

Central secession: towards a new analytical concept? The case of former Yugoslavia

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Abstract *Political literature customarily defines secession as a movement developing in the periphery against the centre. This article questions this common assumption by raising the possibility that secession may be propelled by the centre. A working definition of 'central secession' (or 'secessionism by the centre') will be limited to those cases where a powerful nationalist movement operates from within the core or dominant nation(ality). The focus will be on the break-up of Yugoslavia – the disintegration of which was consistently and widely perceived as a conflict of secessionist republics opposed by, and confronted with, a unitary state. A brief geo-political excursus of recent secessionist movements will serve to highlight the singularity of the Yugoslav 'model'. In the case of Serbia, the rhetoric was adamantly unitarian, anti-secessionist, even anti-nationalist. It emphasised the defence of territorial integrity at all costs. In this way, the centre could cast itself as the spotless saviour of the country's integrity versus a 'treacherous' periphery. In fact, the hidden agenda of the regime was ethnic separation – of Serbs from non-Serbs.*

KEYWORDS: YUGOSLAVIA; SERBIA; POLITICAL THEORY

Secession can be said to lie at the very extreme of the *exit* pole in the conceptual continuum illustrated by Codagnone (see this issue's introduction). In international politics the norm is 'peripheral secession', namely a movement developing somewhere in the ethno-territorial periphery and aimed against the centre. The assumption that exit is generally a peripheral movement is implicit in Codagnone's framework.

This article aims to challenge the common sense understanding of international politics by raising the possibility that secession may be propelled by the centre. A working definition of 'central secession' or 'secessionism by the centre' will be limited to those cases where a powerful nationalist movement operates from within the core or dominant nation(ality). The empirical focus will be on the break-up of Yugoslavia – whose disintegration was consistently perceived by public opinion as a conflict of secessionist republics opposed by, and confronted with, a unitary state.

The main argument of the article is that the strongest input leading to the break-up came from the geo-politically dominant core of Yugoslavia, that is from Serbia. After realising the impossibility of imposing their hegemony on a re-centralised Yugoslavia, Slobodan Milosevic and his circle opted for a project which, though cautiously disguised, in practice amounted to secessionism. Naturally, the unfolding of events led to a relationship between Belgrade's *crypto-secessionism* on the one hand, and the more explicit secessionisms of Croatia and Slovenia on the other. Yet, I claim that the process was triggered in Belgrade.

One of the peculiarities of 'central secession' lies at the discursive level and warrants clarification here. By seizing the central state, the secessionists do not necessarily develop a secessionist vocabulary, and therefore can act from a secure under-the-table position. With this face-saving gimmick, their 'impunity' is granted. In the case of Yugoslavia, Belgrade's rhetoric throughout the conflict remained eminently 'unitarian'. This strategy was adopted by the nationalists in order both to preserve the international community's support for the regime and to enlist the unconditional assistance of the Yugoslav Army (JNA – *Jugoslavenska Narodna Armija*), which was the last remaining unitarian institution inherited from Tito's years.

To highlight the singularity of the Yugoslav case, the analysis will be preceded by a brief excursus on the theoretical literature on secession and by a synthetic geo-political overview of recent secessionist movements.

In search of a missing concept: from secession to 'secession by the centre'

Secession can be defined as a territorial community's breakaway from its erstwhile host state and the founding of its own separate and sovereign political entity (Caney 1998: 152–3). Secession can be *ethnically* or *territorially* based. In the modern nation-state era, the ethnically-based type is by far the most common. That is, secession normally has an ethnic ingredient. Of the two basic types, ethnic and territorial, the present analysis will be limited to cases of ethnic-national secession. However, the above definition is a post-facto one. Ethnic secessionism as a political trend, that is as a goal before secession *per se* occurs, should be defined on the basis of more trend-oriented criteria. The following aspects should be included.¹

- (a) *antagonist* or *oppositional legitimacy*: an attack on the legitimacy of the existing state, with a stand for an alternative state structure;
- (b) *anti-constitutionalism*: a drive to radically alter or discard the state's present constitutional order;
- (c) *ethnicism*: a view of ethnic unity as the supreme value, superior to the value of the state;
- (d) *irredentism*: an emphasis on territorial reunification of the ethnic kins into a single homeland.

These four factors are the basic political weapons in the prototypical secessionist arsenal, and are universally detectable in all separatist movements, either at an open or tacit level. Estrangement from, and disaffection with the existing political order are hence its basic features: 'Like divorce, [secession] is an ultimate act of alienation' (Premdas 1990: 12).

As mentioned above, the assumption is that only peripheral regions are interested in seceding. There is no theoretical consideration of the possibility that a central regime (or a politically dominant ethnic group) may be willing or attempting to secede. Such cases do exist, however, and the means should be available to describe them properly. A new concept would be needed in political science. This article will use the concept of '*secession by the centre*' or '*central secessionism*', to indicate those cases in which the dominant group wishes to secede from the rest of the social and political unit, normally after renouncing its yearning for total control. Such occurrences are as yet rare, they can happen

when the dominant group perceives a feeling of threat and is invested by revanchist and self-victimising nationalism. An illustration of the latter, fortunately so far politically marginal, is the case of radical Russian ethno-nationalism – presenting the ethnic Russians as a ‘discriminated majority’, the victims of the ‘anti-Russian’ Soviet regime built by Lenin – whose more articulated manifesto can be found in the famous pamphlet *Russofobiya* published in 1989 (in the journal *Nash Sovremennik*, No. 6) by the Russian academician Igor Shafarevich (cited in Codagnone 1997: 56).²

The corollary of such forms of nationalism is the renunciation of control over the entirety of the state territory. A focus only on keeping together the core lands inhabited by a co-ethnic population ensure that this form of withdrawal amounts in practice to secessionism, with possible irredentist implications. Again we can find an example of this in the projects advanced in the late 1980s and early 1990s by some Russian ethno-nationalists on how to rebuild Russia. Building on the famous Solzhenitsyn’s essay ‘How We Should Build Russia’ (*Literaturnaya Gazeta*, 18 September 1990), they proposed a withdrawal from all Soviet territories except Belarus, Eastern and Southern Ukraine and Northern Kazakhstan.³ Were this kind of nationalists to have been in power in Moscow and pursued such a project, the dissolution of the Soviet Union might have unfolded in a less uneventful way than it did, given the inevitable resistance they would have met, if not in Belarus, then certainly in Ukraine and Kazakhstan. While this scenario was avoided in the Soviet Union, I argue that this was what materialised in Yugoslavia.

There are three possible major avenues for the creation of new states: *dissolution* (which includes *empire break-up* and *de-colonisation*), *peripheral secessionism* (Bangladesh, Eritrea), and *secessionism by the centre* (Serbia, with or without Montenegro). The three can occur simultaneously, but it is useful to keep them distinct. Even though dissolution and secession seem to (and often do) occur simultaneously, there is normally a causal concatenation of events. It is crucial to identify where the initial disintegrative push emerged from. Moreover, dissolution can occur in the absence of nationalism, while ethnic secession, whether peripheral or central, is almost inconceivable without it.

Theories of secession

Theories of secession are relevant to understanding, not only the dynamic of the Yugoslav case, but also the Western debacle in dealing with it. International misconceptions about the origins of a crisis are often at the roots of unsound and deluded foreign policy decisions. In other words, ideas and concepts are crucial in framing action. Allen Buchanan posits a similar argument by stressing the need for a double-track theory of secession: one explanatory and positive, the other action-guiding and normative (1991: 2).

The study of secession has been plagued by an evident dearth of theoretical tools. In the case of Yugoslavia, this vacuum has been filled by impromptu interpretations, such as the ‘ancient-hatred’ theory, the ‘clash of civilisations’ paradigm, various ‘civil war’ explanations, and competing conspiracy theories (Conversi 1996).

