

democratization was widely believed to entail a commitment to decentralization. According to Zagar, as the idea of democracy became increasingly popular, more and more people tended to favor the notion of decentralization (or even separatism, which could be seen as the ultimate degree of decentralization), while the ideology of centralization remained associated with traditional Communists.¹ In the 1980s, said Zagar, it would be the more liberal republics — Slovenia and Croatia — that would demand further decentralization or full independence, while Serbia and Montenegro would demand a more unified federation and a stronger Communist Party. It became clear that a new federal constitution was required, but there was no mechanism for amending the one of 1974 and no will to compromise and develop new mechanisms.

Tito had defined Yugoslav politics for many years, establishing self-determination and nonalignment as the cornerstones of his foreign policy. These principles would increasingly reinforce the domestic claims for self-determination on the part of the republics, which were guaranteed a right to secede by the 1974 constitution. Tito, lacking a successor with charisma approaching that of his own and having created no democratic federal institutions capable of filling the political void he would leave behind, divided his legacy by devolving power to the republics. With the debt crisis mounting at the time of his death and afterward, this decentralization legitimized even greater demands for autonomy on the part of the republics' political leaders, and also provided them the means to struggle for power on their own terms. The road to their independence had been paved by the central government and the head of the Yugoslav communism.

We can see now that the country's final² disintegration had begun at the end of the 1980s, during the ongoing unsuccessful attempts to reform the federation. A compromise solution was adopted

¹Professor Zagar's analysis of this matter is not universally accepted. An alternative explanation is that the Serbs were more in favor of a strong federation because they were spread all over Yugoslavia, which they therefore perceived as their national state more than did others. This alternative view does not attribute their federalist allegiance to communism (which some observers discount as largely mythical anyway) and does not consider Slovenia and Croatia as leaders of any trend toward liberal democracy.

²Indeed, earlier signs of disintegration began as early as the 1960s, with the 1974 constitution being one of its expressions and instruments.

in 1988 that made some democratization possible and enabled Prime Minister Markovic to launch economic and political reforms, but there was too little support for them to be realized. Because the republics took different positions with respect to the constitutional conflict over centralization or decentralization, this dispute came to be seen as an ethnic one — particularly as the resurgence of old conflicts between Croats and Serbs.³ No formal mechanisms existed within the constitution for addressing ethnic disputes; in much of the postwar period, Tito had suppressed ethnic conflict as illegitimate and encouraged his countrymen to identify themselves simply as "Yugoslavs." Some ethnic disputes had been mediated informally by local figures, but their influence eroded over time. Consequently, as the political conflicts over local versus federal authority became associated with ethnicity in the 1980s, tension was exacerbated and there were fewer means of resolving disputes locally.

Yugoslavia had a rotating collective presidency, in which the president of each republic would be president of the collective Presidency of Yugoslavia for one year. In May 1991 it was Croatia's turn, but Slobodan Milosevic, who represented not only Serbia but also his allies in Serbia's two autonomous provinces, Kosovo and Vojvodina, plus Montenegro, blocked the election of a Croat secessionist, Stipe Mesic, to the presidency. Thus the top of the state became paralyzed. Eventually the major European foreign ministers forced the election of Mesic, but by then the system could no longer reach any decisions. Fighting had been going on in Croatia since the end of March, and it soon intensified in Vukovar and Dubrovnik.

Constitutional Lessons

Politicians and scholars who wish to preserve the unity of a country may disagree as to whether a centralized federal system serves that objective more effectively than a decentralized system. Nor is that debate merely based on theoretical assumptions, for empirical comparisons yield quite different conclusions. Thus Switzerland and Canada are both highly decentralized states, but Switzerland remains stable while Canada faces a separatist movement. Those attempting to forestall Quebec's secession often recommend further decentralization and differentiation among the provinces — a policy of "asymmetrical federalism" in which Quebec would be recognized as a "distinct" society, possibly with greater autonomy than other provinces.

³Actually, conflict between the Serbian and Slovenian politicians was more pronounced until 1990.