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THE INTERNATIONAL DETERMINANTS OF THE BOSNIAN WAR

Bruno Gomes Guimarães¹

Abstract: This paper analyzes the international determinants that led to and triggered the Bosnian War in the 1990s. An overview of the Socialist Yugoslavia and its international stance up to its dismemberment is presented at first, focusing on the integration of the country in the international system (and its impact on Yugoslavia) and on its international economic status. Then, the onset of the war and the actions of the Great Powers — United States, France, Germany, United Kingdom, and Russia — are analyzed, looking at the undermining of the Yugoslav state's sovereignty and the empowerment of domestic actors through external support to belligerent groups. It is seen that after Yugoslavia's economic destabilization, foreign interference propelled the start of the war by making the belligerent groups in Bosnia confident because of their foreign support. Geopolitical interests were a determinant of the Bosnian War, which was characterized as an intractable ethnic conflict to hide political agendas at play.

Keywords: *Bosnian War; Yugoslavia; Post-Cold War geopolitics; Dismemberment of Yugoslavia; Great power politics; Ethnic conflict.*

OS DETERMINANTES INTERNACIONAIS DA GUERRA DA BÓSNIA

Resumo: Este trabalho analisa os determinantes internacionais que levaram a e desencadearam a Guerra da Bósnia na década de 1990. É apresentado um panorama da Iugoslávia socialista e seu posicionamento internacional até o seu desmembramento, focando na integração do país no sistema internacional (e sua influência na Iugoslávia) e no seu status econômico internacional. Então, são analisados o início da guerra e as ações das Grandes Potências — Estados Unidos, França, Alemanha, Reino Unido e Rússia — com atenção ao enfraquecimento da soberania do Estado iugoslavo e o empoderamento de atores domésticos através do apoio estrangeiro a grupos beligerantes. Nota-se que, após a desestabilização econômica da Iugoslávia, a interferência estrangeira levou ao início da guerra ao tornar os grupos beligerantes na Bósnia mais confiantes por causa de seu apoio externo. Interesses geopolíticos foram um determinante da Guerra da Bósnia, a qual foi caracterizada como um conflito étnico intratável para esconder os planos políticos em jogo.

Palavras-chave: *Guerra da Bósnia; Iugoslávia; geopolítica do pós-Guerra Fria; desmembramento da Iugoslávia; política das Grandes Potências; conflito étnico.*

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1 INTRODUCTION

Geopolitical disputes in South-Eastern Europe are back. Politically motivated ethnic violence has erupted recently in Macedonia, triggering once again the fear that the situation escalates into broader confrontations and even civil war in the Balkans (GEORGIEVSKI, 2015). Russia has stated its support to the Macedonian government, while the West broadly condemned the incident (STRATFOR, 2015a). Not only that, but the current migration and refugee crisis in Europe have also strained the relations of Balkan states, which serve as a passage route into the European Union (STRATFOR, 2015b). Alignments in the Balkans may be shifting and to better prevent escalations an understanding of the past is needed and the Bosnian War, which ended only 20 years ago, is an example of how (not) to cope with the situation.

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is located in a region which Kissinger (1999, p. 208) characterizes as being a “no man’s land, between the Ottoman and Habsburg empires”. Apostolova (1994) notes that its location is exactly the division line between many European empires throughout History. Similarly, Huntington (1993) affirms that it represents an inter-civilization border between Catholicism and Christian Orthodox doomed to conflicts.

In fact BiH was dominated by the Ottoman Empire for many centuries until the end of the XIX, when it came under control of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This meant the presence of three large religious groups in the country, namely Muslim, Christian Orthodox, and Catholics. In effect, Mazower (2002, p. xxxv) notes this “disconcerting interpenetration of Europe and Asia, West and East”. However, for hundreds of years there had been no animosity between these religious groups (MAZOWER, 2002), which are frequently portrayed as different ethnicities, although some authors, e.g. Vizentini (2002) and Severo (2011), affirm that they all belong to just one ethnicity, the South Slav.

Glenny (2001) states that the violence that erupted in the end of the XIX century and mainly during the XX occurred primarily due to influence of the world’s Great Powers. This influence would once again be evident by the end of the XX century when a discourse of ethnic violence (and cleansing) in the region was brought about to justify the intervention by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Political commentators, politicians and military officials of the West described the issue as one of “ancient hatreds”, “historical rivalries” that made the Balkans a “power keg” (e.g. ALLCOCK, 2000, p. 1–2). The conflict was later considered by some scholars to be “intractable”, i.e. persistent and deemed impossible to resolve because of the violent history of the region (COLEMAN, 2006;

DODER, 1993; GAGNON JR., 1994; HALL, 2014). The characterization of the conflict as such, dissolving it into a spectrum of ethnic violence and ‘internal war’, denied it analytic and historical specificity.² It removed all responsibility from international actors. And their actions have been fundamental in Yugoslav history.

These international determinants can be particularly noted in the creation of the First Yugoslavia. Serbia, independent since the beginning of the XIX century, began nurturing the idea of unification of all Slav peoples in the Balkans at the same time that Italy and Germany were being unified (GLENNY, 2001). However, this was only possible after the First World War — whose trigger was exactly Sarajevo, the capital of BiH. That is when the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (later named the Kingdom of Yugoslavia) was established, serving the interests of France, Britain, and the United States in containing German and Soviet expansionism (HUDSON, 2003).

The influence of the Great Powers was once again felt during the Second World War. Nazi Germany conquered large portions of the Yugoslav Kingdom for economic reasons, but also to contain the Soviet Union (USSR). At the same time, Hitler established a puppet state in Croatia and divided the country in other eight units with Hungary, Bulgaria and Mussolini’s Italy (GLENNY, 2001). Croatia became nominally independent and its fascist regime, led by Ante Pavelić of the Ustaše Party, turned the region into “one great slaughterhouse” (GLENNY, 2001, p. 486). By this epoch the first acts of violence started being committed between the Yugoslav sub-nationalities³ in a generalized way and by influence of foreign powers.