Secessionism is considered a sort of capital sin in international politics. Since it is hard to reach voluntary agreement on relinquishing the power and prestige attached to geopolitics and demography, secession is seen as illegitimate and

sternly resisted by states and governments worldwide. This partly explains why for some decades secession was not at the top of the research agenda.

In recent years secession has received belated, though abundant, scholarly attention – and this has obviously increased in the 1990s. Even though, in the wake of de-colonisation, some scholars had dealt with related phenomena before (see for instance Emerson 1960), the first low-key attempt to formulate some coherent theories of secession appeared later from several disciplinary angles: Anthony D. Smith in sociology (1991: 123–42) and Walker Connor in political science (1967) approached the issue from the standpoint of ‘separatism’ and ‘self-determination’, while Colin Williams (1982) collected a series of contributions on ‘national separatism’. Crawford Young (1976) attempted the first systematic comparisons in former colonial areas, notably in Africa and Asia. Donald Horowitz (1985) was possibly the first to conduct a wide-ranging comparative investigation of ethnic conflict, in which secession was analysed in detail as one of the possible outcomes.⁴ The moral implications of secession also began to be questioned in political philosophy (see Beran 1984).⁵

The ‘discovery’ of nationalism (and, hence, secession) in international relations shortly preceded the collapse of communism. Most international relation theorists, such as James Mayall (1990), thought that the international system had placed permanent restraints on the possibility of secession, failing to contemplate that until 1989 such world order was a by-product of the Cold War and hence was far from being a perpetual or permanent solution. However, the study of secession really began to take off after the break-up of ex-communist multinational states, engendering a veritable industry. Post-Cold War literature included contributions from several theoretical and disciplinary angles, ranging from rational choice theory (for example, Hetcher 1992, 1995), to peace studies (for example, Young 1994), and moral philosophy (for example, Kymlicka 1998).

McGarry and O’Leary (1993: 14) delineate a typology of possible ways of ‘regulating’ ethnic conflicts. Among the latter, secession is included with ‘partition’ (a term derived from jurisprudence and referring to a form of overlying, conjoint agreement). Both are presented in the framework of self-determination as a political principle. The relationship between secessionism and irredentism also began to be analysed (Chazan 1991; Horowitz 1992). Horowitz (1992) has identified a ‘convertibility of claims’ between the two, a coinage that fits well the present description of Serbian secessionism *cum* irredentism. Despite this burgeoning literature, none of the above-mentioned studies considers the possibility of secession occurring from within the centre. The prevalent assumption is that secession can only take place in the periphery. The possibility that central authorities, or even dominant ethnic groups, may be willing to secede is not even contemplated.

A partial exception is represented by Buchanan, who makes two interesting distinctions: *central* versus *peripheral* secessions; and *majority* versus *minority* secessions (1991: 13–22). In the first case, the area wishing to secede occupies a peculiar (central) geographic position within the country. So, Buchanan aptly describes it as ‘hole-of-a-donut’ secession. It will not merely create a landlocked polity, but one entirely encircled by its erstwhile host state. This would be the case if Tatarstan secedes from Russia. This type of secession, a very rare occurrence,⁶ is central only in the geographical sense. My definition of ‘centre’ is taken to mean not simply the geographical centre, but especially the core or dominant ethno-national component of a state.

As for the distinction between *majority* and *minority secession*, Buchanan does not perhaps sufficiently clarify whether 'minority' is merely a demographic concept or whether it also entails a sociological dimension (related, for example, to discrimination). Indeed, as he recognises, majority secession is usually referred to in scholarly terms as 'exclusion' of the majority by the minority (as in South Africa under apartheid, or in Serbian-occupied Kosovo before 1999). In short, the first criterion is entirely territorial or geographic, while the second is mostly demographic or sociological. But neither is appropriate to explain the wish of a dominant group to carve out an irredentist project from a territory that was at least in part under its direct political control (albeit such control did not remain uncontested in the Serbian case, given the counter-balancing power of other groups).

Thus, in none of the approaches discussed above, is the possibility of *secession by the centre* explored theoretically. The ensuing paragraphs will put 'central' secession in its right context by exploring how it occurred in practice and why its appearance has so blatantly escaped the attention of international politicians and political analysts.

Central secession: possible comparisons or unique event?

Even though I am focusing on Yugoslavia as the quintessential example of central secession, other candidates should not be ruled out. For instance, Czechoslovakia's split can arguably be analysed as an example of peaceful secession from the centre (the Czech Republic), rather than from the periphery (Slovakia). As it is known, the Prague democratising government under the enduring impact of Vaclav Havel's liberal legacy preferred to solve its financial and political disputes with Bratislava by getting rid of the burden at once, that is, by allowing Slovakia to secede, rather than conceding it more autonomy. However, the problem here lies in the fact that the main nationalist movement operated in Slovakia, while the Czech side was relatively exempt of nationalist mobilisations.⁷ Similarly, the case of Russia can disputably be described as a tactic of *laissez-faire* pragmatism, rather than secessionism by the centre proper.

A possible case of potential secession by the centre, or at least of 'majority secession' from the minority, has been advanced by the Reform Party in Canada. This party claims to represent the English-speaking 'oppressed' majority and seeks a re-centralised monocultural Canada at the cost of 'seceding' from Quebec. Yet, the Reform Party is stronger in Canada's Western periphery than it is in the centre of the country per se. Thus, 'secessionism by the centre' would be a misnomer. Moreover, it is only an embryonic form of secessionism, challenged by the existence of a competing 'secessionist' movement claiming a separate identity for each Western Province as well as for Western Canada as a whole, and overlapping with Native American land rights claims (Anderson 1990; Ray and Premdas 1990).

Neither can Eritrea/Ethiopia be considered to be a case of secession by the centre. As is known, Eritrea could secede from Ethiopia only after its allied troops of the Ethiopian liberation movement had captured the capital Addis Ababa ushering in a new regional order.⁸ Since the movement developed in the periphery, this is again not a case of secessionism by the centre.

A case of failed secessionism by the centre allegedly occurred in Nigeria in 1995, as the ostensible coup by General Olusegun Obasanjo had the implicit goal

of secession for the mostly Muslim and Hausa-speaking regions of Northern Nigeria. Eventually, the coup was defeated, its purported leaders arrested and condemned by General Sani Abacha's military dictatorship. Indeed, the entire episode has never been fully proved.

Finally, Singapore can be included as a possible contender: the island's independence in 1965 was warmly encouraged, even pushed, by the Malaysian Federation, since its puissant Chinese majority exerted an all-too-powerful influence on the mainland's own ethnic Chinese minority. Differently from Yugoslavia, the international community did not contest this particular type of secession: hence, the move could occur peacefully and in mutual agreement. Both Malaysia and Singapore were members of the British Commonwealth, which worked as an overarching framework and facilitated the secession. Actually, Singapore fits better the case defined by Heraclides as 'ejection' (1992: 25), rather than as 'secession by the centre' proper.

It is apparent that no case of secessionism by the centre has been successful in creating its own sovereign state, nor in breaking up the existing state – at least if we distinguish 'central secession' (where the state's break-up is actively sought by nationalist elites) from 'ejection' where it is rather given as a *fait accompli*. It is hence a rare phenomenon, one that can occur only in specific circumstances. The ensuing discussion will focus on the case of Yugoslavia. In order, however, to arrive at a final definition of the concept of 'secession by the centre' I will briefly anticipate here the core of my argument.

