



From authoritarian magic to humble politics

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Yugoslav politics were for long represented to European public opinion as a model, or as magic. They solved everything and were permanently new. They were a "paradigm" to political scientists, until the latter experienced a "paradigm shift". In plain language, since Tito's death, Yugoslav politics have, in European perceptions, fallen from their pedestal to their more usual "Balkan" (meaning nineteenth-century Third World), or even "Byzantine" (meaning too complex for a simple Western newsman who knows nothing about Byzantium), status. They can be looked at through the prism of Ryszard Kapuscinski's definition, coined from his reporting of Third World despotism: "To stay in power at any price" - which undoubtedly reflects the now famous Polish journalist's East European background. A more sophisticated version of such politics is the one where, despite the imitation of West European forms, the State is no longer the expression of a nation, but the object of bargaining by sectional or local oligarchies for shares in the benefits to be derived from its power. Both these versions can increasingly be applied to the Yugoslav case, and are increasingly reported, even analysed by Yugoslavia-watchers.

Accepted, and less accepted, ideas

In doing so, foreign observers divide the leadership of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (LCY) and of its regional branches into "hardliners" and "liberals", or into "ideologues" and "nationalists", with the latter labelled "good" (usually of the Slovenian variety) or "bad" (often of the

Serbian kind). They separate them into factions, and bring them together into coalitions, on the basis of what these politicians want them to believe, or of small talk exchanged between the observers themselves. Such an approach skids on the surface of things. It prefers the style of personalities to the structures of power, words to acts, tactics to strategies. It does not link the rhetoric and the emotions to issues, and it takes issues out of their structural and chronological context. It is instant folklore, which tells us more about the perceptions of the observers than about the intentions of the observed, let alone the political reality that is also meant to be observed.

A different aspect of politics in Yugoslavia is instead worth being analysed. Not only what Milovan Djilas first called the “feudalization” of the power structure, nor the unprincipled alliances of uncommon interests, on the range of variations from “liberal” Slovenia to “neo-Stalinist” Bosnia and Herzegovina, or the periodical redistribution of offices by privately arranged rotation, what one American political scientist jarringly calls “consociational authoritarianism”,¹ what most American politicians would recognize as glorified instances of “pork-barrel” and “log-rolling”, and Italians as inflated *sottogoverno*. Rather, what is worth placing the emphasis on is the less structured but ever more tangible strivings of those who look to another conception of politics, a more “European”, hence a more interesting one.² In this conception, the exercise of power can be called “the humility of the possible”, from which people do not expect all that much, merely to do its best to protect the plurality of free and imperfect citizens. If the Communist rulers of Yugoslavia are still far from such a view, there is at least already something of an opposition platform with just that view. And it is not getting its full due from those Western observers who fashion their public opinions, because it does not correspond to the usually accepted ideas about power and politics in Titoist (and post-Titoist) Yugoslavia.

From feudalization to stabilization

One has to start by going back to the last decade of the Tito era, to when the central leadership reacted in 1971-1972, after the confused but spontaneous awakening introduced by the reformist wave of 1965 had culminated in the all-embracing crisis of 1968. The political élite was cleansed of all those who had acquired a genuine popular audience, and who stood accused of “nationalism”, “liberalism” and “technocratism”. The ship of State was put back on course by a policy symbolized in 1974 by yet another Constitution. This turned the

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Yugoslav Federation into an eight-unit confederation in all but name, and thus damaged the very basis of the Communists' restoration of the Yugoslav union at the end of the Second World War.

Tito had intervened to maintain the foundations of communism as they had been instilled into him in his youth, but at a high price - that of precipitating the decline in prestige of the ruling Party while accelerating its feudalization. The purges had been carried out by relying on alliances with and within various local leaderships, and had left the LCY shorn of its most prominent personalities. After four decades of going on to a new Constitution every ten years or so to suit an evolving situation, the fundamental structure of the State was frozen into a seemingly unchangeable consensus.

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The last decade of the reign had an unreal appearance. The life president basked in the ever-surpassed cult of his personality. To restore ideological and political order, he had pointed to the army as the bastion of that order, and left economic decisions to local Party leaders, which enabled them to satisfy their regional bases, and produced eight little Party-States with eight competing economies. Instead of attempting, even in rhetorical intentions, to develop democracy from socialism, the feudalized leadership fixed its renewed legitimacy to local interests. The Communists who had, in the middle of the ethnic and religious fury of the war, placed themselves at the head of a popular movement for the renewed integration of a Yugoslav community, had turned into the establishment of eight "Balkanized" Party-nation-autarchies.

