

Yugoslavia on brink of explosion

by Aglaja Beyes

“Yugoslavia has been abolished as a state,” one Yugoslav observer was quoted in the British *Financial Times* Dec. 4. This view was shared by many after tensions dramatically increased between two of the nation’s republics, Serbia—the largest republic in the southeast of the country, bordering Romania and Bulgaria—and Slovenia, the westernmost republic, bordering Austria and Italy, and the most democratically minded of the republics that make up the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

The provocation was an announcement by followers of Serbian strongman Slobodan Milosevic that on Nov. 1, tens of thousands of Serbs would enter Slovenia through Croatia, march on Slovenia’s capital Ljubljana, and demand that the Slovenians change their policies of westernization.

Milosevic—whom many Yugoslavs are calling the “Yugoslav Mussolini”—and large chunks of the Army, which is largely in the hands of pro-Milosevic officers, want to teach a lesson to the Western-drifting republics of Croatia and Slovenia. Slovenia is scheduling free elections for the coming spring. In response to these developments, Petar Simic, head of the powerful Communist organization in the Armed Forces, warned, “The introduction of Western-style democracy will further enhance the national split in Yugoslavia.”

Actually, Simic and others are threatening Slovenia with a military intervention—and at a later point possibly even Croatia. The pretext was to be provided by Milosevic’s threat to invade Slovenia with tens of thousands of “demonstrators.” The Slovenian government banned the march, and Yugoslavia’s Minister President Ante Markovic and President Janez Drnovsek called upon Serbia to cancel the planned confrontation. Under this pressure Milosevic’s men gave up their plan to march on Ljubljana.

But then Milosevic’s Serbian Socialist Alliance called upon all Serbian organizations to cut ties to Slovenia. Within less than a week, 130 Serbian enterprises announced they were breaking all ties to Slovenia. Yugoslavia’s government convened an urgent cabinet session after which Prime Minister Ante Markovic declared it a violation of the federal constitution to break ties with another Yugoslav republic.

“Overthrow the government then,” rose the war-cry from Milosevic’s radicals. Serbian papers called for overthrowing the “regime” in Slovenia. The Serbian federation of the anti-Nazi partisan organizations, Serbian chambers of commerce, and universities demanded the resignation of President Janez

Drnovsek, who is from Slovenia. As of this writing, Slovenia was expecting an official Serbian offensive to force the resignation of both Drnovsek and Prime Minister Markovic, who is from Croatia. All this is taking place in a climate where the shop windows of Slovenian businesses in Serbia are being broken by whipped-up vandals.

A way out

“Everywhere in Europe and all over the world, Bolshevism, socialism is dead or dying. Only in Serbia it appears as an unshaken vision. Are we in the Middle Ages? Millions of [Milosevic supporters] are calling for a strongman,” a desperate Yugoslav journalist exclaimed in a recent discussion with this author.

While Milosevic is definitely supported by Moscow, he also has visible popular support within Serbia. His slogans include not only, “Serbia for the Serbians,” but he also attacks the Muslims in Kosovo province, and tells the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to go to hell. He has attacked poverty and foreign exploitation, at a time when the Slovenians and Croatians in the government have bowed deeply to IMF demands in the hopes of proving Yugoslavia’s “credit-worthiness.” To the degree that the Western nations turn a deaf ear to Yugoslavia’s pleas for financial aid, this will only help Milosevic and his demagoguery.

Western governments are doing everything to drown those Yugoslavs who want to be friends of the West. On Dec. 4-6 President Drnovsek visited West Germany’s capital Bonn, where he called for financial support, as Ante Markovic had done in the United States in October. But the response from Bonn was no warmer than that from Washington: There were “no bilateral considerations” for any aid or credit. Yugoslavia must come to terms with the IMF and the Paris Club of creditors. Anyway, things were going well, Drnovsek was told: Yugoslavia has unusually high foreign reserves of almost \$3 billion, exports up by 20% this year, an economic reform program to allow private capital, the joint ventures well under way—what need for aid?

Meanwhile, Yugoslavia’s economy and finances lie in ruin. By the end of November, the official inflation rate had approached 2,000% according to the Yugoslav Federal Statistics Office. The official currency, the dinar, is becoming worthless. Prices are issued in West German marks, and few if any Yugoslav mechanics, for instance, will accept payment in dinars.

Yugoslavia is trying desperately to reschedule its \$17 billion foreign debt, and to please its creditors, the country has enforced extremely harsh austerity measures. As a result the official jobless rate is 15% (30% unofficially), farm production has collapsed, and misery is spreading. In Zagreb, the capital of Croatia, which along with its neighbor Slovenia is one of the two most industrialized states of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, one-fourth of the people depend on soup kitchens.