

From the Iron Curtain to a Transparent Wall.
(Fall1999)

The fall of the Berlin Wall is certainly one of the most powerful images of the end of the twentieth century. The disappearance of the symbol of the divided continent has initiated far-reaching changes and marked the termination of suffering for a large part of Europe. We might say, however, that - for the reasons beyond the framework, ambitions and possibilities of this text - the material of the collapsed wall fell onto certain other parts of Europe. Belgrade is certainly part of this zone of collapse. If we compare the city's atmosphere ten years ago with that of the present moment, we could conclude that Belgrade is one of the rare Central or Eastern European cities where this comparison would come out in favor of the past.

But if we want to assess the depth of the fall - and the fall of Belgrade is total - in visual, moral, material, intellectual and all other aspects - we do have to turn back and examine the moment we use as a point of reference. That ought to be the Eighties, the decade which in Belgrade and in all of the former Yugoslavia was marked by an unrestrained, joyous and creative atmosphere. For behind that atmosphere, far from the eyes of the common people, inside the framework of party structures, the positions for the bloody dismemberment of the country in the 1990's were already being established.

First of all, where can we find Belgrade on the map of Europe, and to what degree is its character shaped by its geographical position? In school children learn that Belgrade is a city born on the confluence of two great rivers, one European and one regional. It is built where the mountainous region of Balkan meets the Panonian plains of the north. From antiquity up to the present Belgrade has been the crossroads of important European communications. It has been called "The Gate to the East" and at the same time "The Door to the West". As an important strategic point Belgrade was of central the interest to the great empires of the past. As such, it was repeatedly leveled to the ground--in this century alone it has been heavily bombed four times - which is why one cannot see many important old buildings. The buildings that have survived the destructive waves, houses built during the periods of peace, were usually constructed quickly, bearing stylistic influences from completely different regions, so that we can say that in the architectural as well as in the mental sense Belgrade is a "patchwork-town", the thick sediment of patches and decontextualised fragments. Under certain circumstances, paradoxically, this could make Belgrade a charming and attractive place. And this quality also makes Belgrade fit perfectly the self-image of the socialist Yugoslavia.

The second, or "Tito's" Yugoslavia had thought of itself precisely as "something-in-between". The point of that phrase was not restricted to a geographical or civilisational position (between East and West, between Europe and the Orient, between Roman-Catholicism and Orthodoxy, between Christianity and Islam...): the ideological position was the main content of that phrase. Between socialism and capitalism, between two antagonistic blocs of the divided world. The one and only party, the

Communist one, was in undisputed power, but already in 1948 the skilled ruler managed to set the country and his party apart from Moscow. This secession from the "Eastern Bloc" had brought a lot of sympathies for Tito in the West. That in turn helped Tito to create the probably most perfect system in world history – the so called "debtor socialism." The standard of the Yugoslav citizens gradually improved, and the foundation of that growth was the endless sequence of credits provided by the Western countries. The position "in-between" was additionally underscored by Tito's active influence in the "third World"-- within the movement of so called "non-aligned countries." In the bipolar world that movement, and Tito himself, prevented a lot of newly liberated colonies from falling directly into the embrace of Moscow, and secured them within the ideologically neutral group of "non-aligned" countries. The West valued this contribution--there was no strict questionnaire to receive the credits, there was no control of the money spent. Tito's other request granted by the West was the blind eye to the soft totalitarianism within the country's internal affairs. In the culture and in arts there was no official "zone of prohibition," though it was of course understood that the very heart of the system should be kept outside serious criticism. With that in mind, we can say that Yugoslavia (with one or two significant exceptions) did not have dissidents in the proper sense of the word. Of course, the multiethnic society had to have some sort of control over nationalism: its extreme form was thus fought bitterly, while the formally non-existing nationalism that was rooted in the very structure of Communist party-- divided by the constitution of 1974 into six parties congruent with the six republics-- was tolerated. And this 'party-nationalism,' allied with the governing apparatus of the state, and ideologically backed up by the nationalists from the intellectual "anti-Communist" sphere, in turn generated the amalgam which ruined not only a country, but also the very idea of the unity of the Slavic South, the idea whose history was almost two centuries old.

The Eighties in Yugoslavia, in spite of Tito's death at the very beginning of the decade, benefited from the inheritance of the "Yugoslavian red passport," accepted in almost every country of the world without a visa, and from the relatively high standard of living of the citizens. Those who predicted that Tito's death would bring the immediate collapse of the country were silenced for the moment. The dismemberment of the country was postponed--time has shown that the fuse cord was nine years long. The main slogan was: "After Tito - Tito!" : Josip Broz was the ruler of the country in spite of the fact that he was dead and buried. "The Necrocracy," one of the local inventions, was formally executed through eight rotating faceless representatives of Tito's charisma. That institution was called "the Presidency."

