

Yugo going and gone: The end of a Balkan experiment

by [Paul Mojzes](#) in the [March 8, 2003](#) issue

As I was driving home from the office on February 4 I heard the announcement from Belgrade: the parliament formally voted to end the Republic of Yugoslavia and establish instead the state (or states) of Serbia and Montenegro. Tears came into my eyes—some part of me had also come to an end. Perhaps the end of an illusion.

I was born in Yugoslavia, even though my American passport says I was born in Croatia (that is also true). I came to the U.S. in 1957 as a 21-year-old student. Then I became a permanent resident and finally a citizen. My wife and I deliberately and passionately assimilated. We didn't make much of being from Yugoslavia—which, in any case, many of our friends and neighbors mixed up with Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Ukraine or Lithuania.

When civil war broke out in Yugoslavia in 1991, I observed events as an unhyphenated American. In a short time other countries began to recognize the independence of regions of the old Yugoslavia: Slovenia, Croatia, and then Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia.

The Yugoslavia for which I shed tears on February 4 was already dead in 1991. Vital functions may have ceased earlier—perhaps in 1989 at the Extraordinary Congress of the Communist Party when the delegates from Slovenia walked out. Or maybe Yugoslavia died with Tito in 1980.

The name Yugoslavia lingered on in the 1990s to designate Serbia and Montenegro, though always with the proviso “rump.” That was little consolation because the name no longer made sense. Yug means south; slavia was a reference to the predominant Slavic stock—hence the “Land of the Southern Slavs.” But the majority of the southern Slavs were no longer in that remnant. The charade ended on February 4.

It came as a shock to realize that I am a former citizen of a former country. I guess I am repeating the experience of my parents. They were born under the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, and as a kid I did not understand the old folks' nostalgia for Emperor Franz Joseph. I guess my sons don't understand my nostalgia for Tito.

It is the end of an experiment, perhaps a faulty one. The idea of uniting related yet disparate peoples of the Balkan peninsula, who until 1918 were never all living in one state, and who for centuries lived in empires not their own, was to give Wilsonian self-determination a chance. In 50 years the state was destroyed twice, first in the 1940s by a real "axis of evil"—Nazi Germany, Italy, Hungary, Bulgaria and Albania (as an Italian protectorate)—and then in the 1990s by reawakened national chauvinism.

With all its faults—perhaps even the seeds of destruction present in its design—there was something very positive in Yugoslavia, at least from the middle 1950s to the early 1980s. The inhabitants—not all, to be sure—felt that this was their home, and they shared a sense that it was a good home, though far from perfect.

Prior to the 1990s the map showed a good-sized country in southeastern Europe. Now it shows five tiny states plus Kosovo as a UN protectorate. In three years, when a referendum is to take place in Serbia and Montenegro, the map will likely show a few more. Before 1990 citizens could travel around Yugoslavia the way one travels across state lines in the U.S. Now they have to pass ostentatious border posts and must have visas (which are not automatically granted), and they fear what may happen to them at the hands of the "others" who may hate or suspect them.

I have spent a lot of time comparing the past and the future of the former Yugoslavia. I concluded already in 1994 that "tragically the most promising option has been irretrievably lost. The best option for the South Slavic peoples and other minorities living among them was Yugoslavia—with all its flaws and blemishes." I suppose it is worth shedding a few tears when this tragic reality is confirmed finally and juridically.