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The Morning After

Milosevic has reached the end of his road, but Serbia's journey to self-reconstruction has only just begun

So the magic moment did come: Milosevic's leadership is over. But what can Yugoslavia expect from its life once the excitement of victory has died down? The country is still staggering under the burden of the West's nostalgic image of a "multi-ethnic" Yugoslavia. The West, however, has also grown tired of the Yugoslav crisis and is prepared to make do with anyone, just as long as it's not Milosevic. Slavoj Žižek paints a picture of extreme capitalism going hand in hand with violent nationalism. A "russified" Serbia with its corrupt dealings will make the perfect partner for the West.

Finally, it has happened — the long awaited implosion of the Milosevic regime. Where are they now, all those who claimed that the NATO bombardment only strengthened Milosevic's hold onto power, would make him a national hero resisting world powers? In a kind of poetic justice, the circle has closed. Did we not see the same TV images — including the storming of the Federal Parliament building in Belgrade — more than a decade ago, when Milosevic was strengthening his hold on power by deftly manipulating the Serb public discontent and organizing the so-called "yoghurt revolution", the series of mass demonstrations which toppled local governments in Vojvodina and in Montenegro? The same passionate energy of the crowd has now turned against him.

The magic dimension of this moment rests in the fact that it is always and by definition unexpected, as if it emerged *ex nihilo*. The same analysts who for many years predicted Milosevic's demise (because of the catastrophic economic situation, because of the military defeats, including the loss of Kosovo, the Serb sacred ground), were taken by surprise when, all of a sudden, on the night after the elections, the Change occurred: not a "real" change, no shift in "real" relations of power — just that people somehow knew that the game really was up.

The hitherto feared Power disintegrated when people simply ceased to believe in it. The effect cannot but seem magical: it's over because people *think* it's over. All of a sudden, people awaken and discover that power lies in shambles, that it is an impotent spectre which no longer haunts them; all of a sudden, they are no longer afraid, they become aware that, ultimately, to quote the well-known words, they have nothing to fear but fear itself.

It would be of great interest to identify, in each Eastern Europe's ex-Communist country, the precise coordinates of this moment which, sometimes, was almost literally a moment, lasting a couple of seconds. In

Romania, for example, "the spell was broken" when, at the big mass-rally in Bucarest convoked by Ceaucescu after the demonstrations in Timisoara in order to prove that he still enjoys popular support, the crowd started to shout at Ceaucescu who then raised his hands in a tragicomic and bewildered display of impotent paternal love, as if wanting to embrace them all... In that moment, nothing really great happened, yet "nothing was the same as before" — what a moment ago evoked a mixture of fear and respect, was now experienced as a rather different mixture of ridiculous imposture and brutal, illegitimate display of force.

One should thus fully acknowledge the magic of these unique moments of universal solidarity, in which all differences are magically levelled, and the entire people is united in the hatred and rejection of Him, the Leader fallen from grace. It is no longer a struggle between the two social groups, but a struggle of Society itself, united in the solidarity of all its strata, against its Enemy. It is not surprising that the name of the strongest dissident opposition force in the late Eastern European countries was *Solidarity*: "Communists in power" serves as the embodiment of non-society, of decay and corruption, magically uniting everyone against themselves, including disappointed "honest Communists" themselves. Conservative nationalists accused them of betraying Polish interests to the Soviet master; business-oriented individuals saw in them an obstacle to their unbridled capitalist activity; for the Catholic Church, Communists were amoral atheists; for farmers, they represented the force of violent modernization which derailed their way of life; for artists and intellectuals, Communism was synonymous in their everyday experience with oppressive and stupid censorship; workers saw themselves not only exploited by the Party bureaucracy but even further humiliated by the claims that this has been done on their behalf, in their own name; finally, old disillusioned Leftists perceived the regime as the betrayal of "true Socialism". And something strictly homologous is now going on in Serbia: we are witnessing the enthusiastic moment of universal Solidarity.

However, in such a situation, it is now more important than ever not to succumb to the fascination of this magic moment. One should rather focus on the "morning after", on the sobering headache after the drunkenness of full solidarity, when the enthusiastic unity has to be translated into a positive political program or, at least, into a set of determinate administrative measures. Consequently, the best description of the present moment in Serbia is the famous characterization of the end of a classic novel from Georg Lukács' early masterpiece *Theory of the Novel*: "We are at the end of the road, but the journey is just beginning." Milosevic did reach the end of his road, the circle of his fate is over; however, the journey of Serbia's self-reconstruction is only just beginning. The *true* struggle in and for Serbia is not over: far from deciding what will happen, Milosevic's demise merely opened up the space for a choice.

