

# REASONS OF YUGOSLAVIA'S DISSOLUTION

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## Abstract

Despite all research done on the subject, Yugoslavia's disintegration remains an unsatisfactory comprehended phenomenon. Initially a rich corpus of studies put the blame for Yugoslavia's disintegration on historic animosities peculiar to Balkans. This approach serves more to satisfy Western on-looker's self-image by distinguishing between them and Balkans rather than to explain the real causes of the country's tragedy.

The alternative approaches suggest that the main reason of Yugoslavia's dissolution was the strategic decisions of the country's elites, who exploited ethnic sensitivities to consolidate their own power. In the power vacuum left by Tito's death in 1980, Yugoslavia's leaders chose to use ethno nationalism to attain or to consolidate power, ultimately leading to their country's destruction.

The aim of this article is to present the main reasons why Yugoslavia has broken down. The article shortly presents the history of Yugoslavia; analyzes country composition in religion, ethnicity, and language perspective; finally it gives overview of major groups of reasons, which caused Yugoslavia's collapse.

**Keywords:** *Yugoslavia, history, dissolution, religion, ethnic, Milošević.*

## Introduction

Yugoslavia was abnormally fragmented country. It consisted of five relatively distinct ethnic groups as well as two substantial minorities, organized on approximately ethnic lines in six republics and two autonomous provinces. Between them these groups spoke four languages and followed three main religions (Estrin, 1984). All these forces were brought into play in the creation of the complex entity called Yugoslavia. Some thought at that time that it was a mistake to attempt to make a cake with so many ingredients. Some think the same now.

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ethnicity, and language perspective; finally it gives overview of major groups of reasons, which caused Yugoslavia's collapse.

### Short history of Yugoslavia

The question, why did Yugoslavia dissolve, cannot be answered without at least short presentation of its history. Therefore, in this section the main events (see Table 1) in Yugoslavia's 80 years history will be discussed.

**Table 1. The main events in Yugoslavia's history**

Year	Event
1918	Foundation of The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes
1929	Country's name changed to Yugoslavia
1945	Socialist Yugoslavia declared
1946	Yugoslavia's constitution adopted
1980	Death of Tito
1989	Slobodan Milošević elected as the president of Serbia
1991	Independence of Croatia and Slovenia
1991	War in Slovenia and Croatia
1992-1995	War in Bosnia
1998-1999	Kosovo war
2003	Yugoslavia disappeared from the map
2006	Independence of Macedonia
2008	Independence of Kosovo. The end of Yugoslavia's dissolution.

After Austrian-Hungarian Empire was defeated in World War I, the Versailles peace treaties defined a new pattern of state boundaries in the Balkans. The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was founded. In 1929 King Alexander I changed the name of the state to Yugoslavia – land of the southern Slavs. The country was founded around Serbian monarchy and the state. Serbia was a small South Slavic country which had successfully fought for its independence from Turkey in nineteenth century. It had nurtured the idea of a united Slavic entity in the Balkans, and had thought on various sides in the First World War (Banac, 1988).

Socialist Yugoslavia was declared by Marshall Tito in 1945. On 31st January 1946, the new constitution of Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia, modelling the Soviet Union, established six Socialist Republics, a Socialist Autonomous Province, and a Socialist Autonomous District that were part of SR Serbia. The federal capital was Belgrade. Republics were Socialist Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Socialist Republic of Croatia, Socialist Republic of Macedonia, Socialist Republic of Montenegro, Socialist Republic of Slovenia, and Socialist Republic of Serbia. Under

Serbian rule were two autonomous units: Socialist Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Socialist Autonomous Province of Vojvodina.

The new administration was profoundly concerned to avoid the bitter internal dissensions which were occurring during the inter-war period, and was therefore pragmatic with regard to policies which might act to hold together the unlikely Yugoslavia's entity. Moreover, the regime started with considerable internal support, and rapidly developed myths of self-liberation which acted to underline the relative independence that these communists sought from Moscow (Lampe, 2000).

Communist rule restored stability, and good relations with the West ensured a steady stream of loans. Later, however, national and ethnic tensions increased due to unequal development and a growing burden of debt. When Tito died in 1980 many expected the federation to break up but Yugoslavia was to survive for another ten years.