We have seen that state fragmentation in the case of the former Soviet Union and 'mutual secession' in the case of Czechoslovakia can both be inscribed in a larger historical pattern of state dissolution in which nationalism does not necessarily play a leading role. This was not, I argue, the case for ex-Yugoslavia. In Serbia, a powerful nationalist movement emerged *before* the break-up of the state, first seeking recentralisation under Serbian hegemony and subsequently opting for a *de facto* secessionist hidden agenda eventually leading to the dissolution of the state. From a distant, foreign, international perspective, secession seemed to occur first in the periphery (Slovenia and Croatia). Yet, the other republics of former Yugoslavia were rather pressed into developing their *reactive* forms of secessionism as the abuses exercised by the Milosevic regime made it impossible to sustain the state's continuing legitimacy. Naturally at a certain point an elective affinity ensued between the reactive nationalism of Croatia and Slovenia and the hidden secessionist goal of Serbia. Once the central state was de-legitimised and weakened by the corrosive attack of Serbian secessionism, both central and peripheral nationalism took advantage of the aggravating legitimacy vacuum to press their claims further and further in the direction of independence. I will hence limit my definition of 'secessionism by the centre' to those cases where a powerful nationalist movement operates from *within* the core or dominant nation(ality).

Serbian secession from its early stirrings of to Milosevic's ascent to power

It would be naive to argue that Serbian secessionism erupted suddenly with the collapse of communism as the genie out of the capitalist bottle. The notorious 1986 Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences (henceforth SANU Memorandum), though constituting the crystallisation of *Serbianism*,

cannot be seen as a sudden and unexpected event and its contents were not entirely new.

A form of Serbian particularism, oscillating between an expansionist 'Greater Serbianism' and a more isolationist 'crypto-secessionism', has challenged 'Yugoslavism' throughout the short history of Yugoslavia, from the country's creation in 1918 to the Chetnik guerrilla movement in the 1940s and throughout the rise and fall of socialist Yugoslavia.

Serbia being the first nation in the Balkans after Greece (1822) to have fully enfranchised itself from the Ottoman 'yoke' ensuing a centuries-long struggle (1878),⁹ it was also the least likely to renounce independence in the name of Yugoslav principles. As Seton-Watson once asserted, Serbia would not allow its 'strong wine to be dissolved in the weak water of Yugoslavia' (quoted in Anzulovic 1999: 154). As Serbia had enjoyed independent statehood for four decades by the time the first Yugoslavia was born in 1918 (and as the new state was centred on the Serbian monarchy in Belgrade)¹⁰ it is not surprising that most Serbs considered it as a 'natural' successor, extension, and continuation of the old Kingdom of Serbia.

As matter of fact Serbianism was more a river than a rivulet, but remained below the surface much like a Saharan wadi or a Karst phenomenon of corrosion. Serbian elites have sought an ethnically homogeneous Greater Serbia since the mid-nineteenth century (Cohen 1996). Vujacic, for instance, concludes his analysis of pre-1918 developments in Serbia by arguing that, up to the creation of the first Yugoslavia, literate Serbs in Serbia proper were brought up more in the spirit of Serbian particularism than of true Yugoslavism, the latter being more popular among the so-called *precani* Serbs of the Habsburg lands (1995: 73–4).¹¹ Serbianism became more evident particularly after King Aleksandar Karadjordjevic (1888–1934) assumed dictatorial powers in 1929. In this respect Ivo Banac has observed that, during the first Yugoslavia (1918–41), the Karadjordjevic monarchy was seen as 'the visible symbol of Serbia's state continuity' (1984: 145). Naturally, as long as the first Yugoslavia remained under the control of the Belgrade monarchy, Serbian particularism assumed the forms of a unitarist and assimilationist Greater Serbianism rather than of secessionism. Things, however, slowly changed in Tito's Yugoslavia leading to the re-emergence of Serbian particularism, this time increasingly characterised by a self-victimising mood laying the grounds for the fully-fledged secessionist platform of the late 1980s.

As is known, socialist Yugoslavia, at least on paper, was based on universal supra-national principles and on emphasising a common Southern Slav identity united by the overarching value of socialist internationalism. In the same vein of Lenin's campaign against 'Great Russian chauvinism', the Yugoslav communists were quite aware of the necessity to check Serbian hegemony and Tito's Yugoslavia was the last historical attempt to rein down Serbian secessionism. As stressed by Connor, 'Yugoslavia is unique among Marxist-Leninist states in offering an illustration of gerrymandering as a means of weakening the state's largest ethnic element' (1984: 333).

While the attempt to check the core/dominant national component has been common to both Soviet and Yugoslav state-building projects, it is important to stress, as Vujacic does (1995: 107), one substantial institutional difference: Tito's Yugoslavia's tried to extend its 'centralised federalism' at the party, state and cultural institution levels to the largest republic, Serbia. In contrast, unlike

Serbia, Soviet Russia did not have its own Communist Party, its own Academy of Sciences and other relevant institutions. This led to the equation 'Soviet = Russian' (ethnic Russians being overwhelmingly dominant in Soviet-level institutions). A similar scenario was partially true of the first Yugoslavia, but not after 1948, and especially since the 1974 Constitution. As argued by Taylor:

Old Yugoslavia had attempted to be a Serb national state; in the new Yugoslavia, the Serbs received *only* national equality and tended to think themselves oppressed. There was no longer a 'people of state'. (1976: 261)

It is here useful to reflect a bit more on the different positions assigned to Serbs and Russians in their respective communist multi-national 'federations'. This reflection sheds light on the fact that the Serbs' turn toward secessionism at least in part institutionally shaped. Yet, it was mostly a consequence of their different demographic weight in each state.

Russian elites could not rely on a Russian Communist Party and on Russian governmental and cultural institutions, but they dominated, and identified with, Soviet level institutions. Especially, the Russian *nomenklatura* controlled the CPSU which was highly centralised and was not constrained by any form of equal federal representational principle. The CPSU Politburo and Central Committee did recruit cadres from the ranks of republican branches of the party, but there was no fixed representational quota and, more importantly, Georgian or Ukrainian members of the Politburo were not there as veto-wielding representatives of Georgia and Ukraine interests.

The position assigned to Serbs was in some ways the inverse of that of Russians. Postwar Serbian elites could not dominate and control the federal level Communist Party (The League of Yugoslav Communists) in the same way the as Russians did the CPSU. Since 1948 (and more so after 1974) consociational principles, in the form of representational quotas and the necessity of consensual decisions (that is the representatives of each constituent federal units had veto powers) were extended to the Communist Party and to governmental institutions. Unlike the Russians, a federative Serbian republic was endowed with its own political and cultural institutions. Thus, besides the ideological and demographic roots, the inward turn from Yugoslavism toward Serbianism also has institutional roots (Ramet 1999). In the late 1980s and early 1990s the Serbian leadership 'renounced' control of the Yugoslav party and other 'federal' institutions and by default turned inward, eventually toward secession.

The changes introduced by the 1974 Constitution were promptly incorporated into the Serbian self-victimising discourse. Responding to grassroots pressures, the new Constitution increased the status and powers granted to the two provinces included within Serbia, Kosovo and Vojvodina. These gained the right to participate in federal institutions with their delegates and, most importantly, participated with veto powers within the Serbian Assembly and the Serbian Collective Presidency, while their Assembly and other institutions were completely autonomous from any intervention from Serbia. Precisely this aspect was to become one of the main targets of the mentioned SANU 1986 Memorandum.

