

Trade unions and the fall of Yugoslavia – the potential and the limitations

Abstract

This article reviews the experience of the dissolution of Yugoslavia from the perspective of trade union organisations and actors, both in Yugoslavia itself and the international confederations. The author played a leading role in many of the meetings arranged as a means of keeping dialogue alive between worker representatives, and offers a personal view of the conclusions and achievements. Trade union organisations might have been hostages to the forces that drove the war but the indefatigable efforts of the international confederations to establish a succession of forums, seminars and other platforms at which integration and co-operation might take place in an atmosphere of respect have greatly assisted a subsequent coming together among people who realised that they had not been at war with each other but among whom substantial suspicions and tensions remained. Solidarnost, a platform for trade union organisation, is a tribute to the strategy of the ETUC, and offers scope for a regional reconnection as well as the hope that trade unions might be part of the answer to the continuing problems caused by the war.

Keywords: trade unions, dissolution of Yugoslavia, war in Yugoslavia, European Commission, Dayton Agreement, dialogue, EU integration, regional co-operation, reform, modernisation, transition, trade union integration

At the start of the war – no chance of stopping it

In 2014, Europe will commemorate the outbreak of the First World War. This was the beginning of a disaster that ended, it is commonly thought, with the Second World War. The lesson learnt was European integration, a process that was, from the start, seen as a historical peace process. Subsequently, according to politics and to general public opinion, Europe has become a zone of peace and free from war.

Does this reflect the reality? It certainly does not. There was a war after the War: the one linked to the Yugoslavia that passed on in bloodshed and horror. Europe, proud of its peaceful restart after the defeat of Nazi-Fascism, has to revise its record as a zone of peace. Europe helped to end this war but it was incapable of stopping it at its outset. And the trade union movement in the region was part of the conflict.

The endeavour to keep together something that had already been shot to pieces by means of the Trade Unions of Yugoslavia (SSJ) had definitively failed by the time of its last congress in 1990. At this congress, an ‘All-Yugoslav’ president was, once again, chosen while the right of SSJ to represent union organisations from all the republics was supported but, in truth, reality very soon unmasked this right as mere fiction.

How profound were these breaks had already been shown at one internal conference of the presidents of all SSJ unions from the republics, held in 1991 in Brussels at the initiative of the European Trade Union Confederation. Twenty seven representatives from nine confederations took part in this conference. The problems started during the preparations for the meeting. The President of SSJ, Momo Čolaković, announced that his organisation would appoint the representatives of all SSJ members, even those from Croatia and Slovenia, republics which were already involved in armed conflicts. That approach was only partially successful. *De facto*, SSJ represented its members from Serbia and Montenegro and, to a limited degree, those of the trade unions of Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The conference was held at a time when the aggression of the Yugoslav army against Slovenia was already underway and the conflict with Croatia was beginning to develop. The former Deputy President of the Croatian SSSH confederation, Miljenko Cimeca, a Serb (who was later released from his duties because he was a Serb), wrote in reply on his invitation:

Unfortunately, we must inform you that the tragic events in Croatia can provoke a catastrophe with far-reaching consequences. It would be necessary for Europe to invest all its potential and mobilise all its mechanisms and institutions in order to contribute to overcoming the problems in Yugoslavia. During the past months, the European Union has expressed considerable reservations regarding the new Croatian government. The main concerns have been: deficient rule of law; lack of democracy; and problems concerning the rights of minorities.

The General Secretary of the Free Trade Unions of Slovenia, Rajko Lesjak, wrote in his reply to the invitation:

We sincerely let you know our conclusion: that we will take part in this dialogue, contributing in this way to the making of peace in Yugoslavia and to the reduction of the heavy economic and social consequences of the war in Croatia. ZSSS has started, in the meantime, with two activities: the collection of money for Croatian workers and their families; and with the signing of the declaration for peace, which we have sent to the trade unions of Austria, Italy and Hungary and to the ETUC.

The Yugoslav SSJ had formed an ethnic Serb union that operated in Krajina (part of Croatia). The President of this union wrote:

I ask you kindly to check that we can receive an official invitation for Brussels. In this our plea, we have the support of SSJ and of the Trade Unions of Serbia (SSS). We belong to the first and we are bound to the latter.

The Krajina unions had not been invited.

A special problem for SSJ was the invitation to the Independent Trade Unions of Kosovo (BSPK), formally multi-ethnic but *de facto* representing the Albanian majority. In compromise, the President of the Council of Trade Unions of Kosovo, Momir Popović, was invited as well as the BSPK. The Council was affiliated to SSJ and represented Serbian workers.

