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# The failure of federalism in Yugoslavia

Under various names and constitutions, Yugoslavia has existed as an independent state for nearly three-quarters of a century.<sup>1</sup> For the last forty-eight years, the state has had some form of federal structure.<sup>2</sup> In spite of this history, federalism has failed as a constitutional framework for a polity that embraces a multi-ethnic society.

To be sure, federalism did function for the thirty years between 1945 and 1974, but only to the degree that it was imposed by an authoritarian regime. After the death of Marshal Tito in 1980, the authority of the federal regime was progressively weakened to the point where, in the latter half of 1991, it simply disintegrated. What had been a federation of six republics and two autonomous regions dissolved within less than a year (June 1991 to May 1992) into the four independent states

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This article has been written for those who are not specialists in Yugoslav history, economics, and politics. As such, it contains very few footnotes or sources and those few are confined to English-language publications. Readers interested in pursuing the details in non-English works should contact the author.

- 1 Starting in 1918, the names of the state, in English translation, were: the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The current (1993) Yugoslavia is a rump state which has not received international recognition.
- 2 The constitutions of 1946, 1953, 1963, 1974, and 1992 established the varying federal structures.

of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Macedonia and one, much smaller, 'new' federal Yugoslavia consisting of Serbia, which had already re-absorbed Montenegro and the formerly autonomous regions of Vojvodina and Kosovo. What caused this massive disintegration of a federal system? Why did it happen so rapidly and with such violence?

The answers to these two questions can be found in the chronological coincidence of three factors: ethnic history, the struggle between two different visions of federalism, and growing economic disparities within the federation. Any one of these factors would present a serious challenge to a federal constitutional order; when combined, each factor exacerbated the effects of the other two and in the process produced a truly deadly mixture. Each of the three factors will be examined in turn before their combination is discussed.

#### ETHNIC HISTORY

Yugoslav means 'South Slav,' a term which identifies a distinct group of people, or series of tribes, that migrated into the Balkan region from the northeast beginning in the seventh century. By the end of the Middle Ages several mediaeval kingdoms had existed. Historically, the most important of these kingdoms were three – one Serb, one Croat, and one Bulgarian. Each existed at a different time, but their boundaries overlapped substantially. The existence of these mediaeval kingdoms is the earliest historical source for the territorial claims made by contemporary Yugoslav ethnic groups.

At a later date, all of these areas were absorbed into either the Austro-Hungarian empire or the Ottoman empire. For some five hundred years as the Ottoman empire first expanded into the Balkan region, then contracted in a territorial sense and stabilized, then declined, and finally disintegrated in the early twentieth century, the borders between the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires underwent a series of changes.

Generally speaking, the religion adopted by the local population in any sub-region was influenced by that sub-region's location within one of the two empires. Those South Slavs living

within the Austro-Hungarian empire (that is, most Slovenes and Croats) tended to adopt Roman Catholicism while those South Slavs living within the Ottoman empire tended to adopt the Eastern Orthodox religion (that is, most Serbs) or Islam.<sup>3</sup> However, as the boundaries between the two empires changed over time – especially to the west, north, and south<sup>4</sup> – and as some sub-regions moved from one empire to the other, there were influxes of ‘other’ South Slavs and non-Slavs. Many areas of mixed Serb and Croat population were border areas at one time, as figure 1 shows. Again, over time, some South Slavs who had adopted Islam left their peasant holdings and gravitated to the towns and cities to take up trading and merchant occupations. As a result the Muslim component of mixed population urban areas increased while the Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox component of the surrounding rural areas increased.

