ON THE ROAD TO SECESSION: SLOVENIA AND CROATIA

The new Croatian and Slovenian governments were committed to extricating their republics from the Yugoslav federation either by transforming the federation into an alliance of sovereign states, or by unilaterally declaring independence. The ex-communist elites brought to power by Milošević in Serbia and Montenegro, the communist elites in the Yugoslav federal army and the new pan-Serb national movement and its elites in Croatia and Bosnia–Hercegovina strongly opposed these plans. All three groups were, in various degrees, ideologically committed to the existing Yugoslav state as their common homeland and as their protector from foreign domination. In addition, Milošević saw in Yugoslavia the possibility of extending his power even further; the new Serb elites in Croatia and Bosnia–Hercegovina found in Yugoslavia the protection from domination by the Croat or Muslim governments of their republics and a common state with other Serbs. The military elites saw in Yugoslavia the source of their pay and status as well as the legitimation of their role.

A unilateral declaration of independence by these two republics would have breached the territorial integrity of the Yugoslav state which the Yugoslav federal army was obliged, by the constitution of 1974, to defend. The Serb elites of the Krajina region in Croatia would have opposed by the force of arms – as they did later – any attempt to compel them to break their links with other Serbs in Yugoslavia. In May 1990 the new Slovenian and Croatian governments had no military forces capable of countering the opposition of either the army or, in the case of Croatia, an armed rebellion of the Serbs supported by the Yugoslav army. In consequence, the new Croatian and Slovenian governments proposed to negotiate with other republican leaders the transformation of Yugoslavia into a confederation of sovereign states while, at the same time, building up their own military forces for any future showdown with their opponents.

Before reopening negotiations with the other republican leaders, in May–July 1990 the Croatian and Slovenian parliaments adopted a series of declarations and constitutional amendments asserting the sovereignty of their republics and legally enabling their own governments to
counter any move by Yugoslav federal organs. As expected, the leaders of the Serb Democratic party in Croatia rejected the Croatian constitutional amendments. Amidst increased unrest and violence in the Serb populated areas of Croatia, in October 1990 the Slovenian and Croatian governments submitted to the Yugoslav state presidency an official proposal for the restructuring of Yugoslavia entitled ‘A Model of Confederation’. According to the proposal, the existing republics should constitute themselves as independent and sovereign states, based on the right of national self-determination, and, then, as independent states enter into a confederal agreement with other republics or federations which would be based on international law governing relations among independent states.\(^1\) Confederation was thus conceived as an instrument for gaining recognition of independence for the Yugoslav republics. The counterproposal submitted by the Yugoslav state presidency a few weeks later, entitled ‘A Concept for the Federal Organisation of Yugoslavia’ would have established ‘the federal republic’ of Yugoslavia on the basis of the sovereignty of its individual citizens. No special rights were attributed to nations as collective entities, except for the declaration that the nations as well as federal units were in the new federal republic deemed to be equal.\(^2\) According to the Slovenian and Croatian proposal, former federal units would become independent states while the Yugoslav state presidency proposal – almost identical to the Serbian and Montenegrin proposal submitted in February 1991 – regarded the federal units as separate but equal units in a single state administration.

The negotiations, started in January 1991 at the expanded sessions of the Yugoslav state presidency, were widely publicised in expectation that they would soon resolve the continuing constitutional crisis which was paralysing the functioning of the state. Neither side, however, showed any willingness to modify its constitutional proposal and the Yugoslav state presidency soon became deadlocked over the election of a Croat HDZ nominee as its next president.\(^3\) On 25 March 1991 presidents Tudjman and Milošević met in Tito’s old hunting lodge of Karadordevo ostensibly to discuss the constitutional impasse. According to rumours originating from various sources, they principally discussed a possible partition of Bosnia–Hercegovina between Serbia and Croatia.\(^4\) Whatever the subject of their discussion, their talks brought no change in their previous positions. In April 1991 the negotiations on the future of Yugoslavia were transferred directly to the presidents\(^5\) of the six republics who, in spite of meeting fortnightly until June, likewise failed to reach any agreement. Early in June 1991 the president of the