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“A dinosaur down but not out; Slobodan Milosevic, Serbia's president”

They don't make leaders like Slobodan Milosevic anymore. Square headed, chunky faced, narrow eyed, the Serbian president reads text speeches to rhythmically clapping crowds just like the old communist bosses who, elsewhere in Eastern Europe, have slunk into the woodwork. Serbia's entire apparatus, from Belgrade down to the tiniest village, is in his personal grip. He controls the media, runs a decrepit Marxist state economy and sets tanks on students as if there had never been free elections three months ago.

Milosevic is also a populist chieftain who has harnessed an explosion of nineteenth-century nationalist fervour, hatreds, resentments and paranoias, which have been smouldering for 45 years under communism. Ignoring the rest of Europe and blind to all logic, he is causing Yugoslavia to lurch from one contrived crisis to another as he tries to restore Serbia's dominance at the cost of destroying the federation and ruining Serbia.

In short, Milosevic is a dinosaur. And as is the way with dinosaurs, he is slowly being overtaken by reality. Inch by inch, as each of his manoeuvres rebounds on him, he is being forced into a corner. But anyone who expects a peaceful, happy end to Yugoslavia's present troubles should beware. A frightened, panicky, wounded dinosaur can be an extremely dangerous beast.

Five years ago few would have imagined that the dull apparatchik Slobodan Milosevic from Pozarevac, south of Belgrade, would become a nationalist hero. One of an army of Communist Party officials, he could as easily have been put in charge of a factory as of political indoctrination in the police force. But thanks to his protector Ivan Stambolic, the previous Serbian leader, Milosevic rose rapidly through the ranks from a director of Belgrade's main bank to the Communist Party chief of Belgrade and then - the plum job - of Serbia. In May 1989 he became the region's president.

A chance remark made in April 1987 transformed him instantly into the most popular communist leader Eastern Europe has seen. During a visit to Serbia's strife-ridden province of Kosovo, where the Serbian minority was protesting against its alleged ill-treatment by the Albanian majority, he broke the Communist Party's taboo on siding with nationalist grievances. He told the demonstrators: "No one will ever beat you again." Serbia was electrified, the rest of Yugoslavia appalled.

Seizing his chance, Milosevic organised "meetings", as he calls them, throughout Serbia, ostensibly to support the minority in Kosovo but in fact to overthrow all party leaders who opposed his extreme solutions to Serbia's problems. His juggernaut ploughed on to a climax in November 1988 when half a million people - out of a nation of nine million - converged on Belgrade to demand the arrest of Milosevic's chief remaining opponent, Azem Vlasi, the legal communist leader of the Kosovo Albanians. Vlasi was arrested the next day and charged with

counter-revolution. All resistance in Kosovo collapsed.

Milosevic was unstoppable. Party cells were cleared of anyone who opposed him. One by one the leaders of the provinces of Kosovo, Vojvodina and the separate republic of Montenegro were replaced by his hand-picked men. In March 1989 he crowned his efforts by abolishing the autonomy of Vojvodina and Kosovo - granted by President Tito precisely to diminish Serbia's power within Yugoslavia. Triumphantly, he proclaimed the reunification of Serbia.

The summer of 1989 was the peak of his success. On the six-hundredth anniversary of the battle of Kosovo - the most important date in Serbia's history, when its medieval empire was crushed by the invading forces of Islam - he returned to the scene like a conquering hero to claim, before an estimated million adoring followers, the glory of Serbia's rebirth.

He was doing and saying everything the Serbs wanted to hear and had missed since the communist takeover in 1945. He dropped the dry gobbledegook of his dreary predecessors for a grand oratorical style rich with allusions to Serbia's historic struggle for survival. He promised to restore national pride, to create a more tightly centralised Yugoslavia with Serbia once more in its rightful place as the dominant member. Serbians were intoxicated. Everyone, including most of the intelligentsia, adored him. For non-Serbs, inside and outside the republic, the atmosphere was terrifying.

Although an unreconstructed communist, his main instrument of power was not the secret police but the media. Journalists with "erroneous views" were purged and the Press and television turned into a slavish, ultra-nationalistic chorus, foaming with hatred against Albanians, Croats, Slovenes, the Vatican (Croatia is Catholic), "the hand of Islam" (the Albanians are Muslims) and the West. Since most Serbs have no access to any other television or newspapers, there was no antidote to the lies and misrepresentations: most people believed it all.