From this, it is possible to notice that “Their [the Western powers’] attitudes towards Yugoslavia varied according to their strategic aims and it is these which have primarily, although not exclusively, determined Yugoslavia’s trajectory” (HUDSON, 2003, p. 1). Moreover, concerning the importance of the region, North (2009) says that:

The Balkans do not float above a sea of oil; nor is it a barren wasteland. But its strategic significance has been a constant factor in imperialist power politics. If only because of its geographic location, either as a critical transit point for Western Europe toward the east, or as a buffer against the expansion of Russia (and later the USSR) toward the south, the Balkans played a critical role in the international balance of power.

² See Ramet (2005) for an interesting and comprehensive summary of the debate pertaining the dismemberment of Yugoslavia and its causes.

³ For analytical purposes this paper considers the nationality of South Slav peoples to be Yugoslav. To refer to each of the Yugoslav “nations”, as expressed in Yugoslavia’s constitution, the terms sub-nationality, sub-national group, and ethnicity are used.

Indeed, Cordell & Wolff (2009) note that the international dimension of ethnic conflicts — such as the one in BiH —, alongside other factors, is vital to a comprehensive understanding of it.⁴ Therefore, the aim of this article is to answer the question of what were the main international determinants that led to and triggered the conflict in Bosnia in the early 1990s. The purpose is not to discover a single cause of the Bosnian War, nor to list all of the domestic and external factors that originated it. The intention is to contribute to the debate⁵ pertaining the issue and to draw attention to the main international roots and triggers of the conflict in BiH.

In view of that, the framework of analysis will draw from Harff & Gurr (2004) and Lobell & Mauceri (2004). The former states that there are two relevant factors to deal with the international context of ethnic conflicts, pointedly the external support to opposing ethnicities/belligerent groups and the international economic status of the country/region (HARFF; GURR, 2004). The latter share a similar view. For them the factors are the reduction of state sovereignty and the empowerment of domestic actors and interest groups (with an increasing role of non-state regional and international actors) and the degree of economic, social, and cultural integration within the regional or global system (LOBELL; MAUCERI, 2004). Lobell & Mauceri's view is very similar to the one by Harff & Gurr and only seems to widen it.

Thus, this paper's hypotheses are that 1) before the onset of the war, there had been external support to non-state actors within Yugoslavia, which encouraged them to secede and wage war; and that 2) the Yugoslav changing insertion into the world economic order is at the root of the conflict, especially the foreign pressure for the adoption of neoliberal policies. Accordingly, this paper will first present a broad overview of the Socialist Yugoslavia and its international stance up to its dismemberment, focusing on the integration of the country in the international system (and its impact on Yugoslavia) and particularly on its international economic status. The second part of the article will, then, deal with the onset of the Bosnian War and the actions of the Great Powers (mostly the United States, Russia, France, the United Kingdom, and Germany) which may have triggered it, closely looking at reduction of state sovereignty and empowerment of domestic actors through external support to belligerent groups.

⁴ Halliday (1995) stresses that most conflict analyses avoid relating security within states to international security, because, if too close a relation is established, then unwelcome policies to prevent wars and conflicts may follow.

⁵ See footnote 1.

2 YUGOSLAVIA AND THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

2.1 Yugoslavia During the Cold War

After overcoming the challenges posed by the rivalries between the peoples of the Western Balkans arisen from the massacres perpetrated during the Second World War, the Yugoslav Communist Party (YCP) and its partisans were the only multi-ethnic political force in the region (BOSE, 2007). Then, the YCP rapidly came to power in Yugoslavia through the military dominion of the region; collaborators of the Ustaše and the Chetniks were defeated in less than a year after the war (MAZOWER, 2002). Besides that, the authority of the partisans — and particularly from Josip Tito Broz, leader of the movement — was legitimized through strong popular support due to the success of the struggle against the fascist occupying forces for the liberation of the country and without the participation of foreign allies (GLENNY, 2001). Thence, the autonomist and non-aligned character of the autochthonous socialist regime that was established was very significant.

This aspect of the new regime reflected in its foreign policy, which was not aligned to any of the world's two superpowers (the U.S. and the Soviet Union). The country was actually closer to Third World countries and to neutralist positions opposed to either bloc, a fact that helped the creation of the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries (VIZENTINI, 2002). Yet, in this context, Yugoslavia ended up indirectly serving Western purposes, since it was containing the Soviet Union by not aligning to it. Glenny (2001) tells that the country had friendly relations with both the West and the Soviet bloc, besides the Third World, being able to participate in businesses all around the globe in the sectors of construction and engineering, for instance. Accordingly, during the Cold War, Yugoslavia was one of the most influent and respected countries of the international scene (GLENNY, 2001; VIZENTINI, 2002).

This independent foreign policy was, however, just one of the three fundamental pillars of the new Yugoslavia. The other two key factors of the state were the economic self-management and the “ethnic harmony policy” (APOSTOLOVA, 1994). The first was an intermediary form of management between central state planning and market economy in which great investment and profit-sharing autonomy was granted to the country's regions and its workers' councils (APOSTOLOVA, 1994; GLENNY, 2001; WOODWARD, 1995a). The second refers to a neutralization of sub-national feelings as well as to a greater standardization of what would (or should) be the Yugoslav nation, according to Apostolova (1994). In this context, Tito perceived any form of sub-nationalism (Croats, Slovenes, Serbs and others) as a

threat to the state and, consequently, he suppressed such manifestations in favour of the greater good of the country, even if they were not necessarily (GLENNY, 2001).⁶ Furthermore, it should be noted that Tito consciously built the new Yugoslavia in opposition to the first one — which had been based on Serb hegemony for the maintenance of the country's unity —, aiming, therefore, at a free association of equally sovereign states in the form of the Socialist Federation of Yugoslavia (ŽIŽEK, 1999).⁷

