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**1989: WHEN THE USSR WAS THE MIRROR OF  
YUGOSLAVIA**

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**Summary**

*This paper is focused on a report of the Lončar-Shevarnadze meeting in November 1989, held during a subsequent high level meeting by Yugoslav political leaders. It discusses their interpretation of the fall of the Berlin wall. The Yugoslav politicians did not have a clear strategy of their country's position in the new European context. In the middle of November 1989, they did not expect, in the next future, any significant alteration of the bipolar superpower system (USA and Soviet Union). The debate on USSR is mirroring internal Yugoslav problems – such as being influenced by growing nationalistic tensions. The Yugoslavs perceived USSR as a bigger self, affected by similar dynamics. The strong optimism in the West about the events in Eastern Europe did not match with the evolution in socialist Yugoslavia.<sup>2</sup>*

**Keywords:** Yugoslavia, 1989, Berlin wall, German reunification, Soviet Union.

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<sup>2</sup> A first draft of this article was originally presented at “A Cross Disciplinary Exploration on Central and East-European Totalitarianism(s)”, 1<sup>st</sup> Annual Interdisciplinary Conference on Totalitarianism for PhD students. Iasi, Romania, “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University, 4-5 December 2012.

After more than 20 years, the number of scientific works about the end of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe and the fall of the Berlin wall is quite impressive.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the reaction of the Yugoslav leadership to the fall of the Berlin wall, at the time in a deep turmoil, about that symbolic event, is still under-researched.<sup>4</sup> This is mainly due to three key reasons: first of all Yugoslavia was not a member of Warsaw's pact, so the fall of the Berlin wall should not affect directly non aligned Yugoslavia. Secondly, the Socialist revolution during WW2 in Yugoslavia was not perceived as imported from abroad (as in Poland or in other Eastern European countries). Finally Yugoslavia was experiencing conflicts between the Serbian and Slovenian leadership, and a more general wave of tensions among nationalities in the country. Moreover, scholars have focused more on the post 1989 period because of war in former Yugoslavia during the 90s.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, while new publications are exploring the Yugoslav 1989,<sup>6</sup> the bulk of the existing scholarly literature has generally overlooked it.

This paper will consider the reactions of the Yugoslav political leadership to the changes in Eastern Europe happened in late 1989, using the transcription of a meeting of the Yugoslav "politburo" five days after the fall of the Berlin wall. In this article I will argue that there was a lack of a Yugoslav strategy (so reflecting the internal political divisions) toward the political events affecting other socialist countries and it does emerge that the Yugoslavs did not expect any real change in the balance of powers in the European continent, assuming that Germany will remain divided. While 1989 soon became a symbol of the end of authoritarian rule, the end of the Cold War and the victory of the USA and its Western allies, for the Yugoslav peoples it was just the beginning of a prolonged crisis.

The primary source adopted is the transcription of a meeting of the Presidency of the League of Communist of Yugoslavia. The complete series of this kind of documents is in the Archives of Yugoslavia, Belgrade, but according to Serbian law it is not yet accessible. Notwithstanding this, in the Archives of the Republic of Slovenia, Ljubljana, it is possible to access the fund of the League of Communist of Slovenia, which includes fragments of the Yugoslav League of Communists, usually those that are relevant to the Slovenian branch of the party.

3 See for example Jacques LEVESQUE, *1989. La Fin d'un Empire. L'URSS et la Liberation de l'Europe de l'Est*, Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 1995.; Guido FRANZINETTI, "Venti Anni dopo. Fu vera Gloria?" in *Venti Anni Dopo (1989-2009)*, ed. by Andrea PANACCIONE, Milano, Unicopli, 2010., 79-88.

4 See for example Lenard J. COHEN, *Broken Bonds. Yugoslavia's Disintegration and Balkan Politics in Transition*, Boulder: Colorado and Oxford: Westview Press, 1995., 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (first edition 1993.), 50-85; Sabrina P. RAMET, *Nationalism and Federalism in Yugoslavia 1962-1991*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992., 231-247; Chip GAGNON Jr., "Yugoslavia in 1989 and After", *Nationalities Papers*, 38: 1 (2010), 23 -39.

