

MILOSEVIC'S AIMS
IN WAR AND DIPLOMACY

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MILOSEVIC'S AIMS IN WAR AND DIPLOMACY

Executive Summary

The limits of the West's resolve to enforce a solution to the crisis in the Balkans were freshly exposed last week at a press briefing by U.S. President Bill Clinton. Speaking to reporters on 6 May 1999, Clinton admitted that Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic might well survive the current crisis and remain in power in Belgrade as long as he accepted the West's terms for a settlement in Kosovo and permitted refugees to return home. He also made clear that a NATO invasion of Yugoslavia from the north, the one option open to the West that would facilitate the forcible removal of the Milosevic regime and with it the greatest single source of instability in the Balkans, was something "our (NATO's) goals never entailed"¹.

When the Yugoslav leader first began his grotesque campaign of ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, he envisaged three possible outcomes²:

- Milosevic's best case scenario involved the permanent expulsion of all or at least most ethnic Albanians from Kosovo, the eradication of the Kosovo Liberation Army and reassertion of Serbian control over the province.
- A scenario with which Milosevic might live included the possibility of NATO taking over control of Kosovo but leaving Milosevic intact in Belgrade.
- Finally, the third scenario, Milosevic's worst nightmare, would see a NATO invasion of Yugoslavia from the north, through Vojvodina, the removal from power of Milosevic and his regime and the creation of a transitional government pending internationally-supervised democratic elections.

Milosevic was apparently confident from the outset that NATO lacked the will to pursue the third option. President Clinton's recent remarks only confirm the soundness of Milosevic's judgement. The only question now left open is how close the West will allow Milosevic to come to his preferred scenario.

¹ BBC World (live coverage), 6 May 1999.

² See ICG Montenegro Briefing Paper, *Milosevic to Move on Montenegro*, 23 April 1999.

This report, prepared by ICG's Belgrade-based analyst, looks back on an extraordinary two months of war and diplomacy in the Balkans. It argues that Milosevic, while not actively willing NATO bombing, was prepared for that eventuality³ and examines how he has used it to his advantage.

The start of NATO's air campaign on 24 March 1999 provided Milosevic with the cover to unleash his own ground war within Kosovo. Within hours of the first NATO missiles being fired, Yugoslav forces, including paramilitaries, embarked on the most vicious and extensive campaign of ethnic cleansing seen in Europe since World War II. An estimated 88 percent of the Kosovo population have been driven from their homes, the bulk forced to seek refuge outside of Yugoslavia.

For the first three weeks of NATO air strikes, Milosevic sought to shore up his position at home, assuming sweeping war-time powers, refusing to countenance any concessions to NATO's demands and riding a wave of nationalist resentment directed against the West. During this phase of the conflict, Milosevic strove to emphasise that the Serbs was not alone in the world, holding out the prospect of Serbia's allies, in particular Russia, intervening militarily to protect the country from attack. Much play was made of remarks by Russian President Boris Yeltsin and members of the Russian legislature that NATO's action risked triggering a new world war.

From mid-April, however, Milosevic began to change his approach. With his objective of an ethnically cleansed Kosovo almost achieved, the Yugoslav leader signalled his willingness at last to negotiate a peaceful settlement with the West. To help justify the about-turn, Milosevic sought to dampen down expectations that Russia would come to Yugoslavia's defence. Instead, since mid-April, Russia has been seen as a distanced but trusted mediator who could broker a peace on terms acceptable to the Serbs.

What has been lacking in Milosevic's recent peace overtures, however, has been any sign that the Yugoslav leader is ready to accede to the two minimal conditions of regional peace: the presence in Kosovo of NATO-led armed forces and the complete withdrawal of all Yugoslav forces from the province. Without such a guarantee there can be no security for civilians still left inside Kosovo nor for those who have fled the province and are now waiting anxiously for a sign that it will be safe to return home.

All the indications suggest that the West will, in the coming days or weeks, succumb to the temptation to negotiate a deal with Milosevic. The Yugoslav leader is running out of people to ethnically cleanse. The Alliance is running out of targets to bomb. The continued refusal of Western leaders to contemplate an intervention on the ground to take control of Kosovo and possibly the whole of Serbia leaves the West with few options other than to enter into talks.

The great danger now is that Milosevic will secure a deal that leaves him politically unscathed, his position at home assured, still able to control events in Kosovo. In such circumstances, not only will it be virtually impossible to reverse the effects of recent ethnic cleansing by Yugoslav forces on the ground in Kosovo but also Milosevic would be left with a free hand to stoke new crises and conflicts in the future.

³ *Svedok*, 23 March 1999.

In any diplomatic discussions with the Yugoslav leader, the West must not give any ground on the minimum conditions for peace in Kosovo – the withdrawal of all Yugoslav forces and the presence of a NATO-led force. If Milosevic continues to refuse to meet these demands the international community should immediately begin preparations for an invasion of Serbia proper.

