

# The Reasons for the Collapse of Yugoslavia

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## Abstract

The former Yugoslav federation dissolved in early 90's creating five independent successor states. There are many theories that are trying to explain why this happened. However it is extremely hard task to declare which of those theories is the most relevant. This paper is making attempt to combine the most popular and famous theories concerning the issue and to separate the most relevant aspects of each of them.

*Key words:* Yugoslavia; collapse; theories; international system.

## 1. Introduction

The former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) was important subject of the international community. Internally this federation was composed by six republics, and two autonomous provinces. It was country located on the historically very important geopolitical region in the Balkans. Yugoslavia dissolved in a bloody civil war in the first half of the 90's. The literature review offers a wide range of explanations for the causes that led to the breakup of the Yugoslav federation. Especially controversial are some conspiracy theories. In this respect the paper is treating the issue concerning the reasons for the collapse of Yugoslavia by reviewing the existing theory, reconsidering them and finally offering its own conclusion that the collapse should be searched equally in both inside and outside the federation.

## 2. Theoretical and literature framework

The literature review offers a wide range of explanations for the causes that led to the breakup of the Yugoslav federation.

Some authors find the roots in the economic sphere. So according to Pleshtina [1] the reasons for the dissolution of the federation should be sought in the sensitivity of regional economic disparities within the Yugoslav federation. Pleshtina [1] actually makes the division of the federation into two parts. Northern part, which is economically developed and the southern part, quite behind in its economic development.

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In the northern section the Republic of Slovenia, Croatia and northern Serbia (city of Belgrade with its area and the autonomous province of Vojvodina) are placed. In, South Yugoslavia, Pleshtina [1] the Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and the rest of Serbia (Emphasizing the Serbian province of Kosovo) are placed. Accordingly, the conflict begins with the creating a mutual felling for exploitation from the system. The north felt that the poor south slows down its economic development, while the south complained that the developed North is not doing enough for them and always late with the assistance. So, that set of the economic relations in Yugoslavia is the main foundation and reason for the dissolution of Yugoslavia.

The work of Pleshtina [1] is certainly interesting and has its own logic of reasoning. The economy is the driving force in any society, but also is constant issue in the federations in the context of the principle of solidarity. Mirchev [2] agrees as well; in an interview between the EU and Yugoslavia he made parallels in terms of the existence of the two rings/two speeds inside the Union, developed and less developed. According to him, the greatest challenge for the Union is what was the biggest challenge for Yugoslavia too - the lack of solidarity. So according to Mirchev [2] the lack of solidarity made Yugoslavia disappeared.

We completely agree with the importance of the principle of solidarity, especially in the federations, but we do not fully agree with the previous explanation given by Pleshtina [1] in the part where was claimed the existence of two opposing camps in Yugoslavia. As already explained, in the south side is the Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Kosovo province. If looked at this list it will be easily apparent that we can hardly talk about the existence of a common camp i.e. the above listed entities were rather silent letters and not some loud joint camp.

Related to the Pleshtina's views is Woodward [3] who basically accepts the idea in relation to the main reason for the dissolution of the state. So she agrees that the economy was the root of everything but further more blames the high unemployment that have produces the creation of nationalism and the nationalism cause the disintegration of the federation. However, according to this author the eponymous reasons for the disintegration have not been exclusively located within the state. Opposite to that, maintaining the notion that the unemployment is the main reason and a core problem, the author believes that the unemployment itself was not sufficient for the dissolution of the federation. *"The pressure for changes in the Yugoslav economic policy and political reform in 1980<sup>th</sup> come as in the past - not by domestic political forces, but from the international system."*[3] According to this logic the international creditors have requested changes. Based on these requests the reforms were made in order to satisfy them. At the same time, the Slovenian and the Croatian leaderships have demanded these reforms that would by nature be ones of a systemic change. So, this situation inevitably led to decentralization and finally dissolution of the Yugoslav federation.

Such claims are in many ways related with the previously stated views on economically inequality of current regions in Yugoslavia. The statistic refers to the following: for example for Woodward [3] in 1986 the situation in Slovenia was such that this republic has almost full employment in contrast to other republics and especially unlike the province of Kosovo. Nevertheless it must be emphasized that we accept the importance and the role of the economy, and thus the unemployment rate, as one of the factors that had impact to the breakup of Yugoslavia. However, in order to have the whole picture the economic factors in parallel with the political – legal factors and conditions sought to be observed.