Beyond the actual, or former, member organisations of SSJ, new and alternative trade union centres had been invited: *Nezavisnost* (Serbia); *Neodvisnost* (Slovenia); and the Independent Trade Unions of Croatia.

That, finally, the spectrum of the trade union movement of the former Yugoslavia was represented was undoubtedly a success. But the meeting quickly reflected the ‘front lines’ and reached its limits. SSJ proved to be an instrument of Serb aspirations to hegemony. SSJ was no longer in the position of mediator. This was, of course, also due to the war with Slovenia and Croatia being underway.

The delegation of the Confederation of Bosnia-Herzegovina was present, with its President, Sulejman Hrle, and its General Secretary, Čedo Volaš, a Serb who, months later, left Sarajevo – precisely the day before the war started in BiH – for Banja Luka, where he served as the first President of the Serb Trade Union Confederation. Sulejman Hrle, in one of his interventions, proved to be very close to the future reality. He warned that, at the end, the war would spread to Bosnia-Herzegovina, the republic that was still able, in 1991, to keep ethnic pluralism alive.

The representatives of the new Serb union, *Nezavisnost* – founded in 1990 – had been in clear opposition to the nationalist policies of the Serbian Prime Minister, Slobodan Milošević, and openly condemned the aggression against Slovenia and Croatia. For that, they received, in the back stage of the conference, open threats that something might happen to them when they were back in Belgrade.

The Brussels conference came to an end without any major incident and with everyone speaking to everyone, but it became obvious that the objective of creating a ‘network for dialogue’ had failed. It was clear that the trade unions had been a part of the war scenario and that, trade union wise, Yugoslavia was over.

SSJ and its followers tried hard to keep the fiction alive. The Croatians and the Slovenians had already closed the Yugoslav chapter. Hrle from BiH was aware that the war would reach his republic and destroy ‘mini Yugoslavia’. The third component, the Kosovan BSPK, represented by Professor Gorani, a close companion of Ibrahim Rugova, president of the ‘parallel state’ of Kosovo and an opponent of armed confrontation, ultimately tried hard to draw attention to the situation in Kosovo, rightly fearing that the international focus would ignore the situation there and allow Milosevic to complete the Serb domination of Kosovo. BSPK was, at the time, already under a state of permanent repression by the Serb regime in Kosovo. Prior to the Brussels event, the ETUC, at an Executive meeting held in Geneva in early 1991, was already focused on the situation in Kosovo, where public services suffered from the mass dismissal of Albanian workers and employees as a consequence of the ‘takeover’ and the abandonment of Kosovo’s autonomy granted in the 1974 Yugoslav constitution.

Emilio Gabaglio, ETUC General Secretary, said in his conclusions:

The day will come when all of you will be together again as part of the European Union.

At the time, this message was received as purely utopian, but history proved that it was a realistic perspective, even though the way was paved with obstacles of all kinds.

In his address to the conference, the President of the European Commission, Jacques Delors, underlined the same spirit as Emilio Gabaglio:

The people of Yugoslavia will, in the future, be invited to participate fully in the building of a Europe of peace, justice and co-operation.

However, the European Union proved to be impotent and was not able to stop the war at the beginning; only at its bitter end. And the ETUC had to take note that the trade unions, while in general claiming peace, were, ultimately, hostages of the forces which drove the war.

The ETUC, in its assessment of the Brussels conference, called upon the trade unions to oppose the war and support a political solution through negotiations. The ETUC demanded that the peace conference in den Haag take on board a relevant social dimension, taking into account ILO principles and the European Social Charter. Special attention in the *communiqué* was paid to the situation in Kosovo, where disrespect for trade union and workers' rights, and human rights in general, was evident. The ETUC Executive declared its commitment to supporting further initiatives aimed at keeping the dialogue alive.

Dialogue and relations during the war

During 1992-1993, the ETUC participated in trade union congresses in Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia (*Nezavisnost*) and Montenegro, and established bilateral relations. Relations with SSJ and SSSS from Serbia, however, had been interrupted by the ETUC and its members other than the Greek GSEE. A mission had been sent to all the republics and entities in 1992, and reported back to the ETUC Executive.

