
Sabrina P. Ramet (2002).

Balkan Babel: The Disintegration of Yugoslavia from the Death of Tito to the Fall of Milošević^{3/4}

Fourth Edition

Boulder, Westview Press., ISBN 0-8133-3987-1 (HC) ISBN 0-8133-3905-7 (Pbk.)

Balkan Babel speaks to the important issues associated with the eroding legitimacy of the former Yugoslavia and chronicles the disintegration of an increasingly fragmented federation after the death of Marshal Tito. *Balkan Babel* also speaks volumes about the credibility of the author and her unique ability to synthesise a huge array of information and bring it together into a singular conceptual overview. The fact that this book is in its fourth edition demonstrates the lasting contribution of one of the leading scholars in the field to the debate over why.

The conceptual framework Ramet employs is the question of legitimacy and political institutions. In the specific case of the former Yugoslavia, the descent towards crisis and ultimately disintegration was fuelled by an illegitimate government and a panoply of policies associated with system illegitimacy, such as economic deterioration, escalating polemics, and irreconcilable ambitions of certain unscrupulous politicians. Rather than outlining what a legitimate system of government is, Ramet demonstrates what was illegitimate about the former Yugoslavia, and how its institutions became increasingly dysfunctional and even conducive to chaos and violence. Ramet also dismisses the notion that Yugoslavias demise was caused by ancient

ethnic or tribal hatreds, but, rather, views the country as being beset by perennial crisis that was a symptom of systemic illegitimacy revolving around the question of the federation, economy, pluralism, and breakdown of the sense of community or shared values.

Balkan Babel is divided into four parts dealing with the origins, course, and consequences of the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia. Ramet sets the period between 1980 and 1991 against a backdrop of incessant political debates between the ruling elites from the various republics, most notably Serbia, Slovenia, and Croatia, and their ensuing visions of the future transformation of Yugoslavia, democracy, and market economy. The political debates over the future of Yugoslavia and its potential for transformation reflect an imminent crisis and disunity. Ramet points out the divergent political aspirations of the major national groups and elites. It is noteworthy that Ciril Ribičič and Zdravko Tomac co-authored a book in which they argued for the de-etatization of the economy and strengthening of certain features of the federation to create the conditions for the development of a modern market economy. Ramet also notes that as early as 1989, proposals were presented for the secession of Slovenia and Croatia and their association in a new confederal state, which led to discussions of an asymmetrical federation.

The rise of Slobodan Milošević and his consolidation of power in Serbia are well documented in *Balkan Babel*. Ramet reminds us that Ivan Stambolic had set the agenda when he rallied behind the slogan that a unified and strong Serbia was a prerequisite for a strong Yugoslavia. Milošević picked up on this to focus on the powers of the central government, purging critics and opponents. He also appealed to Serbian

pride and nationalism while launching his anti-bureaucratic revolution. In his nationalistic revival, Milošević rallied support in the most diverse quarters, including the Orthodox Church, reconstructed Marxists around the Praxis group, and the Serbian Academy of Science and Arts.

In discussing the erosion of legitimacy and crisis, Ramet takes a deeper look into the role of the three main religious groups: Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Islam. The rock music scene provides a further level of critique, as it displays a growing disenchantment with the system beyond the normal boundaries associated with alternative bands and the underground music scene. This includes a deeper critique of prevailing social and economic conditions to more arcane interpretations of identity and difference (or Otherness). Here, Ramet is exceptionally clear about the role of religious leaders in producing discourses of grievance, and charges them with a lack of foresight and understanding regarding the role religion has on a society in the process of disintegration. Of course, all three religions had opposed Communist rule, but they were unable to provide alternative structures beyond faith, and often influenced - indirectly and directly - emerging political structures.

The structural weakness of the former Yugoslavia was the tension between Serbia and Croatia, and Ramet's discussion of the competing histories and visions of the future demonstrate aptly the level of acrimony that existed. Indeed, it was so high that the tinder box known as former Yugoslavia ignited into the first large-scale war on the European continent since the end of World War II. Ramet also discusses the politics of Slovenia and Macedonia, and the problem of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the wake of the collapse of Yugoslavia. Although Ramet's critical

analysis exculpates no individual leader, group, or community, it is clear from the study that the axis of tension lay with Belgrade and Slobodan Milošević. This leads to a discussion of the repercussions of the war and the road to Dayton, which ended the protracted conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, despite the Dayton peace accords, Ramet does not end on a positive note, because the rump Yugoslavia remains in the process of dissolution, and there is an unending crisis in Serbia and conflict in Kosovo. Here we are confronted with the sources and consequences of instability that affect not only Serbia, but also the region at large.

The title of Ramet's book is emblematic. Drawing on an allegorical allusion to the biblical story of the Tower of Babel, Ramet notes that within the space of the former Yugoslavia, prior to the creation of the state, the people enjoyed largely friendly and co-operative relations over a period of time. The creation of a common south Slavic state bears resemblance to the biblical story in the sense that the story of two failed Yugoslavias is a story of the failure of co-operative action. At the end of the period, the peoples feel wounded, all with their disparate grievances and incomprehensible discourses. Indeed, the south Slavic discourses seem to speak over rather than to or with each other. There is a certain misunderstanding as to why Yugoslavia failed twice during the twentieth century, and this failure on the part of the diplomatic community and scholars alike reflects a poverty of serious policy and academic discussion of the inherent and structural weaknesses that plagued the development of Yugoslavia and left lasting marks on the memories of its peoples.

Balkan Babel has passed the test of time, and is as relevant now to understanding the disintegration of Yugoslavia as



when it first appeared. This relevance reflects the depth of Ramets understanding of the complex logic involved in the creation, development, and dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, and her normative matrix that posited questions of legitimacy with illegitimate forms of political and economic association. Students, scholars, and practitioners of international affairs, particularly of the former Yugoslavia, will benefit enormously by Ramets rich chronology and analysis.

Marijan Gubic