Magas [4] focuses primarily on the political considerations within the country, primarily the Serbian - Albanian relations in Kosovo, which is considered as crucial for the beginning of the end of Yugoslavia. The author also

characterizes the Yugoslav Constitution of 1974 as a legal and political failure for the effective functioning of federal institutions.

This view is very realistic and it has already been mentioned in the part for the non functional federal institution in Yugoslavia.

Interesting viewpoints are also given by Ramet [5] that argues that basically the problem was in the illegitimate political system - *"It was not a legitimate system, it was system based on one party rule.(...) And you had, of course, control of the media, not as tough as in some other communist countries, but did have control and surveillance of the media. (...) There was a lot of filling that the system was illegitimate, and an illegitimate system fosters resentment, fosters discontent. And within the context of its being a federalized system, in which you did have quite a bit of power devolved to the six republics, the discontent was going to be expressed through these channels."*

So according to this view it was the illegitimacy of the system, i.e. the existence of a "feeling" of illegitimacy of the system as the main reason for the end of the Yugoslav federation. The previous statement can be taken as true in the context of the democratic changes that have begun across Eastern Europe. The feeling of the illegitimacy of the system might have been exceeded if direct and free elections for Parliament were held at the federal level, as suggested by the federal government of Ante Markovic, but it did not happen because of the Serbian - Slovenian opposition. In line with this assertion is Goati [6].

Further literature review reveals quite different views on the issue in terms of the main reasons for the breakup of Yugoslavia. Thus Vjekoslav [7] considers Yugoslav multi confession matters as the key element for its collapse. Or, there is also a view according to which the main reasons must be searched in the cultural politics of Yugoslavia. Thus the Wachtel [8] considered that the key to the failure of the Yugoslav federation lies in the failure to create a unified Yugoslav culture. *"When the elite abandoned the political centralism and a program of administrative decentralization was initiated, any concept for the realization of a unified Yugoslav culture was abandoned."*Wachtel [8]

Certainly, when we talk about Yugoslavia and thus for the Balkans, it seems inevitable to mention explanations under which the reason for the breakup of Yugoslavia lies in history. Such an explanation is given by Cohen [9] according to which there was a historical conditionality for the emergence of nationalism.

This perspective has its own justification and logic. If one's make a historical review, will be able to see that the territory of Yugoslavia was divided between two great empires. It was the Austro-Hungarian Empire on the north and the Ottoman Empire on the south. The different influences and cultures of these two empires have left a mark on the peoples of Yugoslavia. At the same time, the territory of Yugoslavia was an area where major religions collide, i.e. Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Islam.

While accepting the view for the existence of some historical determination, however it's noted that one must be careful regarding this kind of views in order not to be abused. This view should not be used as a the basis for the construction of attitudes according to which Yugoslav wars, primarily the war in B&H, will be described as expected events because of the ancient historical reasons among the Balkan nations, which by the essence of things have always been at war and this is in the blood. In this way, we do not agree with the thesis of Kaplan [10] according to which the nations in the region are guided by historical standing intolerance. The work of Malcolm [11] under which the ethnic conflicts are much more due to manipulation of the elites rather than some kind of genetic propensity toward the ethnic animosities of the peoples of the region, is far more acceptable.

In the context of the discussion for the reasons, there is an excerpt presented for the dissolution of Yugoslavia in addition from an interview with Marshal Tito in which asked about the future of Yugoslavia after his death Tito said[12] *"Yugoslavia has strong unity, regardless of its multi nationality, we can say that today it has one among of the most powerful armies in Europe, than we have general national defense where we have a huge number of people in it and it is legally that everyone should be able to defend the country and they are armed (...) Yugoslavia is able to deploy 8 million people on the battlefield and 8 million is not a joke, especially not for people such as the Yugoslavs who are accustomed to war."* Although at first glance, it looks like the Marshal statement is totally wrong from what really happened, though deeper analysis of the previous interview that are quite the opposite actually could be seen. Tito simply makes a statement as it can be expected from the head of state - optimistic, but in its statement two elements are marked. The first one is the awareness about the multi-nationality of Yugoslavia as a potential problem in the future. As a precaution measure gives the existence of "unity" which is not a reply measurable category. The second element is the country's military power - the ability to mobilize more than 8 million military, which is a relative real guarantee for defending the country from possible external enemy. So it could be assumed that in 1978 Tito was aware that Yugoslavia could be cracked for inside and much less real threat could come from outside in terms of direct military attack by another state, but if it comes Yugoslavia is ready for it. In reality the danger from the outside did not come from any country, but by change of the international system.

