

Twenty Years after the End of the Bipolar World. The Disintegration of Yugoslavia: Paradigm or Exception?

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Twenty years after the end of the Cold War, or, if you prefer, the collapse of the bipolar system, it is useful to reflect on one of its most dramatic partial/regional aspects. To this end, and from the vantage point of the growing importance of regional studies within the field of world politics, special attention should be called to the Balkans and, specifically, to the region of the former Yugoslav Federation, founded by Tito, where tensions boiled over in 1991.

From this perspective, not only is Yugoslavia's central role in Balkan geopolitical problems reaffirmed, but also its legacy can still be felt today, twenty years on, even though other countries in what is commonly known as the "Balkan region" have gradually normalised their situation. Although they have done so at different rates and with varying degrees of success, for all practical purposes, countries such as Romania and Bulgaria are already part of "Europe," whilst others, such as Albania, have made substantial progress on the path "to Europe" as defined through its multi-layered architecture (the EU, NATO, the Council of Europe and the OSCE). The remaining countries of the former Yugoslavia have followed dramatically different dynamics in the ambitious drive towards European integration. Compare, for example, Slovenia with Kosovo, Macedonia with Bosnia-Herzegovina or Croatia with Montenegro.

If Yugoslavia was the core of the Balkans, and its disintegration the most dramatic episode (on European soil) in the entire restructuring of the former Eastern bloc, then it is necessary once again to reflect on and analyse the variables that affected that process. Straightaway, one can hypothesise that no single factor triggered the crisis, as no such explanation has been convincingly put forward in the 20 years that have passed since. In other words, the crisis cannot be attributed to a single cause, whether from a "macro" perspective (the collapse of the USSR, the disintegration of the Soviet bloc), as Yugoslavia had complete functional autonomy within the bloc from 1948 on, or a "micro" perspective (the resurgence of old rivalries within Yugoslavia itself), as the federation clearly did not survive for 45 years by dint of Tito's formally authoritarian regime (single party, communist ideology, etc.), by all accounts the most liberal in Central and Eastern Europe, alone. In short, at the risk of oversimplifying, several factors must be taken into account.

Variables: Initial Consideration

Yugoslav/Balkan geopolitics has always been volatile. A simple glance at maps of the Balkans from 1810 to today reveals constant border changes, a high rate of conflict due to friction between territories and different groups and strong competition between powers far and near. Between the Congress of Vienna (1815) and the early 20th century, the border between the major empires (the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires and, on the outer edges, the Russian empire) gradually shifted east, to the detriment of Turkish power. The two world wars saw (and caused) the continuation of this phenomenon, displacing more people, giving rise to further border changes and accumulated tensions, and sparking the emergence,

disappearance and re-emergence of additional grievances. Whilst this affected Balkan countries such as Romania, Greece, Bulgaria or Albania to a certain extent, it had a powerful impact on what is known today as the former Yugoslavia. As a result, the territory is considered to have its own “post-Cold War geopolitics.” This is what makes the results, some 20 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, so singularly dramatic.

Collapse of the Bipolar System: Breakdown of the International Order

The year 1945 saw the emergence of a new version of the Yugoslavia that had made its international debut at the end of World War I. Following the start of the Cold War and, above all, Tito's falling out with Stalin in 1948, the balance of power in Europe helped Yugoslavia survive as a country and retain its independence. There was also solid popular support for its government and form of state.

However, Yugoslavia's strategic location between two political-military blocs in post-war Europe and its policy of ideological and political equidistance were unable to withstand the collapse of the bipolar structures at the end of the Cold War. Yugoslavia was a “casualty” of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Its role as mediator between East and West and its leadership of the Non-Aligned Movement were rendered irrelevant. As a result, it was no longer able to attract political and economic support from the West. The West's imperviousness to Yugoslavia's new situation was patent in its failure to support the economic reforms undertaken by the Markovic government (1988-91). Economic hardship was one of the factors (though not the only one) responsible for the constitutional crisis, which was used by ethnic nationalists (and, in particular, radical Serbian nationalism from 1986 on) to undermine what was, even by Western standards, a relatively stable and feasible project. It can be argued that Yugoslavia's collapse was due not only to ethnic tensions, nor even to the breakdown of a classic political dictatorship, but rather to the disintegration of the international order, which had exerted a strong influence on Yugoslavia. However, this is a restrictive and merely partial view.