With the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires in the course of World War I, the allies at Versailles decided on the creation of an independent South Slav state. This new state was named the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. Its component parts included a small independent Serbia, a small independent Montenegro, some remnants of the Austro-Hungarian empire (contemporary Croatia, Slovenia, Vojvodina, parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina), and some remnants of the Ottoman empire (contemporary parts of Serbia, parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia). Thus, the new state contained South Slavs who followed one of three religions at a time when religion had a major role in ethnic identity: Serbs were Eastern Orthodox; Croats and Slovenes were Roman Catholic; Slavic Muslims were beginning to think of themselves as Bosnians.<sup>5</sup>

The Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was a unitary state with a constitutional monarch (a Serb), a multi-party

3 The South Slavs who adopted Islam did so voluntarily for the most part. They are the contemporary Bosnian Muslims.

4 For example, in the nineteenth century much of Bosnia-Herzegovina changed from being a part of the Ottoman empire to being a part of the Austro-Hungarian empire.

5 The new state also contained substantial non-Slav minorities: Albanians, Hungarians, Romanians, Germans, and Gypsies, to name only the largest.



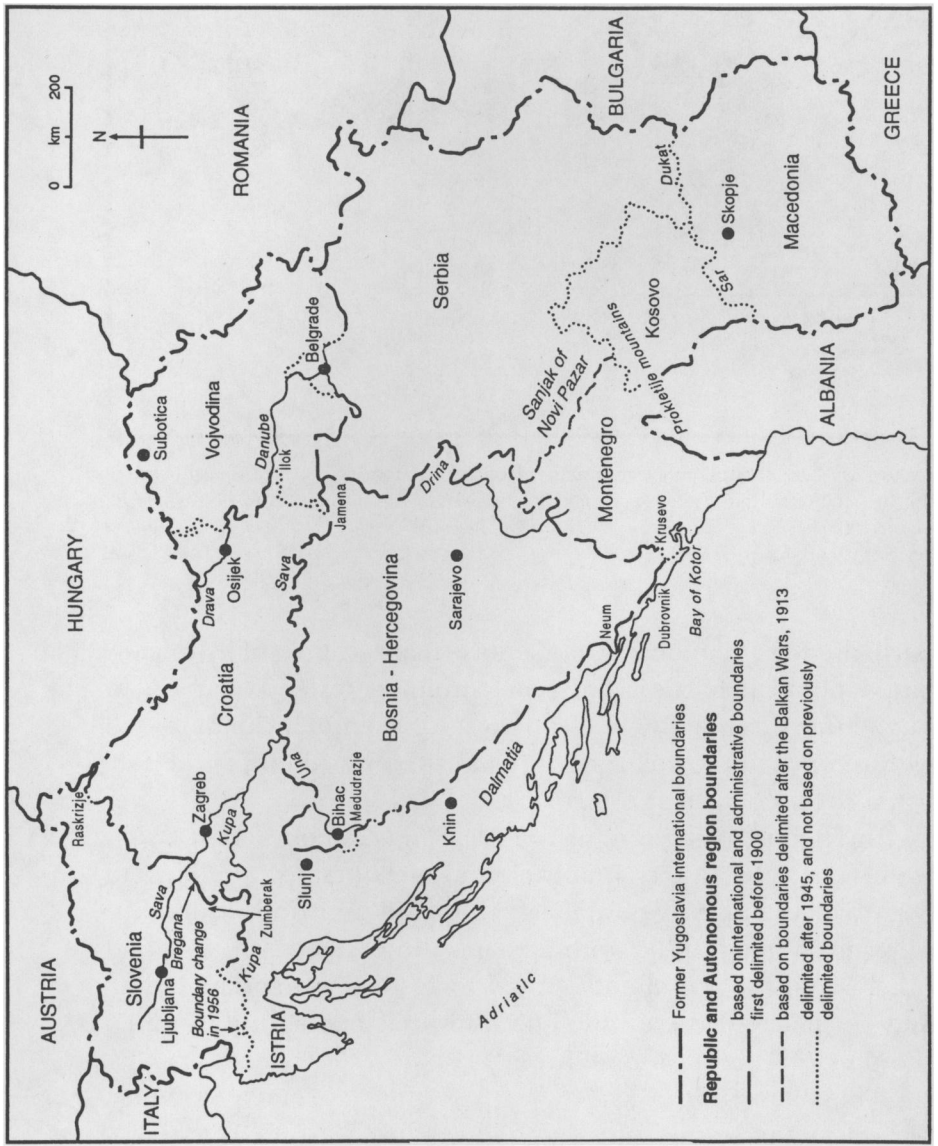
FIGURE 1 The Austro-Hungarian military frontier. Reproduced with the permission of the International Boundaries Research Unit, University of Durham, from G. Englefield, *Territory Briefing – Yugoslavia, Croatia, Slovenia: Re-emerging Boundaries*, Territory Briefing Series 3 (Durham 1992), 3.