In March 1994, for the first time since the beginning of the siege of the city of Sarajevo, a delegation of three representatives (a Bosnian (President Sulejman Hrle), a Serb and a Croat) from SSSBiH, based in Sarajevo, were able to leave the country and arrive in Brussels. They had been in total isolation and even telecommunications were difficult: they had to go to the presidency of the Republic, close to the trade union building, even to make or receive a call. The trade union building had been under fire, the windows were broken and the heating system was broken. Living conditions in general had been extremely difficult. To get fresh water, they had to go to the brewery. The main street was under sniper fire. Public transport was non-functional. To leave Sarajevo, the delegation had to pass through the famous tunnel close to the airport.

Arriving in Brussels, the ETUC organised a series of bilateral talks with ETUC affiliates ready to provide assistance and support. The delegation was received by the President of the European Commission, Jacques Delors. The ETUC, the ICFTU and the WCL agreed to hold a joint meeting of their respective executive committees – the first ever. On the way back to BiH, Sulejman Hrle was received by Pope John Paul II, which was an important signal addressed specifically to the Croats in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The visit of the BiH delegation to Brussels was a starting point for diverse activities of the ETUC aimed at maintaining relations and creating occasions for contact between the unions of a Yugoslavia which was fading away.

The Confederation of BiH (Sarajevo), SSSH and KNSH (Croatia), *Nezavisnost* (Serbia), ZSSS and *Neodvisnost* (Slovenia) were invited to integrate in the ETUC Fo-

rum for Co-operation and Integration, an informal contact point that had been set up as a first reaction of the ETUC to the fundamental changes taking place in Europe.

Promoting bilateral relations between ETUC affiliates and Yugoslav trade unions

In April 1994, at the invitation of the ETUC and in association with the ITUC and the WCL, a meeting between ETUC affiliates and all trade unions from Yugoslavia, except for SSS-Serbia and SSJ, both of which were aligned to the policies of Milosevic, took place. The aim of the meeting was to renew bilateral relations and to continue the relationships between the unions of the region since, at that point in the war, it was hardly possible to hold meetings in the region. A second seminar, on gender issues under the special conditions of transition in central and eastern Europe, was held in Luxembourg in the July.

Before that, however, a major event took place in Sarajevo on the occasion of 1st May, International Labour Day. The Confederation of BiH decided to organise, in a Sarajevo which was still under siege, a public rally under the slogan ‘For a just peace, democracy and human rights’. A delegation from Brussels, with the general secretaries of the ETUC, the ICFTU and the WCL, participated in and addressed the meeting which attracted 5 000 participants to the centre of Sarajevo. The ‘warlord’ Radovan Karadžić gave a special message the day before, warning that, if the meeting was held, the participants could come under attack. At that time, Sarajevo was surrounded by Serbian troops up on the hill and by snipers in the city: the main avenue connecting the old town and Novo Sarajevo was called ‘Snipers’ Alley’.

Hans Koschnick, EU administrator of the City of Mostar and a German former trade unionist, gave a speech in the city of Tuzla, at that time a symbol of peaceful cohabitation between Bosnians, Serbs and Croats.

The ETUC had provided recycled paper so that the Confederation could print its newspaper. The May edition was the only one. After that, it exchanged the rest of the recycled paper for heating materials; it was extremely cold in winter and hard to maintain activities in the trade union building without a minimum level of heating.

More than anything else, the manifestation was a message to the outside world and to those who kept Sarajevo under fire.

Democracy – a precondition for a lasting peace

A significant event took place in Budapest in September 1994 at the initiative of the ETUC and in co-operation with the Hungarian affiliates, the German Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and the European Commission under the title ‘Democracy – a precondition for a lasting peace’. This was attended by a large number of ETUC affiliates and not-yet-affiliated partners from eastern and central Europe, as well as representatives of the two international organisations. This was the first time that trade unions from central and eastern Europe were able to participate in such an event. The basic document for the conference was the report of Tadeusz Mazowiecki, on behalf of the United Nations. Sulejman Hrle, President of the BiH confederation, was, at the beginning, very reluctant to come into contact with a Serb trade unionist. But finally he understood that Branislav Čanak, President of Belgrade-based *Nezavisnost*, was clearly and openly on

the side of those who had been aggressed against. This was the beginning of a long-lasting and respectful relationship between the two leaders.

Later that year, in the December, journalists from Sarajevo joined a meeting organised for fellow professionals in central and eastern Europe in Luxembourg, offering them the possibility to present detailed information about the situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

1995: 'Trade union bridge in Mostar'

Early in 1995, after an information-gathering visit to Sarajevo to identify the needs and conditions for a substantial support programme, a representative of the ETUC secretariat undertook a visit to Mostar, split into two because of the war and largely destroyed. The bitterest destruction was that of the legendary bridge, a symbol of the link between the people of Yugoslavia. Trade unionists from both sides were able to meet for the first time since the outbreak of the war. It was a meeting full of emotion between men and women who had not been at war with each other one single day. When one of the Croat trade unionists walked along the main street in eastern Mostar, she was greeted and embraced. The discussion took place in the old trade union building, where needs for help and action were articulated.