Finally, any respite offered by diplomacy should not lead to complacency that the Balkan problem has been solved. There can be no prospect of lasting peace and stability in the Balkans as long as Milosevic remains in power in Belgrade. Milosevic's track record shows that he is likely to use any time he is given to craft new conflicts both within Yugoslavia and the region. In turn, the international community should use every opportunity to undermine Milosevic's rule, build up democratic alternatives⁴ and be ready for ground action against Belgrade, staged from the north, if and when Milosevic threatens regional stability again in the future.

⁴ See ICG Balkans Report N°57, *Sidelining Slobodan: Getting Rid of Europe's Last Dictator*, 15 March 1999.



MILOSEVIC'S AIMS IN WAR AND DIPLOMACY

I. PRELUDE

On 24 March 1999 the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) began an air campaign against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY). Hindsight now suggests that the Belgrade regime was well-prepared. Arguably, Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic actually wished the air strikes, sensing an opportunity to be exploited to his advantage.

At the very least, Milosevic used the air strikes as a cover, a pretext, for unleashing his own ground war within the once-autonomous province of Kosovo. Coinciding with the NATO action, Yugoslav forces, including paramilitaries, embarked on the worst wave of ethnic cleansing to date that has left an estimated 88% of the Kosovo population displaced, with the bulk forced to seek refuge outside of the FRY.⁵

With war almost a month old, Western media focussed attention on what was described as the Yugoslav dictator's "master plan"⁶ for the ethnic Albanian populated province. The Yugoslav strategy, outlined in graphic detail in the allegedly secret Operation Horseshoe, was to encircle Kosovo with troops from the north, north-east and north-west, force as much of the civilian population to flee the province, but to leave open strategic escape routes enabling the flood of refugees to exit into Macedonia and Albania.⁷ While Western observers have reported shock and horror at the speed at which the province was depopulated and its resources looted, Yugoslav officials were on record well prior to 24 March 1999 with not so subtle hints that there would be little or no resistance in the event of an aggression against the Kosovar population. That is, while the official Yugoslav media has been replete with references to the "terrorist" Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and comments about "ethnic Albanian terrorist gangs...kill[ing] innocent civilians in order to make non-ethnic Albanians leave the province"⁸, high level officials did not hide the fact that the Albanian population in Kosovo was largely if not entirely civilian and little capable of standing up to serious force. For his part, Dragan Tomic,

⁵ This estimate was made by leader of the Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO) and former deputy premier, Vuk Draskovic, and reported by Radio M, 22 April 1999.

⁶ BBC World (documentary report), 22 April 1999.

⁷ Id.

⁸ Tanjug, 6 December 1998. Cited also in *Fear and Loathing in Belgrade: What the Serbian State Media Say About Kosovars* (ICG Yugoslavia Briefing), 26 January 1999.

Serbia's parliamentary speaker, spoke up about the threat of the KLA nearly three months prior to the NATO action, observing "They [the Kosovars] are no force at all, as the terrorists were defeated..."⁹

II. PRE-WAR DIPLOMACY

A. Rambouillet

For his part, Milosevic did little to conceal his intent to scupper the Western peace initiatives.¹⁰ It was back on 23 February 1999 that the Kosovar delegation to the Rambouillet peace conference agreed to the terms. Thereafter, the Western game plan was to pressure the Yugoslav dictator into acceding to the conditions, reiterating the threat of NATO bombing.¹¹

B. Paris

Milosevic, however, resisted, countering with an intriguing strategy of his own and one that ought not be unfamiliar to students of Yugoslav history.¹² Only weeks after the Rambouillet talks ended, a recalcitrant Yugoslav delegation returned to France, this time to Paris, to meet the Kosovars beginning on 15 March. The plan was to torpedo talks by countering the text of the peace accord with a document sanctioned by the Belgrade regime.

On Thursday, 18 March 1999, the Yugoslav delegation unilaterally signed an "Agreement for the self-government in Kosovo Metohija."¹³ This, Yugoslav officials maintained, was proof positive that it was really the Yugoslav government side intent all along to work for a peaceful resolution to tensions in Kosovo and for a resolution offering "the same rights to everybody".¹⁴ According to the Belgrade document, all national minorities would enjoy cultural and political rights while "the rights and freedoms set forth in the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and fundamental freedoms and its protocols shall apply directly in Kosmet." To be sure, a presence for the international community was acknowledged, with a clause in Article II noting that "The Signatories shall cooperate fully with all efforts by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other international and non-governmental organisations acting under auspices of the UNHCR concerning the repatriation and return of persons..."¹⁵

Yet while claiming to be interested in forging and consolidating a peace for Kosovo in keeping with international standards and expectations, Yugoslav officials undermined the

⁹ *Borba*, 4 January 1999.

¹⁰ See article "Che sara-sara" in *Vreme*, 21 March 1999.

¹¹ See *Kosovo: The Road to Peace*, ICG Balkans Report no. 59, 12 March 1999.

¹² This was the strategy adopted in 1941, known as *Ni rat ni pakt* (*Neither War Nor Pact*). The tactic then was to evade the issue of the alliance with the Axis powers and of entering the war, by opting for a third option technically neither presented nor available. For Milosevic's and the Serbian government's version of *Ni rat ni pakt*, see *Politika*, 24 March 1999.