One of the Yugoslav paradoxes with regard to the crisis and collapse of the Soviet Union lies in how Gorbachev's reforms were perceived. Promoting self-management rather than state (Soviet) socialism,

Yugoslav leaders saw perestroika and glasnost not as a loss, but rather a victory for their own brand of socialism. With few exceptions, Yugoslav communists welcomed the policy of détente between East and West as yet another recognition of the success of the Yugoslav path to socialism. The reforms undertaken in Eastern Europe were not viewed as a threat and Yugoslav leaders did not feel in any way imperilled by the changes. However, this view ultimately could not compete with the “end of communism (as a type of state) = end of federalism = rise of separatist nationalisms” dynamic.

As leader of the Non-Aligned Movement, Yugoslavia had a sufficiently independent foreign policy and considerable influence in the United Nations and several other international forums. As noted earlier, the end of the bipolar system took away from this position of high international visibility.

At the geopolitical level, it is worth comparing the case of Yugoslavia to the breakup of the Soviet Union in order to see whether the reasons for the Yugoslav collapse were the same or whether there were other specific factors. Despite certain key similarities between the two cases, such as the end of communism, there was little overlap. This notwithstanding, the fall of the Iron Curtain as a whole did have an undeniable impact on Yugoslavia.

The first step, then, is to identify the cause. A brief analysis shows several causes, rather than just one. Consequently, *multiple* causes must be identified, as none taken alone could have resulted in such fatal consequences (the war between 1991 and 2001). In short, what triggered the collapse of Yugoslavia was the accumulation of several variables (or causes) that are usually taken separately. This could be expressed thus:

$$Event (crisis) = \sum_{n=1}^{Max.No.Variables} importance \cdot causes_n$$

In other words, the sum total of multiple causes (a minimum of one and a maximum of n) of varying degrees of importance led to the Yugoslav collapse.

To perform this analysis, it is necessary first to define the variables (n). The most important ones were as follows:

1. Breakdown of the international order
2. Collapse of the Soviet Union
3. Foreign intervention

4. Ethnic causes
5. Demographic causes
6. Economic causes
7. Nationalist causes
8. Crisis and demise of the Yugoslav federation

Accordingly, “n” can be defined as 8 causes for the Yugoslav Federation as a whole. One problem with this approach is that the causes, or the respective weights thereof, varied in each republic. The equation would thus ideally need to be modified to take into account the specific importance of each cause in each individual republic. The causes would then need to be studied as a whole to understand the collapse of Yugoslavia. However, that falls beyond the scope of this article.

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This is a formal approach, as the internal causes of the Yugoslav crisis can be traced to, at least:

1. The federal leadership vacuum following Tito’s death in 1980 and the paralysis caused by the “Serbian bloc” beginning in 1987, when it managed to block the rotating federal presidency before what would have been the Croat Stipe Mesić’s turn.
2. The fact that, indeed, the Serb minority in the Croatian regions of Krajina and Eastern Slavonia had already held illegal referendums on self-determination in August 1990, and the League of Communists of Yugoslavia had already expelled the Slovenian communists the same year.
3. The fact that the elections in the Federation’s republics (in which all republics participated) were held legally and predated the aforementioned declarations of independence.

A Few Considerations Regarding the Causes

1. *Breakdown of the international order* (implications of the end of the East-West standoff). Yugoslavia’s strategic position as leader of the Non-Aligned Movement, sandwiched between two political-military blocs in post-war Europe, and its policy of ideological and political equidistance were unable to withstand the collapse of the bipolar structures at the end of the Cold War. Yugoslavia could no longer compete in importance with other regions of the world and, as a result, was no longer able to attract political and economic support from the West.
2. *Collapse of the Soviet Union* (breakdown of the international order – direct implications of the demise of the USSR). The collapse of the Soviet Union left Yugoslavia vulnerable to Central and Eastern European fragilities, making way for and “legitimising” different nationalist forces, which depicted themselves as the standard-bearers of “national liberation” alternatives to the failed model of a communist state. The collapse of communism in the Soviet Union had consequences across the continent, with substantial differences throughout Eastern Europe, including in countries that were not part of the USSR itself or of the so-called “people’s democracies.”
3. *Foreign intervention*. Between 1991 and 1995, the sum total of foreign interventions in Yugoslavia consisted of a series of failed attempts at mediation by the European Union and different degrees of engagement by different countries in the crisis. Whereas Germany was accused of being pro-Croatia, there was no denying France’s pro-Serbian bias, the United Kingdom’s general inhibition or the low profile kept by almost all the other countries of the then 12-member EU.
4. *Ethnic causes*. Both ethnic and religious (or nominally religious) factors contributed to the conflict, as did demographic lopsidedness and the socioeconomic gaps between groups. Today, most experts believe that most of the blame (indeed, the responsibility for the plan) for the breakup of Yugoslavia lies with radical Serbian nationalism, beginning with the memorandum published by the Serbian Academy in 1986 and Milosevic’s rise to power in 1987. It is likewise worth remembering that Kosovo’s autonomous

status (enshrined in the federal constitution) was unilaterally revoked by the Serbian parliament in March 1989, well before the 1991 elections.