The major result ultimately was the establishment of a project 'Trade Union Bridge in Mostar', developed in very close co-operation with the EU Administrator, Hans Koschnick, who was in charge of the reconstruction and reconciliation process in Mostar. Koschnick, a high-profile politician in Germany as well as a former trade unionist, was twice the target of Croatian extremists. In 1994, his office was destroyed; and in 1996 he was attacked in the street and only barely escaped. Koschnick was very open to co-operation and understood that the trade union initiative – the first of this type in Mostar – could be an important element of his efforts to appease and to construct new relations. Croatian extremists who opposed a common state of Bosnia-Herzegovina continually tried to undermine and to control the trade unions, especially in the rather important aluminium plant. In that environment, the ETUC project, funded both from its own means and, substantially, by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, was the right thing to do at the right time. The ETUC opened a contact point (on Marshal Tito Street) and obtained significant support from the French CFDT, the Italian CGIL and CISL, from the DGB and the Belgian FGTB.

The project started on 1st May with a (modest) celebration at the headquarters of the Koschnick mission, which was located in a hotel in the centre of town (east Mostar). However, it was an event which was under scrutiny, especially from the Croatian side. The badge produced for the occasion had the inscription of 1st May in the until-then common language of Yugoslavia. In the meantime, however, Croatian nationalists had already started to clean up the language and – unfortunately – the transcription of '1st May' did not fit in. Anyway, it was too late to change it.

In the same year, and again in Mostar, a seminar brought together branches and sectoral trade unions from BiH, while their counterparts from Belgium (FGTB) and Germany (DGB) contributed to the project. The project was supervised and organised by a 'troika', consisting of a German co-ordinator and two counterparts from western and eastern Mostar, over a period of two years. The project suffered from the very

beginning as a result of the opposition of hard-liners from the Croat side fighting for a special Croat entity (the Republic of Herceg-Bosna) and consequently hostile to any policy focusing on a new re-integration. This position did not extend to the trade unions – with the exception of some hard-liners – so that, with the support of the Croat Trade Union Confederation, SSSH, the project was able to be realised.

After the war – based on the Dayton Agreement, signed by Tuđman and Milošević under strong international pressure – Mostar was fully integrated in the new state of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Meeting with Jacques Delors and Tadeusz Mazowiecki

Trade unions from the region, other than SSS and SSSJ, had been invited to attend the ETUC Congress held in May 1995 in Brussels. During the Congress, they had the occasion to meet, over several hours, the President of the European Commission and the former Polish Prime Minister, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, now Special Rapporteur on behalf of the United Nations. This again offered them the possibility to present their suffering, their concern and their hopes. But, at that time, Europe and the UN were not in a position to bring peace in the place of war. Milošević was still in place and deals between him and Croat President Tuđman had been in the making. Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo were then at the heart of the crisis.

After Dayton: establishing new relations and promoting dialogue

The very complex Dayton Agreement (21 November 1995), intended to establish peace and to set up a new architecture for the state of Bosnia-Herzegovina, brought a lot of hope but proved ultimately to bring nothing more than a precarious and unstable interim solution. The main objective of the agreement was to preserve the state of Bosnia-Herzegovina and to find a new formula allowing for the co-existence of the three ‘ethnic groups’. The agreement was, and still is, far from perfect. However, in its initial phase it brought a pacification and opened the door to new arrangements. The main problem remains in existence: the state of Bosnia-Herzegovina, composed of the Federation of BiH (Sarajevo), Republika Srpska (Banja Luka) and the very special entity of Brčko, has a very low level of competences (mainly in the fields of foreign policy, security and currency). And those political fields that are at the centre of trade union policies fall, up to now, within the competences of the entities: social policy; labour legislation; and social dialogue.

Some practical steps at the beginning helped to re-establish the relationships between trade unionists. This was all but easy. Even after Dayton, people from both entities could not travel easily because of worries about their security. Serbs from Sarajevo travelled by bus from their side of the city (after Dayton, a part of Republika Srpska) while the Bosnians came from their central bus station. To approach normality, neutral car plates had been introduced which did not allow the identification of the local origin of the car driver.