All previous views have their own logic and eligibility. Although in the foreground highlight various factors that they consider as the most important for the breakup of SFR Yugoslavia, our opinion is that the previous views are not necessarily opposed to one another. It is believed that the main reason for the dissolution of Yugoslavia was the existence of a huge nationalism. However the nationalism did not appear itself. Thus, the combinations of economic, legally-political, cultural and historical factors were the ground for the development of nationalism that was the main reason for the end of Yugoslavia. Yet, all these factors cannot simply be characterized as internal. For example, Woodward [3] as one reason refers to pressure for changes in to the Yugoslav economic coming from outside. Some others even go further by direct location of the reasons in the some external factors. So according to Pond [13] it was the fall of communism as an external factor that contributed for the fall of communism inside. With this the common ideology that managed to unite the country with two alphabets, three religions, four languages, five nationalities and six republics was no more there.

The collapse of communism worldwide had its influence in Yugoslavia where it was difficult to sustain this system in the new international order that was coming. The collapse of ideological framework was disastrous for Yugoslavia as a common ideology that has driven out all the other divisions. The common ideology has been replaced with the nationalism which practically meant the replacement of Titosm with nationalist principles.

The external reasons were not less important than the internal ones and that there was some degree of interconnection between them. Thus the fall of communism in the world, meant a decline of the socialism in Yugoslavia. Changing in the international system also meant the end of federations like the USSR, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. The democratic changes in Europe began to penetrate Yugoslavia. The threat from the USSR was no longer there and with this a good part of the geostrategic importance of Yugoslavia was lost in the world after the Cold War. With all this, Yugoslavia has begun to lose certain economic credits and benefits that once have enjoyed. These certainly have found its reflection inside the country than instead allowing democratic pluralism actually moved towards ethno – centric mobilization.

According to the above, the reasons for the Yugoslavian collapse should be searched equally in both inside and outside the federation.

### 3. Conspiracy theories

On 12 March 1991 emergency session of the Presidency of Yugoslavia was held. The Yugoslavia defense Minister, General Kadijevic [14] addresses the attendants. He presented what he called *perfidious concept* developed by foreign forces which aims to dismantle Yugoslavia and in to three consecutive phases. The first phase would start as a civil war that would allow creation of conditions for foreign intervention on the territory of Yugoslavia (the second phase) and finally the last phase would have been creations of a puppet regimes on the territory of Yugoslavia.

When talking about the breakup of Yugoslavia the existence of numerous conspiracy theories cannot just simply be ignore. The abovementioned speech is often used by many advocates of the conspiracy theories as evidence for foreign forces, which aimed for the breakup of Yugoslavia. The common element for the different conspiracy theories is the claim that the dissolution of Yugoslavia was a consequence of the actions of foreign factors which consciously worked against Yugoslavia. Most of these theories, as the main countries responsible for the dissolution of Yugoslavia pointed out primary USA and Germany but also sometimes Austria and Hungary too. According to the logic of the conspiracy theories, all these states had their own interest in the termination of the existence of federal Yugoslavia. The question here would be: What was their interest? And the answer to the above question concretely for Germany's interest is offered by Mahairas [15] *"The German government aimed at this division because it wanted to include as territory of its "vital interest" Slovenia and Croatia, the most economically developed states of the Yugoslavia (...) This states were old allies in the second world war."* Thus, according to this, the interest of Germany consists in breaking up of Yugoslavia after which the territories of its vital interest will become under its control. As an argument for this kind of theories there are some historical reasons that are offered. So if looked at the suggested "vital interest territories" it can be seen that those are the same areas on which during the Second World War were formed quisling half autonomies states. This thesis logically leads to the assumption of the creation of a third German Reich from the Batiks to the Adriatic ... In order to achieve these goals, according to previously cited author, Germany gives them (the secessionist Slovenia and Croatia) any kind of support (financial and political) and even organize training military camps for the troops that would fight with the federal forces.