2.2 Yugoslav Economic Crises and International Involvement

Yugoslavia had great socioeconomic development until the 1970s, when liberal economic reforms could not be sustained due to the rise of unemployment and inflation (SEVERO, 2011).⁸ Because of that, Yugoslavia had to resort to foreign loans to deal with its economic crisis, worsened by the return of many Yugoslav workers who had migrated to Western Europe seeking better opportunities (GLENNY, 2001; HUDSON, 2003; SCHÖPFLIN, 1997). Hudson (2003) and Woodward (1995a) notice these foreign loans were only granted by international creditors — especially the International Monetary Fund (IMF)⁹ — provided that there were Yugoslav counterparts, particularly reforms aiming at greater economic liberalization, which, on their turn, further aggravated the situation of the country. Besides that, these reforms introduced as prerequisites to IMF loans reoriented the Yugoslav economy towards the production of goods destined to Western European markets, economically favouring Slovenia and Croatia, the republics physically closer to them (HUDSON, 2003). This context generated considerable tension between the Yugoslav republics, because the most developed ones (Croatia and Slovenia) did not want to keep bearing the costs of Belgrade's projects to develop the least favoured regions of the country, namely Macedonia, BiH and Kosovo (GLENNY, 2001; HUDSON, 2003; VIZENTINI,

⁶ It is called “sub-nationalism” for it is considered in relation to the Yugoslav nationalism. The ethno-nationalisms or sub-nationalisms of Yugoslavia still bear the same characteristics of Gellner's definition: “[...] nationalism is a theory of political legitimacy, which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones, and, in particular, that ethnic boundaries within a given state [...] should not separate the power-holders from the rest” (GELLNER, 1983, p. 1).

⁷ The country was federally structured and composed of six republics (Slovenia, Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Macedonia) plus two autonomous regions within Serbia (Vojvodina and Kosovo).

⁸ Freyberg-Inan (2006) further asserts that the Yugoslav economic crisis was triggered by the rapid rise of oil prices in the 1970s as well as the global debt crisis by the end of that decade when the US and other creditors raised interest rates unilaterally.

⁹ In June 1980, Yugoslavia contracted a debt with the IMF amounting US\$ 441 million. In the following year the agreement was replaced by one adding up to almost 2 billion dollars. In 1984 a further agreement was signed in the amount of US\$ 319 million (TYSON; ROBINSON; WOODS, 1988, p. 82).

2002).¹⁰ As Severo (2011, p. 80) points out “[the] pressure of these [Western financial] institutions for liberal reforms and the dependence on them, together with the international context of the time, generated the bases of the crises that would burst during the 1980s”.

Accordingly, the situation was exacerbated in the mid 1980s when the economic situation once again reached a low point due to the high foreign debt and the accompanying liberalizing reforms.¹¹ Even though the federal government was seen as the main responsible for the situation, reforms to further centralize the control of the economy were demanded by the international creditors (HUDSON, 2003). Moreover, the United States began conditioning its economic assistance to the execution of elections in the country, which were to be carried out separately in each republic and not at the federal level (PARENTI, 2002). As a consequence, Croats and Slovenes — which persevered in their critics to income redistribution among the republics — started to call for political reforms to constitute a multiparty system, a market economy, and rule of law as a means of handling the crisis, even though they were fiercely against the economic centralization demanded by the IMF (APOSTOLOVA, 1994; SOARES, 1999). The future of the Yugoslav socioeconomic model, highly dependent on Western powers, was in check.

At the time, there were promises that Yugoslavia might join the economic integration process taking place in Western Europe, the European Economic Community (EEC). In the early 1980s, the EEC had allowed Yugoslavia to sell 70% of its industrial goods duty free in EEC markets. This measure favoured Croatia and Slovenia as they were the most industrialised regions of the country. Conversely, Yugoslav agricultural products did not have an easy access to EEC markets due to high tariffs. West Germany and Italy accounted for 70% of the trade between Yugoslavia and the EEC (GOODRICH, 1992, p. 159). Although Belgrade did not fulfil the prerequisites, Yugoslavia’s admission as a full member of the bloc was used as a tool to pressure the country into harsher liberalizing reforms. Moreover, according to Shoup (2008), fears of a Soviet intervention in Yugoslavia due to a continuing instability there spurred the EEC to take this course of action.

Yugoslavia also resorted to the Soviet Union. Both countries had been politically estranged since the 1950s, when Moscow imposed trade barriers and other restrictive

¹⁰ The debate pertaining this issue led to political reforms in the mid-1970s towards greater decentralization of administrative structures, which is one of the main domestic factors which led to the disintegration of the country (BOSE, 2007).

¹¹ In 1988 the inflation rate reached 217% p.a. and the unemployment was at 13% by the end of the same decade; many inhabitants of the poorer republics were migrating to the more prosperous ones (i.e. Croatia and Slovenia) (SOARES, 1999).

measures towards Belgrade.¹² Trade level between them was almost insignificant until the oil crisis of the 1970s, which made Yugoslavia seek Soviet oil. It served as a starting point for an increased bilateral trade, which increased tenfold between 1972 and 1984 (MAKSAKOVA, 2015). However, the trade balance between the USSR and Yugoslavia tended to negative for the latter. In 1983, Belgrade informed Moscow, its main trade partner, of its intention to cut the amount of Soviet imports so as not to incur in greater foreign debt and currency shortage (GOODRICH, 1991).¹³ The plan was successful. In 1985 Yugoslavia had a great surplus, a trend that was maintained until the dismemberment of the country (MAKSAKOVA, 2015). Notwithstanding that, it should be noted that these surpluses were to no avail to the financial crisis, because Soviet-Yugoslav trade was conducted in the form of barter transactions (GOODRICH, 1991). Since they did not use hard currency, Yugoslavia could not accumulate it to service its foreign debt.

When Mikhail Gorbachev, leader of the Soviet Union, visited Belgrade in 1988, the issue was at the top of the agenda (SHANKER, 1988; TAGLIABUE, 1988). Plans were made to start hard currency transactions, while Soviet oil prices were to be tied to world market prices. However, it did not start immediately and bilateral trade started to be described as Soviet “debt” or “interest-free credit” from Yugoslavia (e.g. BEBLER, 1990; REMINGTON, 1991). Two years later, the USSR agreed to pay it back in a three-year period and to end barter transactions already in 1991. But to reach this deal, deemed to be good for the liberalizing reforms being implemented in Yugoslavia, the federal government had to agree to conditions which further strained its relations with the republics and aggravated the socio-economic crisis:

the Yugoslavs agreed to early repayment of \$230 million of commercial and \$650 million of interstate, government credit. This means that Yugoslav firms, borrowing from the USSR, are expected to pay their own federal government instead of the creditor. Or to put it differently, the Belgrade government must now collect \$230 million from Yugoslav enterprises (REMINGTON, 1991, p. 110).