¹³ *Borba*, 19 March 1999 and *Borba* 20-21 March 1999.

¹⁴ *Vecernje novosti*, 20 March 1999.

¹⁵ Cited in *Borba*, 20-21 March 1999.

very commitment they swore to uphold. Rather than signalling a willingness to cooperate with international peace efforts, Belgrade derided them, opting to designate them counterproductive and aimed at destabilising Yugoslavia. According to Milosevic's regime and propaganda machinery, the international community was bent on occupying Kosovo by sending in invasion ground troops. Such actions would only bolster the Kosovar "separatist-terrorist organisations" in their search for international sponsorship for independence from the FRY.¹⁶

Thus, ranking officials such as Serbian President Milan Milutinovic were high-profile in the days leading up to the NATO action, driving home the message that it was time for a resounding "No to foreign troops".¹⁷ As further evidence of the international community's alleged sinister and conspiratorial intent, and what turned out to be the Yugoslav dictator's willingness to defy NATO threats, Belgrade propaganda focussed on what it called the West's duplicity. Once again, it was Milutinovic taking the lead in the propaganda crusade, alleging that the Paris peace efforts amounted to nothing more than "absurdity without precedent".¹⁸ It was Milutinovic's, and ultimately of course the regime's, position that the peace process beginning with the Rambouillet talks was a sham all along, but not because of Belgrade's efforts. According to the Serbian president: "They [the Albanian delegation] signed a document they had drawn up with their American friends even before Rambouillet... That document was made public by the Pristina-based Albanian language daily *Koha Ditore* already on February 5, whereas the talks in Rambouillet started on February 7".¹⁹

III. COUNTDOWN TO CONFLICT

A. Peace on Belgrade's Terms

The 72 hours prior to NATO action saw an entrenchment of Belgrade's defiance. Rather than opting to signal any genuine willingness to back off and perhaps negotiate a Kosovo peace, Milosevic and his supporters shored up their anti-Western and anti-NATO stance.²⁰ To be sure, official rhetoric did say that negotiations between Belgrade and the Kosovars could be entertained, but only after the international community were de facto shut out and only after the Kosovars accepted the political terms offered by the regime. That is, Belgrade maintained that "a political agreement whereby representatives of the political parties of Kosmet Albanians will accept autonomy and express respect for the territorial integrity and unity of the Republic of Serbia will be the best proof that they have given up the project of destroying the State whose full-fledged citizens they are. Upon signing the political agreement, representatives of the political parties of the Albanians could participate in the talks on its implementation but only with members of the delegation of the republic of Serbia".²¹

¹⁶ See statement of Serbian President Milan Milutinovic in *Vecernje novosti*, 20 March 1999.

¹⁷ *Borba*, 24 March 1999.

¹⁸ *Borba*, 22 March 1999.

¹⁹ *Borba*, 20-21 March 1999.

²⁰ *Politika*, 24 March 1999.

²¹ *Borba*, 22 March 1999.

B. A Call to Arms

The regime's commitment to waging a campaign of ethnic cleansing continued to come to the fore in veiled language, through media headlines which heralded the message that "No Solution [to Kosovo] Comes with Force [against FRY]"²². Meanwhile ultranationalist leader of the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) and Serbian deputy premier, Vojislav Seselj, was left to whip up populist feelings against the West and against NATO. In a debate televised by the state carrier RTS, Seselj, addressing the question of the likelihood of Serbia acquiescing to NATO threats of bombing, observed that loyal Serbs would fight to the end while giving no thought to compromise or surrender. "Some politicians who aren't [to be taken] serious say that we mustn't thump our chests [in defiance] before the whole world. They summon up the example of Prince Milos who, allegedly, kissed the slippers of the Turkish sultan, and they say that we, now, must kiss Clinton's slippers. I say to them, I caution them, that the old days are gone, that customs have changed. Now with Clinton the slippers aren't kissed, but something else instead".²³ Seselj ended his remarks at the speakers' podium by vowing "that if they attack us and it is a state of war, there shall be no grace before deserters, no grace for those who sew panic, those who spread false news...If somebody thinks of philosophising after the first bombs fall, about do we defend ourselves or not, and if so how, then he is entertaining a colossal falsehood, whether that person be a leading politician or an ordinary citizen".²⁴

C. Eleventh Hour Diplomacy

Amidst all the defiant rhetoric, one key Western player was given an opportunity to meet with President Milosevic. Special envoy Richard Holbrooke, pro-regime media reported, was slated to have an eleventh hour meeting on 22 March with the dictator for what was described as "a new chance for diplomacy".²⁵

Upon his arrival, Holbrooke met first with journalists from Studio B for an exclusive and explained the Western commitment to the peace process, underscoring the point that international troops would "bring peace to Kosovo"²⁶ and underlining Western intentions at resuming the peace process. Holbrooke also stressed that international troops in Kosovo would protect "both Serbs and Albanians".²⁷ Instead of seizing on the possibility of a peace initiative, however, it appears the regime intended merely to repeat its insistence on resolving the Kosovo crisis on its terms and on those terms only.