parliamentary democracy, and more than a score of ethnically based political parties. This constitutional order collapsed in 1928 after three national elections and seventeen cabinets – all within ten years. Until 1991 this was the only attempt to establish a democracy in this territory.

In 1929 the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was established. It lasted until 1941 and was essentially a royal dictatorship. The king (a Serb) ruled a unitary state in which the administrative sub-units were given geographic, rather than ethnic, names. In this and other ways, the regime attempted to foster a ‘Yugoslav nationality’ in place of the ethnic identities that had so undermined the previous constitutional order.

The years from 1941 to 1945 are an extremely complex period in the ethnic history of the South Slavs in Yugoslavia.

FIGURE 2 The boundaries of the former republics of Yugoslavia. Reproduced with the permission of the International Boundaries Research Unit, University of Durham, from C. Englefield, *Territory Briefing - Yugoslavia, Croatia, Slovenia: Re-emerging Boundaries*, Territory Briefing Series 3 (Durham 1992), 8.





First, it was a period of international war and invasion for the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Germany, Italy, Bulgaria, Albania, and Hungary invaded and occupied large chunks of the territory, while two Axis puppet states were created in a part of Serbia and a part of Croatia. Secondly, this was a period of ideological civil war within the kingdom: the old regime and its supporters versus the fascists and their supporters versus the communists and their supporters. It was not uncommon for one of the three sides in this ideological civil war to collaborate periodically with some of the foreign occupiers to the detriment of its civil war enemies. Finally, this was a period of inter-ethnic war: that is, of local wars in areas of mixed population between Serbs and Croats, between Serbs and Slavic Muslims, between Croats and Slavic Muslims, and between Serbs and Albanians. One characteristic of this complex three-wars-in-one period was the commission of unimaginable atrocities on all sides. Forty-five years later, in 1991, individual, family, and ethnic group memories of those horrible events were still extremely fresh, and those memories engendered extreme fear and hatred as well as a strong desire for revenge.

In 1945-6, Yugoslavia was re-created, this time as a socialist federal republic. The republic was led by Josip Broz Tito, the victorious communist resistance leader of the early 1940s. Although it was a one-party state, that party – the League of Communists of Yugoslavia – had a federal structure which mirrored the constitutional/administrative structure. One of the regime's central policies was to foster a 'Yugoslav' national identity and to suppress the expression of ethnic identity. Nevertheless, the units of the federation – the six republics – had ethnic titles: Serbia,<sup>6</sup> Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Macedonia (figure 2). In addition this constitutional order and central federal policies stemming from it resulted in the official creation of two 'new' ethnic groups: the Bosnian

6 Two parts of pre-war Serbia were declared autonomous regions: Vojvodina in the north and Kosovo in the south. The degree of autonomy in these two regions gradually increased, but in 1989 they were re-absorbed into Serbia.

Muslims (that is, Slavic Muslims in Bosnia) and the Macedonians were declared 'peoples' or 'nations'.