Other aspects of the liberalizing reforms carried out by Ante Marković from 1989 onward added to the turmoil. They abolished the self-management system and all traces of the socialist economy in the country. Severo (2011) notes that, under the guidance of international

¹² In 1948 occurred the Tito-Stalin split. In the following decades, Yugoslavia harshly criticised the Soviet interventions in eastern Europe (Hungary, Czechoslovakia) and Asia (Afghanistan), which pushed them further apart.

¹³ Singleton (1989) tells the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China offered aid and loans while Belgrade was negotiating with the IMF in the early 1980s. Moscow’s aid came in the form of increased import of Yugoslav goods. Beijing’s a US\$ 120 million loan (SINGLETON, 1989, p. 277).

creditors such as the World Bank and the IMF¹⁴, the attempt at creating a free market economy amidst austerity measures abolished the social welfare protections granted by the socialist system to the individuals at the federal level.¹⁵ Susan Woodward (1995a) notices that IMF policies were particularly inappropriate, because they constantly failed and after each failure a new dose of IMF credits and policies were required. These entailed cutbacks in production and labour — thereby fuelling unemployment¹⁶ — in order to fight inflation (WOODWARD, 1995a). Not only that, but Marković's reform also threatened the right of sub-national equality, especially regarding proportionality of employment (of the sub-national groups) in the public sector (SEVERO, 2011; WOODWARD, 1995a). Furthermore, the federal government also suspended its transfer payments to the republics and provinces so as to be able to pay the foreign debt under the instruction of its creditors, and it increased the animosity of the republics towards the federal government (CHOSSUDOVSKY, 1997; 2002; WILLIAMS, 2004).¹⁷

As a result of these reforms, half of the Yugoslav companies faced bankruptcy and the industrial workforce was deeply devaluated (SEVERO, 2011). This package of reforms and its corresponding legislation, structured to dismantle and privatize the socialist Yugoslav economy as fast as possible — following international guidelines — brought about socio-political chaos and fragmentation (HUDSON, 2003).

This is, in fact, the starting point of the political construction of the ethnic identities by the leaders of each republic. McQuay (2014) stresses that, while differing national identities do not themselves lead to war and multinational states are not “naturally” destined to fail, the politicization of the sub-national groups created the necessary conditions for the economic crisis to polarize Yugoslav society. Vilification of other ethnic groups became a political tool for exclusion where previously there had been one single community

¹⁴ In 1988 the IMF and Yugoslavia reached a deal to reduce debt servicing and in 1989 another loan was agreed upon amounting to 600 million dollars (SHOUP, 2008, p. 337).

¹⁵ These neoliberal policies and austerity measures have started to be questioned even by the IMF itself (ELLIOTT, 2016). See, for instance, the piece “Neoliberalism: oversold?” written by IMF economists Ostry, Loungani and Furceri (2016) published by a journal of the institution in 2016.

¹⁶ By the end of the 1980s, the unemployment rate in the country reached over 17%, with another 20% underemployed, and 60% of the unemployed were under 25 years old (BODUSZYŃSKI, 2010, p. 66).

¹⁷ Chossudovsky claims this suspension was the final blow on Yugoslav unity: “In one fell swoop, the reformers engineered the final collapse of Yugoslavia's federal fiscal structure and mortally wounded its federal political institutions. By cutting the financial arteries between Belgrade and the republics, the reforms fueled secessionist tendencies that fed on economic factors as well as ethnic divisions, virtually ensuring the de facto secession of the republics” (CHOSSUDOVSKY, 2002).

(DEUTSCH, 2006).¹⁸ Vizontini (2002) suggests the ethnic character is a representation of a social, political, and economic conflict in a crumbling world. In other words, “the necessity of a political legitimisation of the new forces in power and of a slogan for social mobilisation, in a context of ideological vacuum, transforms nationalism in a consequence of the socio-economic transition process itself” (APOSTOLOVA, 1994, p. 102).

Yet the inter-regional dispute still presented proposals for the coexistence of the different sub-national groups within a reformed Yugoslavia: Croats and Slovenes argued for a confederation, while Serbs and Montenegrins sought a more centralized federative system, and Bosnians and Macedonians took an intermediary position (APOSTOLOVA, 1994). The federal government of Ante Marković favoured the maintenance of the federation but with the introduction of multi-party democracy¹⁹ and reforms towards a free market economy, just as it had been happening elsewhere by the end of the Cold War (HUDSON, 2003). This situation is described by Crawford (1998) as one in which ideological debates merged with conflicts between the centre and the regions. Instead of straightforward secession, a change of nature of the Yugoslav state was being debated. In this context, the United States, the United Kingdom, and France supported the central government in its intention of political and economic liberalization (HUDSON, 2003).

Moreover, concerning the Western powers, their assertiveness in trying to change the socioeconomic system of the country is very striking. There was no room for discussion on defaulting the loans, the dispute was clear-cut about the restructuring of the Yugoslav system and the refinancing of the debt, while concerning Latin America, which was undergoing very similar problems, the stance of the same Western countries was not as unyielding (WOODWARD, 1995b). Freyberg-Inan (2006) notes that the West’s main interests in the situation were the Yugoslav foreign debt payment, the consolidation of neo-liberalism’s hegemony, and market opening. These three factors, interconnected, justify the proposition that the interference of world powers in the Yugoslav question was fundamental to its disintegration (SEVERO, 2011).

¹⁸ McQuay (2014, p. 27) informs that as late as 1989 37% of Yugoslavia’s population declared themselves to be “Yugoslavs” by nationality rather than choosing a sub-national group, a remarkable sign of shared political identity and sense of community.

¹⁹ Notice that “The introduction of political pluralism in an ethnically plural environment without democratic traditions can lead to divisions along ethnic lines, as politicians and parties use ethnic identification of people for their political purposes. This happened in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and other parts of the country. Nationalism and nationalistic policies were used to mobilize ethnic political support and to frame new national interests and politics, consequently contributing to problems in ethnic relations and to the escalation of crisis and conflicts in Yugoslavia and its different parts, especially in the ethnically more plural and diverse republics.” (ŽAGAR, 2009, p. 459).