The ETUC was focused on two main issues: to help trade unions reconstruct their organisation; and to establish new relationships between each other. Initial meetings took place immediately after the signature in Dayton, at de Haan on the Belgian coast

and in Brussels, bringing together all the partners of the ETUC in former Yugoslavia. These meetings, which included contact with the European Commission at a high level, and, of course, co-ordinating meetings with the ICFTU and the WCL, allowed the establishment of a support and co-operation programme.

The focus was, for a specific reason, placed on Bosnia-Herzegovina. The first point on the agenda was the renewal of the relationship between the confederations of the two regional entities. Jean Lapeyre, Deputy General Secretary of the ETUC, gave a speech in Sarajevo while the author of this article went to Banja Luka. A first meeting between the two organisations had been held, even before Dayton, in Sofia (in March 1996) with the support of the two Bulgarian affiliates, Podkrepa and CITUB, in the presence of ETUC General Secretary, Emilio Gabaglio. The atmosphere was more than frosty, and the meeting started with controversies. But, slowly, dialogue started and *détente* emerged in the evening around the table. The same year, follow-up meetings were held in Luxembourg and in Trier (Germany).

A significant episode occurred in Trier. A meal had been arranged in a fish restaurant in which diners could get their own trout out of a pond. Two teams, one from Sarajevo and one from Banja Luka, were formed for a peaceful competition. At the end, Banja Luka was ahead with eight trout to seven, and the winners were very happy until the ETUC co-ordinator of the meeting announced the result, saying: 'We got fifteen trout'.

At the invitation of the ETUC, several affiliates (from France, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark, Italy and Belgium) came to Sarajevo to take first-hand information on the situation and to mobilise material support for unions in the Bosnian part of BiH. The delegations arrived by plane but had to return by bus to Zagreb because the airport was closed as a result of the weather conditions. On the way back, the bus passed through the destroyed part of eastern Mostar. After having seen Sarajevo largely in ruins, Mostar on the way back probably provided an additional motivation for assistance. The financial result of that meeting was considerable.

Step-by-step, the protagonists returned to normal, but still tense, relations. The President of the Banja Luka-based confederation, Čedo Volaš, arrived in Sarajevo, accompanied by the ETUC co-ordinator in a car belonging to the EU mission. The staff of the Sarajevo-based union waited for him at the front of the *Dom Sindikata* and gave him a warm welcome, which he had not really expected, before bringing him to his old office (he was General Secretary of the BiH Confederation before the war).

From here on, relations did restart. However, politics and the minutiae of the Dayton Agreement made life difficult. The lack of central state competences in regard to social policies and legislation does not encourage trade union co-operation. Furthermore, looking closely, it has to be stated that the two confederations are not really devoted to a common state with a normal, and full, range of competences.

In June 1996, delegations of the two unions of BiH came to Brussels at the invitation of the ETUC to discuss the consequences of the Dayton Agreement. After discussion, a joint declaration was proposed by Emilio Gabaglio. The declaration recognised that:

The Dayton Agreement is the real basis for peace, democratic development and economic and social reconstruction The war has left wounds which will take time to heal. Trust is something

which cannot be decreed. The first step in overcoming the barriers which the war has created is to co-operate on a democratic basis. We are ready to engage in such cooperation... We call on all workers to join us in the transposition of the Dayton Agreement and the construction of a democratic, social and progressive society based on European and international standards.

The general introduction was completed by concrete demands, such as:

- the immediate lifting of the war legislation
- the right of trade unions to be actively involved in all phases of decisions
- the active involvement of trade unions in the ongoing transformation of state and public property
- special measures and social protection for the victims of the war
- the ratification of all international conventions on work and trade unions
- the return of all workers to the jobs which they lost illegally.

Finally, the European Union and the High Representative, Carl Bildt, were asked to consult and involve the trade unions in the reconstruction process.

Reality proved that all this was, with minor exceptions, a trade union wish list.

KSBiH: One confederation for Bosnia-Herzegovina

The ETUC made it clear that it can only affiliate national trade union confederations, not regional ones. According to the Dayton structure, the Federation of BiH and Republika Srpska are regional state bodies so neither of the two unions was eligible for ETUC membership. Both unions finally agreed to find a way out by setting up a Confederation of Trade Unions of Bosnia-Herzegovina, composed of the union centres of the Federation, Republika Srpska and the City of Brčko. The ETUC, as well as the representative of the American Solidarity Center, Donald Spatz, assisted in the process of building a common confederation.