Yet, Serbianism was detectable already by the mid-1960s, well before the 1974 Constitution attempted to curtail its growing strength (Budding 1997; Miller 1997). This trend was further amplified since 1972. The dissident Serbian academic Nenad Dimitrijević, for instance, argues that:

... after the fall of the so-called 'liberal' leadership of the Communist Party of Serbia in 1972, a strange alliance was gradually established between the Party and the so-called 'loyal nationalists'. The latter were allowed to organise themselves (primarily through the Serbian Academy of Science and Arts, and the Serbian Writers' Association), and to articulate their positions on social issues in the form of scholarly or aesthetic elaboration of the Serbian national question (again, on the understanding that the regime would not be challenged). Feathers were ruffled occasionally, but the regime managed to remain remarkably tolerant: and only open messages of hatred were subject to censure. (1999: 127)

It was in fact the case that demands inspired by a self-victimising Serbian 'supremacism' were beginning to find expression by the second half of the 1970s, even within the ranks of the Communist Party of Serbia. As early as 1976 Dragoslav Markovic, the most prominent Serbian party politician, had initiated a revisionist move, calling for a recentralisation of Serbia through a dilution of the autonomy granted in 1974 to Kosovo and Vojvodina (Magas 1993: 193). His efforts culminated in 1977 in an internal party document known as the *Blue Book* (1977), disclosed to the public only in 1990 (Vujacic 1995: 277).¹² Anticipating the SANU 1986 Memorandum by almost a decade, the *Blue Book*, though in the cautious double-speak style typical of communist officials, blamed the 1974 Constitution for having de facto curtailed the sovereignty of Serbia by ending it at the borders of the two provinces. The conclusion was that the regionalisation of Serbia was leading to the emergence of the problem of the status of the Serbian 'nation' within Yugoslavia. The document stated that this was a crucial problem in the context of the speed by which decentralising processes were changing the nature of the Federation, and posed the following 'epochal' question: was Serbia able to exercise its historical right to national statehood on an equal footing with other Yugoslav peoples?¹³ The book was not well received within the Serbian Communist Party and Markovic, who earned the label of 'Serbian nationalist', but then in 1988 'was reviled as traitor of the nation' (Magas 1993: 214) was overruled within the party. The *Blue Book* was the first expression of basic elements of new Serbianism that was to resurface in a more favourable political context some years later. Yet, it failed to produce significant political changes.

After Tito's death (4 May 1980), a long period of gestation was needed in order to take full advantage of the regime's dissolution and reach the historical goal of Serbian reunification. All ensuing events indicated that a relatively small elite of intellectuals and politicians were engaged in the revival of Serbian secessionism. From the late 1980s mass celebrations related to major historical events punctuated the political calendar, while the politicians' agenda was replete with historical references. In this way, present-day politics could be publicly perceived as the revival of a millennial history and the re-enactment of an epic tradition of national resistance. At the same time the tide of self-victimising discourse was mounting with the alleged plight of Serbs in Kosovo at its centre:

Stories of threat to property and life, desecration of Serbian cultural monuments and graveyard, arson, rape and murder, proliferated in the Serbian alternative media throughout the early 1980s, finding little response in official circles. (Vujacic 1995: 219–20)

Without any doubt the historical watershed came in September 1986, with the publication of the first draft of the above-mentioned SANU Memorandum signed by the major Serbian intellectuals and rife with secessionist statements – although well-concealed behind a veil of unitarism, and even anti-nationalism. The decision to produce the document was passed by the Serbian Academy

of Arts and Science (SANU) in May 1985. It was the first time that a leading non-party institution was to be openly 'engaged in political questions' (Dimitrijević 1999: 128).

The document was immediately 'attacked' by all quarters (significantly including its supporters), presaging that it would spell the death toll for Yugoslavia. The widespread self-confessed awareness of the dangers it posed may be a further indication that 'secession' and its risks had been carefully evaluated. The Memorandum can be defined as the quintessential document of the Yugoslav intellectual *nomenklatura* made up of pseudo-dissidents who indeed benefited enormously from the regime's covert support. By referring simultaneously to Yugoslavia and Serbia, to socialism and liberalism, to dissidence and conformism, to nationalism and anti-nationalism, to unity and separation, these intellectuals were masters in double-speak or double-voiced discourse.¹⁴ However, the baseline in the document was a stress on Serbian *victimhood*. All the embellished paraphernalia of the classical ethnic secessionist arsenal were exploited, recited, underlined and emphasised countless times in all possible formats and shapes: the Serbs were portrayed as victims of 'genocidal terror' by the Albanians, of 'economic exploitation' by the Slovenes, of cultural assimilation by the Croats, of religious conversion by the Muslims, of systematic historical impairment by the Titoist regime – including an alleged attempt to replace the Cyrillic alphabet with Latin script and the supposed stealing of Serbian writers by 'others' (Dimitrijević 1999: 128–ff.). But the undertone was rampantly irredentist as well, as Noel Malcolm notes:

the fundamental argument of the Memorandum was that the 'Serb people' throughout Yugoslavia was a kind of primary entity, possessing a unitary set of claims and rights which transcended any mere political or geographical division. It was the pursuit of that 'integrity' which would eventually destroy Yugoslavia. (1994: 207)

For the benefit of foreign audiences, Serbian re-centralisation was justified and framed as a wider civilisational crusade to defend the 'liberal' West in its struggle against nationalism, communism and 'religious intolerance' (a code word for Islam). The core argument of Samuel Huntington's *'Clash of Civilisations'* (1997) had already been formulated by the SANU document at an embryonic level. Perhaps Huntington's subsequent explanation of the war in Bosnia as the prototypical 'civilisational clash' should credit the Memorandum's architects more generously.¹⁵

Despite the apparent influence of ideas and ideology, Serbian secessionism as outlined so far could not have led to dissolution and war without a powerful state and party machinery at its disposal. As suggested by Codagnone,¹⁶ the lack of a charismatic leader and of an institutional power basis (in the Russian Communist Party) can probably explain the modest political results achieved by radical Russian nationalists in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Serbian secessionism, meanwhile, moved forward with Slobodan Milosevic's ascent to power in 1987 as President of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Serbia.

Arguably Milosevic's initial project was not necessarily 'secessionist' but became so out sheer calculation (as well as international pressures). By the beginning of January 1989 Milosevic had managed to purge the party leadership of Vojvodina and was planning to do the same in Kosovo. He could also count on the support of the party leadership of Macedonia and Montenegro. He could

thus hope to rely on five out of eight votes at Yugoslav-level politics, but Slovenia and Croatia were beyond his reach. As became clear on the occasion of the Twentieth Plenum of the League of Yugoslav Communists (31 January 1989), this turned out to be an insurmountable obstacle for Milosevic's more ambitious goal of imposing his own project of a new re-centralised Yugoslavia. When the Plenum opened, Milosevic's attempt to substitute the head of the federal party, Stipe Suvar, with his own candidate was rebuffed by the representatives of Slovenia and Croatia, supported by the Kosovo party leader Azem Vllasi. Quite tellingly, it was on this occasion and in the face of such opposition that Milosevic, in his final speech to the Plenum, for the first time hinted at the possibility of Serbia's secession from Yugoslavia:

if Yugoslavia were to be imagined as a political community in which Serbia is divided into three parts and on its knees, then Serbia would be against such a community, against such Yugoslavia.¹⁷

From that point onwards Milosevic did in fact proceed down the road of secessionism, by first 're-taking' Vojvodina and Kosovo, then facilitating the exit of Slovenia, and finally by attempting to let Croatia and Bosnia go only under his own terms, that is without the lands inhabited by Serbs.

The 'official' date of the inward-looking 'secessionist re-centralisation' can be put at 1989, when Slobodan Milosevic de facto abolished Kosovo's and Vojvodina's provincial autonomy, engendering severe protest in all other republics. On 28 March 1989 the new Serbian Constitution was adopted, making Serbia a unitary state. Then Milosevic could symbolically celebrate the re-conquest of the holy land on the six hundredth anniversary of the famous battle of the fields of Kosovo. The celebration of the Kosovo battle on 28 June 1989 was attended by one million Serbs. Such a celebration served to enlist nationalist intellectuals, while marginalising liberal ones.