After meeting with the US envoy, Milosevic reiterated the position that no resolution veering from the text of the of an accord signed by the Serbian delegation at Paris would be accepted. "In the interests of all who desire a peaceful, free and united life in Kosovo and Metohija, Yugoslavia and Serbia cannot accept any solution upon whose foundation it would be possible to create a state within the province of Kosovo and Metohija".²⁸ In the end, the meeting with Holbrooke afforded Milosevic only the opportunity to express

²² *Borba*, 23 March 1999.

²³ Cited in *NIN*, 25 March 1999.

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Vecernje novosti*, 22 March 1999.

²⁶ Studio B, 22 March 1999. Also Radio B 92, 22 March 1999.

²⁷ See coverage of the Studio B, Radio B 92 interview in *Danas*, 23 March 1999.

²⁸ *Danas*, 23 March 1999.

intransigence.²⁹ State media also hammered home the message that any international “force” would encounter “defence”.³⁰

IV. 24 MARCH 1999—NATO BOMBING BEGINS

A. Milosevic Declares A State of War

On the morning of 24 March, but at least six hours before the first bomb fell, signs of how the regime was to manage the polity became clear. Veran Matic, editor in chief of Radio B 92, Belgrade’s independent broadcaster, was arrested and jailed, forced to spend a day in captivity with an accused murderer. The station’s broadcast signal was silenced, and within days, total control of 92’s web page was seized by loyalists of Milosevic’s governing Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS).

The state of war gave Milosevic sweeping powers, enabling him to even drop the pretence of ruling with adherence to democratic tenets.³¹ Media were subject to the strictest of censorship codes, with nothing that failed to meet ministry of information standards being allowed to appear in print or over the airwaves. Restrictions on foreign journalists continue to be in effect.

Shortly after the NATO campaign began, males of military age (that is up to the age of 65 years), were prohibited from travelling abroad.

According to legislation governing the FRY in a state of war, “no one had the right to conclude or to put signature to the capitulation of the country or of any part [of the country], or to prevent citizens from fighting against enemies attacking the country”.³²

B. Silencing the Opposition

Democratic opposition voices were either silenced or reported selectively. After the NATO action, some of Serbia’s most eloquent opponents of Milosevic’s government received no media exposure, unless they had something critical to say about the NATO action. Zoran Djindjic, leader of the Democratic Party (DS) and a key figure in the coalition Alliance for Changes (SZP) could only garner attention when observing that “NATO aggression” has become “that kind of politics which [is] the hostage of the most extreme Albanians”.³³ Nebojsa Covic, leader of the Democratic Alternative (DA) and another key figure in the SZP received media spotlight only after noting “citizens if the world, soldiers of the FRY are dying because of your bombs which are landing in their country while defend their homes. Ask your governments why are your soldiers dying hundreds of kilometres from their homeland. Why are they killing our children in our

²⁹ *Borba and Vecernje novosti*, 23 March 1999.

³⁰ *Vecernje novosti*, 23 March 1999.

³¹ See Law of Defense and powers conferred upon head of state, reprinted in part in *Vreme*, 27 March 1999.

³² Cited in *Vreme*, 27 March 1999.

³³ *Blic*, 27 March 1999.

land?”³⁴ The voice of the reformist president of Montenegro, Milo Djukanovic, was only heard when he remarked that “force cannot and it will not solve the problems of Kosovo”.³⁵

Any distinction between disagreement with regime policy and treason became blurred; it soon became clear that any criticism might be regarded as treason. Detractors of the Milosevic regime in Montenegro, led by the pro-reform and Western oriented president, Milo Djukanovic, were being portrayed as enemies of the state. In a prelude of what was to come, the independent daily *Blic*, literally less than a day from falling subject to severe censorship, gave prominence to remarks by Montenegrins critical of Djukanovic. Predrag Bulatovic, vice president of the Socialist People’s Party (SNP), was featured when vilifying the Montenegrin president, arguing that the republic’s neutrality during the state of war was “much more dangerous than NATO bombs”.³⁶ Bulatovic stressed that “there is no and there can be no neutrality when in question is the FRY and aggression against it”.³⁷

V. MANIPULATING THE SERBIAN PUBLIC — THE PROPAGANDA WAR

A. Support for the Serbian War Effort and War Aims

The propaganda war for the hearts and minds of the average Serbian citizen began with the premise that stalwart and brave Serbs did not stand alone in the world. Popular sports figures living abroad were featured widely in Serbian media, condemning the bombing of their homeland and expressing solidarity with friends and family in Serbia.³⁸

More importantly, propaganda featured the message that many foreigners empathised with the plight of the FRY public. Reports of Russia bearing alongside Serbia dominated headlines during the first three weeks. Such accounts periodically hinted that Russian support was comprised of more than cheerleading from the sidelines, and was in fact preparing to take the leap past diplomatic initiatives aimed at resolving the “Kosovo crisis”.³⁹ According to Serbian state media, the West could continue bombing Serbia, but only at its own peril. “Russian President Boris Yeltsin warn[ed] NATO, the US and Germany not to push Russia into a military action which might lead to a European and perhaps a world war,” heralded the state press.⁴⁰

Press coverage also highlighted anti-war demonstrations around the world, when they featured pro-Serbian sentiments or solidarity with the people of Yugoslavia. As for Albanians who were the targets of Milosevic’s vicious ethnic cleansing campaign, their condition was left unmentioned. Only those ethnic Albanians willing to, or coerced into,

³⁴ *Blic*, 27 March 1999.

