists, and orthodox communists, for whom only a one-party socialist Yugoslavia was possible. No giving up of Party control in companies, the army and the security services. While climbing within the Party, safe in the footsteps of its President Ivan Stambolić,<sup>4</sup> Milošević created his own network, also among the ‘old guard’ and in the army.

At the 8<sup>th</sup> Session putsch, a turning point in the modern history of Serbia and Yugoslavia, Milošević removed the head of the Belgrade Party chapter, the biggest in the country, Dragiša Pavlović, who had been warning that problems in Kosovo could not be resolved speedily, as Milošević was promising, nor against the Albanians. Pavlović spoke of a dangerous atmosphere in which any sober words uttered against ascendant Serbian nationalism were construed as yielding to Albanian nationalism. “In preserving their rights, the Serbian people must not be led astray through wrongly chosen methods of struggle, inflammatory words result in nothing but conflagration”. Milošević’s real target, however, was Stambolić, then President of Serbia, whose political fate was sealed by his voice for Pavlović, against nationalism.

That very Session at which he upheld the nationalist programme, formulated a year earlier in a Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences,<sup>5</sup> Milošević

<sup>4</sup> Stambolić, Milošević’s friend for 25 years, was killed in 2000, on Milošević’s order, by members of a special Serbian police unit notorious for crimes in Croatia and Bosnia.

<sup>5</sup> The Memorandum appeared in September 1986 in a Belgrade newspaper under unclear circumstances. It concluded: after four decades in Yugoslavia, only the Serbian nation did not have its own state. It posited that Serbia was in an inferior position, that

criticized any attempt at accusing Party leaders of nationalism. He then renounced it:

Serbian nationalism today is not only intolerance and hatred of another nation or nations, but is itself a serpent deep in the bosom of the Serbian people [...] Serbian nationalists would do the greatest harm to the Serbian people today by what they offer ... namely isolating the Serbian people.

### 3. Media-Made Protector of the Nation

What appears as a relatively smooth and speedy communism-to-nationalism salto mortale in Serbia, in fact was a decades-long process. Milošević was just the visible final episode, the 8<sup>th</sup> Session the first Party forum ever to be directly broadcast on national television.

Milošević “for years paid the biggest attention to the media, especially television”, revealed a close associate.

He personally appointed editors-in-chief of newspapers and news programs, especially directors-general of the radio and television... He was deeply convinced that the citizens formed their view of the political situation on the basis of what they were presented and not on the basis of their real material and political position. What is not published has not happened at all – that was Milošević’s motto.<sup>6</sup>

Already in 1984, in his first speech as head of the Belgrade Party chapter, in a polemic with a Vojvodina representative, Milošević said: “If all hell needs to break loose, let all hell break loose ... not more, not less”.

Hell quite literally did break loose, before his victory at the 8<sup>th</sup> Session, and more so afterwards. From the spring of 1987, when Milošević became the media-made ‘Protector of the Nation’ with his signature phrase “No one may beat you”, uttered after a staged incident at a meeting with Serbs in Kosovo, the Serbian public was increasingly exposed to a round-the-clock threat message about the survival of the Serbian people. There was no escape. Extreme, intense hate propaganda aimed at the Albanians, the Slovenians, the Croats, later the Bosnian Muslims, poured from everywhere – the Church,

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there was an anti-Serbian coalition, led by Croatia and Slovenia, motivated by Serbophobia and chauvinism manifested ultimately in genocide; that the Serbian people was subjected to genocidal terror and neo-fascist aggression in Kosovo, discrimination and national assimilation in Croatia, and total break-up of national unity with the autonomy of Vojvodina; that constant discrimination against the economy of Serbia was “to engrain in the Serbian people a feeling of historical guilt in an attempt to prevent its resistance to the political and economic subordination it is constantly exposed to”.

<sup>6</sup> Borisav Jović, “Last Days of the SFRY”, *Politika*, 1995, translation ICTY, p. 15.

the opposition, the press, television, radio, the theatre, music, sports, shop windows lined with books about genocide against the Serbs, from street conversations. Also from public events organized by nationalistic intellectuals, cultural, scientific and professional institutions. A ‘front of the learned’, it seemed.

The frenzy culminated at the June 1989 celebration of the 600th anniversary of the battle of Kosovo, the central Serbian myth, at which Milošević announced – war. “Six centuries later we are again engaged in battles and facing battles. They are not armed although such (battles) are also not excluded” he told the hundreds of thousands gathered. The fact that the Serbs are a major nation in the region is not a sin, and was not used against others, but the Serbs, said Milošević, have not used the advantage of being great for their own benefit either.

