

Comment: The Balkan Endgame

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By Sonja Biserko (BCR No 23, 22-Apr-99)

Even at this late stage, the Serbian regime--not just President Slobodan Milosevic, but a substantial proportion of the establishment--believe it has a chance not only to survive the NATO campaign but indeed to emerge victorious with a new Greater Serbia.

Under scenarios seriously discussed in Belgrade, officials hope that fatigue and splits within the NATO alliance, and concerns for the regional ramifications, will cause the West to call a conference and negotiate peace. This would be a major historical event, along the lines of the 1878 Congress of Berlin, involving all the regional players. And, if Serbian negotiators have their way, it would be a time for territorial swapping and fresh map-making. The key deal would be to partition Kosovo, hiving off a southern strip from Yugoslavia in exchange for some of Bosnia.

It is crucial for Western planners charting the course of the war to understand the implications of this. Far from in retreat, the Belgrade regime--while losing important military and economic assets--feels itself to be well positioned for a historic victory against the world's largest military alliance and its only superpower.

To most Western observers, this may seem astounding. But a proper understanding of the Serbian power structure reveals why--from Belgrade's perspective--it is utterly logical. And it makes clear that the West must adopt a comprehensive strategy and a region-wide approach for long-term peace and stability.

The destruction caused by NATO will cost Serbia dearly. It will annul the efforts of several generations in developing its infrastructure. But it is also destroying the rudimentary institutions of democracy. As a result, contrary to expectations both in the West and in the region, an uprising against Milosevic is hard to imagine. Thus the likely outcomes within Serbia are: Milosevic's survival and a personal dictatorship, a coup d'etat and a military dictatorship, or rivalry among competing warlords and total chaos. None of these would be likely to bring a positive policy change from Belgrade.

The negotiations, at Rambouillet and then Paris, also suggested a flawed strategy. The delayed and inadequate response by the European powers leading up to the talks gave ample time for Milosevic's expansionist and repressive policies to be put in place. Resisting a leading US role in Kosovo for so long, the Europeans allowed Belgrade to launch the war unopposed. The negotiating posture tended to equalise all sides and inevitably led to concessions to the "stronger side"--ie, the Serbs. Confusion over the response to the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), without any effort to analyse the roots of the crisis and the reasons for the emergence of the KLA, gave a green light to Serbia to launch its attacks on villages, under the guise of "exterminating terrorists." The Europeans' anxiety over refugees also contributed to a negative stereotype about Kosovo Albanians.

The Holbrooke-Milosevic agreement of October 1998 was probably the last chance for a peaceful resolution. Understanding that the international community did not expect conflict until spring, and believing that there would probably be no intervention anyway, Milosevic initiated his build-up in Kosovo and, once again, confronted the international community with a *fait accompli*.

But by taking Kosovo and the whole Kosovo Albanian community hostage, Milosevic triggered a reaction he did not expect and has no answer for. Milosevic's decision to reject the Rambouillet accords finally forced the NATO powers to define the nature of the conflicts that have plagued southeastern Europe for the past decade. For the first time, the West recognised them clearly as a series of Serbian wars of aggression and conquest.

This posture incensed the regime in Belgrade, which then fully revealed its war aims: the complete cleansing of Albanians from Kosovo. The possible loss of Kosovo was first mentioned in the infamous Serbian Academy Memorandum, which laid out the Greater Serbia national project back in 1986. Dobrica Cosic, the national writer and one-time president of the country, has predicted many times that "the 20th century will end for the Serbian people with the loss of Kosovo and Metohia." Yet by unleashing a full war against its own Albanian citizens, the regime displayed its complete inability to adopt to the shift in Western policy towards such regional conflicts, and the Balkans in particular. Instead it has sought--and so far succeeded--in creating "new realities" on the ground in Kosovo, in pursuit of its maximalist aims.

The beginning of the bombing campaign was treated in Belgrade as another of NATO's simulations. Belgrade simply did not believe it was real. Accordingly, the first reactions by the regime and the public were defiance and derision. Officially, this remains the stance, as evidenced for example by the daily rock concerts throughout Serbia.

Yet in fact only a few days of air strikes sufficed to strip the Serbia political scenery of its false covering. The ethnic cleansing of Kosovo Albanians demonstrated once again the utmost cruelty and barbarity of the Serbian war machinery. The concerts and other demonstrations actually reveal a refusal of the population to confront the atrocities being committed in Kosovo in their name. People in Serbia are undergoing a mass denial which is itself commensurate to the crime taking place before the eyes of the whole world.

Unfortunately, the developments have also demonstrated that the democratic alternative is almost negligible. The media became the first victim of the bombing, and all information has been put under direct state control. The declaration of a state of emergency, as well as the introduction of capital punishment, martial law, a partial mobilisation, a pardoning of criminals and the drafting of volunteers--such measures have closed all avenues of possible resistance. Fuelled by wild propaganda and increasing criminal banditry, Serbia is heading down the path of no return. Displaying, indeed glorifying Serbian obstinacy, the regime is on the verge of self-destruction, rejecting all prospects of mediation and causing damage throughout the region.

Rather than strengthening, the structure in Serbia is in fact crumbling and heading towards chaos. Serbia faces an inevitable moral collapse and historic debacle. It refuses to confront the policies of the past, and even the crimes for which it is responsible day by day. Indeed, while Milosevic bears primary responsibility for disasters caused by the regime, in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and now Kosovo, he has only followed and expressed the collective consciousness of much of the Serbian elite--especially within the security forces.

As such, Serbia cannot hope for integration into the mainstream of European structures without massive assistance from the international community. This means that the expected NATO presence in Kosovo will not be enough. A protectorate in the province will enable the deportees to return in safety and prevent the spreading of the refugee wave in to Europe.

But after a decade of failed policies in the Balkans, it is essential that the US and the European democracies articulate a long-term vision for the whole region. This must start with the de-Nazification of Serbia. A mini-Marshall plan for economic recovery will be essential. And a long-term security structure is a prerequisite for continued peace and stability. The West may debate ground troops in Kosovo. But the reality is that, in the long term, an international force will be required in Serbia, too.

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