5 See for a general overview Sabrina Ramet, *Thinking about Yugoslavia. Scholarly debates about the Yugoslav Breakup and the Wars in Bosnia and Kosovo*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005.

6 See Florian Bieber, Armina Galijaš, "The Revolutions that did (not) Happen: Yugoslavia 1989" in *The Revolutions of 1989: a Handbook*, ed. by Wolfgang Mueller, Michael Gehler, Arnold Suppan, Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 2014.

While Eastern Europe, in 1989, was experiencing tremendous political changes, Yugoslavia, the most open and partially reformed socialist country, was on the verge of collapse. The socialist politicians did not want to give up the monopoly of the power, so they exploited the national issues. In this sense, the Yugoslav 1989 will be remembered for the Pandora's box of growing nationalisms and not properly for its regime change, as in the socialist countries of Europe. What follows is the recount of a meeting of the Yugoslav leadership at the time of a crucial event, the fall of the Berlin wall.

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of November 1989, the Presidency of the League of Communist of Yugoslavia held its 165th meeting.<sup>7</sup> The first point of discussion was the situation in Kosovo, the second and last one was the Yugoslav federal secretary of Foreign affairs Budimir Lončar's debriefing about the recent events in Eastern Europe. The second point focused on the development of *perestrojka* in the Soviet Union, and on the consequences of these events in the countries of Eastern Europe. It referred in particular to the events in the German Democratic Republic, notably the relations between East and West, the further development of the European Community and the position of the two German states.

Obviously the Yugoslavs were interested in the possible effects over Yugoslavia, being a non-aligned country. Indeed, during 1989, the pressure for change in various countries in Eastern Europe, such as Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia etc. grew, and the protests against the one party system put under pressure the socialist regimes. One of the most important event was the removal, in May 1989, by the Hungarians, of the fence at the border between Hungary and Austria, allowing East Germans to escape in West Germany (passing in Hungary and Austria). That meant a serious attack to the Cold War balance of power and was the indirect effect of Gorbachev's *perestrojka*.

Lončar began his debriefing reporting Schevarnadze's statement about the importance of the future of *perestrojka* in the Soviet Union for the "world destiny". Budimir Lončar met his Soviet counterpart in Moscow November 1<sup>st</sup> 1989 (at the time a serious cut in the armament of the Super powers was being discussed).

The background of the meeting was not very encouraging: indeed there were growing polarizations among some East European countries. Lončar thought that the evolution in the German Democratic Republic and Bulgaria meant the

7 Arhiv Republike Slovenije, *AS 1589 IV*, Centralni Komitet Zveze Komunistiv Slovenije, tehnična enota 1370, 165. Seja predsedstva centralnega komiteja zkj, Neautorizovane Magnetofonske Beleške, 14. Novembra 1989, 10/5. The League of Communists of Yugoslavia was the heir of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (1920), and has been the only party in power after the end of War War II. It was led by Josip Broz Tito from 1937 to 1980 (when Tito passed away). The meeting here analyzed was held by the Presidency of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (LCY), a Yugoslav version of the Politburo. LCY was the expression of the six republican and two provincial Leagues of the Yugoslav federation and dissolved in January 1990, during its XIV Congress (the previous one was held in 1986), after a few years of nationalistic feud, especially between Serbia and Slovenia. The Presidency of the LCY advanced the interests of each republic and was very hard, especially after the death of Tito, to find a functional synthesis.

dissolution of the “axis against-reforms”.<sup>8</sup> For him, Romania was “a bastion of conservatism” going toward “deeper isolation”.

Those reforms could have lead toward a situation “out of control”, even for the very same position of Gorbachev himself in the Soviet Union. In other words, was Gorbachev prone to tolerate such a development without Soviet intervention, was he ready to accept and “tolerate” differences in the countries of the Eastern Bloc?<sup>9</sup>

The Soviet leadership was divided, the role of the Soviet Union toward the United States was at stakes and the economics results of *perestrojka* were uncertain. On the other hand, Shevardnadze, during the meeting in Moscow with Lončar, reassured his Yugoslav counterpart that what was happening in Eastern Europe represented “a further democratization” in those countries, and it was “in accordance with our [Soviet] interests”. Moreover, according to the Soviet minister of Foreign affairs, while the evolution in some countries was outside the concept of *perestrojka*, he was quite optimistic about the outcome.<sup>10</sup> Actually Shevardnadze was more worried about Hungary, were the situation was considered out of control, due to the formation of “50 political parties”, as well as due to the tendencies to abandon the Warsaw Pact and “anti-sovietism” and “anti-Russian” feelings.<sup>11</sup>