³⁵ *Blic*, 31 March 1999.

³⁶ *Blic*, 24 March 1999.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ See coverage of NBA basketball star Vlade Divac, *Blic*, 29 March 1999.

³⁹ See, for example, details of Russian Premier Primakov’s visit to Belgrade. *Danas*, 30 March 1999.

⁴⁰ *Borba*, 12 April 1999.

declaring that their suffering was due to NATO bombs appeared on state television or had their stories covered in dailies.⁴¹ Unintended civilian casualties became the sought-after targets of NATO bombs. Thus, 70 Kosovars killed was described as “just one more horrible crime of the Western alliance. NATO killed Albanians...The aggressor in no way could have ‘unintentionally’ confused a civilian and a military transport.”⁴² Needless to say, media efforts at war coverage focussed principally on Serb civilian casualties, invariably described as the intended targets of “barbarian” or “Nazi” NATO bombing raids.⁴³

B. Pop Music

Pop music concerts got underway on 28 March 1999, just days after the NATO action, and eventually expanded into nightly vigils on Belgrade’s bridges as citizens insisted they were building “a living shield” deterrent against Alliance bombs. Each day at about noon, in the centre of the Yugoslav capitol at what Draskovic dubbed ‘Freedom Square,’ contemporary and rock and folk artists gathered along with the public to allegedly protest the war. In fact, the music shows, organisers’ claims notwithstanding, were more about denouncing NATO and the Western alliance than demonstrations about a just peace. At no time did the thousands who gathered each day seize the occasion to denounce ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. Rather, the concerts proved the occasion to perpetuate the image of ethnic Serbs as victims.⁴⁴ In part, this may be attributed to the driving force behind the events. Undoubtedly the innovation came from the SPO and Vuk Draskovic: one of the ubiquitous symbols of the daily events became a target, suspiciously close to, if not almost identical to, the logo of Studio B television, controlled by the SPO. Kiosk trade along the main public thoroughfare emptying into the Square is dominated by the SPO, which had dedicated most of its trade and output to the manufacture and sale of products sporting the targets. At least some of the performers, moreover, were of questionable pedigree. Among the most popular acts was Ceca,⁴⁵ a pop icon and wife of the notorious paramilitary leader and accused war criminal Zeljko Raznatovic, alias Arkan.⁴⁶ At times Ceca and Draskovic’s wife, Danica Draskovic, were seen standing together in the crowd.

VI. MILOSEVIC’S DIPLOMATIC OVERTURES

A. Milosevic Plays to the Home Crowd

Milosevic, arguably for the first twenty or so days of the war, used public diplomacy primarily for domestic consumption. He likely understood that NATO, at that time, was not prepared for a dialogue. Thus in an effort to maintain the fiction that Belgrade was interested in promoting peace, the Yugoslav dictator launched a two-pronged diplomatic

⁴¹ See, for example, *Borba* and RTS, 8 and 9 April.

⁴² *Vecernje novosti*, 15 April 1999.

⁴³ See, for example, front page coverage of events in *Vecernje novosti* from 27 March 1999 to 10 April 1999.

⁴⁴ See *reportaza* in *Blic*, 5 and 8 April 1999.

⁴⁵ *Dnevni avaz*, 26 April 1999.

⁴⁶ *Glas javnosti*, 1 April 1999.

initiative. As mentioned above, receiving communiqués from Moscow and greeting Russian officials helped Belgrade sell the idea that heroic Serbs were not alone in the world.

On the other hand, Milosevic met Kosovar leader Ibrahim Rugova, an event touted all over Serbian media on 2 April as the likely breakthrough that would be the foundation for a lasting peace in the province.⁴⁷ While Western media queried how and why Rugova came to meet with Milosevic, suggesting that Rugova had been pressured and was unable to act of his own accord, official state accounts chose to emphasise statements from sympathetic sources, such as Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov who offered the insight that the Albanian leader met with Milosevic “on his own accord” and “Rugova denied rumours that he was wounded and that his house had been burned down”.⁴⁸ Insofar as the Yugoslav president was concerned, the windfall from the Rugova meeting was that it enabled him to show the Serbian public that while NATO continued its “barbaric” attacks on Serbia’s infrastructure and against its citizens, Belgrade, by contrast, was of the opinion that outstanding differences between the Yugoslav and Kosovar leaderships could be resolved “only through political means”.⁴⁹

B. The Russian Dimension

On 12 April the Serbian legislature voted, according to some reports unanimously, to accept FRY’s membership in the Union of Russia and Belarus.⁵⁰ FRY and Serbian officials heralded the event as one of paramount historic significance. Serbian parliamentary speaker Dragan Tomic said the development “would be ‘written in gold letters’ in the history of the Serbian people”. Serbia’s prime minister, Mirko Marjanovic, said the Union “was one of the ways to resist the NATO aggression”.⁵¹