In 1987, Slobodan Milošević, a Serbian nationalist, became the Serbian Communist party leader. To the alarm of the other republics Milošević and his supporters revived the vision of a "Greater Serbia," which would consist of Serbia proper, Vojvodina, Kosovo, the Serb-populated parts of Croatia, large sections of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and possibly Macedonia. In early 1989, Serbia rescinded Kosovo's autonomy and sent in troops to suppress the protests of Kosovo's largely Albanian population. Slovenia and Croatia elected non-Communist governments in early 1990 and, threatening secession, demanded greater autonomy. Serbia and Montenegro were the only republics to retain Communist leadership. Milošević was elected president of Serbia in 1989 (Meier, 1999).

After attempts by Serbia to impose its authority on the rest of the country, Slovenia and Croatia declared their independence on 25th of June in 1991. Fighting immediately broke out as the federal army (controlled largely by Serbs) moved into Slovenia. A fragile peace was negotiated by a European Community (EC) delegation, but fighting soon resumed. By the end of July, 1991, however, all federal forces had left Slovenia (Lampe, 2000).

The war in Croatia was more intense. It led to hundreds of thousands of refugees and re-awakened memories of the brutality of the 1940s.

By 1992 a further conflict had broken out in Bosnia, which had also declared independence. The Serbs who lived there were determined to remain within Yugoslavia and to help build a greater Serbia. They received strong backing from extremist groups in Belgrade. Muslims were driven from

their homes in carefully planned operations that become known as “ethnic cleansing” (Meier, 1999).

By 1993 the Bosnian Muslim government was besieged in the capital Sarajevo, surrounded by Bosnian Serb forces that controlled around 70% of Bosnia. In Central Bosnia, the mainly Muslim army was fighting a separate war against Bosnian Croats who wished to be part of a greater Croatia. The presence of UN peacekeepers to contain the situation proved ineffective (Meier, 1999).

American pressure to end the war eventually led to the Dayton agreement of November 1995 which created two self-governing entities within Bosnia – the Bosnian Serb Republic and the Muslim (Bosnjak)-Croat Federation. The settlement's aims were to bring about the reintegration of Bosnia and to protect the human rights but the agreement has been criticized for not reversing the results of ethnic cleansing. The Muslim-Croat and Serb entities had their own governments, parliaments and armies. A NATO-led peacekeeping force was charged with implementing the military aspects of the peace agreement, primarily overseeing the separation of forces. But the force was also granted extensive additional powers, including the authority to arrest indicted war criminals when encountered in the normal course of its duties (Vladisavljevič, 2004).

In 1998, nine years after the abolition of Kosovo's autonomy, the Kosovo Liberation Army – supported by the majority ethnic Albanians – came out in open rebellion against Serbian rule. The international community, while supporting greater autonomy, opposed the Kosovar Albanians' demand for independence. But international pressure grew on Serbian strongman, Slobodan Milošević, to bring an end to the escalating violence in the province (Vladisavljevič, 2004).

Threats of military action by the West over the crisis culminated in the launching of NATO air strikes against Yugoslavia in March 1999, the first attack on a sovereign European country in the alliance's history. The strikes focused primarily on military targets in Kosovo and Serbia, but extended to a wide range of other facilities, including bridges, oil refineries, power supplies and communications.

Meanwhile, relations between Serbia and the only other remaining Yugoslav republic, Montenegro, hit rock bottom, with Montenegrin leaders seeking to distance themselves from Slobodan Milošević's handling of Kosovo.

In 2003 Yugoslavia has disappeared from the map of Europe, after 83 years of existence, to be replaced by a looser union called simply Serbia and Montenegro, after the two remaining republics. The arrangement was reached under pressure from the European Union, which wanted to

halt Montenegro's progress towards full independence. Montenegro duly voted for independence in a referendum in May 2006 (Vladislavljevič, 2004).

Kosovo itself became a UN protectorate and later in 2008 declared its independence. Many authors consider that it is the end of Yugoslavia's dissolution.

#### Reasons of Yugoslavia's dissolution

The consequences of the wars in Yugoslavia have been frightful: tens of thousands have been killed and at least three times that number wounded; millions remain psychologically injured; more than seven hundred thousand people have become refugees; hundreds of thousands of homes have been ruined, families separated (a great number of whom were ethnically mixed), and industrial plants and infrastructure destroyed (Devetek, 1996). But was it possible to prevent this from happening?

Researchers still cannot agree about the real nature and essence of the Yugoslav wars. Difficulties in its understanding and interpretation thus remain. In this section the main reasons of Yugoslavia dissolution are grouped.

Yugoslavia's dissolution was not unexpected. This country for a long time faced lots of problems. These problems can be divided into couple of groups.