The choice is not as simple as it appears. The partisans of global liberal capitalism see the choice that is confronting the ex-Yugoslav republics as that between embracing Western liberal capitalism or persisting in their ethnic self-enclosure. But what if, however, this is a false alternative and there is a third option — the combination of the two, which Vesna Petic, member of the Serb democratic opposition, called the possible "Russification" of Serbia? What if, after Milosevic, we'll get a new ruling elite, composed of the corrupted *nouveau riches* and members of the present political class, that will present themselves to the West as democratic (in order to get Western financial support), postponing the true democratic changes, justifying the delay with

special circumstances, and claiming that the nationalist hardliners will take over again as soon as the West withdraws its support from it (while actually following the nationalist line in internal politics)?

In other words, what if, upon his demise, Milosevic will play a Christ-like role of taking upon himself all the Serb sins? Milosevic is a pariah who, for the Western powers, embodies all that is wrong in Yugoslavia, so that his demise will be hailed as the chance of a new democratic beginning — Yugoslavia will be accepted again, without paying any price. This same scenario is already taking place in Croatia with the death of the President Franjo Tudjman. His funerals were ignored by the international community; the leitmotif of most of the commentators was that his obstinacy was the main obstacle to the democratization of Croatia, so that his passing opens up a new prospect for the democratic Croatia — as if all the dark aspects of the independent Croatia, from corruption to its own "ethnic cleansing", now magically disappeared from the focus and were interred with Tudjman's body. Is this also the last favor Milosevic will be able to perform for his nation?

However, this very parallel with Croatia renders the difference all the more visible: the fact that, following his death, Tudjman's memory was erased and endures now only in the scandals from the time of his rule that continue to reverberate, is, paradoxically, a good sign. It demonstrates that Tudjman's authoritarianism was superficial, that the Croat state was able to survive his disappearance without too much of a shock. In the case of Serbia, the situation is much more complex: what the rule of Milosevic stood for was the survival of the old Communist nomenklatura which continued to dominate the entire scope of state apparatuses and economy, from the Army and police to education, public media and big business. Which is why the cleansing of this Augean stable will be much more demanding, threatening to tear apart the social fabric.

Now, that the Milosevic era appears to have ended, one naive and simple but nevertheless inevitable question needs to be asked: Was the nationalism which exploded in Yugoslavia two decades ago really a "regressive" nineteenth century phenomenon?

Today, in what Ulrich Beck calls the "reflexive society", all social links and patterns of interaction, from the forms of sexual partnership to ethnic identity itself, are more and more perceived as something that has to be improvised and negotiated. The case of Muslims as an ethnic, not merely religious, group in Bosnia is exemplary here: during the entire history of Yugoslavia, Bosnia was the place of potential tension and dispute, the locale in which the struggle between Serbs and Croats for the dominant role was fought. The problem was that the largest group in Bosnia were neither the Orthodox Serbs nor the Catholic Croats, but Muslims, whose ethnic origins had always been under dispute — are they Serbs or Croats? In order to forestall this focus of potential (and actual) conflicts, the ruling Communists imposed a miraculously simple invention in the 60s: they proclaimed Muslims an autochthonous ethnic community, not just a religious group, so that Muslims were able to avoid the pressure of identifying themselves either as Serbs or as Croats. What was a pragmatic political artifice in the beginning gradually caught on, Muslims effectively started to perceive themselves as a nation, systematically manufacturing their tradition, etc. However, even today, there remains an element of a reflected *choice* in their identity: during the post-Yugoslav war in Bosnia, one was ultimately forced to *choose* his/her ethnic identity — when a militia stopped a person, asking him/her threateningly "Are you a Serb or a

Muslim?", the question did not refer to the inherited ethnic belonging, i.e. it always contained a hint of "Which side did you *choose*?" (like the movie director Emir Kusturica, for example, who comes from an ethnically mixed Muslim–Serb family, has chosen the Serb identity). Thus the answer to the question is: far from being "regressive", the post–Yugoslav ethnic identities are a phenomenon which *returns to us not from the past, but from the future*.

Perhaps the best illustration of what was and is fundamentally *false* in the attitude of the Western liberals towards the Yugoslav war is their hypocritical disappointment at the behavior of the Albanian Kosovars after the withdrawal of the Yugoslav army: "See, the Albanians are no better than Serbs — the ultimate result of the Western intervention is that, now it's the Albanians who are ethnically cleansing the Serbs!" Well, what did the Western powers expect? That the Albanians would behave as the angels of multiculturalist tolerance who, after decades of the Serb terror, would happily embrace their oppressors? To avoid any misunderstanding: the Albanian cleansing of the Serbs is to be unequivocally condemned and prevented — however, one should also take the next logical step and simply accept that, in the present situation of the ethnic hatred, *the "cantonization" of Kosovo into an Albanian and a Serb part is the only viable solution*.