Only days later, on 14 April, Milosevic received the President of Belarus, Aleksandr Lukashenka. According to most official reports, the visit demonstrated that fraternal ties were being cemented: “The arrival of the President of Belarus at the head of a state delegation...is a sign of the great solidarity of the people and leadership of that country with the people of Yugoslavia at this most difficult of times”.⁵²

But it was precisely during the hype of the Lukashenka visit and of the reporting on the vote in the Serbian parliament days prior that a fundamental strategy shift was under way. That is, Milosevic was signalling that Russia would no longer be presented as FRY’s protector willing to trigger a third world war. Instead, he began opening channels of negotiations and presenting Russia as a trusted mediator in a possible peace process.

State censors let one story slip quietly through in the pages of *Danas*. In hindsight, that emerged as the first clear signal that in fact Belgrade was launching a new public diplomacy, aimed perhaps more as a foreshadowing of what was to come later, courtesy of SPO leader Draskovic. In the 15 April 1999 issue of the daily, it was stated openly that ties between Belgrade and Moscow were not as, most official coverage would have it, on

⁴⁷ Tanjug and RTS, 2 April 1999. See also coverage in *Blic* and *Vecernje novosti*, 2 April 1999.

⁴⁸ *Borba*, 4 April 1999.

⁴⁹ *Vecernje novosti*, 2 April 1999.

⁵⁰ Tanjug, 12 April 1999; see also *Borba*, 13 April 1999.

⁵¹ *Borba*, 14 April 1999.

⁵² *Borba*, 15 April 1999.

a rock-solid foundation. The piece cited ranking Russian officials as suggesting that the idea of Serbia joining a fraternal union with Russia and Belarus, while a laudable goal in principle, was unworkable in the context of current international relations. According to the account, none other than Russian President Boris Yeltsin had responded to Belgrade's initiatives with the observation that "at this moment in time it is too early to achieve the 'practical realisation' of the idea of FRY entry into a union with Russia and Belarus".

C. The Opposition: With Room for One More, Mr. Vuk Draskovic

When the NATO bombing began, Vuk Draskovic, then a federal deputy premier and a committed nationalist, was among the most outspoken critics of the Western alliance. In the early days of the conflict, he appeared numerous times on CNN, BBC and Sky News defending Belgrade's interests in Kosovo as he and Milosevic saw them. In sensational rhetoric that has become a Draskovic trademark, he at one point declared that NATO had committed a violation against the FRY that was nothing short of a "Hiroshima of human rights."⁵³ Like official Belgrade, he was on record as saying that no compromise on Kosovo could even be considered as long as NATO waged its air campaign. "Stop the bombing, and we'll cease our operations. The Albanians, however, also have to halt their operations against our civilians," he said.⁵⁴

It was really on 21 April that Draskovic's criticisms of the regime came to international prominence. At the NATO briefing that afternoon, it was remarked that the deputy premier had gone on record saying that Serbian state television was not up front about the effects of the NATO bombing, hinting that the state media needed to stop "lying" to the public. Draskovic also reportedly called for a cooling of nationalist passions. He followed up these observations by going on the record with a call for an international presence in Kosovo: "As far as the first tragedy is concerned I'm suffering, I'm very sad, and I think this bombarding must be stopped and all refugees must come back...I think an international presence in Kosovo is necessary for establishing peace, reconciliation, confidence..."⁵⁵ Only days later, Draskovic was again featured prominently in the international media, this time candidly assessing the contribution that Russia would make to the FRY war effort: "Let's tell our people the truth...there will be no third world war...we are alone".⁵⁶

But on 28 April, Draskovic, who had only served as deputy prime minister since mid-January, was sacked.⁵⁷ The question remains: why? Some observers have speculated that his outspokenness constituted a break at least at some level with the government, and showed that fissures or "dissonant" voices existed within the governing elite.⁵⁸ Were there, then, opponents of the Milosevic government who had possibly garnered enough influence to effect a break with the dictator? At first blush, there is some evidence to suggest this eventuality might have been a possibility.

⁵³ *Vecernje novosti*, 26 March 1999.

⁵⁴ *Danas*, 27 March 1999.

⁵⁵ Reuters, 23 April 1999.

⁵⁶ Reuters, 25 April 1999.

⁵⁷ Tanjug, 28 April 1999.

⁵⁸ Reuters, 25 April 1999.