The oligarchical coalition that had set up this new system would thereafter

defend it as an institutionalized status quo. Instead of Yugoslav socialist patriotism and class ideology, Yugoslavs - or rather the "nations" (South Slav component groups) and "nationalities" (minorities) of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Voivodina, "inner" Serbia, Kosovo and Macedonia - were offered the apparently more attractive prospect of ethnic self-satisfaction as a substitute for democracy.

Titoism had run its course, and gone back on what were seen by most Yugoslavs to have been the genuine advances of the '60s. If the system still appeared to solve the country's problems, it was by a mixture of rhetoric, pretentiousness, corruption, consumerism and foreign loans. When Tito expired in 1980, the unease felt by the average Yugoslav stemmed from the fear that his way of life could be disturbed. Tito, for him, had become over the years the symbol of a Yugoslav style that had less to do with socialism, self-management and non-alignment, than with freedom of movement, the advent of the consumer society, and fending for oneself.

During the years that preceded Tito's death, the country had experienced such stagnation in government that, in the vacuum that followed, his successors delayed the extensive economic innovations which necessity demanded. The country was facing an acute economic and financial crisis, the result of misconceived ideological planning, of investomania, and of the squandering of foreign credits and remittances, when Yugoslavia had become accustomed to the ready availability of international finance, which enabled her to pay off old debts with new debts, and go on "muddling through", as they (the Yugoslavia-watchers) say. The creditors were, however, reluctant to pay more, and by 1983 an international rescue operation was mounted, to restore Yugoslavia's immediate solvency, and help her carry out the long-awaited "stabilization" programme, intended to go back to the abandoned reforms of 1965. The party was over.

The first signs of de-Titoization

Most observers admitted at last that the economic crisis was structural, but the political crisis was even more serious. Reforms in the economy had constantly been delayed by political constraints, and developments since Tito's death had strengthened the assertiveness of regional structures. The events in Kosovo along with the 20-billion dollar debt had shocked the country out of its irresponsible self-satisfaction. The official ideology had largely lost its

persuasiveness, for the intellectuals, for the masses, for the bureaucrats, and even for the rulers. The tacit claim to legitimacy had become power itself, coloured by the admixture of sectional nationalism to make it more attractive: the LCY ruled because it possessed the monopoly of rationality, and there was no alternative, which stopped just short of saying that it ruled.....because it ruled.

The voluble self-criticism that appeared after Tito's death soon grew to question the validity of a self-management that provided no more than a veil of legitimacy. The dissatisfaction of the élites, the emergence of an intellectual proletariat, growing popular disenchantment, a general decline in confidence, all pointed to a crisis of legitimacy. The ruling class had been granted territorial shares of sovereignty in recognition of services rendered. These were no longer relevant, and the monarch was dead. The government he had left behind had run out of ideas. There was a substantial trend in the LCY favouring some overhaul of the system. Would it be a mere face-lifting? Would it try and make it work more efficiently within its existing terms of reference? Or would it go for something more radical? Such were the feelings at the XIIth Congress in 1982, when deep divisions at the top were not far from coming into the open, but in the end no one was brave enough to ask for structural changes, and unanimity hovered around the lowest common denominator - the slogans. The opening up of the press and of publishing was a sign of the Party's weakness, not of a new policy. Tito was no longer there to impose consensus on a divided oligarchy. There were heated discussions about a number of important issues of recent history, dozens of open petitions and protests by intellectuals, as well as questions about Tito's legacy, and how to tackle it.