Being the capital of a composite, federated country, Belgrade gradually acquired a multinational character. All these diverse elements were in turn built-in into the specific "Belgrade mentality," in which it did not matter where one comes from but rather what are one's qualities. In that period Belgrade saw numerous exhibitions of foreign artists, theatrical and musical performances and festivals, rock-concerts. The presentations of the artists from all parts of the ex-Yugoslavia were numerous and welcomed. That gave Belgrade a cosmopolitan dimension, and allowed local artists the possibility of direct comparison with the highlights of the work of their colleagues. The other large centers of the ex-Yugoslavia, like Ljubljana or Zagreb-- now the capitals of independent states-- were more inward-turned. It could be said only Sarajevo had a similar degree of the

openness towards others. During the Eighties, more than at any other time before, Belgrade took the advantages of its geographical position.

Most of the people who had created this Belgrade live today in New York, Toronto, London, Vienna, in Australia or in the New Zealand. And in Amsterdam, of course.

The attempt of the last federal government, headed by Ante Markovic , to stress rational reasons for the survival of a multiethnic country were frustrated in the confrontation with the strong national-communist oligarchies of the major Yugoslav republics, above all those from Serbia and Slovenia. These two, though opposing each other in public, found a mutual interest in the ruination of the federal government. At the crucial moment for the success of the reform which would have lead Yugoslavia , as the first ex-communist country, into the European Community the promises of help from Western countries remained just promises. This lack of concrete financial help was just the first in a sequence of imprudent moves and contradictory signals sent out by the international community to the desperate people of the Balkans and to their arrogant leaders. After being called "The Balkan Butcher", Milosevic would, in less then a year, acquire a new title from the very same people who gave him the first: he would become "The Guarantor of Peace and Stability in the Balkans." All those contradictory signals have been lavishly used by the infernal regime propaganda. Even today you can hear from the nationalists in almost all new ex-Yugoslavian states that the program of economic reforms of Ante Markovic "could not have worked anyway," or that he had been "just a clown."

The Army, the virtual but very powerful "seventh entity" of a six-republic federation also constituted a strong anti-reform circle.. Mesmerized by the communist segment of Milosevic's national-socialist rhetoric, rather than preserving the country it entered actively into the process of its destruction. The first materialization of that alliance, and also the first blood split on the pavements in the sequence of the Balkan Wars, took place in Belgrade. On 9 March 1991, massive demonstrations against Milosevic and above all against his television station which had long been been leading the process of the nation's mental preparation for a war with its neighbors, were smashed by military tanks. I say "military" on purpose, because some of the green tanks were later painted blue, so that the Milosevic party's guard, the police, now would have their own armored vehicles.

By the end of the Eighties the population of Belgrade approached two million. Even under the conditions of "war in the region" --that was how state television euphemistically called the engagement of the army in Croatia and in Bosnia-Herzegovina --Belgrade remained a multi-layered, complex city. While a segment of its population tossed flowers at the tanks going to Vukovar, the other part, smaller and frightened, lit candles --for the victims of the war on all sides in front of Milosevic's office, or took part in the mass action of carrying a giant black cloth, a magnified traditional symbol of mourning, through the central streets of the city. The flower-tossers were shown on TV broadcasts to reassure those who still had some doubts concerning the war; Belgrade with its lighted candles was instead met by the paramilitary, equipped with knives and bombs. They were not on TV.

Running away from military mobilization and from the growing feeling of desperation hundreds of thousands young and for the most part educated persons fled Serbia. Their places were filled by refugees: after the fall of Milosevic's self-proclaimed statelets in Croatia and Bosnia, Belgrade was crowded by the desperate and the impoverished, by people not accustomed to life in the city, abandoned by those who pushed them into the war. In this way the social profile of Belgrade was changed.