All these events occurred well before the international community officially acknowledged the break-up of the country. Secessionism by the centre was made possible in Yugoslavia by the fact that the dominant ethnic group, that is, the Serbs, did not constitute a demographic majority. Except for their international diplomatic projection and their military strength, ethnic Serbs were in any event a numerical minority. As such, Belgrade's elites were left in charge of a delicate balance of interests and fragile co-existence. According to the latest reliable census before the break-up (1981), Serbs only made up 36.3 per cent of the overall population of former Yugoslavia (Ramet 1999).¹⁸ In other words, they could not function as a fully dominant group, at least in numerical terms. A consequence of this minority situation (but not minority status) is that demographic imbalance became an emotionally-loaded and a politically-charged factor: as the geo-politically dominant group was not demographically so, the corollary was a sense of demographic 'threat' (similar, in many respects, to the experience of white Afrikaners in South Africa). Among other things, this helps to explain the powerful feelings and fears unleashed by population figures, in particular as indicated by subsequent censuses: The Albanian demographic explosion, that is the high fertility and birth-rate of Albanians in comparison to Serbs (3:1), exerted a crucial emotional impact on the emergence of present-day Serbian nationalism. In Tito's years, remarkable economic aid had been channelled into Kosovo making it the most heavily subsidised Yugoslav region, but this development strategy did not result in a change of basic

demographic patterns. Moreover, in contrast with other nationalities, the Serbs were indigenous to seven of the eight federal units, hence their territorial contiguity was broken apart by what nationalists perceived as Tito's 'imposed' boundaries. If the Serbs had made up the absolute majority, perhaps Serbian secessionism would not have taken place, as other means – such as assimilation, hegemonic control and religious conversion – would have been possible in order to secure that dominant position. According to Lampe, this 'fear of demographic decline [was] shared by many ethnic groups' (1996: 301), mostly as a consequence of urbanisation, and was strongly felt in Croatia. However, it was only in Serbia that it was systematically and unremittingly used to stir up the flames of radical nationalism.

Secessionism and the Army's 'defence' of Yugoslav territorial integrity

This case-study analysis must begin by focusing on a paradox: while the regime was launching a secessionist campaign, the Yugoslav Army (JNA) remained mostly unitarian – at least during the earliest phases of the conflict. In other words, Belgrade's secessionist drive clashed with the army's primary self-identification as defender of the state's territorial integrity. How can this contradiction be explained?

The army's role as a strongly unitarist actor needs some theoretical underpinning. In many countries, the military establishment is the sector most prone to using force as an answer to ethnic tensions. By definition, the military see themselves as defenders of the sacred unity of their 'fatherland'. This quasi-religious fervour renders them often impermeable to the possibility of compromise. Relying on their overwhelming military power, often in terms of super-tanks and sophisticated weapons of mass-destruction against home-made rifles and hand-grenades, the military are generally convinced of the virtues of resolving ethnic conflicts speedily and by force. Protected by an inner conviction of superiority, the army may succeed in convincing the higher government spheres to act on its directives. To some extent, this has been Boris Yeltsin's error in Chechnya.

When the military are unsuccessful in convincing governments about the need to intervene with repressive measures, they may increase their pressures with threats of directly interfering or taking over government affairs. Finally, threats of *coups d'état* justified to defend 'national' unity are not uncommon in semi-democratic or 'weak' authoritarian regimes. Even more frequent is the self-legitimation of dictatorial regimes by the *raison d'état* of defending the state's territorial integrity. This phenomenon is recurrent amongst many (if not most) Third World countries, for instance Myanmar (Burma), where since September 1988 a military junta has been in power officially to stem ethnic separatism. The Islamic Republic of Iran has sometimes increased its appeal to radical Islamic principles at times when threats emanated from regional nationalists – typically in Azerbaijan, Baluchistan, Luristan and Kurdistan. Nigeria's military rulers have also justified their hold on power in the name of the struggle against 'tribalism' (Soyinka 1994; 1996).

Whenever the President of Zaire, Mobutu Sese Seko was seriously challenged by opponents, he used to raise the spectre of the country splitting apart along ethnic lines, and his successor Kabyla did the same. Finally, one of the most

bloodthirsty dictatorships of this century, Ba'athist Iraq, has remained in power throughout the 1980s and 1990s thanks to the perpetual threat of the country's division along its main three constituents groups: Kurds, Sunnis and Shias (Al-Khalil 1989; Makiya 1993). Yet, many of these typical unitarist dynamics were conspicuously absent in former Yugoslavia.

In order to persuade the Yugoslav military establishment of the inevitability of secession, the Serbian regime had to launch the army into a rapid and hopeless war. Although there was initially resistance within the army to commit troops for such a task, the regime easily overcame these oppositions. Once the army was persuaded of the feasibility of the task, its main concern regarded the possible international reactions to the use of force. This obstacle was easily overcome with an informal meeting: Slobodan Milosevic and Borislav Jovic, vice-president of Milosevic's Serbian Socialist Party (and, until 1991, President of Yugoslavia) organised a trip to Moscow for General Veljko Kadijevic, then Yugoslavia's Defence Minister. In the corridors of the Kremlin, it was possible to gather first-hand information about the wider international repercussions of a possible attack. Moscow was then perceived by Serbian nationalists as a possible ally or, at least, a trustworthy source of information on wider global matters, including the likely repercussions of Belgrade's planned actions. Hence, this Russian trip represented the first momentous 'green light' given by the international community to Belgrade for the forthcoming war. The trip's aim was to allay the army's fears about possible Western reactions – and it fully succeeded.

According to Silber and Little (1995), at the secret meeting the Soviet Ministry of Defence briefed General Kadijevic about Western, chiefly American, intentions. The hard-line communists then in charge readily identified Western double standards: the key message dispensed to the Yugoslav generals was that US and European warnings were empty utterances not to be taken seriously. There was no credible threat to Serbian nationalists from the West. Soon after receiving this crucial piece of information, the Yugoslav army launched its military campaign.¹⁹

But how and why did the army yield to this logic? Part of the answer lies in the preceding tug-of-war between the JNA and Slovene public opinion. The most unitarian elements within the army had a long-standing grudge against Slovenia. In February 1987, Slovene intellectuals published a 'manifesto' in the magazine *Nova Revija*, partially in response to the SANU Memorandum. All communist institutions, chiefly the army, were attacked. A strong anti-militarist movement had begun in Slovenia, and subsequently found its voice in the pages of the Socialist Youth magazine, *Mladina*, which openly began to espouse the army's undemocratic trends and its readiness to launch a military coup.

Among the most unitarian and socialist-minded officers was Admiral Branko Mamula. He was defined by *Mladina* as a 'merchant of death' over the scandal of weapons sale to the totalitarian regime of Col. Menghistu in Ethiopia. This was an extremely sensitive issue, since Yugoslavia was a leading arms exporter to Third World countries, including many dictatorships. And Mamula himself had been Yugoslav Defence Minister until May 1988. According to Silber and Little, Mamula recognised later the short-sightedness of his anti-Slovene campaign:

One Slovene noted that, with my threat against the Slovene opposition, I did more for Slovene independence than anyone else. But what else was I supposed to stand up for? (interview cited in Silber and Little 1995: 52)

With wisdom of hindsight, such a boomerang-effect could be belatedly admitted by most of the military personnel involved, yet at the time some of the highest cadres in the army believed they still could act with impunity to uphold unitarist and communist principles with pure coercive means.

Even though the initial trend was to recentralise the country and protect its socialist system from Western pluralist influences (an option strongly defended by Kadijevic), already by 27 June 1990 a basic understanding was reached among the components of the ruling 'triumvirate' (Milosevic, Jovic and Kadijevic). In his 'diaries', Jovic admits his

preference ... to *forcibly* expel them [the Slovenes and the Croats] from Yugoslavia, by simply drawing borders and declaring that they have brought this upon themselves. (Jovic 1995)²⁰

Yet, although Kadijevic agreed in principle, only one week later (4 July 1990) he seemed to resist the plan, leading, in Jovic's words, to a state of 'incredible instability and indecisiveness' (Jovic 1995: 91). On the other hand, Milosevic questioned 'whether the military will carry out such an order' (Jovic 1995: 90). In the end, Jovic succeeded in convincing both Kadijevic and Milosevic of the virtue of expelling the two republics. It is important to stress that the term 'expulsion', rather than 'secession', was used by the leaders, and that it *had* to be carried out with the use of force. The situation of 'instability and indecisiveness' described above, with the consequent potential for conflict between the army and the regime, made the choice of diversionary violence virtually imperative. These plans were hence informally agreed upon one year before Slovenia's and Croatia's secession.