The first signs of de-Titoization were in the air. Not only was there a good deal of it in the day-to-day running of diplomacy and in economic statements, but books appeared which implicitly reduced the late leader's stature, and demystified standard accounts of the all-heroic partisan war. The government had not openly declared that the austerity programme had been imposed by Yugoslavia's creditors; some people were already saying that it would not have happened under Tito. The *diadochi* were probably not sorry to shed some of their burden of problems back to yesterday's hero, but in so doing they were allowing their essential claims to legitimacy to be questioned. Tito's face was still to be seen everywhere, public obeisance was still made at his tomb, and open criticism of him still remained unacceptable, but it was progressively felt that the appeals for continuing to tread his path were no longer relevant. Tito



The Tito affair

was a historic personality; he belonged to the past. The present was in a state of paralysis, and the one who had led the country for 30 years was to a great extent responsible for it. Paralysed as it was by the contradictions between a power structure that remained, however loosely, modelled on the East, and an economy that contained a free market, however undeveloped, the system was becoming synonymous with mismanagement. Yugoslav economists were challenging self-management itself, as being responsible for a situation where

the country found itself once again, as before the revolution, near the bottom of the European League table.

In 1983, in return for an IMF-sponsored salvage plan, the Yugoslav government had made certain commitments, some of which were being translated into legislation after long and fierce debates. The laws passed did not, however, contain a clear path to implement the much-needed restructuring. The Federal government was coming up against tough resistance from the Party bureaucracy, firmly entrenched in the regional administrations. Real power lay in the hands of these oligarchies. They had been making important economic decisions that were not based on economic criteria; they had gone unchecked, as there were no channels for political criticism, and no sanctions against political mistakes. The system was seen to have become one of regional power structures defending their vested interests, and uniting only in defence of their general hold on the reins on power. Public criticism of politicians surfaced to the point where papers carried articles saying that there could be no serious economic reform without a democratization of the electoral system, and that which was needed was a new generation of political personnel free from ideological prejudice or nationalist passion. The outgoing prime minister, Mrs. Planinc, is on record as saying in 1984 : "Either our political system will be made to work, or we shall be under pressure to have it changed".

Nineteen eighty-four

Pressure indeed there was. Disillusioned Yugoslavs were deserting the Party in droves, from workers who did so in silence, to prestigious members who clamoured their disappointment. The twin shocks of debts and Kosovo had - to quote the philosopher Ljubomir Tadic³ - woken up the country, but left it in the dark. In spite of the dark, and of the hangover, the deterioration of the economic situation had also awoken a spirit of opposition. There was a realization that an essential condition for reform was a genuine redistribution of power. Real reforms could only take place if different spheres of activity could function autonomously of politics, and if different groups in society could develop their own legitimacy - in a word, with pluralism. The sclerotic communist system bred anti-communism, and anti-communist sentiments surfaced publicly, with one-sided, superficial, nationalistic verbiage, some of it with reactionary undertones, and also with calls for democratic pluralism - coming from the Party itself, from retired partisan cadres of the People's Liberation War, and even more so from intellectuals.

Freed from fear, dissidents came to life in 1984 - journalists, poets, novelists, artists, scholars - to contest the idea that the LCY was the only political institution capable of rising above individual, or even sectional, interests. Although the climate differed from Republic to Republic, more and more people distanced themselves from the system, seen to be decayed, divided, and incapable of solving anything. Rotation that year installed in the executive a new team of younger individuals, coming from their respective Republics with a reputation for toughness. Their neo-conservative trend found immediate support among the military - almost the only centralized institution left in the State - but it was difficult for them to consolidate it, as any change, in any direction, was bound to provoke defiance in some other coalition of groups and Republics. All they could do was to react nervously to the challenge by harassing critical intellectuals. There was a series of arrests, followed by clamorous and unproductive trials which provoked a great show of solidarity. According to Amnesty International, in the years 1980-84, there were on average over 500 judicial sentences a year for political transgressions, most of them for "verbal offences".

Nineteen eighty-four was no Orwellian year for Yugoslavia. It was the year when the emperor was seen not only to be dead but also naked, when myths began to crumble, when people began to want to know how they had come to be in such a situation. A crisis had come out in the open, which was at once a crisis of post-totalitarianism, of transfer to modernity, and of national identity. It was not really new, but it was seen for what it was - a crisis of the system that had been symbolized by Tito. Nineteen eighty-four was the year when "Tito's way" came to an end, without anyone saying so. If international lenders were scathing of the Yugoslav government's failure to implement its declared policies, Yugoslav economists were even harsher. Rescheduling had been but a wasteful and expensive buying of time - they said - for it had not been used to carry out any structural change. Various political regional interests had combined to stall effective reform - for even in what was left of the Federal government's powers under the Constitution of 1974, policies could only be adopted and implemented through a harmonization of the views of the local leadership. In order to anticipate IMF demands, a tougher stand was taken again - to close loss-making enterprises, and to link wage increases to productivity. Even though applied only very selectively, it had started to hurt by the beginning of 1987, and led to a series of strikes, which disrupted industry all over the country, but mainly in Croatia. The scale of the movement alarmed the authorities. For the first time, workers had spontaneously downed

tools, with the support of trade-union leaders, to get the government to reverse, and they had called for the resignation of the prime minister.