Belgrade, a city proportioned spatially and spiritually to be the capital of a middle-sized, ethnically and culturally diverse European country, ceased to be that. Its framework had become a new, autistic country. The economic sanctions imposed by the international community were a gift from heaven to the ruling circle of that new autistic state. The notion that the sanctions would weaken the regime has proven, simply, to have been a mistake; rather, the sanctions made the ruling structures stronger and the people desperate. They contributed to the wild redistribution of capital and erased the last traces of the middle class-- the only part of society capable of carrying on the project of denazification and democratisation of society. Belgrade had forgotten that the gas station was the place where one buys petrol – instead the streets became crowded with burglars and petrol sellers, just as they are now, after the destruction of all the refinery-plants in the recent bombing campaign and at the point of the new sanctions. The regime had found the way to deal with the international sanction controllers very quickly - so the prominent members of Milosevic's family and his party seized the monopoly in smuggling. Every liter of petrol sold on the streets, packed in plastic Coca-Cola bottles, made the ruling circle happier, richer and more arrogant, more ready for new war projects. The money they have moved from the pockets of the citizens to their own bank accounts is the same money that the international community is now trying, unsuccessfully, to trace to accounts of various banks in Switzerland, Cyprus and Malta.

Of course, the black market and the smuggling monopoly were not the only method of pumping money out of people's reserves - the almost metaphysical inflation of 1993 was a program created by the state for a linear taxation of its citizens. Together with inflation came the venture of "the pyramid savings banks", a phenomenon familiar to people from other post-communist countries. Attracted by the unbelievably high interest rates the citizens even sold their property in the hopes of soon becoming millionaires. The consequence was that the depositors lost everything, while those who conceived and organized such "banking" chains became far richer than before. In the neighboring Albania the breakdown of the pyramid savings institutions provoked riots and also the change of government. In almost any other country the outcome would probably be the same. Not so in Serbia. Robbed citizens just shrugged their shoulders, accustomed to the state's theft of private property as a normal thing. Just two or three years earlier Milosevic's regime had deprived them of their money in regular banks by imposing a moratorium on hard currency deposits and, of course, blaming others for that.

Such absence of reaction would be strange in the case of people living in normal countries. But no one in Yugoslavia was seriously shocked. This passive and fatalistic attitude can be compared to a well-known medical experiment. If you want to boil a living frog you can do it two ways: you can put the animal into a pot of boiling water and the frog will, naturally, thrash. But if you put the frog into a pot of cold water

which you then heat up gradually to the point of boiling, the frog will be cooked without any resistance. Similarly the slow but steady decay, impoverishment and anesthetisation of people has been the main characteristic of life in Yugoslavia during the last decade.

This mental pattern of the population and of the ruling class is naturally a determining factor in the outlook of Belgrade. The large capital projects are not being undertaken anymore. The reason is general poverty. There are no great changes in the urban views, but parallel to the social corrosion there is also urban corrosion—a process visible through the prolific "overbuilding" of existing houses. Additions to houses are executed without any control, without plans and regulations, so the city is slowly becoming similar to the average African or Middle Eastern, quick-built megalopolis.

A separate chapter in the history of Belgrade's recent urban changes are the recently built houses of the newly rich war- sanctions- and party profiteers. The new wealth chose an older residential area of town called Dedinje. On that privileged hill had stood the residencies of the royal Karadjordjevic dynasty, of Josip Broz Tito and, of course, of president Milosevic. Villas built in the first half of this century are being enlarged, modified, or replaced by pretentious eclectic edifices whose only purpose is the public display of the newly acquired power, whether financial or of any other sort.. Those instances of post-communist architecture, similar to those built in other East European countries, have an additional cynical and monstrous dimension in Yugoslavia. Not only have they been erected with stolen money; they also have the death of innumerable innocent people built into their walls. Here, the architecture functions as a theatrical set. With its agglomeration of balustrades, Corinthian capitols, extravagant domes, usually surrounded by tall garden walls and secured by armed body-guards it is the sign of arrogant emptiness, and ultimately a caricature.

A strange coincidence of events made another face of Belgrade visible - a face that almost everyone thought had been exiled, erased or silenced forever. In the perfect system by which the ruling party orchestrated all the multi-party elections after 1990 a small crack appeared. During the 1997 autumn elections, more specifically in the elections to local councils, the Socialist party had been caught in a theft. The mass protests of the citizens surpassed the 1991 demonstrations both in number and in intensity. The daily rallies lasted almost three months. The frozen streets of Belgrade suddenly saw the city's other face -- funny, imaginative, cheerful, strong in its determination to get back the stolen votes. Whistles and eggs, the roar of the masses, a multitude of drummers giving the protests a steady rhythm, all these gilded- if only for a moment - Belgrade's decayed facades

The outcome of this protest was the change of power in favor of the opposition coalition in the local councils of more than three-quarters of Serbia, most of them in densely-populated urban areas. Milosevic's national-socialist government diminished these results through continuing changes in legislation designed to deprive the local councils of any trace of real power. The new opposition governments in the major cities thus had their hands tied. Still, the hope arose that it might be possible to remove the brutal police regime whose killing hand had made itself known not only to the neighboring nations, but also to Serbs themselves.