Following Slovenia's and Croatia's declaration of independence (25 June 1991), the army was sent to Slovenia two days later with no effective preparation, nor an overall plan to counter the anticipated Slovenian resistance from the TD (Territorial Defence) units.²¹ Even though an order of disarmament had been issued throughout the Yugoslav territory for the Territorial Defence and other possible challengers to the JNA to surrender all weapons by 16 May 1990, the order could not be implemented in Slovenia due to several factors. Despite their overwhelming might, the JNA forces were insufficiently trained, scarcely motivated and poorly-organised for the event, while its generals turned out to be utterly unprepared for the 'unexpected' resistance from the Slovene TD.²² At the same time, Milosevic and Jovic were well aware that the Slovenes were prepared to resist, but did not even inform Premier Ante Markovic of the planned attack. More importantly, after the first clashes occurred, no reinforcements were forthcoming from Belgrade. All this seems to point clearly to the fact that the regime 'sent' the army to its defeat.

What was the main rationale of this strategy? Perhaps the most important one was the effort to avoid a military coup in Belgrade. Since this likelihood was quite predictable if Milosevic turned out to be openly conniving with any form of secessionism (which he tacitly did), the most immediate threat to the regime was averted once the army was defeated by its own unitarist logic on the Slovenian battleground. Hence, whereas the Slovenian debacle became a crashing all-out defeat for the JNA, it also was the first successful secessionist battle towards the goal of an entirely Serbian state. The 'ten days war' also served to test the reactions of the international community. Its muted response was a further 'green light' for the southward escalation of the war.

The army was dispatched with the perfectly 'legitimate' pretext (at least from the point of view of international law) of having to defend border posts, since Slovenia had not been internationally recognised. As it is known, the war lasted little more than a week, from 27 June to 6 July 1991, ending with a massive withdrawal of JNA forces – the last Yugoslav soldier leaving Slovenian soil on 25 October 1991. The so-called 'ten-days' war convinced the entire JNA staff that defending Yugoslav unity by force was unrealistic. This also gave the regime a new lease of life and new leverage in its further dealings with the army. After conceding an humiliating defeat by the Slovene Territorial Defence, great changes in the JNA became unavoidable. These led eventually to a series of a purges in which the most unitarian, less nationalist, elements were promptly dismissed from the army.²³ The first phase of Milosevic's plan was then accomplished and the military were forced to retire to a less ambitious, yet more ruthless, war in Croatia to defend more openly the goal of a Greater Serbia.²⁴

While no resistance was in the end opposed to repel Slovenia's secession, the case of Croatia indicates a wholly different strategy: the main rationale became seizing as much land as possible prior to any external forces agreeing on a new international order. However, this choice was determined by the course of events unfolding during the first phase of the war. The initial goal of the army was to destroy all forms of resistance in Croatia and bring the country to its knees. According to Norman Cigar:

in 1990, in fact, the JNA made an offer to the Croatian Communist Party leader, Ivica Račan, asking the latter to call in the JNA as a means of legitimacy, with the JNA installing Račan [Tudjman's vice-president] and keeping a communist Croatia within Yugoslavia.²⁵

After the siege of Vukovar, such a task turned out to be unrealistic. The self-declared 'Serb Autonomous Province of Krajina', formally recognised by the Serbian government in March 1991, was the first instance of 'open' ethnic secession in Yugoslavia. The ensuing war to 'defend' ethnic Serbs throughout the territory of Croatia rapidly degenerated into the first fully-fledged campaign of ethnic cleansing.

In a nutshell, Slovenia *could* opt, if it so chose, to exit immediately from the 'federation', whereas Croatia *could* only exit after radically changing its boundaries. It is important here to stress the 'could' factor: the possibility of accepting external secession *faute de mieux* as a masquerade for promoting central secession. When the JNA attacked Slovenia, it did so on the grounds that it had to protect the frontiers of Yugoslavia, rather than protect a Serbian ethnic minority there. The legitimising principle was entirely different. However suspicious, it could be presented as a last-ditch attempt to hold Yugoslavia together. In contrast, the attack on Croatia could be more easily identified as a Serbian separatist assault to destroy definitely the remaining 'federation' from within.

Interestingly, the term 'secession' was not used by either side in their declarations. The preferred Slovene and Croat code-word was instead 'disassociation' (Silber and Little 1995: 184, note 2). Within Serbia's highest circles, secession was only acknowledged as being plausible under extreme circumstances, the predominant discourse still being aggressively oriented towards the maintenance of the exiting state. There was no clear and open pro-secessionist programme at the top level: it was only tacitly accepted behind the scenes. The reason behind this 'double-voiced discourse' is understandable: what head of state could make public statements leading to the eventual break-up of the country without

risking his/her own political career? A posturing, two-faced, Janus-faced idiom, a sort of 'double-speak', is hence strictly necessary. In Yugoslavia this was facilitated by the deep-seated terminological ambivalence contained in a constitutive historical legacy: the very word 'Yugoslavia' had opposite meanings for Serbs (and the international community) and non-Serbs. While for the latter it was genuinely seen as a federation of all Southern Slav peoples (except Bulgaria), for nationalist Serbs it represented already an incipient Greater Serbia, the possibility of which had been curbed and fettered by the 'enemies of the Serbs' – most recently by Titoism.²⁶

Additionally, this Yugoslav example has pointed out that it was rather the international community that strongly opposed the state's dismemberment, while the group which seized control of the state strove for its dismantlement.²⁷ As pointed out by Alexis Heraclides, 'ejection, like secession, is not tolerated by international law' (1992: 25). Such an international abhorrence of secession, together with a search for internal legitimacy, compelled the regime to conceal its secessionist agenda. Hence since the very beginning, Serbian nationalism's crucial task was to obscure all possible reference to either secession or ejection. It had to develop a unitary semblance in order to gain internal and international acceptance. In its early stages, Serbianism even succeeded in presenting itself as a form of 'civic' integrative patriotism, as opposed to the periphery's centrifugal 'ethnic' nationalisms.

In general, there is no alternative for a centralising state other than to conceal all forms of secessionism: even a *laissez-faire* attitude, such as in the Czech and Russian cases, would imply at least a superficial attempt to preserve a modicum of anti-secessionist posture, while proclaiming the devotion to the maintenance of existing borders. As discussed before, the two main reasons for this contradictory attitude are an *internal* one (pressure from the army to maintain a strong unitarian state) and an *external* one (pressures from the international community not to alter existing boundaries). The interaction between these two trends with the contrasting force of Serbian separatism determined the shape of the events that led to the violent break-up of Yugoslavia.

Central secessionism remained the key principle in the overall strategy of Yugoslavia's unravelling, from the siege of Vukovar to the war in Kosovo. For instance, the largest amount of 'ethnic cleansing' in a specific area before the Kosovo crisis occurred in the wake of Croatia's recapture of Krajina, that drove nearly 200,000 people from their homes. Yet, the only 'protest' on the part of Belgrade came in the form of rhetorical gimmicks. In other words, the refugee crisis was utilised by Belgrade uniquely to raise the status of victimhood of the 'Serbian nation' in general, rather than focusing on the affected people, the refugees. There was no real attempt to find a solution for the refugees and there was no convincing endeavour to put pressure on the international community to allow the refugees' return. On the contrary, the regime's propaganda had long psychologically prepared the local Serbian population for the exodus, by cultivating a powerful mental image of a life under siege and convincing the natives that they had no future in independent Croatia and that they should join their ethnic kinsmen. In other words, there was no desire on Belgrade's part to see a multiethnic Croatia that would include and accept Serbs among others. All attempts were carefully arranged to tear apart all forms of ethnic co-existence.