Pressure from the *intelligentsia*

Growing pressure of another kind was coming from the *intelligentsia*, more particularly in the Republics of Slovenia and Serbia. University students and their papers in the northernmost Republic mocked the posthumous cult of Tito, the continued emphasis on revolution and civil war, the militarist pretence at mass mobilization, and came out in support of intellectuals put on trail in Belgrade. In 1985 the Serbian Academy set up a working party to prepare a document on Yugoslavia's social and ethnic issues. The authorities came to know about a preliminary draft, which challenged the whole system of monopoly of power that had, among other things, weakened Serbia, and warned that, unless liberal reforms were introduced, the federal system might fall apart. A war of words was started between the government and the Academy, which stuck to its guns, and refused to celebrate its centenary in 1986.

Slovenian intellectuals then came up with their counterpart to the so-called "Memorandum of the Serbian Academy". That was a special issue of the Ljubljana periodical *Nova revija*. The request that it should be prosecuted for "hostile propaganda" (under article 133 of the Penal Code which makes a crime of non-conforming opinion) was actually turned down by the public prosecutor of Slovenia. That, no less than the strikes, was a momentous "first". Founded in Belgrade in late 1984, the Committee for the Defence of Freedom of Thought and Expression is virtually an offshoot of the Academy. Made up of leading Serbian writers, artists and scholars, most of whom have been active Communists (with a partisan hero to boot), it followed as a more prestigious forum on the work of a similar committee that had operated within the Association of Writers of Serbia since 1982. It meets regularly, monitors all transgressions to the freedom of thought and expression all over Yugoslavia, and addresses open protests to constitutional institutions, executive, legislative and judicial. In particular, it rushed to the support of the practising Catholic Croatian student Dobroslav Paraga, who had already been tried and gaoled for organizing a petition in favour of an amnesty for political prisoners. His new trial in 1987, for having described the situation in which these prisoners were held, mobilized the intelligentsia, with appeals from various quarters, including a sensational interview by Cardinal Kuharic.

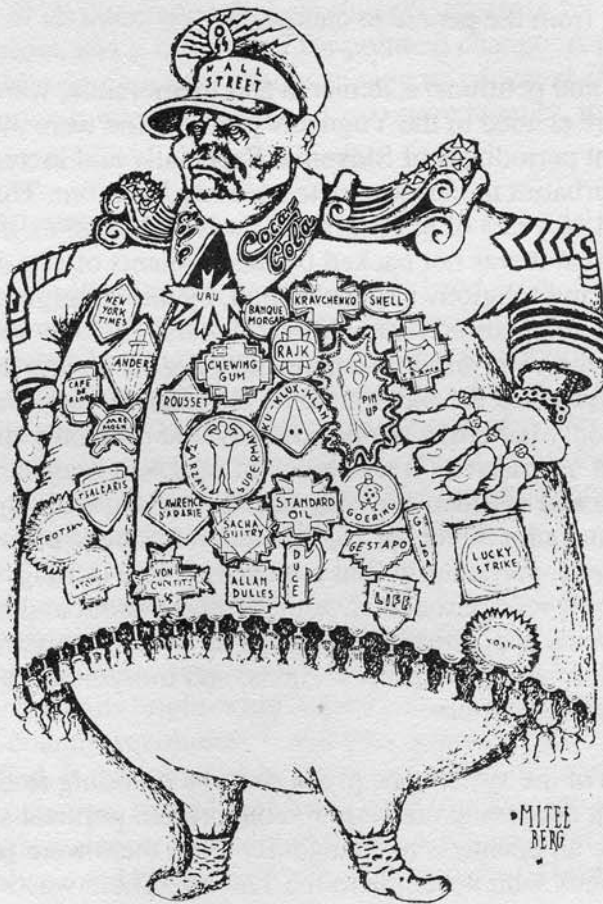
In October 1986, the Committee submitted a set of proposals to the Federal Assembly, for changes in existing legislation, to establish the rule of law, along with free and direct elections. A year later, it went further, and called for an end to the monopoly of power by the LCY, the right of workers to organize their own independent unions, and their legalized right to strike. Before the end of 1987, 25 well-known dissidents and former political prisoners from Croatia, Slovenia and Serbia, led by Vladimir Seks, the Croatian lawyer and former Amnesty International "prisoner of conscience", formed the Yugoslav group of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights. Another initiative launched in Belgrade at the end of 1986 was the proposal to set up a Solidarity Fund as a voluntary association to help those whose livelihood was threatened on account of opinions they had expressed. The proposal was accompanied by a manifesto denouncing all sectarianism, no less than the monopoly of power, and calling for the democratization of social life with the strengthening of public opinion. The appeal was signed by more than 600 personalities, including 250 journalists representing the whole range of the media. The launching of the Solidarity Fund provoked a fierce outburst of words from the authorities, who denounced it as an anti-communist opposition movement. Pressure to renege was resisted, in spite of expulsions from the LCY.