Lončar continued to recount about the meeting with Shevardnadze, mentioning the separatist tendencies inside the Soviet Union, in particular in Latvia, Armenia and Moldova.<sup>12</sup> Concluding his debriefing, Lončar stressed one of the most important open questions: the future of the two German states, keeping in mind the Warsaw Pact, the NATO Pact and the reaction of West Germany. He believed that the answer was in the Kremlin, in the Soviet Politburo, and that it was up to Gorbachev and his political adversaries, and of course to the Soviet Army leadership, to influence the outcomes of *perestrojka*.<sup>13</sup>

In his debriefing (before the discussion), the foreign minister of Yugoslavia continued to expose his information about the two superpowers. He explained that USA and USSR basically agreed about disarmament. Indeed, Lončar said, mentioning (without naming him) a Japanese colleague that the United States economically lagged behind “Japan and Germany” and they were relatively weakened due to expenditure in weapons. Nevertheless, according to the unknown Japanese, while transformed, the two blocks should have continued to exist, while the Eastern Bloc would have been oriented toward a market economy and pluralism in the future. This without giving the impression that that meant “a victory of an

8 Ibid, 11/1.

9 Ibid, 11/1.

10 Ibid, 11/3.

11 Ibid, 11/3.

12 Ibid, 12/1.

13 Ibid, 12/2.

anti-socialist idea”, according to Lončar’s Asian colleague.<sup>14</sup> Lončar reassured the members of the Yugoslav party that in the end the Soviet Union did not perceive Yugoslavia as a possible problem for *perestrojka*. Indeed, in that period, USSR consulted Yugoslavia about how to borrow money from the West.

According to Lončar, Shevardnadze told him that the Soviet reform process would bring “more communication” with the rest of the world, “access to foreign technology” and the “circulation of the capital”.<sup>15</sup> Essentially Shevardnadze aimed to cut the expenditure for the armaments and invest the saved capital into the economic development of the Soviet Union. He was against the idea to increase the foreign debt of Eastern European countries, because “not even Poland, who has 40 millions [inhabitants] can live at the expense of foreign [financial] help”.<sup>16</sup>

Once Lončar terminated his report, and the discussion among the members of the Presidency of the LCY started, Dušan (Duško) Čkrebić, one of the representatives of the Socialist Republic of Serbia, asked Lončar about the position of the Russian Republic (in the Soviet Union) and its status, in particular stressing the fact that it had, compared to the other Soviet republics, a very small amount of visibility in the mass media (TV and newspapers). Moreover Čkrebić wanted to know more about the “announcement of the exit of some [Soviet] republics from the Soviet Union”.<sup>17</sup> The questions of the Serbian representative clearly hinted at the position of Serbia within Yugoslavia and at the possible detachment of Slovenia from the Yugoslav federation or at least an asymmetric federation.

First of all, it must be stressed that Yugoslavia was in turmoil in the last years and in particular in the last months. After the XIII Congress of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (1986), a new generation of political leaders came to power. This phenomenon was particularly evident in Slovenia and Serbia. Secondly, the disenchantment of the people with the Communist regime was growing year after year, due to the economic crisis, growing unemployment and rising prices. A deep disaffection in the Yugoslav society at large was also reflected by dissidents’ growing role in the public sphere, and by the spread of relatively new ideas that challenged the system in its entirety. This was especially the case for Slovenia, during the 1980s, where a dynamic civil society, oriented toward Western values (feminist and gay movements, ecology movements, alternative music bands, pacifist movements etc.) found quite open minded liberal politicians ready to tolerate them. Meanwhile, the society and the values in Serbia were different. Serbia had to cope with a growing grassroots protest of Serbian and Montenegrins from Kosovo, a Serbian province with a very high level of autonomy since the 1970s, whose degree of decision-making was comparable to a

14 Ibid, 12/2.

15 Ibid, 13/1.

16 Ibid, 13/1.

17 Ibid, 13/1.

Yugoslav republic. Yugoslavia was composed by six republics (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia) and two Serbian Provinces (Vojvodina and Kosovo). Since 1974, with the adoption of the new Constitution, the parts of the federation enjoyed a large amount of independence toward Belgrade.