Once it became clear that there was a military build-up by all sides in 1990, Western countries were still officially committed to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the country. So was the USSR. However, the West would frequently make statements against it. Indeed, the United States made a declaration stating that the use of force by the Yugoslav National Army (YNA) to maintain the territorial integrity and unity of the country — the very essential function of a state's armed forces — would be unacceptable (HUDSON, 2003). Still, this apparent paradox of Western countries' policies towards the escalation of the Yugoslav crisis becomes understandable when one considers the political views of the leaders behind the main belligerent forces: Slobodan Milošević and Franjo Tuđman. Milošević, president of the Serbian Socialist Republic and who had effective control over the YNA, was opposed to the liberalizing reforms carried out by the federal government and instead supported renewing the self-managing socialist system. Tuđman, on the other hand, was supposedly in favour of market capitalism following western precepts and democracy. Even before the armed conflict started, the former was “demonized” by the West and the latter “glorified”, although both were authoritarian, intolerant, and ultra-nationalistic (HUDSON, 2003). Consequently, it is noticeable that the difference of treatment given to these leaders from the onset originated from their political-economic views (one autonomist and the other pro-West) and not from authoritarian leanings, hate speech or any other reason shown by the media at that time (HUDSON, 2003; SEVERO, 2011).

2.3 The End of the Cold War and Its Impact on Yugoslavia

Yugoslavia served as a buffer state between the Western and Soviet blocs during the Cold War. By itself, the country did not represent a threat to the balance of power of the conflict, although it constituted certain danger to any force that wished to incorporate the Balkans as a sphere of influence (SEVERO, 2011). Belgrade itself worried that either Moscow or Washington would invade its territory in a war between the superpowers. However, the Yugoslav state served mostly the strategic interests of the United States, since it contained the Soviet Union and impeded Soviet access to the warm waters of the Mediterranean Sea. In fact, a great majority of the YNA was stationed at the border with countries of the Warsaw Pact, since Belgrade thought that Moscow could intervene in the country as it had done in Afghanistan, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia (BEBLER, 1990; MCQUAY, 2014). This is further corroborated by the provision of financial help by the

United States to the country because of its role in the American strategy against the USSR (USA, 1984).

Then, as a consequence of the end of the Cold War, Yugoslavia lost its strategic position of balancing the Soviet Union and the United States. Already during the 1980s its role began to erode because of several international political events. The paradigm that oriented international affairs after the two world wars entered a phase of decline at the same time as a new — yet unknown — international order was being established (ARTURI, 2005). In the USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev introduced political and economic reforms and unilaterally reduced the Soviet military presence in Eastern Europe.²⁰ The late historian, Eric Hobsbawm (1992), affirms that the reforms being carried out in the USSR undermined, by the force of example, the central command and authority structure which allowed communist regimes to operate (including Yugoslavia) and that the rise of nationalism was a by-product of this phenomenon. In Western Europe, the European Community was further deepening its integration through the approval of economic and monetary union. Also in the 1980s, the United States overcame the economic crisis of the previous decade by boosting up the economy with liberal economic policies and a special focus on the defence industry.

By the end of the decade all of this meant that there was no longer any challenge by the Soviet Union to the U.S.-centred capitalist model. The main symbol of the collapse of the Communist alternative and triumph of the West was the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, which also reverberated in the internal balance of power of Europe, especially because of the political and economic power that a reunified Germany would have in the continent. Nevertheless, this invigorated Western Europe still did not have the capabilities to challenge the American military and economic might and its leadership in the international system. In sum, the world came into a transitional period of consolidation of American hegemony throughout the world, which was guaranteed in political, economic and military spheres (SEVERO, 2011).

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization also had to be reoriented after the end of the Cold War. Questions about NATO's existence emerged with USSR's withdrawal from Eastern Europe and ultimately its dissolution, since the alliance's role of countering the Warsaw Pact vanished: Its own *raison d'être* had disappeared (MEDCALF, 2005). In that case, the United States argued that the organisation should have an offensive and preventative

²⁰ This further eroded the central role of the YNA within Yugoslavia, since one of its main legitimating factors was the defence against the Soviet Union in case of an intervention from Moscow (BEBLER, 1990; MCQUAY, 2014).

attitude and that it ought to expand to the East (especially in order to avoid any convergence between Russia and the European Community) (SEVERO, 2011). In the end, NATO's involvement in the Yugoslav dismemberment was a question of justifying its existence after the Cold War and legitimising American policies: “[The] organisation was no longer of collective defence against a possible attack from the USSR, but an instrument to propagate American values” (SEVERO, 2011, p. 103). The preservation of NATO had also other strategic values, most importantly the maintenance of close transatlantic relations, while containing the political power of the reunifying Germany (VIZENTINI, 2002).

Consequently, Yugoslavia's role of containing the Soviet Union was no longer needed in the American strategy. The country would have to give in to the new international logic of adherence to the American values, because there was no room for a socialist country in such a strategic place in Europe (SEVERO, 2011). That is why the United States and Western Europe began calling for the opening of the Yugoslav and other socialist markets to the world economy. However, there were sectors of the economy in Eastern European countries (and in Yugoslavia) that were not favourable to capitalism and stood up against (drastic) changes. The American and Western European support to separatist forces within Yugoslavia makes sense in this context: The political-economic views of the belligerent groups mattered for them, i.e. they would support only those that favoured an open-market capitalist economy regardless of international law and undemocratic tendencies.