The West was wise enough to accept the *de facto* division of Bosnia into three separate entities, with the result that at least a semblance of normal life is returning there. Why not accept it in Kosovo, where the tension between Albanians and Serbs is incomparably stronger and deeper than among the ethnic groups in Bosnia? The answer, of course, is that the West does not want to abandon its nostalgic dream of the "multiethnic" Yugoslavia: Kosovo is the last piece of ex–Yugoslavia where this dream can still be enacted. To accept with a division of the Kosovo would mean having to concede the final instance of the image which sustained the Western intervention in Yugoslavia. People in Kosovo, both the Serbs and the Albanians, are now paying the price for being the stuff of the Other's (West's) dream: no rule of law, no independent public authority, ridiculous situations like the one where 50 NATO soldiers guard a Serb family living right in Albanian territory... Today's Kosovo vividly illustrates the absurdity as well as the catastrophic results of the ruthless imposition of a foreign ideological dream.

It may appear in Serbia that the President–elect Vojislav Kostunica is the ideal man for his job: a sincere committed nationalist (and as such acceptable to the vast population — one cannot dismiss him as a Western stooge), but at the same time a non–charismatic democratic legalist, standing just for what Serbia lacked under Milosevic. However, this combination of attributes can also work in the opposite way, so that we will get the nationalist stance that had produced Milosevic in its "normal" version, without Milosevic's "excess". In other words, Milosevic will not be discarded as a nationalist, the instigator of ethnic hatred and violence, but because he was a ruthless politician who manipulated national sentiments in order to stay in power and give another life to Communism, so that now we shall get *honest* and *true* nationalists. There are enough signs which point in this direction: Kostunica advocated strong Serb positions in Bosnia and Kosovo; he rejected the Dayton agreement as a betrayal of Serb interests; in his proclamations about the new Serbia at peace with Montenegro and the world, he did not mention the peace with Albanians in Kosovo: a couple of days ago, he claimed that Milosevic is a "NATO–hireling" whose politics were effectively pro–Muslim, pro–Albanian and pro–Croat, while he (Kostunica) stands for the true Serb interests (the exact copy of the reproaches Milosevic made against the opposition).

These statements have to be put in the context of the origins of Yugoslav crisis. Its explosive power was detonated with the fusion of two originally unconnected, even opposed, ingredients: the Communist nomenklatura struggling to retain power and anti-Communist nationalism fuming mostly among conservative poets and writers. Things took a catastrophic turn when, in Serbia in 1986, the nomenklatura itself adopted nationalism as the strategy for survival. True, Milosevic "manipulated" nationalist passions — but it was the poets who delivered him the stuff which lent itself to manipulation. They — the sincere poets, not the corrupted politicians — were at the origins of it all, when, back in the 70s and early 80s, they started to sow the seeds of aggressive nationalism not only in Serbia, but also in other ex-Yugoslav republics. So, instead of the industrial-military complex, we in post-Yugoslavia had the *poetic-military complex*, personified in Radovan Karadzic, the Bosnian-Serb poet-warrior. In his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel mentions the "silent weaving of the spirit" — the underground work of changing the ideological coordinates, mostly invisible to the public eye, which then suddenly explodes, taking everyone by surprise. This is what was going on in ex-Yugoslavia in the 70s and 80s, so that when things exploded in the late 80s, it was already too late, the old ideological consensus was thoroughly putrid and collapsed in itself.

This brings us back to the present situation in Serbia: how radical will the sobering process be? Will the new public self-consciousness stop again at putting the blame on the others (NATO, the Communist legacy, up to Milosevic himself), reasserting the self-perception of Serbs as eternal victims, or will it achieve a true catharsis, discerning the roots of the present catastrophe in its own past acts? Will Serbia continue to play the game of "who betrayed the national interests", or will it be able to confront the ethical betrayal that pertains to excessive nationalism itself? In short, will Serbia really awaken to what it has done in the last decade, or will it just awaken into a new dream? And, to avoid a crucial misunderstanding, this fundamental choice has nothing to do with the reintegration of Serbia into the Western community: it's emphatically not true that only a Serbia cleansing itself of its nationalist guilt will be really admitted into the West. The West has grown tired of the Yugoslav crisis, willing to settle with anyone, as long as it is not Milosevic. Once the West will be able to save face by claiming that democracy has won, the reintegration of Serbia will be fast and smooth, and money will start to flow — if anything, the "Russified" Serbia, with "honest nationalists" in a pact with corrupted business, would be the ideal partner for the West.

Published 2001-03-27
Original in English
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