### 4. Borders – an Ultimatum

When the leaderships of Serbia’s two provinces, and of the Republic of Montenegro, were overthrown by Milošević-supported violent mobs called “the happening of the people”, the “anti-bureaucratic revolution” or “rallies of truth” about Kosovo, Serbia adopted the first secessionist constitution in Yugoslavia. Then, in the debate about Yugoslavia’s future, Milošević raised the issue of borders, publicly demanded in 1988, the year Milošević made no secret that “Yugoslavia must be destroyed”. He told toppled Vojvodina leaders that its rich resources, the oil industry, agriculture and banks, were needed in what “would politically follow towards other members of the federation”.

Proclaiming that he wanted the preservation of Yugoslavia, Milošević was categorical:

The adoption of a new constitution (of Serbia), among other things, should prevent any attempt at a quiet transformation of federal Yugoslavia into a confederation [...] there is no confederation *even if all political subjects of Yugoslavia wanted it* [...] In [...] case that a federal Yugoslavia is not wanted, the issue of borders of Serbia is an open political issue.<sup>7</sup>

Borders are dictated by the strong, was his message nine months later. He said:

We must ensure unity in Serbia if, as a republic which is the largest, most populous, we wish to dictate further developments. At hand are issues of borders, therefore, essential state issues. And borders are, as you know, always dictated by the strong, they are never dictated by the weak.

<sup>7</sup> 25 June 1990 address to the Assembly of Serbia on the proposed new constitution.

## 5. From Lies to Crimes

Nationalism is in its essence a violent process, as this narrow fraction of Yugoslavia's recent history is intended to show. As deeper processes unfortunately always escape scrutiny, nationalistic occupation of the public space, institutions and policy, in communist and democratic states, is usually a surprise. For almost everyone but those who engaged in *using* nationalism.

Assisted by the repressive nature of communism and nationalism, Milošević made the switch by abusing the unchecked power of the Party in the communist state. He turned nationalism, a paranoid, disorienting perception of reality and a dangerous primitivism, the lowest form of social consciousness, as George Orwell wrote, into state policy in a state he came to totally control.<sup>8</sup> He waged war for an anti-historical goal requiring massive crimes that destroyed Yugoslavia and Serbian society, all as the leader of "a party of the modern left". His political trajectory and governance, characterized by constant manipulation, went from verbal to physical violence to war, from lies to crimes.

With the start of the war, the instrumentalised Serbian media continued to create a separate reality: others are committing crimes, the Serbs are honourable, with an innate democratic character. There was a widespread conviction that everything was justified against those who commit shocking, media-fabricated, atrocities against Serbs.

The Serbian leaders in Croatia and Bosnia, indicted, like Milošević, for international crimes including genocide, insisted on separation and a single Serbian state because life with the other treacherous, genocidal and jihadist Yugoslav nations was impossible. Non-Serb victims of the most terrible crimes in Croatia and Bosnia were forced to sing Serbian songs, to kiss "the Serbian land", to yell aloud "This is Serbia". The anti-human na-

tionalistic message had penetrated from the highest to the lowest ranks.

Pushing the Serbs into war and isolation, Milošević showered them with promises. Instead, in 1993 Serbia had the longest and second most intense inflation in history. Above 50% in February 1992, it reached 300 million percent in January 1994. Serbia's GDP in 2008 was 30% smaller than in 1989.

The lies about the past, the present, the future, that Serbia was not at war, the criminalized state, main violator of the law, the economic degradation, erased moral values and sensitivity. Nationalism left Serbia under a heavy weight of organized crime, as the war criminals came home, violence, intolerance, all-pervasive corruption, denial of its responsibility for harm done to others and the Serbs themselves, and unpredictable consequences of the trans-generational transfer of the fresh national trauma in a nationalistic interpretation.

Nationalism is the measure of our individual and collective failure in the civilizing process so far. It is the indicator that changes are needed in imagining society, its organization and priorities, and in the meaning, and especially, the conduct of politics.

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<sup>8</sup> "Milošević was an absolute authority regardless of whether he was the Party president or not. Not a single important decision in Serbia was made, nor could be made without him", Jović, ICTY, Milošević trial, 18 November 2003. "He had total control. All institutions in Serbia acted the way he wanted them to. He didn't have a legal basis for that, it was de facto. Who disagreed, he would apply 'happening of the people'", Ante Marković, ICTY, Milošević trial, 23 October 2003.

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