It was evident from the very beginning that this exercise was more due to the ‘friendly pressure’ of the ETUC than to the commitment of some of those concerned. The Banja Luka-based union could not easily escape from the mainstream of local politics, which remains to these days somewhat hostile to any strengthening of the common state. Nevertheless, KSBiH (the Council of Independent Trade Unions of Bosnia and Herzegovina) was founded at the end of September 1997, with its first congress in Sarajevo. In its preamble, it says:

The Council... is a unique, non-governmental, non-partisan, independent, multi-ethnic and multi-national organisation... in which independent union branches from the region of Bosnia and Herzegovina voluntarily participate to express... the economic, social and legal interests of its members.

This was followed by fully-fledged statutes regulating in detail all the organisation’s structures at the global, sectoral and local level and empowering the confederation to negotiate and represent the unions in regard to the public authorities. These also stipulated that a congress should be held four-yearly. It was agreed to rotate the presidency of KSBiH between SSSBiH and SSRS.

So far, so good. KSBiH is affiliated as such to the ITUC and to the ETUC (where it has observer status). On the ground, KSBiH is functioning poorly, but it has the merit that it exists in a country that is divided, where the central state is still suffering from the Dayton structure and where the political class is not able to change things for the better. If one compares the trade union agenda of the two main stakeholders, there are no major differences and relations are as normal as they can be in such abnormal conditions. At international and European level, they act jointly, mostly as representatives of KSBiH. The ICFTU office in Sarajevo (now the regional office of ITUC-PERC, the Pan-European Regional Council) has offered significant levels of support.

However, things are still fragile. The European trade union federations (ETUC members) and the global unions (associated with the ITUC) have affiliated the respective regional branch unions from SSSBiH and SSRS, and have not followed the strategy of the ETUC and the ITUC. Further positive developments in regard to trade union integration in Bosnia-Herzegovina can only be expected if there is progress in the further state institution building process. It would be unfair to put the responsibility for the *status quo* on the shoulders of the trade unions.

Serbia: trade unions at the heart of the conflict

The trade unions of the dissolved Yugoslavian republics had been taken in by the logic of war. The main protagonists at the beginning, Croatian President Tudman and Serbian President Milošević, had been everything but carriers of hope of democratic development, the only way out of the logic of war. The Bosnian movie director, Emir Kusturica (*Underground*) brought it to the point:

Sometimes, I wonder: Tito is not dead at all. He is living in a double embodiment. The one has the face of a cunning fox by the name of Milošević... and the other is the caricature of a Latin-American junta general, named Tudman.

This is probably rather unfair to Tito who has on his historical record, and to his credit, that he kept Yugoslavia together; but it is certainly correct with regard to the two others.

Under Tudman and Milošević, neither the Serbian nor even Croatian society underwent real changes to democracy; at best, they experienced a kind of timid transition to a formal pluralism. Both regimes used the war to extend their power by practising subtle repression. Their main tool was propaganda through a mass media that remained fully under control. People were ceaselessly flooded with nationalist folklore (labelled by the youth as ‘turbo-folk’). In Croatia, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, a high quality opposition daily, was bought and put in line with the regime’s communication policy. In Serbia, the former central organ of the League of Communists, *Borba*, which was not at all in line with the regime and was indeed ‘anti-war’, was taken over in a very specific way: its editorial staff was fired and, in a very practical approach, the Minister of Information had himself appointed as editor-in-chief.

Of course, the trade unions in Croatia and Serbia (except the Serbian SSS, at that time clearly Milošević’s transmission belt) also suffered from this situation. Indeed, the Croatian SSSH, the most representative confederation, tried to bypass the commu-

nications embargo of the controlled media with paid TV adverts and even considered taking a share in a private channel.

In Serbia, the alternative *Nezavisnost* confederation (*Independence*) had been initiated by journalists (its President, Branislav Čanak, was a prominent correspondent of Yugoslav Radio and Television before the regime change) and became rapidly an important centre for civil society organisations in opposition to the regime. *Nezavisnost* founded a monthly ‘Workers’ Bulletin’ and offered support to the dismissed *Borba* journalists, who had founded *Naša Borba* (*Our Struggle*), lodging them in the rather limited space of the headquarters of *Nezavisnost*.

SSS, in line with Milošević, focused on ‘humanitarian help’ and distributed basic goods (provided by the regime) to its members, in order to keep them and to cut the grass from under the feet of the new alternative union. In its policy response, *Nezavisnost* combined an anti-war position with social demands. One of the consequences was that many of its members were fired (the management of still state-owned or even private companies were under the control of the regime) or otherwise received urgent draft calls to join the army. Meanwhile, the media denounced them as ‘traitors’ and ‘foreign agents’ (*Nezavisnost* received significant support from the American Solidarity Center, the ETUC and some of its affiliates).