Broadly speaking, divergences among political leaders within Yugoslavia about restructuring the economy originated separatist ethnic movements — propped up by Western countries —, ultimately leading to the disintegration of the country (SOARES, 1999). The political elites of Croatia and Slovenia — the most developed Yugoslav republics —, generally supported neoliberal economic policies, but most of them were against the preservation of unified Yugoslavia for they did not want to subsidise the poorer republics of the country. They deepened their trade with Western Europe, especially Germany, thus, entering its influence zone and receiving assistance from them (economic and military). The Serbs, on the other hand, were staunchly against most neoliberal policies and mobilised around the issue. As a response, the West raised several economic and military sanctions, besides being characterised by the Western media as the unreasonable antagonists of the crisis (SEVERO, 2011).²¹

²¹ For instance, the United States imposed sanctions on Yugoslavia already in 1990–1991 even before open conflict had started. These included a suspension of all aid (summing US\$ 5 million) and threatened to block the concession of IMF loans (new or already agreed upon) (BINDER, 1991). They are known as the Nickles

The findings of this section corroborate this paper's second hypothesis. The Yugoslav insertion into the world capitalist economic order was indeed at the root of the conflict that would take place in BiH and other Yugoslav republics. Yugoslavia's place in the international system was challenged. Its economic crises and foreign pressures for neoliberal adjustments fuelled nationalisms in the country and created the conditions that led up to the wars. The confirmation of the hypothesis does not mean there were no other causes (internal or international), nor does it exhaust the international factors prior to the escalation of the conflict. Yugoslavia's dismemberment is too complex an issue to be considered a mono-causal process. The following section will delve into the international factors that contributed to the escalation of Bosnia's conflict in particular, paying close attention to foreign support to belligerent groups.

3 THE COUNTDOWN TO THE BOSNIAN WAR

While the political elites in Slovenia and Croatia were already openly talking about secession in the beginning of 1990, Bosnia and Herzegovina conducted multiparty elections. Three nationalist parties won, one for each ethnicity (Serb-Bosnian, Croat-Bosnian and Bosniak²²). In spite of hostilities towards one another, they formed a coalition government to oppose those parties that were pro-Yugoslavia and against ethnic-based nationalisms (UDOVIČKI; ŠTITKOVAC, 2000). The leader of this government would be Alija Izetbegović, a Bosniak with a past of fundamentalist Islamism (HUDSON, 2003).²³

When the war started in Croatia and Slovenia in 1991, BiH did not take part in the hostilities and neither manifested interest in becoming independent too. In spite of everything, soon the Bosnian government was trapped between Croatia and Serbia, both of which pressured BiH in order to destabilise it and be able to divide Bosnian territory between them (APOSTOLOVA, 1994; GLENNY, 2001). As a consequence, Izetbegović began considering the idea of secession, driving the Serb-Bosnians off of the coalition (BOSE, 2007).

Amendment (or sometimes Nickles-Bentley) and intended to target Milošević and the Serbs in particular. By the time the White House officially still supported the unity of Yugoslavia, but US Ambassador Zimmerman (1996, p. 184) affirms that the US Congress "downplayed, ignored, or even criticized the importance" of it.

²² The term Bosniak is used to refer to the Muslim population of Bosnia.

²³ In 1970 Izetbegović wrote a piece called "Islamic Declaration" in which he called for an Islamic state in Bosnia as soon as Muslims achieved a majority (SAMARY, 1995). Izetbegović was incarcerated for Islamic fundamentalism in the 1980s for five years (and condemned to 14) and pardoned in 1988 (DE KRNEVIC-MISKOVIC, 2003). After the secession crisis had started in Yugoslavia, Izetbegović started to publicly refute allegations that he was fundamentalist and denied intentions of establishing an Islamic state in Bosnia (RAMET, 2005).

Besides the Serb and Croat pressure, the policies of the European Community were also decisive for Bosnian political forces to start entertaining the possibility of declaring independence. After civil war started in Croatia and Slovenia, the EC created an arbitration commission on 27th August 1991 (called Badinter Commission) to deal with the legal questions pertaining the recognition of new states in substitution of Yugoslavia. There was significant disagreement among the members of the bloc. Germany, Austria, Denmark, and Hungary supported the self-determination of Croats and Slovenes, while France and the United Kingdom favoured the preservation of Yugoslavia. At the outset, the Commission considered Yugoslavia was undergoing an irreversible process of dissolution (instead of secession), i.e. it paved the way for the recognition of the republics as independent countries (BOSE, 2007; WOODWARD, 2000). This met the principle of isonomic treatment to all republics forwarded by Spain, France, the U.K., and the U.S., but it was going against the German calls for the recognition of Croatia and Slovenia only (WOODWARD, 2000).

Afterwards, the Badinter Commission decided that the republics would only be recognised by the EC based on the internal borders of Yugoslavia, which ought to become international ones through the International Law principle of *uti possidetis iuris*²⁴. Moreover, the republics would also have to fulfil several other criteria defined by the commission. The most important of these criteria were, to be precise, a constitutional protection to minorities and popular support for independence through referenda (COUSENS; HARLAND, 2006).²⁵ Shortly thereafter, it decided that those republics wishing to be recognised as independent states ought to file their requests until 24th December 1991 for analysis. Consequently, the stipulation of this deadline put enough pressure on Izetbegović to ask for international recognition of BiH, which he did on the last possible day as a way to make sure that the Bosniaks would have a place at the table of future negotiations (UDOVIČKI; ŠTITKOVAC, 2000; WOODWARD, 2008). As a response, the YNA started to fortify its positions in Bosnia so as to deter secessionism: “It was clear that the entire disposition of the army was directed to preventing Bosnia-Herzegovina from pursuing a path to independence and to keeping the republic within a truncated rump Yugoslavia.” (MEIER, 1999, p. 200).

²⁴ This principle states that the one that legally possesses the territory has the right over it, or, in other words, the territory belongs to whom possesses it according to what has already been established by law (SHAW, 1997). According to the International Court of Justice, it is a principle that in its essence tries to maintain the respect to territorial limits of a country when it becomes independent in order to avoid the dangers posed to its stability by fratricidal conflicts provoked by the contestation of borders after the withdrawal of the administrative colonial power (ICJ, 1986). It was used in the case of Yugoslavia to avoid the use of force for changing borders (WOODWARD, 2000).

²⁵ Some other criteria were: respect to the rule of law, democracy, human rights, disarmament, nuclear non-proliferation and regional security (WOODWARD, 2000).

The Bosnian request was denied by the Badinter Commission due to the absence of a referendum in the republic about the independence (PELLET, 1992). Instead the European Community organised a mediation in February 1992 to solve the issue in response to Izetbegović's attitude. The proposals of the so-called Lisbon Agreement, which *grosso modo* intended to divide BiH in three territorial units or cantons that would share the central government. The agreement, however, stipulated that all districts would be classified as Serb, Croat or Muslim, even where there was no majority. This caused the first clashes between Croat-Bosnians, Bosniaks, and Serb-Bosnians in BiH. Territorial dispute seemed to make impossible the agreement's implementation.