Indeed Draskovic's was not the only voice receiving prominent coverage in the international media during that 21-28 April period. Democratic opposition leaders once again renewed their attacks on the dictatorship, seemingly coming out of the woodwork, with Djindjic being among those leading the charge.⁵⁹ As long as Milosevic remained at the helm of Yugoslav politics, there could be no resolution to the Kosovo crisis and an improvement in relations with the NATO states, the DS leader claimed.⁶⁰ For his part, Vuk Obradovic, former general and founder and leader of the SZP-affiliated Social Democracy Party, said he and his supporters "call and insist on his [Milosevic's] removal from power, because we see the regime as mainly responsible for the situation Yugoslavia is now in."⁶¹

But to return to the question: Did this sudden flood of criticism, reported by the international media, result because of a fundamental weakening of the Milosevic regime and its inability to maintain strict social and political order? Regrettably, this must be answered in the negative. Even those resurfacing as the harshest of critics tempered their observations with remarks that suggested that Milosevic's grip on power continued to be nothing short of iron, and that his departure from the political scene could not be taken as a given. It was Djindjic who hinted that Milosevic could continue to rule for some time, an eventuality that could be characterised as "much the same as Saddam Hussein while NATO troops eventually occupy Kosovo".⁶² Milosevic's ability to exert control through terror and brutality, Djindjic explained, remains intact. "I don't stay in my office. I can't be seen on the streets and I only speak to people on the mobile".⁶³ By 6 May 1999 Djindjic had reportedly "fled" Serbia for the relative safety of Montenegro.⁶⁴

D. Milosevic as Dove...

The answer to why Draskovic surfaced with criticism, and was followed so suddenly by democratic opposition leaders, may be found in the explanation that it was in the interests of the Milosevic dictatorship to tolerate if not actually promote some dissonance, but only as a way of signalling the opening of a conduit to NATO representatives. As mentioned, it was in reality since about 15 April that Milosevic was beginning to measure carefully some distance between Belgrade and Moscow. What cannot be discounted is the possibility that Draskovic interpreted that to mean that Belgrade was leaving Moscow out in the cold, and made statements in public that did not reflect what Milosevic truly wanted. Specifically, the FRY dictator seemed to be signalling that Russia would be brought into the process, but this time in the guise of a serious diplomatic player, suggesting that Belgrade and Moscow would be working in tandem with the intent of luring the West into talks. When Draskovic went public with statements that Moscow's threats of triggering a third world war were absurd and meant that Belgrade was isolated, he either at the very least misunderstood Milosevic or intentionally garbled the message, either way resulting in his departure from the post of deputy premier.

⁵⁹ n-tv, 25 April 1999. Djindjic continues to sustain his criticism of the Milosevic regime. On 6 May 1999, from the relative safety of Montenegro, the DS leader gave an exclusive interview aired on BBC World, in which he observed Milosevic ought to be tried for war crimes for what is taking place in Kosovo.

⁶⁰ UPI, 25 April 1999.

⁶¹ BETA and Reuters, 25 April 1999.

⁶² UPI, 25 April 1999.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ AP, 6 May 1999.

What must be understood is that it appears Milosevic likely feels stridently confident about his new approach. In the days since Draskovic's sacking, the Yugoslav dictator has grown even bolder in his aim to engage the allies in negotiations. Perhaps to demonstrate his intent to break the ice with NATO officials, he has signalled aggressively his willingness to compromise, arguably in most graphic terms on 1 May, when three captured US servicemen were informed that they, apparently as a result of the intervention of US peace envoy Reverend Jesse Jackson, would be freed.⁶⁵ Since, Milosevic has signalled an interest in meeting privately with US President Bill Clinton.⁶⁶

To be sure, observers have already noted that Milosevic's recent and ongoing machinations are not without some pitfalls for the Alliance. For example, it has been acknowledged and said publicly that the freeing of the servicemen may have been done with the calculated objective of dividing domestic US public opinion against the efficacy of the air war.⁶⁷ Moreover, it has been noted that the seemingly clumsy overture to President Clinton may have been a calculated attempt to tap into and sew disunity within the Alliance.⁶⁸

On another note, Rugova's arrival in Italy on 5 May 1999⁶⁹ has fuelled some speculation the Kosovar leader's ability to now travel abroad represents a concession by the Belgrade regime.⁷⁰ Alternatively, Milosevic may now be enthusiastic to involve the Kosovar pacifist leader in negotiations as away of discrediting him with the KLA, and using the militant reaction within the KLA as justifying goals such the seeking of a Yugoslav security presence in Kosovo (an objective which if, in any way secured, would spell disaster for the personal safety of any possible refugee returnees).

E. ...Flies Full Circle

Even with the tremendous impact that NATO bombing has had on the military and physical infrastructure of the FRY, along with the attendant economic and social costs, it would be imprudent to conclude that Milosevic perceives himself to be in a position of political weakness vis-à-vis the Alliance.

It was on 30 April that international media reported that Milosevic had six conditions for a resolution to the Kosovo crisis.⁷¹ That same day, the Russians were partnered prominently in the latest and ongoing diplomatic offensive. Moscow's Balkan envoy, Viktor Chernomyrdin, arrived in Belgrade for a first round of talks, lasting six hours.⁷² What emerged was described as a seven-point peace plan⁷³ in which Belgrade acceded to a foreign presence in Kosovo, but ruled out armed forces. "It's a U.N. mission...so, no

⁶⁵ Tanjug, 1 May 1999.

⁶⁶ CNN, 1 May 1999.

⁶⁷ CNN, 2 May 1999.

⁶⁸ CNN, 1 May 1999

⁶⁹ *Le temps*, 6 May 1999.

⁷⁰ Note reporters' questions at President Clinton's press conference, 6 May. BBC World coverage, 6 May 1999.