Allocating ethnic titles to the federation's constituent republics had one important weakness. The titles masked the degree of ethnic mixing in most of the six republics. The clearest way to show the problem is by examining the two sets of population statistics in tables 1 and 2. (These figures were accurate until mid-1991. Since then, voluntary and forced migrations, ethnic cleansing, and casualties of the fighting in parts of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina make them *quite* inaccurate for nearly all former republics and autonomous regions.) The data show clearly that the former Yugoslavia was a multi-ethnic state of impressive proportions and that all the units of the federation – with the exception of Slovenia – had mixed populations and substantial minorities. Indeed, even the percentages presented in table 2 mask the degree of ethnically mixed populations in some sub-regions such as parts of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Although the post-1945 regime in Yugoslavia suppressed expressions of ethnic identity, the underlying reality and 'ethnic memories' stretching from mediaeval times to the atrocities of 1941-5 remained. That reality began to reappear with the changes embodied in the 1974 constitution and the death of Tito in 1980. It re-surfaced in two ways. First, in the population at large, there was increasing expression of ethnic identity (as opposed to 'Yugoslav nationality') and a growing perception of social and economic problems in an ethnic context; secondly, among local and regional politicians, there was an intensified use of 'ethnicity' to revisit current grievances and past hatreds.

#### FEDERALISM

The struggle between two different visions of federalism is the second of the three factors which help to explain the failure of federalism in Yugoslavia.

Many South Slavs who were not Serbs – especially the Croats – were unhappy with the constitutional arrangements of the various Yugoslav states from 1918 to 1941. They regarded these



Table 1 Overall ethnic population, Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

Serbs	36%	Macedonians	6%
Croats	20%	Montenegrins	3%
Muslim Slavs	9%	Hungarians	2%
Slovenes	8%	Others	9%
Albanians	8%		

SOURCE: Compiled in part from G. Englefield, *Territory Briefing – Yugoslavia, Croatia, Slovenia: Re-emerging Boundaries*, Territory Briefing 3 (Durham: International Boundaries Research Unit, University of Durham 1992), 16. Percentages do not add to 100 due to rounding.

Table 2 Ethnic population by federal sub-unit, Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

Republic	Population	Ethnic composition
Slovenia	2.0 million	90.0% Slovene 2.9% Croat 2.2% Serb
Croatia	4.6 million	70.0% Croat 11.0% Serb
Bosnia-Herzegovina	4.4 million	32.0% Serb 18.0% Croat
Montenegro	0.6 million	62.0% Montenegrin 13.5% Muslim Slav 9.2% Serb
Macedonia	2.0 million	68.0% Macedonian 20.0% Albanian
Serbia	5.8 million	66.0% Serb 14.0% Albanian 2.3% Muslim Slav
Kosovo	1.7 million	85.0% Albanian 13.0% Serb
Vojvodina	1.8 million	54.0% Serb 19.0% Hungarian

SOURCE: Compiled in part from G. Englefield, *Territory Briefing – Yugoslavia, Croatia, Slovenia: Re-emerging Boundaries*, Territory Briefing 3 (Durham: International Boundaries Research Unit, University of Durham, 1992), 16. Percentages do not add to 100 because of the existence of other minorities in each sub-unit which have not been included in these figures.

unitary states as Serb-dominated to the detriment of other ethnic groups. At the same time some Serbs were also unhappy with those constitutional arrangements for, while they did provide an answer to their desire for all Serbs to be in one state, their degree of political control was not, in their view, commensurate with the sacrifices and casualties that Serbs had sustained

throughout history in support of their own political independence and that of other South Slavs.

The inauguration of a federal state in 1945-6 was met with some relief and optimism as people attempted to recover from their horrible experiences during 1941-5 and to rebuild their communities and the economy. Their optimism was increased by the official state promotion of 'the myth of Partisan solidarity': that Tito (a Croat) had led the multi-ethnic Partisans as their numbers and units eventually spread throughout Yugoslavia and as they achieved liberation from the occupying forces, thus proving that the South Slavs could collaborate successfully as Yugoslavs. In spite of that early optimism, dissatisfaction with the new constitutional arrangements, albeit suppressed, soon emerged and would grow over the years – especially among the Serbs, the Croats, and the Slovenes. The Croats and the Slovenes noted that Belgrade was both the federal capital and the capital of Serbia and that a large proportion of senior civilian and military leadership positions were held by Serbs. The Serbs, for their part, began to see themselves as essentially losers in an anti-Serb conspiracy, especially when Vojvodina and Kosovo were carved out of Serbia to become autonomous regions.