Meanwhile, a referendum was organised in Bosnia also in February 1992 for satisfying the Badinter Commission's criteria for recognition. Results were overwhelmingly in favour of independence (98% of the votes) (BOSE, 2007; UDOVIČKI; ŠTITKOVAC, 2000). However, it was boycotted by the Serb-Bosnian population, that did not wish to break away from Yugoslavia. In addition to that, shortly before the referendum in January 1992 they declared the Serb Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, a political entity within Bosnia that wished to remain a part of Yugoslavia. Bose (2007) tells that the Serb-Bosnians composed approximately 37% of the electorate, i.e. only 63% of the people voted on the official referendum. Because of that, the recognition of independence could not be granted to BiH according to the opinion of the Badinter Commission.

Nevertheless, Izetbegović declared the country's independence on 3rd March 1992 after Croatia was unconditionally recognised as an independent country sooner that year by Germany²⁶ (and followed by the whole EC shortly afterwards) regardless of the rules stipulated by the Badinter Commission.²⁷ Thus, this recognition violated International Law (HUDSON, 2003; VISENTINI; PEREIRA, 2008; VIZENTINI, 2004). Not only that, but the recognition of Croatia as an independent state meant the remainder of Yugoslavia would be dominated by the Serbs, which was at that point an important factor for BiH's future within or

²⁶ Germany had interests in having a cheaper way out to the Mediterranean Sea and access to the markets of Yugoslavia, and this Croatia and Slovenia could provide. For that reason, Germany led the international movement for their recognition. In addition to that, there is evidence that the German intelligence service provided training to the Croat army (HUDSON, 2003). The country was also responsible for convincing the United States to support the dismemberment of Yugoslavia (FRANÇA, 2004). Câmara (2013) and Glennly (1996) stress that the German (and Austrian) position reflected its historical, cultural, and economic interests in the region, but Serbia perceived it as an expansion of German imperialism.

²⁷ What happened was a simple bargain: The other EC countries followed Germany, because the terms of the Maastricht Treaty were being under negotiations and giving in to the German position was the best choice for the Community, which was trying to develop a common economic policy (SEVERO, 2011). Germany could have been sanctioned for its premature attitude, but France and the U.K. depended on German goodwill on European integration matters (BEARCE, 2002).

without the federation (MEIER, 1999). Izetbegović also hoped to increase his leverage on future negotiations with the measure.

After the declaration of independence, on 18th March 1992 all three sides signed the Lisbon Agreement. Izetbegović for the Bosniaks, Radovan Karadžić for the Serb-Bosnians and Mate Boban for the Croat-Bosnians. However, ten days after signing it, Izetbegović withdrew his support. Hudson (2003) and Binder (1993) affirm that it happened due to strong American influence, which had been pushing for international recognition of BiH since February.²⁸ Carr (1995) tells that the Bosnian Muslims rejected the plan following an assurance from the US and Germany that BiH would be recognized, given UN membership, and, that they could get a better deal than was currently on offer. Fact is that on 28th March 1992 Izetbegović met the US Ambassador to Yugoslavia, Warren Zimmermann (DE KRNJEVIC-MISKOVIC, 2003). Although Zimmermann later denied it, there have been several reports that he told Izetbegović not to follow through with the Lisbon Agreement and wait for a better one favouring an unitary state in BiH (BINDER, 1993; DE KRNJEVIC-MISKOVIC, 2003; BELOFF, 1997 apud HUDSON, 2003). In a declaration for *The New York Times* he even gave an account of the meeting with the Bosnian leader: “I told him [Izetbegović], if he didn't like it [the Lisbon Agreement], why sign it?” (BINDER, 1993). There was even a hint of possible US military assistance to BiH against the Serbs:

Izetbegovic's repudiation of the [...] agreement [...] was the immediate trigger for the war. Whether the Muslim leader repudiated this agreement because of pressure from militants at home [...] or because he understood America's advice to reject it as an implicit pledge of military support remains unclear. Given the distribution of military power in Bosnia at the time, the only way to make sense of Izetbegovic's decision is to assume that he did believe that the United States would make good on his military inferiority; the support Izetbegovic received from the United States to oppose cantonization may well have given him the confidence to take this fateful step (TUCKER; HENDRICKSON, 1993 apud DE KRNJEVIC-MISKOVIC, 2003).

Afterwards, the United States and Germany recognised the independence of the country on 6th April 1992, before any political settlement could be reached, and pressured EC and NATO members to do the same (CARR, 1995; GLENNY, 2001). Full-scale war began on the same day.²⁹

²⁸ Bosniaks were receiving support from several Middle Eastern countries as well, especially Iran and Turkey. There are also reports that Iranian specialists trained Bosniak soldiers for the war (HUDSON, 2003).

²⁹ As previously stated, there had been clashes between Bosniaks, Serb-Bosnians and Croat-Bosnians as early as February 1992. However, on 6th April the conflict gained greater international dimensions with the recognition of BiH. Furthermore, on 8th April the Bosnian government announced the formation of a single national army, which prompted the Serb-Bosnians to declare the independence of the Serbian Republic

During these events the Soviet Union underwent internal turmoil that culminated in its dissolution in August 1991. Before this event, Gorbachev referred to the situation in Yugoslavia in terms of the possible Soviet breakup, but he did not establish direct connections between both. After August 1991 and until February 1992, Moscow did not have a well-developed policy towards the situation in Yugoslavia because it was self-absorbed (GOBLE, 1996). Goble (1996) suggests the pace of dramatic changes within Russia meant that the Russian diplomats had little time to discuss the Yugoslav situation. Accordingly, Russia tended to echo Western statements so as to build a good partnership with the US and the EC. Although Moscow generally supported the unity of Yugoslavia, it ended up following the Western actions and recognized BiH on 27 April 1992.

Hence, the referendum recommended by the Badinter Commission as well as the Western recognition of independence of former Yugoslav republics precipitated the start of the war in Bosnia. The former has shown how the foreign meddling in the conflict worsened it once the principle of consensus among all three sub-national groups was transgressed (and imposed a majority principle) not taking into account the particular realities of the region (BOJOVIC, 1992). European and American policies to cope with the crisis led to an intensification of the violence, culminating in the war that would last four long years.