This kind of contention, contradictory or not, had some degree of influence in France and Britain which have not yet forgotten the German militarism and looked with suspicion and caution on the German reunification and its daily growth. It's agreed that Germany gave some kind of political (probably and financial) support for the pro-disintegration oriented Slovenia and Croatia, but for everything else that is stated it must be acknowledged that it was never really confirmed. So without any other relevant evidences it could only be considered that these theories appear as exaggeration on the reality. Furthermore, we let's not forget the fact that Germany was part of the joint position on 23 June under which the EC decided that it will not recognize any unilateral declaration of independence by Slovenia and Croatia. At the same time, Germany was the largest trade partner of Yugoslavia and in accordance with this logic would not have had much interest in disintegration of the relatively large Yugoslavian market. Furthermore, the eventual breakup of the country could have meant a river of refugees which would come in Germany where a number of Yugoslavs have worked. However for the sake of truth,

Germany changed the direction of its foreign policy, and persuaded its partners in the EC to recognize the Slovenian and Croatian declaration of independence, but it was only after the military intervention of the YNA. With regards to Austria's and Hungary's possible interests, most of conspiracy theories authors argue that there were historical and geostrategic reasons for them. Namely, similar like Germany, Austria is guided by the interest of the vital existence interest territories in Yugoslavia. These are the lands which historically, have belonged to the Austrian- Hungarian sphere of influence and were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, (i.e. the territories of the Republics of Slovenia, Croatia and letter B&H) for a long period of time. In addition to these claims are the statements by certain circles in the Austria parliament "*Representatives of the Christian conservative People's Party, members of parliament argued that Slovenia could become a part from Austria.*". [16] While according to the conspirators the Austria's guilt mostly consists in the public support for secessionism in Yugoslavia, the Hungary's guilt is more concrete and consists mostly in the illegal selling of weapons to the pro-secessionist Croatian authorities.

We believe that some of the claims for "guilt" of Austria and Hungary regarding the dissolution of Yugoslavia are exaggerated. Namely, Hungary and Austria were not powerful individually to cause the breakup of Yugoslavia. The existence of certain political parties' positions does not mean the same views on the official state foreign policy. So despite, the existence of a desire and maybe some kind of interest in the breakup of Yugoslavia perhaps, it is too hard to claim that there was some concrete action in this field from Austria which actually was crucial for the breakup of the Federation. It's believed that Austrian policy toward Yugoslavia was much more kind of respond to the already burning situation in SFRY. With regards to Hungary and the main accusation for selling weapons we believe that this is true. So according to General Vasiljevic, the head of the YNA counter intelligence [14] there is obvious evidence of that. However, it is debatable whether all this was illegally having in mind the fact that the contractor of the arms was the legitimately elected authorities in the Croatian Republic. Accordingly, the selling a weapon does not necessarily mean political support (though not excluded) and that it can also be seen as a purely business interests prism. Furthermore the existence of the Vojvodina Hungarian minority suggest that Hungary did not wish separation of Slovenia and Croatia from Yugoslavia, because in this way the Hungarian minority would remained isolated in the hands of Milosevic. Normally, this can also be interpreted in the direction that the separation of Slovenia would have been the beginning of disintegration which may be completed even with the dissolution of Vojvodina too.

However, most of the conspiracy theories place blames on the USA as the biggest advocates and culprits about what happened not only in SFRY but also in FRY. According to Mahairas [15] in the beginning of 1990 the USA have projected the dissolution of Yugoslavia in two phases –the first phase in the time period between 1992 to 1995 and the second period from 1998-1999. These claims find its justifications in the reality because of the USA militarily involvement through NATO in the two wars (B&H and Kosovo). Also, according to these theories, the USA interests are often located in the central and southern parts of Yugoslavia, i.e. B&H, Serbia (especially Kosovo) and Macedonia. Confirmation of such claims can be found in the literature according to which the President Bush was not so decisive for more active involvement of USA in the wars in Slovenia and Croatia and even B&H but was pretty determent for active role of the USA if the conflict occurs in Kosovo.

However, even if it is accepted as true the claim that the USA were more interested in the southern Yugoslavia, this by itself does not necessarily mean that the USA have the blame for the collapse of Yugoslavia.