⁷¹ Milosevic interview, UPI, 30 April 1999.

⁷² Tanjug and Itar-Tass, 30 April 1999.

⁷³ Tanjug, 30 April 1999.

force, no occupying soldiers on our soil," Nebojsa Vujovic, foreign ministry spokesman said,⁷⁴ invoking the ghost of the Serbian delegation at Paris.

The tragic bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade on the night of 7-8 May 1999 handed Milosevic a propaganda gift.⁷⁵ While Beijing is unlikely to stand long in the way of an accord involving Russia, NATO and the FRY, the incident has placed pressure on the Western powers to come to the peace table. Perhaps recognising the value of the tragedy and aiming to exploit the timing of its potential, Milosevic, on 10 May, announced that Yugoslav forces in Kosovo, having achieved their objectives, would be subject to a "partial withdrawal".⁷⁶ The announcement, almost certainly aimed at pressuring the NATO countries to the negotiating table, has been met in Alliance circles with a great amount of scepticism.⁷⁷ Meanwhile Chinese authorities have added that their support for any possible peace agreement is contingent upon NATO ceasing its air campaign.

Milosevic has also said that while a NATO-led peace mission for Kosovo remains out of the question, a "lightly armed" force could be accommodated.⁷⁸ If anything, his arrogance in reviving in essence the demands put forth in the Paris document signed by the Serbian delegation suggests he may see himself in an advantageous position.

VII. CONCLUSION

Milosevic appears now ready to negotiate a settlement for Kosovo. His diplomatic overtures, ongoing since about 15 April, also suggest that he has confidence in his ability to return to the negotiating table. While NATO has inflicted heavy casualties against the FRY, now is no time to assume that Milosevic believes himself to be bargaining from weakness.

The signal to engage diplomatically is by no means a sign that Milosevic sees himself as unable to resume international relations through force and aggression.⁷⁹ First of all, he continues to harass Djukanovic and the democratically elected Montenegrin government, suggesting he is prepared to destabilise that republic. Also, if pressed, it must not be ruled out that he may retaliate by seeking to destabilise the entire Balkan region, by dragging neighbouring Macedonia and Albania into a wider conflict.

⁷⁴ Reuters, 30 April 1999.

⁷⁵ Tanjug and BETA, 8 May 1999.

⁷⁶ Tanjug and RTS, 10 May 1999.

⁷⁷ CNN and Sky News, 10 May 1999. See also press coverage of French President Jacques Chirac's statement on Belgrade's policy "turnaround"; see, for example, Reuters, 11 May 1999.

⁷⁸ CNN and Sky, 10 May 1999.

⁷⁹ *Blic*, 26 April 1999.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

As it appears that Milosevic is now attempting to win the war against NATO by the most effective means available, that is, through the tools of diplomacy, ICG urges that the international community adopt four tacks should it opt to meet with FRY officials:

1. Milosevic's maximal demand appears to bring a "peace" to Kosovo without the presence of armed NATO-led international forces. Under no circumstances must the international community be manoeuvred into allowing Milosevic to think this can be done. No peace is possible without security for returning civilians, which in turn requires the expulsion of all Serb forces from Kosovo and the presence of an armed NATO-led international force.
2. Milosevic hopes to bring a halt to NATO bombing before Alliance ground troops can be engaged, either in Kosovo or through a wider invasion of the FRY through northern Vojvodina. Recent diplomacy suggests Milosevic may be dangerously close to a victory on his own terms. Thus ICG warns the international community that allowing Milosevic to drag out his diplomatic machinations may mean arriving at the point where any remaining international support for the use of ground troops is undermined.
3. It is imperative that a key and non-negotiable objective of international diplomacy be the safe return home of all Kosovar refugees. This aim must not be compromised, and the refugees must be afforded international protection after return. To that end, the international community must be aware of the fact that Milosevic may try to thwart the process even after agreeing to respect the returnees. Any discussion, by Milosevic, on the point of the legality of return may be fraught with pitfalls. Many Kosovars leaving the FRY were stripped of personal identification and all papers, making it virtually impossible to produce such documentation as proof of residence. As Milosevic's legality may hinge on being able to produce such documentation, it is imperative that the international community understand that he, while on the one hand claiming to welcome returnees, may use diplomacy to institute a legal requirement that could keep the refugees at bay for some time.
4. As it appears that Milosevic will use diplomacy to secure as much as possible of his best case scenario—namely, to wipe out and remove the Kosovo Albanian population, destroy the KLA, and win acquiescence for the presence of some FRY security or policing forces in Kosovo—the international community must be wary that any concessions made on these points will only embolden the FRY dictator to foment future regional crises. Thus ICG urges in the strongest possible terms that any respite offered by diplomacy must not lead to complacency. The international community must use the time to support democratic alternatives to Milosevic⁸⁰ and must begin preparations and plans immediately for a ground action against Belgrade staged from the north. Milosevic's track record proves he will use any breathing space to craft the next regional war.

⁸⁰ See *Sidelining Slobodan: Getting Rid of Europe's Last Dictator*, Balkans Report no. 57, 15 March 1999.