Therefore, the first hypothesis of this paper is also confirmed. There was considerable foreign support to secessionist groups in Yugoslavia and BiH. While Germany and others supported Croatian and Slovene separatism, which contributed to the aggravation of the conflict in Bosnia, US support to the Bosniaks and Izetbegović in particular encouraged them to secede from Yugoslavia and wage war against unionist forces.³⁰

4 CONCLUSION

The view that an intractable ethnic conflict was going on in Bosnia and Herzegovina and elsewhere in the Balkans was disseminated internationally by the West to hide the political and economic objectives at stake and to justify its intromission in the matter. The ethnic character of the conflict was rather a consequence of it and not its cause, which is

(Republic Srpska). A few days later Izetbegović ordered the troops to attack all barracks of the YNA in BiH (CARR, 1995).

³⁰ Not only the YNA, Croat-Bosnians and Serb-Bosnians fought against Izetbegović. In Bosnia's northwestern region there was a Bosniak-dominated province (Bihac) which opposed the government of Izetbegović and in fact fought against his forces until NATO's bombing campaign started (HUDSON, 2003; PARENTI, 2002). Thus, the characterization of the conflict as an ethnic one is again put into question.

more related to domestic political and economic reasons and foreign designs (GLENNY, 1996; GUIMARÃES, 2012).

In line with the frameworks of analysis of Harff & Gurr (2004) and Lobell & Mauceri (2004), the study presented the international stance of Yugoslavia up to its dismemberment, focusing on the country's role in the international system (and the system's impact on Yugoslavia) and its international economic status. Furthermore, an examination was conducted about the actions of Great Powers which have led to the Bosnian War.

During the Cold War, Yugoslavia was a socialist yet non-aligned country which, from the American perspective, contained the Soviet Union in Europe (and its access to the warm waters of the Mediterranean). It was not fully integrated to neither bloc, but it was able to trade with both, i.e. Yugoslavia managed to retain its independence to conduct its foreign economic affairs. The country underwent several economic crises in the 1970s and the 1980s that prompted an international involvement, especially through the IMF and the World Bank, which stipulated neoliberal reforms in return for loans. These reforms, however, further eroded the political and economic stability of the country, engendering the emergence of nationalistic discourses.

These liberalising measures imposed by international creditors are to be understood in the context of the end of the Cold War. Yugoslavia could no longer hold the position of buffer state, because the Soviet Union was heading towards its eventual dissolution. Therefore, it had no place in the greater strategy of the United States. And, in a context of reforms in the USSR, Moscow was no much help since it was undergoing some of the same troubles as Yugoslavia. This confirms the second hypothesis. Yugoslavia's insertion into the world capitalist economic order was indeed at the root of the conflict that would take place in BiH and other Yugoslav republics.

At first sight, the West declared support to the Yugoslav Federation. This policy was taken as a tactics to foster neoliberal structural adjustments, integration to the capitalist world market, and to reimburse the loans granted to the country. Yet, as soon as they realised the issue was more serious than imagined, different opinions began to emerge as to what ought to be done. France and the United Kingdom stood against the dissolution of Yugoslavia, while Germany and others backed up the plea for independence of the rich separatist republics, pointedly Croatia and Slovenia, which were more closely integrated to the Western European economy than the other Yugoslav republics. The German position, followed by other countries, in fact ended up eroding the sovereignty of Yugoslavia while empowering sub-national actors.

The reaction of the United States at first was one of leaving the subject for Europe to deal with it. However, after the European Community's inability to adequately lead the process, the U.S. came to the table. The country led the political and economic offensives for a regime change in the country, while Germany fostered the secession of the most developed republics to recover its sphere of influence in the Balkans lost at the end of the Second World War. These two foreign policies combined — secession and regime change — resulted in the end of Yugoslavia. The dismemberment wars and NATO's intervention also gave the organisation a new *raison d'être*, whose destiny was at stake after the Soviet debacle (VIZENTINI, 2002).

Concerning the Bosnian War per se, foreign interference in effect propelled its start by supporting different belligerent groups and making them confident because of this foreign support. Germany legitimised the notion of the division of Yugoslavia through its support to Croatia and Slovenia, while Russia, the United Kingdom and France officially supported the maintenance of the Yugoslav federation (a position identified with the Serbs). These stances reflected on the internal strives in Bosnia, whose opposing parties were encouraged by this support as well, notably the Bosniaks with support from the U.S. This confirms the first hypothesis of external support to sub-national actors within Yugoslavia: While Germany and others supported Croatian and Slovene separatism, which contributed to the aggravation of the conflict in Bosnia, US support to the Bosniaks and Izetbegović in particular encouraged them to secede from Yugoslavia and wage war.

The American policy towards BiH is also noteworthy as it was very divergent from the European one. The United States was at the same time trying to contain both a weakened Russia and a stronger Western Europe, especially after the steps the EC had taken to deepen its integration process and after having become free from its main adversary (the Soviet Union). Moreover, after USSR's dissolution Russia did not have a foreign policy for the issue and tended to agree with Washington's positions, which ultimately converged into the recognition of BiH's independence (albeit in a later date).

In sum, the international determinants of the Bosnian War played a large role in the conflict. The work here presented is not an exhaustive study of all causes, domestic or international, of the Bosnian War. The dismemberment of Yugoslavia was not caused by a single variable and the confirmation of both hypotheses does not mean there were no other factors at play. However, it shows international economic interests destabilised Yugoslavia, which had already been suffering from economic crises, causing the emergence of nationalisms in sub-national groupings. This paper contributes to the debate concerning the

issue by drawing attention to geopolitical factors. Geopolitics determined that Yugoslavia was no longer needed after the Cold War and instead a regime friendlier towards neoliberal capitalism. The interplay between Great Powers — above all between Germany, the United States, France, and Britain — once again triggered a savage conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the end, the uncertainties arisen with the end of the Cold War were solved when the United States ascertained its power more decisively in the region through NATO and the Dayton Agreement, but only after four years of a bloody conflict.

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