#### *Languages issues*

Yugoslavia had the main four languages. Those were Serbian, Croatian, Macedonian and Slovenian. Serbian and Croatian are really similar, though they use different scripts. Sometimes it is even called Serbo-Croatian language. So language number can be reduced to three. However, many Croats, more than Serbs, challenged the idea of single language and put lots of efforts to identify vocabulary that highlighted the differences rather than similarities. Despite that there are a number of meanings conveyed by different words in two languages, the level of similarity and identical grammatical structure seem to give more weight to the contention that there is one rather than two different and distinct languages (Crnobrnja, 1996).

Other two languages – Slovenian and Macedonian – though deriving from the same Slavic roots, are quite different from Serbo-Croatian (or Serbian and Croatian) and from each other. The reality was and still is that the Slovenian and Macedonian population spoke much more Serbo-Croatian than the Serbs or Croats spoke Slovenian and Macedonian. This was a consequence of

some official pressure, but much more of a spontaneous need to master a language in which 80 percent of population could communicate (Crnobrnja, 1996).

The other dispute concerning languages could arise from the fact that besides the languages of Yugoslav nations, one has to consider the languages of national minorities, at least the languages of the two most numerous ones – Albanians and Hungarians. These two are completely different from Slavic languages, and understanding or communication without translation is impossible. Albanian language was spoken more than either Slovenian or Macedonian. Hungarian language was used by more than a half a million people as well.

One must not forget other national minorities – Italians, Slovaks, Romanians, Bulgarians, Turks, Gypsies and so on, who contributed to the richness and complexity of the Yugoslavia linguistic cocktail.

Besides making communication more difficult, the fact that so many languages existed in one country added to the cost of communication, not to mention national identities and sensitivities. Language proved to be one of the important battlefields on which a fight for or against Yugoslavia was waged. So, if the existence of four languages was not enough to add the complexity to the scene, the disputes about their number and relationship of one language to another tended to make the linguistic situation extremely hard to manage (Crnobrnja, 1996).

To sum up, one of the reasons of Yugoslavia's dissolution were language differences. Of course, it wasn't the main reason. In the world a lot of countries use several official languages (for instance, Switzerland having four official languages can be mentioned. But, however, in Yugoslavia's case, language differences also contributed to the collapse of the country. But more important was ethnic differences analyzed in the following section.

### *Ethnic tensions*

It is said that Yugoslavia consisted of five nations, but this statement is also disputable. The Serbs, Croats, Macedonians and Slovenians were generally treated as separate nations. The fifth nation is more disputed. Montenegrins are split between those who believe that they are Serbs but living in a different state or those who claim that they are different nation altogether (Vladisavljevič, 2004).

The disputed was also the Muslims status in Yugoslavia. Usually Muslims are considered as religious group, not a nation. But this is not true in case of Yugoslavia. The notion of the Muslim

nation was introduced in 1963 constitution. Since then one could declare him/herself as Muslim national. This was done in Tito's time to preserve tranquillity in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the Muslims had the majority, though not an absolute one (Kachuyevski, 2008).

Also the number of nations constituting Yugoslavia has been disputed by Albanians, who claimed that they should be treated as constitutional nation and also bolstering their claim for Kosovo to become an independent republic. The key argument was that their population is bigger than three of the nations that have their own republics. The principal counter-argument was that they cannot be a nation in Yugoslavia, because there is already Albanian state, so in addition to that, Albanians in Yugoslavia should be satisfied with national minority status (Vladislavljevič, 2004).

An interesting, one could say even bizarre, dispute concerning nations in Yugoslavia involved the question whether Yugoslavs should be treated as nationality, because around 5% of Yugoslavia's population identify themselves as Yugoslavs (Somer, 2001).

So it can be seen that there are lots of disputes over number of nations that lived in Yugoslavia. It is officially declared that there were five nations, not taking into count Albanians, Muslims and Yugoslavs, but meanwhile considering Montenegrins as a separate nation. Apart from this, other attitudes can be found as well.

In addition to all these disagreements, the main patterns of bias why Yugoslavia dissolved involve the ethnic lines of the two major groups in the post-Yugoslav conflict during the '90s. Croatian social scientists are likely to see the conflict as Serbian aggression, due to the Serb national character, sometimes refined by rational choice as an explanation of Serb behaviour. Serb sociologists, on the other hand, stress the global dimensions of the event and the role of the international community, basically as a conspiracy, an international plot against the Serbian people (Flere, 2003).