So it was no surprise when in Serbia's first free elections last December Milosevic and his party - by then unconvincingly repackaged as the Serbian Socialist Party - were swept back into power with three-quarters of the seats in parliament. Promises not to close down factories, and support from the myriad administrative officials and their families who owed them their jobs, helped.

Terrified by Serbia's apparent collective madness and the fear that the brutality in Kosovo could be turned against them, Slovenia and Croatia, the most northerly, most European and most affluent republics, began talking of secession. This fuelled Mr Milosevic's increasingly paranoid sense of encirclement and his determination to use violent means to stop the country's break-up.

After elections in these two republics brought non-communist, pro-Western governments to power, Milosevic encouraged the large Serbian minority living in Croatia to arm themselves and secede, evoking the terrible atrocities committed against them by Croatian fascists during the war. But his election success was also the beginning of a decline. People were noticeably growing poorer while he blocked the federal government's economic reform plan. Factories were not closed, but workers were often not paid for months.

Serbs began to turn against him. While their parents remained loyal, the children, mainly students, have revolted against the servile media that to them is an incarnation of the regime. The former idol was reviled as "Slobo-Saddam". On 9 March, with extraordinary brutality, he sent in riot police equipped with truncheons, tear-gas and armoured cars to break up a peaceful demonstration. Then he called in the army to patrol the streets with tanks. Two people died,

scores were beaten and hundreds of anti-communists all over Serbia were flung into jail. Four years after he had promised no one would beat them again, he himself caused it to happen.

Seemingly desperate, Milosevic attempted to destroy the federal presidency so as to induce the army to stage a military coup to bolster his regime. But the army, although deeply sympathetic to communist Serbia, has shown no inclination to fight a civil war on his behalf. The media on which he so heavily depends are becoming more objective, at least for the present, and independent TV and papers are making inroads. Inspired by the defiance of the students, Belgrade's once passive intellectuals signed a petition denouncing his "selfish greed for power which the Serbian people can no longer tolerate," and demanding his resignation. What will Slobodan Milosevic do now? He has no vision, no long-term strategy, much less the skill to achieve one. He has depended on sensational tactics, and these have failed him. The atmosphere of fear he deliberately generated has evaporated. He has made enemies of nearly all the other republics. The Yugoslavia he said he would strengthen is on the point of disintegration, and now he has split Serbia itself. To outsiders the situation is clear. "I think he is doomed," says one Western diplomat. "It may take two days, two weeks, two months or two years, but he has to go," says another.

But Milosevic, who is 49, is not a logical man, and the last people he listens to are those who disagree with him. He is intemperate, irrational, violent, intolerant and bitter. Some speak of mental instability and point to his family history: his father, an Orthodox priest, abandoned the family, disappeared and committed suicide. His mother, a fanatical communist and schoolteacher, killed herself, too. An uncle is said to have done the same. Milosevic's wife, Mirjana, a childhood sweetheart and professor of sociology, is an extremely powerful politician in the new hardline Communist Party that operates within the army under the protection of powerful generals. Her influence on him is such that some call her Lady Macbeth; others, Elena - a cruel reference to the Ceausescus.

But the couple have none of the opulent lifestyle of the Ceausescus. They lead a quiet, petit bourgeois life in a Belgrade suburb, rarely going out. There are no salty scandals. She has few, if any friends; in fact, she lives in an ivory tower, surrounded by non-entities, devoid of all contact with the people. He rarely appears in public, never speaks to journalists and is out of touch. He denounced the students as fascists, saying they were conspiring to bring Serbia to its knees.

It would be hard to get rid of Milosevic. His term of office runs until 1994 and only the Serbian people themselves can topple him - unless the army chooses to do so. With him still in power, the prospects of Serbia becoming a real democracy and Yugoslavia remaining united look bleak.

As pressure mounts for him to go, Milosevic could well become more irrational, desperate and dangerous. Rather than submit quietly to extinction, this dinosaur may well prefer to bring Yugoslavia down with him.