At branch level, numerous company trade unions were created by workers who left SSS but did not join *Nezavisnost*, fearing being branded.

SSS was, in that period, rather isolated internationally and got back on its feet only years after the dismissal of Milošević.

Things have changed since then. *Nezavisnost* has become, in the meantime, a long-standing member of the ITUC and the ETUC (according to its statutes, the ETUC only affiliates unions from EU member states (or candidate countries) or from the European Free Trade Area; unions from potential candidate countries may obtain observer status. SSS had been affiliated to the World Confederation of Labour (WCL) and – after the merger of WCL and ICFTU – automatically became a member of the ITUC. The ETUC affiliated SSS only in 2002.

The relationship between the major two Serbian unions changed mainly as a result of the perspective of EU integration and have, surprisingly, been improving since 2013. A joint commission on EU integration has been established and will start to operate, in parallel with the negotiations between Serbia and the EU, in February 2014. In addition to that, the two unions continually try to reach common positions in regard to legal projects, such as the labour legislation. A new dynamic of co-operation could be an important contribution in overcoming the dramatic segmentation of the Serbian trade union landscape, which remains a major obstacle to the efficient representation of workers’ interests while, at the same time, being a tool in the hand of the government to keep the quality of social dialogue at a very low level.

The result of the war and the Milošević regime is that the reform of SSS, the traditional Serbian trade union organisation, is actually not even in the making. Meanwhile, *Nezavisnost* has suffered from diverse splits. The Serbian trade union movement is, by and large, the most divided in south-eastern Europe. However, through a further developed co-operation between the two major forces, there is a realistic prospect for a renewed trade union movement in Serbia. If not, workers’ economic and social in-

terests will be without relevant advocacy in the forthcoming years on Serbia's way to the European Union.

Kosovo – the other war

In March 1991, the ETUC had sent a mission to Belgrade and, after that, to Zagreb and to Ljubljana. The mission report contains relevant information as regards the socio-political and trade union situations. However, one aspect was not addressed: the situation in Kosovo.

That same year, on behalf of the German DGB and co-ordinated with the ITUC, the author went to Kosovo to meet BSPK, a new confederation organising only Albanian workers in practice even though, theoretically, it was open to the other nationalities present in the province. Serbian workers had been organised in a regional structure affiliated to the central organisation in Belgrade ever since Kosovo, under the Milošević constitution which replaced the former 1974 constitution, had lost its autonomy becoming an integral part of Serbia.

The repression of the Serbian police regime against what was, at that time, a peaceful movement for independence, led by Ibrahim Rugova, was outrageous. BSPK was under permanent pressure. Its headquarters, a poor barracks, was regularly 'visited' by the police and documents, typewriters and computers were systematically taken away.

The ETUC and some of its affiliates started co-operation, recognising BSPK as such without taking a stand in the 'national question' and continuing to hope that a peaceful solution could be found through the democratisation of Serbia.

The Milošević regime – in the shadow of the war over Bosnia-Herzegovina – increased the oppression, forcing thousands of Kosovars to leave their homes and flee abroad, to Macedonia and to Albania but also to western Europe. The conflict gained a military dimension and nothing could apparently stop the Milošević fury. The period of peaceful resistance was over. A new war started and all external interventions to find a solution failed.

The ETUC took, at the end, a position in favour of military intervention.

This position was confirmed in an *ad hoc* emergency meeting in Brussels on 8 April 1999, convening a large number of affiliated organisations:

Military intervention has been rendered inevitable in the light of the repressive action of the Belgrade regime against the Kosovar people now escalated into an ethnic cleansing strategy.

The meeting addressed a message to the European Council, urging the EU to 'Take the lead in the process of finding a solution.'

The resolution says:

The first condition for a political solution has to be delivered by the authorities of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Yugoslav military and police forces and paramilitary gangs must be withdrawn from the province of Kosovo and be replaced by an international peace-keeping force including Russia... In the light of such an agreement, NATO intervention must be immediately suspended.

The author was despatched to Belgrade where he tried to explain the position to Serbian trade unionists. That was all but easy.

The ETUC installed contact points in Tiranë for BSPK trade unionists that had to leave the country, with the help of CCM-Macedonia in Skopje. Another contact point was established in Brussels with a French trade unionist who was of Kosovar origin.