This general dissatisfaction came to be expressed in the only politically acceptable fashion that was possible in those days – in two different visions of federalism. On the one hand, some people wished to see a more centralized federal structure which would give more power to the federal level and less to the republics. This vision was supported by many Serbs. On the other hand, some people wished to see a more *decentralized* federal structure with more power in the hands of the units (the republics and the autonomous regions) and less power at the federal level. They wanted a structure which was closer to a confederation. This vision was supported by many Croats and Slovenes.

The constitution of 1974 attempted to resolve the growing tension between these two visions of federalism by creating a more decentralized structure. At the federal level, the position of president was replaced by an eight-person 'collective presi-

gency' (with each of the eight representing one of the eight units) wherein one of the eight was elected chairman on an annual rotation basis.<sup>7</sup> The federal assembly was composed of delegates from each of the eight units (six republics and two autonomous regions). The jurisdiction of the federal level of government was confined to foreign affairs, defence, and some joint economic concerns. At the same time more powers and authority were given to the legislative assemblies of the units.

Rather than resolving the tensions, this new constitutional order increased dissatisfaction on all sides – particularly after Tito's death. At the unit level, politics in the governments of the republics and autonomous regions was increasingly identified with the majority or dominant ethnic group in that unit. Throughout the 1980s, politicians at the unit level increasingly used ethnicity as a component of their policies and debates. Serbs in the Serbian republic worked for a more centralized federation, while Serbs elsewhere in Yugoslavia grew more and more unhappy with the governments and policies of the non-Serb republics in which they resided. Croats and Slovenes, for their part, wanted further decentralization to convert the federation into a confederation. Albanians in Kosovo and Macedonia wanted more autonomy and political power. Among some Croats, Bosnian Muslims, and Albanians there was a growing fear of becoming minorities in a 'Greater Serbia' and losing their own autonomy and political power: that is, a fear that the Serbs, by annexing territory to Serbia or reincorporating the autonomous regions or centralizing the federation, would use their overall dominance to the detriment of locally dominant non-Serb ethnic groups.

As the constitutional situation deteriorated, elections at the republic level which took place in the late 1980s and 1990 brought non-communist governments to power in four of the six republics. Thus, communist/non-communist/anti-communist political divisions were added to ethnic and republic divisions.

7 This constitutional provision did not come into practice until 1980, after Tito died.

The struggle between the two different visions of federation continued and even sharpened right up to mid-1991 when Slovenia and Croatia declared their independence.

#### ECONOMIC DISPARITIES

Economic disparities provided the third challenge to the continuance of federalism in Yugoslavia. When the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was created in 1918, the new state had to combine territories which all supported peasant agricultural economies but which had a variety of currencies, landholding systems, and transportation networks which were both rudimentary and rather incompatible with each other. Little progress was made towards the creation of a common economic infrastructure in the ensuing twenty-odd years. During 1941-5 the three wars in one wreaked havoc on the population, through disease and casualties, and on their rudimentary economy. Efforts at economic recovery after 1945 were impressive by pre-war standards, but they resulted in uneven economic development across the new federal state. Some republics – particularly Croatia and Slovenia – used industrialization and tourism programmes to foster their economic development and garner hard currency for further development. Compared with other parts of the postwar federation, they became rich. Other republics – Serbia, Montenegro, and Macedonia – remained heavily agricultural on what was a poor agricultural land base, experienced little industrialization, and so remained the least economically developed and poorest regions of the state.

Within the post-1945 federal state, attempts to even out the levels and pace of economic development across the federation, by transferring federal revenues from the richest republics to the poorest and by making greater federal investments in the poorer areas, were not very successful. Instead, these efforts at balancing economic development exacerbated political differences and jealousies among the units of the federation. The richer, more developed republics and autonomous regions resented paying for the economic development of the poorer units. They wanted the monies from contributions to federal

revenue and additional federal investment for the economic development of their own republics and autonomous regions. The poorer units resented receiving federal 'charity' and the attitudes the richer units displayed towards them.