Inter-ethnic tensions, swept under the carpet by the political leadership of the country, have been one of the sources of the ineffectiveness of the system. While there is clearly a great deal of hatred in former Yugoslavia, it is hardly ancient or irrational. Indeed it is only in this century that South Slavs have had sufficient dealings with each other to fall out and come to blows. The wars fought in Balkans in the past centuries were not the wars between South Slavs, but between and against multinational empires of the Habsburgs and the Ottomans, which took presence in Balkans for about five hundred years. Far from being enemies, Serbs from Serbia and Croats from Croatia were completely strangers. Moreover, Serbs who lived within Habsburg Empire had more in

common with their Croat neighbours than with Serbs from Serbia; and Serbs, Croats and Muslims from Bosnia and Herzegovina had more in common with each other than they did with either Serbs from Serbia or Croats from Croatia (Bennet, 1995).

The hatred which was so overwhelming in the beginning of 90's and still can be seen now is a very recent phenomenon and reflects the failure of the South Slavs to develop durable formula for national coexistence in the course of 20th century. It is a hatred bred of fear which is rooted not in history but in contemporary interpretations of the past and can be dated to the 1980's and the media offensive which accompanied Milošević's rise to power in Serbia.

Slovenians, Croats, Serbs, Muslim Slavs and even Hungarians and Albanians were not enemies in former Yugoslavia until 1980's, yet from the moment Milošević launched his anti-bureaucratic revolution. What had, or had not, actually taken place in distant past, during the Second World War and during the four decades of Communist rule, ceased to matter as the Serbian media dredged up and distorted every conceivable event from Serbia history.

The economic and social crisis, the rising rate of unemployment, the prevalent sense of economic hopelessness, all played into the hands of the exponents of this expansive nationalist rhetoric of the 'us' (our ethnic/national group) being 'exploited by them' (all other ethnic/national groups). Everybody had a grudge against Yugoslavia and against each other. Yugoslavia's non-Serbs were simply scapegoats for economic and political failures of communist society in 1980's and a convenient tool Milošević was able to exploit to further his own political ambitions. However, the xenophobia cultivated in Yugoslavia was very real and, in time, it destroyed the state.

Out of this Milošević's policy great fear was created. Even in Tito's times, leaders of the republics lacked knowledge and capacity to lead the states. However, after Tito's death it became even worse. Fear between leaders spread everywhere. What were the leaders afraid of? They were all afraid of the new post communist world of pluralistic politics they were headed for. They feared each other and each others' secret goals. The leadership of Serbia under Milošević had, in addressing the very real problem of relations within Serbia, thrown off balanced federal architecture of 1974, provoking resistance and strengthening the aspirations for independence of the other peoples of Yugoslavia (Perović, 1993).

Indeed, when Serbia, territorially the biggest unit, with the most numerous population and also the greatest number of nationals living in other republics, decided to move on the constitutional issue, it sent a veritable shockwave through the country. The repressive actions against the



Albanians living in Kosovo were perceived, rightly or wrongly as the model of future behaviour of the Serbian leadership toward the other republics. And so the Great Fear spread to the population as a whole. The Albanians in Kosovo were in fear of the Serb leadership, but the Serb minority living within Kosovo had similarly been in fear of the Albanian majority with which they were sharing Kosovo (Vejvoda, 2004).

Once Croatia, the second largest republic, started to make clear moves towards putting forward its own independent agenda, fear started to spread among the Serbs living on its territory. Pronouncements by the newly elected President, Franjo Tudjman, to the effect that he was happy that his wife was neither a Serb nor a Jew did nothing to dispel this fear (Vejvoda, 2004).

This cascade of fear, uncertainty, and utter insecurity spread into Bosnia, where three of the six constitutionally constituent nations of Yugoslavia were sharing one republic in a communist consociationalism of sorts, with no group having a majority (Vejvoda, 2004).

So ethnicity at first wasn't the reason why tension raised in Yugoslavia. Leaders of republics, especially Milošević, created that fear between nations, promoted nationalism and basically initiated collapse of the Yugoslavia.

### ***Religion reasons***

There were three main religions in Yugoslavia. Generally speaking, the further West and North one goes in what once was Yugoslavia, the more solidly the population is Catholic. Catholics were Slovenians and Croats. Conversely, the further East and South one goes, the more solidly the population is Orthodox. Orthodox were mainly Serbs and Montenegrins. The central part of the country – Bosnia and Herzegovina – is where three religions meet and mingle, where it is unusual to see churches, mosques, and religious shrines of all three next to each other. The main Muslim population lived in Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Kosovo, autonomous district of Serbia (Srdjan, 1994).