5. *Demographic causes.* As a result of higher birth rates and heavy immigration, the population balance in Kosovo had gradually tipped in the Albanians' favour. This was cited as a threat, sparking a rise in Serbian nationalism and a backlash against the Albanians. However, this was not a new factor. Milosevic had already manipulated such sentiments for political advantage in 1987.
6. *Economic causes.* The economic crisis of the late nineteen-seventies and early nineteen-eighties and the growing gap between developed and undeveloped regions (whether republics or provinces) severely hampered Yugoslavia's future. The more highly developed republics clamoured for independence with an eye towards future development. The crisis triggered a constitutional conflict, which, in turn, led to a crisis of the State itself.
7. *Nationalist causes.* Communism left a strong imprint on the economy, as well as on social and psychological aspects of Yugoslav society. With the end of communism came new opportunities for economic and social progress. The emergence of national identification as an alternative gave rise to new forms of old grievances and had a decisive impact on the transition. Nationalism was the strongest of Yugoslavia's competing ideologies and, therefore, the alternative to garner most support in the wake of communism.
8. *The crisis of the Yugoslav Federation* (loss of cohesion after Tito's death). Within years of Tito's death, ethnic schisms had been rekindled and certain underlying problems that had been papered over at the end of World War II had re-emerged. Indeed, an unusually quick accumulation of "crisis drivers" hastened the final collapse.

An assessment of each cause's importance shows that some causes were the result of others and that interactions between different causes sometimes had a domino effect, triggering a series of consequences. For example, the impact of nationalism was multiplied by economic and demographic differences, or, at least, by what was perceived as such differences.

Conclusion: Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Dayton Peace Accords as Paradigm and Metaphor

Subsequent events are well known: successive wars between the summer of 1991 and September 1995, definitive destruction of the Yugoslav Federation, etc. However, special mention should be made of the final act of the show, for it is no coincidence that all the most destructive aspects of this peculiar historical process are concentrated in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

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Three crucial decisions were taken in late 1995 regarding the end of the war in the Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina and, by extension, in the former Yugoslavia at large. First and foremost, the Dayton peace accords (General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina) were signed on 21 November. Second, a formal signing ceremony was held in Paris on 14 December. Third, the London Peace Implementation Conference was held on 8 and 9 December in the interim period between those two dates. Fifteen years later, one can begin to take stock of one of the most ambitious peacemaking and peacekeeping operations undertaken by the so-called international community, at least on European soil, since the United Nations was founded. From this perspective, the international community's approach to the conflict in the former Yugoslavia was glaringly inconsistent: from 1991 to September 1995, its actions were ambivalent and contradictory; from that point on, it used punishing force against the Serbs in Bosnia and pushed hard to achieve the signing of the Dayton peace accords as quickly as possible. As noted above, this calls for much needed reflection regarding the lessons that the international community must, or, at least, should, draw from the Balkan conflict with regard to both conflict prevention and post-war and reconstruction management.

In short, the time has come to assess the pros and cons of the process launched under the Dayton peace accords, and the results are contradictory. To a large extent, they depend on the original expectations. Put simply, where expectations included, at the very least, full compliance with the accords within one year (or less, if one accepts the initial general election calendar), the results are clearly insufficient, if not flat out atrocious. However, where expectations included, for starters, ending the war, consolidating peace, separating the adversaries and slowly but steadily pressuring all the parties to the conflict to progress towards the same possible solution, then the results are more complex and positive. In other words, it depends on which criteria are used for the assessment and on the time frame used to gauge the results.

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Overall (and this is a valid perspective for regional geopolitics in the Balkans), the outcome is clear: after twenty long years of crisis, war and instability, there is but one horizon, and its name is Europe. This horizon can only be reached by means of internal reconstruction processes in each of the countries involved and through membership and integration in the different “houses of the European security architecture”: NATO, the European Union, the OSCE and the Council of Europe. Quite simply, there is no “plan B,” and it is eye-opening that Serbia has been so slow to join the regional movement.

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