In 1965, federal economic reforms were introduced which favoured more decentralization in the form of decreasing the revenues paid to the federation and allowing for more economic planning and policy control at the republic/autonomous region level. These reforms created dissatisfaction on all sides, however. Economic disparities increased, as did mutual resentment among the various units of the federation.

#### CONCLUSION

I have suggested that the failure of federalism in the former Yugoslavia was caused by the chronological coincidence of three factors: ethnic history, the struggle between two different visions of federalism, and economic disparities within the federation. Now that each of these factors has been examined, the fact that their coincidence in recent years exacerbated the overall constitutional problems in the federation should be obvious.

The disintegration of the federation is mirrored in the fighting that started in the summer of 1991 and continues as this analysis is being written. Before June 1991, the armed land forces in Yugoslavia consisted of the multi-ethnic federal army and militia-like territorial defence forces in each republic. The latter were locally organized units which were semi-trained and whose weapons were in local armouries. The first months of fighting involved federal army units, but some of these units were not under a chain of command that was either disciplined or effective. These army units were fighting with various types of irregular forces: army deserters who were fighting for their own ethnic group; units of the territorial defence forces in various localities (only some of which were under the control of republic authorities); and, following a centuries-long guerrilla warfare tradition, ad hoc units raised in many localities which took orders from no one. As the fighting continued, it became increasingly a guerrilla war between ad hoc local units in areas

of mixed population, with each unit defending its own small local territory against units in adjacent localities. Neither republic level nor regional political authorities control many of the units fighting within their territory. Hence, the repeated violation of a whole string of ceasefire agreements over the past two years; the multiple roadblocks that humanitarian aid convoys must negotiate over even relatively short distances; the voluntary and forced migrations and ethnic cleansing.

The chaos, anarchy, and horrors that exist in parts of the former Yugoslavia are best described in the following quotation:

Under the slogan of democratization the governments of all the republics have made their lands unmistakably poorer and their people unhappier. Instead of genuine democracy, they have created small, obedient national [ethnic] statistics; instead of free media, media under control; instead of overthrowing the old state apparatus, they have strengthened small state replicas; instead of a free judiciary, a controlled one; instead of demilitarization, a new militarization ...<sup>8</sup>

The extreme inter-ethnic violence, severe social disruption, and economic disaster that has ensued from the failure of federalism in the former Yugoslavia suggest very strongly that in the aftermath there will not be hospitable soil for the re-creation of a federation or the establishment of democratic states in the various independent pieces of the former Yugoslavia for the foreseeable future. At least one generation has been poisoned psychologically.

As the elements of exactly the same situation exist in areas of mixed ethnic population in the former Soviet Union – for example, Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan – and in the Czech and Slovak states, what can be learned from the failure of federalism in Yugoslavia in the hope of avoiding such tragedy elsewhere? There seem to be at least five key lessons. First, the suppression of ethnic identities – particularly where there are inter-ethnic tensions – provides no long-term solution to those tensions.

8 Dubravka Ugresic, 'Parrots and priests: "before" and "after" in Yugoslavia,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 15 May 1992, 12.



Eventually and in various political, economic, and social ways, the tensions re-surface with, perhaps, more intensity because of the previous suppression. Secondly, decentralization (and even centralization) of a federal constitutional order is not a substitute for genuine political pluralism. Thirdly, self-determination as a principle for founding territorially and demographically small and fragile 'nations' or independent states is a formula for political and economic disaster.<sup>9</sup> Fourthly, the political leaders in multi-ethnic states who play on ethnically defined identities, problems, and resentments for short-term political gains should be widely and immediately recognized as the criminals they are. Finally, human rights – and especially minority rights – must receive prominent and meaningful acknowledgment in any federalist constitution because this recognition is the central exercise in establishing a positive environment of trust and confidence-building among the citizens of a multi-ethnic federal state.

9 On this point and a number of other matters raised in this analysis, see John Zametica, *The Yugoslav Conflict*, Adelphi Paper 270 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies/Brassey's, summer 1992).