Solidarnost – a regional platform of trade union co-operation

Even in the hardest times of the war and the fall of Yugoslavia, contacts and relations – even though in some cases hostile and unfriendly – had not been completely on hold. In that respect, the ‘keep-the-dialogue-going’ policy of the ETUC was certainly useful and, ultimately, paid off.

The regional office of the German Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, in which the German DGB is an important stakeholder, has focused on the promotion of regional co-operation at the level of the confederation as well as that of branches and sectors.

Ultimately, this was the prerequisite for an initiative to form *Solidarnost*, envisaged as a platform for regional trade union co-operation. All ETUC affiliates and observers of the new states emerging from Yugoslavia were invited to join and sign an agreement of co-operation, focusing on the ‘hard core’ agenda of trade union policies. The only exceptions were BSPK from Kosovo (which had been invited and showed interest but ultimately declined participation, probably due to the high tension in relations between Belgrade and Prishtinë) and the Croatian NHS (whose statutes exclude any participation in a ‘neo-Yugoslav’ exercise). A high level of information exchange and the practical experience from years before the decision to set up a structured form of co-operation had demonstrated the need to formalise relations. The main issues on the *Solidarnost* agenda are linked to the transition process and to European integration, both important challenges for all unions in the region although the European perspective is still far off for some.

The functioning of *Solidarnost* is based on a light structure and on the rotation of the co-ordinating confederation, with two plenaries per year focusing on specific themes. A major project on EU integration, in co-operation with the ETUC, was started in 2013. The objective is network building as regards labour legislation, social security policies, the economy and the single market, and health and safety within the framework of *Solidarnost*. BSPK has been included in this project. The central axis of the project is the transfer of the recent experiences with EU integration of the Slovene and Croatian unions.

Regional reconnection

Sometimes, unions are latecomers. In this specific case, however, they were front-runners. At the political level, progress in this respect can be noted over the last couple of months. Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina are actually considering creating joint embassies, certainly primarily for financial reasons (mainly to secure consular representation) but also as an important sign of the ongoing *détente*. Regional reconnection is a new paradigm. A paper prepared by the Sarajevo-based Foreign Policy Initiative BH, says:

A large number of regional initiatives might have initially been enforced by the EU but, as time passed, quality has emerged from quantity. The concept of European regionalism was developed at the time of the blood count in the Balkans. However, regionalism is now moving to the Balkans, where it has imposed itself as a new doctrine.

More and more bilateral meetings are taking place. Regional co-operation including, in part, Albania and Turkey, has become an integral part of foreign policies. The end of 2013 saw the first joint session of the Serbian and BiH government take place, while another one, between the Croatian and the Serbian governments, is in preparation.

Regional reconnection and the (still long) path to the European Union finally confirm what ETUC General Secretary Emilio Gabaglio said in the 1991 conference, at which all trade unions from former Yugoslavia were present:

The day will come when you will be together again. In the European Union.

In 1991, this was a very risky prognosis and received as a pure utopia. Now, it seems that it is becoming a reality. Step-by-step.

The foundation of *Solidarnost* was, in the beginning, harshly criticised by some who thought that such a step should have been the subject of consultation. Those critics ignored that that this foundation is one important part of the answer to the war that is now in the past but whose effects are still in the present. It was, we hope, the last war in Europe.

What is urgent now?

Before the war, bilateral relations between ETUC and ICFTU affiliates with the central trade union organisation were intensive and widespread. During the war, European affiliates were able to mobilise significant levels of support for trade unions and workers suffering across the whole region, mostly in Bosnia-Herzegovina and in Kosovo.

However, after the war, relations dropped and, up to now, exist at best at a 'protocol' level. Both sides – with notable exceptions, mainly at the branch level – are obviously not aware that 'normal' bilateral working relationships and exchanges have been a driving force in the process of European trade union integration and could help to develop trade unionism in former Yugoslavia. The interruption of relationships must be ended. Most unions in the region are falling behind in regard to reform, modernisation and leadership 'refreshment'. Too many unions – too many leaders.

The already-quoted paper on regional reconnection says, in its summarising chapter:

The Balkans are getting connected. This is a fact which can hardly be disputed. One could discuss how long the process will take, how deep and how far it will go, and what sort of obstacles it will come across, but there is no doubt whatsoever that it is already well underway. Strong regional economic interdependence, common cultural identity and uniform social fabric have turned out to be stronger than the numerous disaster scenarios that have been long been subscribed to the Balkans. It has certainly helped to have a common EU perspective.