In 1985 delegates of the writers' associations from all the Republics met for the first time after ten years. It had been feared (or hoped) that they would disgrace themselves by indulging in sectarian squabbles. It had not been expected that their congress would occasionally be more like a pluralist parliament, even less that they would express themselves in favour of the freedom of culture and creation, and against the criminal offence of opinion. The regime was no longer monolithic. People were no longer afraid, and the Party, admitting that there was an opposition, was seen as an anachronism. The press and literature were freer, especially when it came to dealing with the past or with other Republics, provinces, nations or nationalities. Dependence on foreign markets also favoured greater openness. *Glasnost* was everywhere. Because of all this, opposition trends were able to express themselves more publicly, and yet they were both limited to specific circles and lacking in any real organization. They did, however, also extend to the younger generation, reflected through aesthetic currents and pop-groups.

In Serbia and in Slovenia, left and right were able to meet and take part in a pluralistic dialogue, both within each Republic and between the two republics. In Croatia, where the regime was much more conservative, there was less co-

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operation between various trends, or with other Republics. Elsewhere, there was little or no opposition. In Serbia, it was the in-fighting within the local oligarchy, divided in its reactions to the Kosovo problem, that favoured openness. In Slovenia, it was the conscious, if quiet, toleration by the leadership of a range of interest-group activities, even though such toleration remained discretionary, depending on the goodwill and intelligence of the republican government.



Tito as seen by "L'Humanité" in 1950

The call for a political evolution

These conditions were nevertheless sufficient to enable several hundred intellectuals to stand up and be counted, in appeals and petitions calling for the respect of citizens' rights, an end to political monopoly, and the introduction of democratic reforms. Many of them had been prominent Communists. Some had even been political leaders and partisan generals. An all-Yugoslav opposition platform, however inchoate, had emerged, and the mood was spreading to the LCY itself. The failure to grapple with the economic crisis had removed the last shreds of credibility, and the financial scandals the last shreds of dignity, from the people in charge.

All these appeals and petitions, statements and memoranda, were circulated in *samizdat*, and were echoed in the Yugoslav press. Some were mentioned more fully in the student periodicals of Slovenia. Especially and increasingly, they were published verbatim in the expatriate monthly *Nasa rec*. This journal has just accomplished 40 years of publishing in Paris and London, no mean feat when one knows that it was not backed by the remnants of any *émigré* establishment, by any religious-national group, by any immigrant community or by any Western foundation. Its founding "fathers" in 1948 were a group of very young men who were *émigrés* among the *émigrés* no less than from their country, and who rejected the old regime no less than the new Party dictatorship. Not only has *Nasa rec* fastidiously and rationally monitored and analysed events in Yugoslavia, it was quick to establish bridges with like-minded reformists and dissidents in Yugoslavia, starting with Djilas who is now a regular contributor. Over the last decade, it has been taken up by such circles in Yugoslavia, particularly (but not exclusively) in Belgrade, to the point where it is now read, circulated, copied, talked about and attacked as the voice of Yugoslavia's opposition platform for an evolutionary, reformist path towards pluralism, respect for citizens' rights, and independence of civic, social and religious institutions.