What united and connected Serbia and Slovenia was Communist politicians' fear of the growing opposition movements. In the second half of the 1980s, in fact, Milan Kučan, president of the Presidency of the League of Communists of Slovenia, and Slobodan Milošević, his counterpart in the Socialist Republic of Serbia fearing to lose the monopoly of the political power and in order to restore their legitimacy in the eyes of the public opinion, accepted some ideas, values and recommendation of the extra-legal non-communist opposition. Those values and the permissions were quite strictly related to national values and nationalism. In Serbia this led to a process of revision of the Constitution, culminated in the March 1989 abolition of the (quasi)state prerogatives of Kosovo and Vojvodina. The virulent nationalism that affected the dissidents and various opponents of the Yugoslav regime could explain, at least in part, the fear of reform the Yugoslav communists had in 1989 (to say, the risk of a civil war similar to what happened during WW 2).

The next move of the Serbian leadership, led by Slobodan Milošević, was the re-centralization of the Yugoslav federation. Slovenia, interested to get closer to the European Community, and politically scared by "Serboslavia", as Milan Kučan used to name a Yugoslavia dominated by an aggressive Serbia, systematically moved toward requests of more autonomy.

The clash between Slovenia and Serbia heavily damaged the functioning of the Yugoslav federation, and this process accelerated in 1989, the year of the fall of the Berlin wall. While the media of the two republics engaged in a violent verbal war, a process of mass mobilization was triggered in Ljubljana and Belgrade, with citizens of the two republics protesting against each other. This evolution of Yugoslavia as a polity, undermined by political leaders who wanted to preserve the regime or at least themselves, put the role of Yugoslavia, in a time of deep changes in Eastern Europe, on the background, and even more, put seriously under question the very same existence of this multinational federation.

To be sure, the Slovenian communists were more prone, in order to save the party, to allow multiparty elections. The Serbian political elite, after a nationalist and populist wave between 1988 and 1989, the so-called antibureaucratic revolution, was still hesitating to give up the idea of socialism. After all, in the Marxist thought, the bourgeois democracy was a step back in the past. Let aside the Marxist concepts, this was an instrumentalization made by an authoritarian model of government, led by Milošević and his supporters.

In response to the Serbs' concerns, the Yugoslav foreign minister tried to offer his explanation. It must be stressed that at the time Lončar did not enjoy the esteem and trust of the Serbian political leadership. Milošević was directly influencing the foreign politics of Yugoslavia and in particular the relations with the USA, because America and the West were putting under pressure Belgrade due to the allegations of violating the human rights of the Albanian population in Kosovo. The Serbian leader felt that the Americans were questioning the very same base and legitimacy of his nationalistic politics and so his political power. The sudden cold shower between Yugoslavia and the US caught Lončar in between, because he was accused by Serbia' leaders of not doing enough to counter the allegations from Washington.

This said, the answer of Lončar to Čkrebić was based on the information obtained from Shevardnadze and it did not go straight to the point: indeed Lončar said that a slow reform process in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union was the cause of anti-communism. Lončar mentioned, during the meeting, the case of Poland and, quoting Shevardnadze, he said that that if Wojciech Jaruzelsky "had understood the reality of the situation in Poland, and through him also us [Soviets], all the development of Poland could have been painless and would have been possible more socialism and less [...] anti-communism."<sup>18</sup> Due to that big mistake of Jaruzelsky, went on Lončar citing Shevardnadze "now [Polish communists] have to pay a high price, now [they] have to step down [...] from power." This quotation could be interpreted as a warning (made by Lončar quoting Shevardnadze) addressed to Slobodan Milošević (Čkrebić's "boss") and his politics in Serbia.

Lončar went on adding that for the Soviet Union the threshold of tolerance toward East European countries implied them remaining in the Warsaw pact, this was seen as a "sine qua non".<sup>19</sup> Finally answering to the question, he said that in the Soviet Union *glasnost* was the "primary ally", this meaning "democratization, freedom of thought, [freedom] of expression."<sup>20</sup> So, according to Lončar, reporting the thought of Shevardnadze, the success of *glasnost* was more important than the desire of secession (from the Soviet Union) of a few republics. Shevardnadze added, just to be clear, that the goal of the rebel Soviet republics was "an unrealistic thing."