How was this achieved? How did it start? How was the strategy implemented? One of the answers lies in nationalism's mirror-like character: Serbia's

secessionism had its complement in Croatia's derivative secessionism. Several political analysts, casual observers and journalists have discerned the notorious 'allocation of tasks' between Milosevic and Franjo Tudjman, the late Croatia's president. This has been particularly marked in relation to the break-up of Bosnia – where both Tudjman and Milosevic supported their ethnic 'kins'. In many respects, Croatian secessionism under the guidance of Tudjman became a mirror image of Serbian secessionism. It would hence be incorrect to assume that Croatia's secessionism was the root cause of Yugoslavia's dissolution, as initially assumed by political commentators and nationalists alike.

Breaking-up a country from within: the Serbian 'paradigm'

If Serbia was the first mover and the main secessionist player, then Slovenia's and Croatia's secessions cannot be held to be the main cause of Yugoslavia's break-up. In December 1991, premier Ante Markovic, a non-nationalist Croat thoroughly devoted to economic reform, was compelled to resign. He was the last non-Serb to hold such a high office. An ethnically-purified pyramid of power was slowly taking shape, and Yugoslavia had become a mere figment of the Western collective imagination.

The JNA was ensnared in this trap partly by Jovic's and Milosevic's words and deeds, partly by its own naivety: given the close links existing between the JNA and the CPY (Communist Party of Yugoslavia), the former's vision was still entirely imbued with socialist ideology. Given its secretive character and societal isolation, it took longer than other East European armies to realise that the demise of communism was historically irreversible. In the wake of his secret trip to Moscow, for instance, General Kadijevic became convinced that Gorbachev would not last long and that, 'if they could hold out just a bit longer, communism would be shored up in the Soviet Union' (Silber and Little 1995: 138).

The army's ethnic composition was a crucial factor in granting its compliance to Milosevic's orders. Already in 1986, long before the break-up, 60 per cent of the higher cadres and officer corps were ethnic Serbs (Gow 1992: 139–52; Remington 1997). Despite Tito's overall efforts to decentralise the country, the army stood as a lone exception and was one of the few institutions to remain heavily dominated by Serbs. This situation made the army easily pliable to Serbian nationalist manipulation: It was easier for a Serbian-dominated JNA to believe at face value Milosevic's appeals for national unity, his tirades against 'national chauvinism' and his mutterings about unlikely foreign conspiracies to break Yugoslavia apart. Thus, the army openly sided with Milosevic and this proved to be an irreversible choice.

A campaign of ethnic purification had indeed begun within the JNA's rank and file, even before the war. According to the testimony of a genocide survivor:

By 1992 the Yugoslav Army had already systematically 'ethnically cleansed' itself of non-Serbs, even by sending young draftees home from boot camps in coffins. This had been going on for years. Nonetheless, when the army took up positions in the hills around Sarajevo, we Sarajevans still thought of it as the Yugoslav *National Army* ... (cited in Allen 1996: 13)

A further move in the direction of ethnic 'purification' was the transfer of JNA's Bosnian Serb soldiers to units in the Bosnian territory in order to pave the terrain

for the Republic's break-up (apparently on the orders of Milosevic and Jovic). That was the channel through which Radovan Karadzic could finally have access to 'an army of 80,000 soldiers fully equipped with sophisticated weapons which they used to target civilians with' (Silber and Little 1995: 245).

The underlying tensions between Yugoslavism and Serbianism were overcome within the army with a classical 'diversionary' strategy, that is, by searching for possible foreign scapegoats. Externalisation was made easier by Tito's persisting 'Third Worldist' anti-imperialist legacy. In the past, Tito's politics of international 'non-alignment' founded on equidistance between the two blocs had been the national glue infusing the entire country with a strong sense of identity and autonomy in the international arena. As the last bastion of Titoism, the army had never completely abandoned the old vocabulary and ideology of non-alignment. The impact of Serbian nationalism slowly transformed this world-view into a raging paranoia. Conspiracy theories moved onto centre stage: Germany became the primary target (German bankers, Kohl, Genscher, the German media and financial market, Bavarian Catholics, the Fourth Reich), while a Vaticanist plot to 'dismember' the country was promptly uncovered, and neo-Habsburgic machinations in neighbouring Austria and Hungary were being unveiled. Such nightmarish visions were later accompanied by the unlikely coupling of American imperialism and Islamic fundamentalism. Bewilderingly, the latter was 'ad hoc' confused with the supposedly formidable threat emanating from the Albanians' baby boom, aided by Turkey's imaginary drive to expand its control via Bosnia and Kosovo. Despite the farfetched and risible character of these 'threats', each of them proved to be crucial in welding the army firmly to Milosevic's regime. They provided both army and regime with a pretext, a non-verifiable justification, and a face-saving mechanism for the successive loss of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Macedonia. All this was made paradoxically easier by the international situation created after the end of the Cold War.

As one of the leaders who most emblematically incarnated the schizophrenic tensions between Serbianism and Yugoslavism at a personal level, General V. Kadijevic became an outspoken conspiracy theorist (1993). In a dejected attempt to resuscitate the bygone Yugoslavist ideology that had shaped his juvenile Partisan struggle during World War Two, Kadijevic also claimed that:

All possible enemies of socialism and united Yugoslavia had emerged on the scene, Ustashe, Chetnik, Albanian, beloguardist and other factors. We are fighting against the same enemy as in 1941. (cited in Silber and Little 1995: 136)

The JNA's essay to find a new role and credibility led it towards an alliance with Serbianism. The final effect was to forfeit its own legitimacy:

[t]he more the Generals tried to take initiative, the worse they made the situation ... If the Generals were to end up without a country to defend, it would have been largely their own doing. (Gow 1992: 146-7)

At the same time, Belgrade was heralded by the Western elite for its supposed self-defence against fissiparous national chauvinism and ethnic secessionism. If order was needed, let it then be by sword and fire. Belgrade's quasi-sacred task of guarding the status quo, and its very able propaganda to diffuse this image, elevated the regime above all suspicion in international circles. The UN and in particular the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (USA, Soviet Union/Russia, China, France, and Britain) put their weight behind Belgrade's

'unitarist' drive. Serbian nationalist elites took up this role with enthusiastic ardour.

Conclusion

The regime's rhetoric about Yugoslav unity, which it was supposed to safeguard, was a travesty of true intentions and part of a far-reaching historical drift. The unitarist rhetoric served two main aims: one external, namely to convince the international community that Belgrade's option was the most suitable for preserving international stability; the other internal, namely to convince the Yugoslav army that they were fighting for the unity of the country. Before its constituent republics even began formulating the possibility of secession – and long before they were internationally recognised, Yugoslavia was domestically destroyed by Serbian nationalism. Silber and Little concur that 'under Milošević's stewardship, the Serbs were ... the key secessionists' (1995: xxiv).

But how could Belgrade's unitarism be reconciled with Belgrade's secessionism? A crucial contradiction was taking shape behind the scenes: while the discourse of Yugoslav unity served to increase sympathy abroad, it served the opposite function within the country. That is, while it successfully propped up international support for Belgrade, it also inflamed the army against non-Serbs. Blaming international actors provided an easy external decoy for both the army and the regime, instead of confronting the issue of the regime's failure to defend the country's unity. This elementary paradox was ignored by the international 'community' with tragic consequences and must account for one of the greatest stumbling blocks in the understanding of the origins of the war. Beyond the unitary rhetoric, there loomed the reality of the creation of a Greater Serbia, an ethnically pure state for the Serbs.

