

# Yugoslav survivors see danger in separatist talk

BY MIKE TRICKEY

From the bloody remains of the former Yugoslavia, the Canadian parliamentary system of settling disputes by debate rather than by gun looks pretty good.

A first-hand look from the visitors' gallery of the House of Commons makes it appear even better to a delegation of young democrats and journalists from the region.

But proximity to the debate gives no understanding whatsoever to those who have survived the bloodiest European war in 50 years — a war rooted in ethnic and cultural division — about how Canada can continue to tear itself apart over flags and independence.

"We have a lot of experience with these kinds of questions," says Slobodan Popovic of shattered Vukovar, a once-picturesque city reduced to ruin in a bloody orgy of ethnic slaughter by Serbs and Croats in 1991.

"What has emerged for me as the key question is, is it necessary for each nation to have its own state?"

"I don't think so. To have a state of your own is not the only way for a nation to develop."

Though they disagree with the motives of separatists and those who would wield the flag for political purposes, the Yugoslavs visiting here on the ticket of the National Democratic Institute, an organization dedicated to spreading democracy to former Soviet Bloc countries, are awestruck that the debate can continue peacefully.

Danijela Dabic lives in the deeply divided Serb-dominated city of Banja Luka in Bosnia.

"What has been really impressive

for me is that, even though you've had this long discussion over Quebec and the flag, there is still the commitment to a democratic approach to try to resolve it. We never had a chance to discuss these things in our country."

And it is that continued commitment to discourse and civility that has her questioning why Quebec would want to leave.

"It seems to us that the French people in Canada have all the rights of everybody else," says Ms. Dabic. "Even after meeting with the Bloc Québécois members of Parliament, I still wasn't given one good reason for separation. They want to be in Canada, but out of it. They want to use the Canadian dollar and the Canadian passport. It's very difficult to understand."

The Balkan delegation also saw some danger in the flag debate, which they watched from the galleries.

Tihana Kacavenda of Zagreb said flags can be powerful symbols, noting how the fascist Ustashi checkerboard adopted by Croatia and the symbols of the anti-Catholic Chetniks adopted by Serbia rekindled deep and fearful memories across the borders.

Sarajevo's Mladen Popovic says Canadians and Québécois would do well to step back and look at the experience of Bosnia.

"When we first gained our independence, everybody was so proud, but that soon changed. Life became very difficult. The economy was bad, people were restricted from travelling because of passport problems. And then people from the different nationalities started moving from one territory to another, to be with their own."