We should have in mind that at the time, in 1989, also Slovenia's independence was considered "an unrealistic thing" (but maybe closer to the concept of "possible"). Lončar did not ask directly how those Soviet republics would get out of the federation, he simply asked how USSR would overcome the situation (referring to the republics looking for independence): Shevardnadze answered that it was just a "passing phenomenon".<sup>21</sup>

18 Ibid, 13/2.

19 Ibid, 13/2.

20 Ibid, 13/3.

21 Ibid, 13/3.

In any case, the Yugoslav ambassador in Moscow, Milan Vereš, expressed to Lončar his personal views, stating that the key factor in the unity of the Soviet Union was Ukraine: if the anti-Russian feelings had to prevail, the end of *perestrojka* or the USSR was quite probable.

Today, we could say, with historical insight, that Croatia, in the survival of the Yugoslav state, had a role similar to that of Ukraine for the Soviet Union, as a counterbalance to Serbia.

Letting aside these more general considerations, the meeting of the LCY's Presidency went on. The Slovenian member of the Presidency, Boris Mužević, during the meeting, showed his perplexities about the marginal international position of Yugoslavia, compared to its key role during the Cold war.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, Milan Pančevski, president of the Presidency of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, was concerned about the two German states: "these things, passports and borders and [Berlin] walls [...] that's easy but then it is about the question of the reunification of Germany. What will this mean in Europe, which repercussions will it have?"<sup>23</sup>

Pančevski concluded his speech saying that Yugoslavia should have been more united and that it was necessary to avoid talking about trivial things. This remark about the unity was more than understandable considering the situation. Moreover, it echoed the Titoist mantra of "brotherhood and unity", but it could also be understood as a latent support to Milošević's policy. Indeed, since the beginnings of the Serbian leader career, the word "unity" was often used to indicate various things, all related to his political campaign to make Serbia equal to the other Yugoslav republics, abolishing the autonomy of its provinces.

Bogdan Trifunović, president of the Presidency of the League of Communist of Serbia (after Milošević left the Presidency of the party and became president of the Presidency of the Socialist Republic of Serbia) and member *ex officio* of the Presidency of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, asked Lončar if the Hungarians had some territorial and revisionist pretensions toward Yugoslavia.<sup>24</sup> Clearly Trifunović had in mind Serbia's Vojvodina province, which had lost its large autonomy during the previous spring (28 March 1989) due to Milošević's political strategy.

Vojvodina was, and still is, populated by a remarkable Hungarian minority. To be sure, Serbia feared some sort of retaliation. Lončar answered saying that Hungarians were not dangerous for Vojvodina; he described the Hungarians who live close to the border with Vojvodina as "very emotional". "Not by chance that is a country [Hungary] with the highest rate of suicide".<sup>25</sup>

22 Ibid, 13/4.

23 Ibid, 14/2.

24 Ibid, 15/2.

25 Ibid, 15/4.

Lončar himself could not avoid talking and speculating about the fall of the Berlin's wall. To be sure he always talked about the two German states, the two Germanies.<sup>26</sup> From his personal point of view, a better communication between the two German states meant a stronger German nation (here in the sense of German people, not the state). Moreover the political system of the two states, thanks to an improved communication and exchange would become more similar but, at least for a certain (not defined) amount of time, the two different states would continue to exist. Not only, Lončar believed that the unity of the German nation would have become stronger because "it has always existed" and "this [the division] has been an artificial thing and "antihistorical".<sup>27</sup>

It is interesting that the foreign minister of Yugoslavia considered the post WW2 division of Germany as "artificial", assuming that the spirit and sense of the nation was stronger. Somehow, his vision implied a certain philosophy of the History: the natural course of History was embodied by the nation. Ironically, if we apply Lončar's conceptual and methodological framework of analysis to post WW2 Yugoslavia, a multinational federation kept together by a dictatorship, of which Lončar was a full member of the government and the political elite, the logical outcome was that Yugoslavia had soon to fall apart due to that above mentioned natural course of History.