Religion was a political factor in a course of Yugoslavia history. However, it would be difficult to say that it was decisive factor, that the confrontations that occurred among various ethnic groups on the territory of Yugoslavia were holy crusades or purely religious campaigns. In the last decade of the XX century in Yugoslavia, religious tolerance was much more pronounced than confrontation (Crnobrnja, 1996).

In order to clarify the dilemma regarding the role of religion in the Yugoslav wars, let us note that the majority of conflicts in the world, in which religion represents a significant factor, are not waged for religious reasons. This is primarily the case with so-called “identity conflicts”, where religion may serve as an appropriate *differentia specifica* that perhaps more easily articulates much more complex reasons for the conflict, including warfare. It can be contended that this was the case with the Yugoslav wars in the 90s.

The highly secularized society of the 1960s and 1970s, in which the Communist, atheist ideology left its mark on the political, as well as cultural, national and religious levels, suddenly faced, in the late eighties and early nineties, a massive ethno-mobilization, ghost of nationalism and the politically imposed identification of religion and nation. This society also faced its own semi-literacy regarding religious matters, providing, thus, a secure refuge for an ecclesiastical nationalism and nationalist populism. Therefore, it was possible that in this region, under the conditions of a fratricidal war and long-lasting politicization of religion (first in the communist, and then in the nationalist key), one witnessed a subsequent, secondary “religization” of politics and interethnic conflict. This, of course, has found its expression in the theories concerning the religious roots of the Yugoslav conflicts. The war in the former Yugoslavia from 1991-1995 was, however, primarily a result of political and inter-ethnic conflicts. Religion, however, appeared as a significant element of ethnicity, and this is probably the reason why the war itself, in this context, has been experienced as an inter-religious conflict (Vukomanovič, 2004)

Speaking of the temples destroyed during the war, let us have in mind that this was primarily a symbolical act: the temples were not destroyed so much as religious facilities, but rather as the national and ethnic symbols of a community's presence on a certain territory (Vukomanovič, 2004).

### ***Structural problems***

Apart from the reasons discussed above, Yugoslavia's dissolution was caused by structural problems as well. The decision-making process at the federal level in Yugoslavia that was regulated by the federal constitution of 1974 was ineffective. The major economic and political decisions regarding the “equality of nations and nationalities” had to be adopted by consensus of the republics and both autonomous provinces. It was very hard, if not impossible, to obtain, for instance, a consensus between the “developed” republics and provinces (Slovenia, Croatia, “inner” Serbia

without provinces, Vojvodina) and the “underdeveloped” ones (Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo) on economic and political reforms and the restructuring of industry, reforms which have been in the last two decades a basic need for ensuring the stability and progress of the country (Devetek, 1996).

But decision-making problems were not as bad if we compare them with S.Milošević's answer to the incompetence of the federal system. He declared that the best solution was to centralize the government (Devetek, 1996). Considering Slovenia and Croatia were looking further ahead to independence, this was considered unacceptable.

So one of the reasons why Yugoslavia collapsed was ineffective governance of the state and even worse attempts to solve that ineffectiveness.

So, the answer to the question of whether the survival of the Yugoslav federation would have avoided the cataclysm in this country is therefore very simple: no, because the Yugoslav federation had few chances for survival. It was too fragmented – a lot of different nations living there, speaking different languages, confessing different religions, and of course, leaders didn't do a good job too, the structure of the country contributed to dissolution as well. But another assertion is unfortunately very clear, too: most of the ethnic leaders chose the worst of all possible ways for dissolving the federation, and in so doing have driven several generations of the members of “their nations” into war, stagnation, misery, and humiliation.

### **Conclusions**

Yugoslavia was created immediately after the First World War and officially survived until 2003, when it was replaced by Serbia and Montenegro Union. But actually Yugoslavia collapsed much earlier in 1991, when Croatia and Slovenia declared their independence. Later Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as Macedonia separated from Yugoslavia. In 2006 Montenegro declared its independence, and in 2008 Kosovo did so. Now many authors tend to think that it is the end of Yugoslavia's dissolution and no new states will be created in this area. If it is true, we will see in the future.

Yugoslavia was very fragmented country. The country consisted from five relatively distinct ethnic groups as well as two substantial minorities, organized on approximately ethnic lines in six republics and two autonomous provinces. Between them these groups spoke four languages and followed three main religions.

There is no single reason why Yugoslavia collapsed. All problems created the dissolution of Yugoslavia. However, the three main reason groups can be pointed out – structural reasons, ethnic tension and nationalism as well as religion problems.

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