This "Belgrade Resisting Milosevic" which arose out of the winter protests of 1997-8 received, after its initial success, two serious blows . The first was the dismemberment of the victorious coalition of the City Council of Belgrade, a defeat that sent people back into despair and brought along a new wave of apathy. The other were the NATO-bombings.

From the first moment on, the bombing of Serbia provided Milosevic and his regime with immense propaganda opportunities; leading to a homogenisation of the people—whether real or simulated--around the wise and now indisputable leader. On the other hand, for the opponents of the regime, the bombings were a real disaster. Milosevic's regime is a system constantly fed by blood, and the bombing has given new food to it. The beginning of the air campaign was immediately a pretext for a brutal annihilation of the infrastructure of the resistance to totalitarianism: the free radio stations were closed shut, censorship of all newspapers was introduced, and a brutal assassination of a well-known journalist in front of his house in the city center at high noon was a clear sign. While in the south of the country people were being thrown out of burning houses, with killings on all sides, in someone's sick mind. was born the idea of organizing public concerts in the city squares as a way of showing that "the aggressor is powerless." These manifestations of bad taste were later moved to the bridges; so that the bridges would be "protected" by singing bodies, though these were just productions for TV cameras, performed during the safe hours.

During the NATO air campaign the regime propaganda did have its moments of stardom. This happened despite the fact that the Tomahawks and other smart missiles destroyed almost all the transmitters as well as the central building of the State Television Station (where the missiles also killed sixteen workers-- left there by their bosses to serve as exemplary-victims) Serbian TV consumers, for example, did not have any chance to learn that something bad was happening to the ethnic Albanians in the southern province, and by the careful selection of international news, one could conclude that the people of all the world countries were strongly opposed to the military intervention. But over and beyond the distorted image served up to the media audiences sitting in Belgrade shelters - the image of a Yugoslavia bombed by two or three powerful maniacs, against the will of their nations - it is the case that some European governments had greater or lesser problems gathering public support for this military action. To shore up the public support for a less than clearly defined undertaking, the global networks began to use the very same language and propaganda patterns that characterize the national televisions in ex-Yugoslavian countries. In that language there is no place for gray tones - so the overall impression created was of a Serbia populated exclusively by people deserving nothing better than to be hit from the skies or to die from cancer caused by the degraded uranium which forms an essential component of the penetrating missiles. The characteristics of the degraded uranium were not discussed at length during the Allies' press conferences, of course. On a value scale the position of Belgrade today is only slightly higher than the position of the second to the last circle of Hell. That space deserves to be surrounded by a high and impenetrable wall. So, slowly we are discovering that the Wall, rather than having been undone, has only been displaced/. No longer does it exist as an artifact, as a brick or a stone wall - it has just been transformed into a virtual obstacle. Those who are willing to pass the *cordon sanitaire* are going to be confronted by the endless and often very imaginative ways of bureaucratic humiliation.

President Milosevic is not particularly enthusiastic about the idea that his subjects travel around the world - so he is charging the bearers of Yugoslav passport with a tax for EXITING THE COUNTRY, possibly a unique achievement in world terms. At least on this one point, we could say, is he in perfect harmony with the governments of the "international community", who too would prefer not to see any Serbs around.

The media coverage of the NATO action created interesting patterns, patterns very close to racism – while the bombings were going on, young Serbs in Britain were followed, and their bank accounts were watched. We have to remember that those young emigrants were the people who fled from Milosevic. The prominent world intellectuals who had been, during the nineties, amazed by the low level of resistance of Balkan people to media manipulation, now, affected by their own TV programs, became fanatic supporters of the laws of primitive retribution typical of the Stone Age. They suddenly discovered that degraded uranium was not as dangerous as is sometimes was rumored. Pacifists became lovers of smart bombs. Thus we are slowly approaching the news distributed by a world news agency, and reprinted in the Belgrade dailies. The text goes like this:

One famous international fashion company is broadcasting a TV-advertisement whose content, retold in brief, looks like this: One can see two persons swimming in the sea after a shipwreck. One is white, the other is black. The rescue boat is approaching, and from the gestures of people in the boat we can conclude that there is place for only one man. And that they are willing, of course (it is written like that), to rescue the white man. Grabbing his upper arms they started to pull him out of water. Then, suddenly, one can see the large inscription: "And what if he is a Serb?" In the next frame one can see the laughing black man waving from the boat which is moving towards the horizon.

This small masterpiece of politically-correct racism can provide the grounds for our final conclusion: on the eve of the third millennium: Belgrade is a ghetto encircled by a double wall.