The general crisis of the system has given rise to a brooding re-examination of the past. There is a deepening concern that the present political system cannot survive, and hence an openness to change. By 1986 there were few people left who still looked back with nostalgia to the Tito era. There was widespread agreement among the intellectuals that the political system was responsible for the economic bankruptcy, and that change must come, including within the political leadership put together by Tito in the last decade of his reign. I have

used the expression "opposition platform", because it was no more than that, and is not an opposition movement. Its aim is not to gain power, but to establish and maintain respect of some basic values of civilized society.

One can actually define its common, fundamental, demands as being: the release of all political prisoners, and the repeal of article 133 of the Penal Code; an end to the intimidation of individuals and groups struggling for the rule of law, human rights and a democratic alternative; the public expression and discussion of their ideas, and the establishment of a dialogue between them and the government; the link-up of foreign aid with the respect by the Yugoslav State of its international commitments. Pressure for change is coming from below, and it is pressure for political change. A growing section of Yugoslav public opinion now aspires to, and its educated *élite* clamours for, a political evolution towards more pluralism, more legality, more rationality, more reality.

The loss of legitimacy

Yugoslavia has an authoritarian, narrow-minded and second-rate leadership. It is so divided among itself, and not only on regional lines, that it no longer clearly understands what it is trying to do, beyond preserving its power. The system under which it operates has maintained the dogma of political monopoly, while not allowing for any redistribution of power within it, thus effectively excluding social forces from the political arena. Nevertheless, it has to share power with the market, trying alternately or simultaneously, and always unsuccessfully, to go along with, or oppose it.

The LCY is reduced to adapting itself endlessly to circumstances, in order to keep its monopoly of power and the privileges that go with it. It still reacts against anything that can compete with its own ideology, from parliamentary pluralism (which it calls "right-wing opposition") to religious revival (which it calls "spiritual counter-revolution"), at a time when its legitimizing slogans are being demystified. It is frightened by the relatively all-Yugoslav character of the pressure for change. Indeed, in March 1987, the partisan veterans' organization rightly denounced the links between opposition centres in Belgrade, Ljubljana and Zagreb on the question of the "Third Yugoslavia" - the Yugoslavia of tomorrow.

The LCY resorts to half-baked trials of dissidents, to threats, and to words.

Generals have again taken to growling in public that the army can not remain indifferent to the shameful things being done by students, by novelists, by painters, by historians, by publishers, by journalists... Politicians warn that the system will be defended by all available means, including the army.

In 1985 the leadership decided in principle to try to overcome existing constitutional obstacles to the further development of a market economy, and to extend federal powers over economic affairs. It took some time to obtain the necessary consensus on a scheme, which was submitted to parliament at the beginning of 1987, and is still being discussed. Limited to vague proposals for better legal guarantees to small private enterprises, for rationalized planning as a way of working towards an integrated Yugoslav market, and for a unified tax system, it fell short of radical change.

In the mind of the public opinion, the 29 draft amendments, in spite of being over 10,000 words long (or because of it), confirmed that the system had exhausted its resources, that it could not deal with the situation, that the country faced a collapse of living standards, and the likelihood of a deeper political crisis. At a popular level, the legitimacy of the Communist Party which had turned into the League of Communists had resided in the following achievements: it had ended the civil war, and brought the various ethnic groups



out of their blind alleys; it had then stood up to Stalin and to the Soviet Union; finally, it had introduced the Yugoslavs to the joys of consumerism, and put their country on the map.

All that is now finished or meaningless, and Yugoslavia is but one instance of the general East European tension between the societies and the regimes that govern them, all facing the same dilemmas. From the '60s onwards, through consumerism, freedom of movement and corruption, her rulers had given the average Yugoslav a substitute for liberty. In the late '80s, when all East European regimes are desperately trying to re-legitimize themselves, there are few rewards for Yugoslavia in having already tried it all.

An increasing proportion of her public opinion, looking at the way in which she survived, as an idea and as a reality, through the successive dreams, achievements and mistakes of the visionaries of the nineteenth century, of the Karadjordjević monarchy, and of Tito's Communist Party, envisages the possibility of a new Yugoslavia emerging from the crisis of post-Titoism through the medium of the political opposition now in gestation.

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- 3 - See *Da li je nacionalizam nasa sudbina?* Author's edition, Belgrade, 1986.