Hence, Serbian nationalists could not present their secessionist drive for what it substantially was. In order to gain international respectability, they had to emphasise their will to preserve the central state's integrity instead. In this way, they proffered themselves as champions of international legality and watchdogs of the old geo-political order.

The main paradox is that, in such a covert, under-the-table position (that is, by seizing the central state), the secessionists did not necessarily develop a secessionist vocabulary. In the case of Serbia, the rhetoric was most uncompromisingly unitarian – indeed virulently anti-secessionist and even anti-nationalist. It stressed the unity of the state at all costs. This was the posture adopted constantly in international fora.

Nevertheless, all influential political programmes since 1986 (the year of the Memorandum) indicate that the goal of Belgrade's emerging elite was separation, more specifically ethnic separation (Serbs from non-Serbs). According to the definition of secession proposed above, Serbian nationalism was a form of ethnic secessionism due to the presence of at least four characteristics:

- (a) It attacked the legitimacy of the existing state.
- (b) It was based on an anti-Constitutional platform.
- (c) It stressed ethnic identity and unity as a supreme value, before and preceding the state and civic values.
- (d) It postulated the existence of an organic homogeneous Serbian identity, striving towards territorial reunification along ethnic lines.

Although in ex-Yugoslavia it led to war and genocide, secessionism by the centre *per se* has no inscribed predisposition to become virulent. Given a more alert response and careful attention from the international community, the wars unleashed by Serbian nationalism could have been easily avoided.²⁸ But such a reaction from the international community was made impossible by a conspicuous lack of understanding and theoretical tools. Moreover, the Serbianist-Yugoslavist double agenda implied that secession from the centre could only be proffered on terms that would cripple the periphery.

Acknowledgements

My warmest thanks are due to several scholars who commented on some aspect of the paper on which this article is based, in particular to Allen Buchanan, Mark Bessinger and Norman Cigar. The responsibility of what is asserted herein is entirely mine.

Notes

- 1 For a list of factors, conditions and recurrent themes in secession, see Horowitz (1985: 262–5).
- 2 For an analysis of Russian self-victimising nationalism see Brun-Zejmis (1996) and Laqueur (1993: Chapter 10).
- 3 Insight from Codagnone's correspondence with the author.
- 4 For a more recent development of his approach see Horowitz (1997).
- 5 For a recent re-statement, see Beran (1998).
- 6 If geopolitical conditions discourage it, neither it is likely to be accepted by the host state. As a rule, that is why secession happens mostly in the geographical periphery of the host state. There exists, however, a modification of this general norm that is more likely to occur: a dispersed or discontinuous secession, such as (Eastern and Western) Pakistan (1947), before it split up again into two states after Bangladesh's independence (1971).
- 7 On Czechoslovakia's break-up, see Musil (1995).
- 8 Eritrea's independence was declared on 24 May 1993 after an internationally verified referendum (23–25 April 1993) and two years after the 30-year-long liberation war had ended. On the case of Eritrea see Connell (1997); Iyob (1995); Pateman (1997).
- 9 Serbia became officially independent in 1878, yet had already achieved a strong autonomy within the Ottoman Empire by 1833.
- 10 The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was indeed established on 1 December 1918 by uniting the Kingdom of Serbia with the rest, and was then renamed Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929.
- 11 *Precani* Serbs are those who went *preko*, that is across the river into Habsburg lands.
- 12 As reported by Vujacic (1995: 277), the full text of the *Blue Book* was published in Mirko Djekic (1990) *Upotreba Srbije: Optuzbe i priznanja druze Markovica*, Beograd: Beseda: 123–75.
- 13 *Blue Book* (1977): 172 (as cited in Vujacic 1995: 279).
- 14 Following a suggestion by Keith Doubt, (see also Doubt 1996, 2000), I am introducing here the Bakhtinian concept of 'double-voiced discourse'. According to Bakhtin (1895–1975), a double-voiced discourse occurs when: 'the word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention' (Bakhtin 1981: 352) As with Serbianism–Yugoslavism, there are, in effect, two voices speaking simultaneously. The first voice is the one we normally hear, while the second is the one that can be heard beyond those limits. The discourse is hence doubly-directed: towards the outside world in the guise of Yugoslavism, towards the inside in the shape of Serbianism. Both discourses succeed in captivating their respective audiences, each in abeyance of the other. And both discourses are uttered by the same voice. The Yugoslavist parlance reflects the state-centric environment and points to the cultural bias of an international society dominated by nation states. But what lingers on is its own antithesis in the contrasting secessionist discourse silenced by that dominance. Two 'voices' co-exist in the rhetoric with which Milosevic speaks. Its intent and purpose is to tell the

truth twice: the truth of political realism or *Realpolitik* and the truth of ethnic secessionism. In a paradigmatic example of ambiguity and multivoicedness, Belgrade's official discourse carries us in one direction, toward the emphasis on national unity, while the actions of the narrative propel us in the opposite direction. Here the distance between the political and the societal sphere is maximal, even though the former is deemed to represent the latter. At the wider international level, it can only become a 'dialogue of the deaf' that externalises and dramatises the intestine ideological tensions of the regime. The aim of this article has been in part to deconstruct the Yugo-centred monological view by shedding light upon its double-voiced character and revealing its concealed anti-Yugoslavist underpinnings.

- 15 It is not a coincidence that Huntington's book (1997), promptly translated into Serbian, has become a popular and authoritative source among Serbian nationalists. Not only does it reiterate some key assumptions of the Memorandum, but it also lends legitimacy to the entire Serbian secessionist strategy – including its most extreme forms.
- 16 Codagnone's correspondence with the author.
- 17 The quote, reported in Vujacic (1995: 372), is taken from Slobodan Milosevic (1989) *Godine raspleta*, Beograd: BIGZ: 330.
- 18 As the ensuing, and final, Census (1991) was conducted in a climate of extreme nationalist polarisation, its figures are unreliable.
- 19 From the BBC television series *The Death of Yugoslavia*, produced by Brook Lapping, first broadcast in second half of 1995 on BBC Television (UK), and subsequently shown by Discovery Channel (USA) as *Yugoslavia. Death of a Nation*.
- 20 Quoted from the English translation 'The Last Days of the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia', *Foreign Broadcast Service* (FBIS), Daily Report Supplement (East Europe), FBIS-EEU-96-205-S, 22 October 1996: 89.
- 21 TORS (*Teritorialna Obramba Republike Slovenije*). Originally set up in 1974 as General People Defence (GPD) to act jointly with the JNA, it became the embryo of the Republic's army and in 1991 successfully organised the resistance against the JNA, together with the Slovene police.
- 22 For instance, over 10 per cent (2,500) of the 20,000 'federal' troops in the region deserted, surrendered or were captured by the Slovene resistance.
- 23 The most important of these purges occurred later at the end of 1991. A second purge of 38 colonels, generals and admirals ensued in May 1992. See Jovic 'The last days of the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia', *Foreign Broadcast Service* (FBIS), Daily Report Supplement (East Europe), FBIS-EEU-96-205-S, 22 October 1996: 261.
- 24 On the war in Croatia, see Cigar (1997).
- 25 Quoted from Cigar's correspondence with the author.
- 26 Doubt concurs that 'Yugoslavia as a name assumed the status of double-voiced discourse – did it refer to Tito's Yugoslavia or Milosevic's? Whenever the press used the word, it refers to them both' (Keith Doubt, correspondence with the author).
- 27 As a good example, a quote from the former US Secretary of State James Baker: 'All of the Western European allies of the United States and most other European countries, outwardly at least, subscribed to the idea of preserving the territorial integrity of Yugoslavia, unless it was to break up through peaceful negotiation' (interview by Chris Gunness, *Policy and Prejudice: Programme 1*, 15 April 1998, BBC transcript, tape A, band 3: 3).
- 28 This point has been highlighted in all the chapters included in the collection edited by Cushman and Mestrovic (1996).

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