After this short digression, it is important to point here that the interest of Lončar and the other Yugoslavs about the German question was always intended as a problem of the balance of power in Europe and the rest of the world between the United States and Soviet Union. Lončar himself was sure that NATO and Warsaw pact were going to change, but he was sure too that they "will live long".<sup>28</sup>

Milan Kučan, president of the Presidency of the League of Communists of Slovenia, member *ex officio* of the Presidency of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, presented Slovenia's position to his colleagues. First of all, he stressed the fluidity of those events in Eastern Europe, emphasizing they were still without a stable perspective. Kučan feared, after the fall of the Wall, the return of anti-reforms forces (orthodox communists), so he was looking, as soon as possible, for a meeting or a Yugoslav forum in order to discuss about the next Yugoslav political "strategy".

Kučan objected to Lončar that he heard from him just discussions about bilateral accords but not a single word about the general trend in Western Europe toward a more integrated union (he alluded to the forthcoming 1992 Maastricht Pact). Kučan even used the expression of "united states of Europe".<sup>29</sup> He did not know if that debated "European Union" had to be the one imagined by Lenin in

26 Ibid, 16/1.

27 Ibid, 16/1.

28 Ibid, 16/1.

29 Ibid, 16/2.

the 1920s or the effect of the 1974 Helsinki Accords: in any case he wondered about the place of Yugoslavia in the future Europe.

Kučan continued saying that after the 1989 events in Eastern Europe, “now Yugoslavia is definitely less interesting for Western Europe”. In other words, after the new events, the Western economical help has been directed towards other countries, like Poland and Hungary, so that Yugoslavia would find itself “at the margin of Europe”. Last but not least, he mentioned that during one Alpe Adria – Alps-Adriatic working community – meeting (a central-adriatic European cooperation of regional institutions born in 1978) Slovenia (member of the organization together with Croatia) was warned by its Western counterparts that without a deep and full process of democratization, the access to the European market and institutions was precluded. That meant also the respect of the human rights in Eastern Europe.<sup>30</sup>

Kučan’s speech, as in the case of the Serbian representative, was merely aimed at portraying Slovenian interests. Indeed, at the time, and more in general in the last years, the Slovenian political elite thought that Slovenia’s national interest was linked to the European Community and to Western financial help. This Slovenian vital interest was seriously put in danger by Milošević’s Serbia, in particular due to the treatment of the Albanian population in Kosovo. As already mentioned in this article, Western countries and NGOs believed that Serbia - and Yugoslavia by extension - were violating the basic human rights of Albanians in the Serbian province: that meant a stop to any Slovenian or Yugoslav dream of closer association with Western Europe. Needless to say, the Slovenian leadership was very disappointed with Milošević.

Marko Lolić, the Croatian representative in the Yugoslav party’s Presidency, talked about the crisis of Socialism in Eastern Europe, and how this affected Yugoslavia too. Considering the crisis of socialism was extended “from Berlin to Belgrade”, he warned that ongoing developments were very dangerous, because Yugoslavia risked to be one of the last countries to reform. From Poland to Romania, each country had very different speed in the new process, and he believed that it was better to fasten this renewal in Yugoslavia in order to avoid more troubles in the next future.<sup>31</sup> This position was close to the Slovenian one and was a signal of fear of negative consequences for Croatia, while Lolić was less assertive than Kučan. The similar point of views of Slovenia and Croatia encouraged their tactical political cooperation in order to contain Milošević’s Serbia.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 16/3.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 17/1.

## Conclusion

While Yugoslavia since the 1960s had been at the forefront of the reform process in respect to the socialist bloc, in the late 1980s it was unable to resolve the feud and quarrel among the political leadership about the future of the federation. In 1989, while some Eastern European countries were, thanks to *perestrojka*, more open and democratic, or at least started a process of transition, Yugoslavia was stuck in its contradictions. The Yugoslav leaders, in November 1989, most probably have not been seen as imminent the end of the socialist economic and political system or, at least, not as we know it today.