As in the most conspiracy theories, where the USA is involved, here too, the USA interests are located primarily in the oil as very important and expensive resource. Although on the territory of Yugoslavia there are no oil platforms, still, according to some of these theories, the USA interests go way down in securing the control over the main routes in the way of oil. Thus, according to Mahairas [15] Macedonia, Bosnia and Serbia are on the only route from east to west and north to south through the Balkan Mountains along with Romania and Bulgaria. But also Turkey and Arab nations form a European-Middle East bloc, and it's a territory that USA wants to control. Some former parts of USSR are included too as for the complete exploitation of vast oil resources of the Caspian Sea.

Another USA interest, according to the conspiracy theories could have been keeping the American-dominated NATO as the only guarantor of security of Western Europe after the Cold War. In addition to the following statement goes the official Pentagon document according to Flounders [17], *"The preservation of NATO as the primary instrument for the western defense and security is from fundamental importance (...) We must prevent the creation of purely European security arrangements that would endanger NATO."* Or [16] *"In such a war Washington would not only prevail over the people of Yugoslavia, it would mention its dominant position over its European rivals."*

Such views actually have some validity. In the very first years after the Cold War there was a period of self-identifying and searching for answers about the necessity of keeping NATO out of the system of the cold war. USA had its interest in preserving this defense Alliance. Namely, it is not very secretive that USA has always preferred the existence of NATO rather than some new defensive Alliance with a purely independent European character. And there is nothing contentious about it. Yet before rushing with some conclusion we must bear in mind the fact that the USA have been reluctant for NATO intervention in Yugoslavia for a long time and has addressed the problem as a European for a long time as well. However, on the other hand, as one of the hardest and most realistic allegations to the USA was the encouragement that was given to the Muslims for not signing of the EC sponsored Lisbon agreement. This can be interpreted as deliberately sabotaging of the peace process which would have been brought by the Europeans. Rather the peace has been brought by the USA which has demonstrated that the Europeans cannot deal with the problems without the active participation and leading role of the USA. In this regard is the statement by former Ambassador to Yugoslavia [18] that if the USA does not lead in finding a solution to the general ethnic problem then no one will do this. In this direction are also the statements of both retired chiefs of staff of the USA air forces, according to which the victory in the Balkans would have established USA world leadership in the Post-Cold War era in a way that Operation 'Desert storm' never could. Hence the interest of the USA consists in giving a kind of example for the future role of the USA as the main leaders in the new world order.

We can agree that there were some kind of USA considerations, about how can the Yugoslav (and indeed any) conflict be used in USA favor. But there is nothing contentious in the endeavor to achieve your own interests. This does not necessarily mean that USA initiated the military conflict, especially taking into account the fact that for a long time they did not want to interfere in it.

Second question for the conspiracy authors is how would the USA implement its plans? The charges go from the fact that USA have been providing political, economical, and even military aid to the secession movements in Yugoslavia. In this context the most dangerous and most realistic accusation that are found are the ones from the bill 101-513 passed in Congress in 1990 where one paragraph refers to, Mahairas [15] that the maintaining of

direct and Republic election will result in direct economic aid for them (not channeled through the federation). This can be interpreted as USA stimulation for maintaining parallel direct elections in the various republics rather than one election process managed on the federation level. So according to the conspiracy authors, this is how USA would have made Yugoslavia fallen apart into a small states and legalize this with “(...)the neo-colonial Dayton agreement, involving two points - the establishment of a strong force of 60,000 NATO troops in Bosnia and the writing of the new,, Bosnian constitution.”[13]

Certainly that the previous allegations have their weight but before the theories under which the USA clearly have worked on the disintegration of Yugoslavia are accepted we must first return back and see that the USA preferred unity and survival of the Yugoslav federation.

The existence of certain interests of certain countries is quite normal in international relations, the collapse of another state is different matter. Was there strong connection between the two? The previous theories failed to prove this in full.

### 3. Conclusion

After the review of the combination of the most popular and famous theories concerning the reasons for the Yugoslavian collapse we can conclude that the reasons should be searched equally in both inside and outside the federation. In the terms of the conspiracy theories we can conclude that they have their own logic and its own weight, but at the same time they contain numerous inconsistencies that generally cannot be accepted as an absolute truth.

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