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Excerpted from "Crisis in the Balkans" by Ali L. Karaosmano'glu

The 19th and 20th centuries have undoubtedly left scars that are difficult to cure. But the immediate cause of the present Yugoslav crisis is neither external power intervention nor traditional ethnic animosities. The latter could well be prevented from escalating to a bloody conflict situation if moderate policies were adopted by the conflicting regional entities. First of all, Serbia's, and its extreme nationalist leader Milosevic's, ambition to create a "Greater Serbia" constitute the major cause of the crisis.⁵ To some extent, the crisis is also the product of the Croatian and Bosnian policies of independence which failed to show sufficient consideration for the large Serbian communities in both countries.

Yugoslavia's nations had "very different and often mutually exclusive needs and aspirations." For the Serbs [who were the dominant power], Yugoslavia's future depended on further and tighter centralization. The non-Serb majorities, on the contrary, were in favor of creating their own sovereign states, or at least a confederation of sovereign states. . . .

A series of events in 1990–91 contributed to the deterioration of the crisis. In April 1990, the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and the Democratic United Opposition of Slovenia (DEMOS) came to power as a result of multi-party elections. Both political parties were centre-right and pro-independence. During the election campaign, the HDZ advocated a "Greater Croatia" that would annex Croat-populated regions of Bosnia while condemning "greater Serbian hegemony" [i.e., dominance]. This created considerable concern among the Serbian population living in the border areas of Croatia. The Serbian perception of this threat was reinforced, on the one hand, by the increasingly secessionist stance of Croatia, and on the other, by the expulsion of Serbs from government positions. Moreover,

the Croatian authorities threatened the Serbs by saying they would take measures to weaken Serbian economic position in the republic. These moves of the Croatian government led to growing Serbian fears, and, eventually, to insurrections and armed clashes. . . .

In February, [Serbian President] Milosevic and [Croatian President] Tudjman agreed on Serbian and Croatian annexations in Bosnia. . . . [A Bosnian referendum on independence] was held in March 1992 without Serbian participation. The Muslims and Croats voted in favor of a “sovereign and independent Bosnia and Herzegovina” while the Serbs were erecting barricades around Sarajevo.

So far there have been three wars in the Yugoslav succession. The first took place in Slovenia in the Spring of 1991 and lasted for 10 days. The Serbian minority in Slovenia is only 2.4% of the population and is not implicated in the Serbian design of creating a “Greater Serbia.” The conflict remained local without regional or international implications. The second war [between Croats and Serbs from Croatia and Serbia] started in Croatia in the spring of 1991. The hostilities were resumed again in February 1993 while the UN and EC representatives were working on a peace plan. The third began in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the spring of 1992 and is still being waged.

The last two conflicts had a significant similarity. One of their common features was the application by the Serbs of policies of “ethnic cleansing.” This involved changing the demographic composition of villages, towns, and regions and clearing land corridors to link up ethnic Serbian enclaves in Croatia and in Bosnia-Herzegovina with Serbia. These policies were (and still are) extensively applied to Bosnian Muslims and Croats. The victims were either directly driven out or intimidated to flee their homes. The methods of intimidation included murder, rape, and imprisonment in concentration camps. The Yugoslav conflict brought more than two million refugees and displaced persons. Hungary, Slovenia, and Turkey were put under migratory pressure. Serbia resettled ethnic Serbs in areas that were ethnically cleansed, thereby using refugees to change the demographic composition of regions and thus contributing to the creation of a Greater Serbia. . . .

The Kosovo problem constitutes one of the most dangerous crisis areas in Yugoslavia's ongoing process of disintegration. The origins of this problem can be traced back to the creation of an independent Albanian state after the defeat of Turkey in the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913. The independent Albania included only 50 percent of the Albanian population in the area. A great number of Albanians remained in Kosovo, an Ottoman province, most of which was given to Serbia. Today there are more than 2 million Albanians in Kosovo (an overwhelming majority of them are Muslims; the figure includes 15,000 Turks) and they account for over 90 percent of the population, the remaining 10 percent being Serbian and Montenegrin. However, the Serbs regard Kosovo as their historic heartland. Kosovo was the cradle of the medieval Serbian state. [See Figure 13.9.] It is the historic battlefield where the Serbs fought against the Ottomans in 1389. It is also a region containing many Orthodox churches and monasteries. These factors make the province a cultural and spiritual centre for the Serbs. Kosovo has greatly contributed to the formation of a Serbian collective memory and consciousness, and this has become particularly significant in the process of building a Serbian state based on ethnic nationalism.

While the Serbs view Kosovo as a part of the Serbian historical patrimony that cannot be negotiable, the Albanians base their claims on self-determination. Kosovo was in fact a self-governing province of Serbia in terms of the 1974 Yugoslav Constitution. Kosovo had its semi-autonomous status gradually eroded by the central government in Belgrade in 1990–1991. The basic cultural and educational rights of the Albanian population were abrogated. The Serbian authorities shut down the Albanian language schools. They dismissed Albanians from the police force, which has been totally serbianized. Belgrade also reinforced the local security force by sending in Serbian and Montenegrin military units. Moreover, the economy was almost entirely serbianized. Most of the Albanian workers and managers were replaced with the Serbs.

The Albanians, for their part, took measures to set up their own state organization in a gradual and clandestine manner. In September 1991 they held a referendum in which they voted for a “sovereign and independent” Kosovo. In May 1992 they held elections [and elected the moderate intellectual Ibrahim Rugova]. They also set up an underground school system financed by parents. Despite these efforts, the Kosovars have not been able to develop an effective means to defend themselves should the fighting spread to Kosovo. The lack of adequate defensive means, on the one hand, and the offensive Serbian strategy on the other, have brought about a very deep sense of insecurity, not only in Kosovo but also in Albania. It should be noted that this feeling of insecurity, combined with the measures of democratization in Albania and Kosovo, increased the assertiveness of Albanians. As a matter of fact, the democratic elections in both countries have further increased popular pressure for an Albanian-Kosovar reunion.

Nevertheless, in spite of popular pressure, Albanian authorities in both countries prevented numerous incidents from escalating to all-out conflict. [Remember that this was published in 1993.] Moreover, many Albanians seem willing to accept some form of autonomy within a new Yugoslavia. But this type of settlement is abhorred by the Milosevic administration which still views Kosovo as an integral part of a unitary Serbia.

The Albanians are careful not to provide the Serbian authorities with an excuse for a violent crackdown and the Albanian government has been urging the Kosovars to contribute to a peaceful solution of the Kosovo problem. But Albanian leaders have repeatedly declared that ethnic cleansing in Kosovo would not be tolerated by Tirana [Albania’s capital] and would lead to Albania’s military intervention.