While Slovenia was oriented toward social-democracy, Serbia was still linked to an authoritarian model shaped by the communist regime. At the time of the fall of the Berlin wall, the Yugoslav leaders, and in particular the Party’s politburo, was divided along republican lines, incapable of giving a more comprehensive answer to the new challenges that were transforming Eastern Europe. Slovenes thought how to access Western European funds, Serbia how to limit the power of Albanians in Kosovo. The socialist regimes, the Yugoslav one included, were close to the grave, while the democratic ideal was mostly linked to the idea of nation and to the national state. Apparently, there was no democracy outside the nation state, and the concept of community, in this case the Yugoslav community, was becoming an almost meaningless word. Finally, even if Yugoslavia was not a member of the Warsaw pact or the Eastern Bloc, its leaders felt that socialism in their country had to change: they had to give up the monopoly of the power.

The combination of these political dynamics made the Yugoslav 1989 at odds with the Western overoptimistic perception of the events in Eastern Europe. While in that moment and the subsequent official interpretations of the so called “1989 Revolutions” it became a symbol of the victory of the West (the “free world”) and of the peoples of Eastern Europe against their authoritarian governments, a closer focus will show something different. The USSR imploded because of Gorbachev’s reforms process, and it was, as it often happened in History, a revolution from above. Moscow abandoned the dictators behind the Iron Curtain.

In Yugoslavia, the trust the West poured in the federal prime minister Ante Marković and his reforms, did not match the reality of the political power. Once the LCY fell apart and the republican leaders of Serbia, Slovenia and Croatia became entrenched in a nationalist spiral started by Milošević, all the potential of a democratic wave in Yugoslavia, just crumbled. The political crisis among the Yugoslav republics led to war in 1991, when the federation finally dissolved: the Yugoslavs were not able to find a compromise about the future of the federation.

In Serbia and, to a lesser extent in Slovenia and in Croatia, the three main republics of Yugoslavia, the political class, with strategic U-turns in the public

ideology or abdicating the power, were able to survive and retain influence. When the crisis in Yugoslavia was acute, in 1991, the USA, since the country was not anymore a useful proxy against the USSR, left it to its destiny. The European Community was deeply divided, with countries such as UK or France scared by the German reunification and its new influence also in South Eastern Europe.<sup>32</sup>

While limited in scope, this article proved that the Yugoslav leaders, immediately after the fall of the Berlin wall, believed that Germany will not reunite, the balance of power between USA and USSR will not change, while they did expect a larger wave of (especially economic) reforms in Eastern Europe. On the internal level, the Yugoslav political leaders perceived USSR and its troubles as very similar to their own, notwithstanding the differences in magnitude and scale. The Baltic republics were a reminder of Slovenia in Yugoslavia, as Russia mirrored Serbia. Indeed, when the war in Yugoslavia started in 1991, the USA were worried about a similar dissolution process in USSR and the fate of its nuclear weapons.

The effects of the events described in this article are still alive in Europe, a quarter of a century later. Kosovo is a open issue between Belgrade, Priština and Bruxelles, while Russia is trying to renew its influence in Eastern Europe and a deep crisis is affecting Ukraine.

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<sup>32</sup> See Josip GLAURDIĆ, *The hour of Europe. Western Powers and the Breakup of Yugoslavia*, Yale University Press, 2011.

## SAŽETAK

### 1989.: KADA JE SSSR BIO OGLEDALO PRILIKA U JUGOSLAVIJI

Christian COSTAMAGNA

Dok je Istočna Europa 1989. proživljavala velike političke promjene, Jugoslavija – najotvorenija i parcijalno reformirana socijalistička zemlja – je bila na rubu režimskog kolapsa. Socijalisti se nisu htjeli odreći monopola u vlasti te su iskorištavali nacionalna pitanja. U tom će smislu Jugoslavija 1989. biti zapamćena po Pandorinoj kutiji sve rastućeg nacionalizma, a ne po padu režima, kao u ostalim europskim socijalističkim zemljama. Ovaj rad dotiče se interpretacije pada Berlinskog zida od strane jugoslavenskih političkih vođa tijekom značajnog sastanka. Jugoslavenski političari nisu imali čistu jugoslavensku strategiju koja bi definirala položaj zemlje u novom europskom kontekstu. Sredinom studenog 1989. nisu predvidjeli nikakve bitne promjene u bližoj budućnosti, unutar bipolarnog sistema super sila (SAD i SSSR).