

A NEW CONSTITUTION

On 19 July I called a meeting of the Presidency to discuss an initiative for the drafting of a new federal Constitution. Clearly this would be a huge task. We would have to resolve many vexed questions within the federation before a new Constitution could be passed. For me this meant the Constitution would have to enshrine the basic orientations I had advocated within the Presidency: establishing a democratic multiparty political system and a market economy, consolidating the rule of law, ensuring the protection of human rights and – no easy task – settling, or establishing a new basis for, relations between the nations or republics. Clearly, the new Constitution would come, if at all, at the end, once the main crisis was over. Yet a start had to be made to the process. The existing Constitution was out of date. Reality had overtaken it, with the result that further political democratisation and free-market reform would become constitutionally or legally questionable unless a new Constitution appeared soon. But much would have to be settled: the Kosovo question and the degree of political centralisation or decentralisation within the federation. Opinions on these issues were diametrically opposed. Yet the democratic processes

would proceed more smoothly – they would be easier to defend – if they were set out at least in constitutional intent, if not yet in the actual Constitution.

SPEECH TO THE NEW JNA OFFICERS

A fresh test awaited me on 22 July. This was the passing-out day for new officers at the JNA Academy, and a major ceremony traditionally addressed by the President of the Federal Presidency. That now meant me. I felt there were a number of formidable circumstances. I was due to speak at a major military ceremony, outdoors, in Belgrade, attended not only by huge numbers of JNA officers but also by the entire diplomatic corps including all the military attaches, the parents of every new officer, in short, a sizeable gathering of people. The whole thing was to be broadcast live on all of Yugoslavia's television stations. My relationship towards the military had always been somewhat awkward and distanced. There was much scrutiny and examination on both sides. The JNA had come in for severe criticism in Slovenia in the preceding years. There was conflict with the Slovene political leadership, and with the media, over the notorious "Gang of Four" trial. The JNA had a very bad press in Slovenia. I was in a peculiar position inasmuch as I had never performed military service. Consequently, the first time I had anything to do with the Army was when I was made its commander-in-chief. No one had ever put this question to me. It was

universally assumed that I had been in the military. When asked at a press conference what rank I had held, I replied none. It was assumed that I had been a common soldier. But I hadn't even been that. I was exempted from military service on the grounds of poor eyesight. I am sure the generals knew the commander-in-chief of the JNA was an absolute civilian, but they never mentioned the fact or used it against me. In various interviews and media appearances, including during the run-up to the elections, I was rather tight-lipped when it came to the JNA, maintaining a neutral stance. I firmly believed the JNA should play a neutral role and should not be a political force. I advocated the rationalisation of the military. I made no statements that would lead directly to a confrontation with the JNA or imply criticism of it, let alone call for its actual abolition, as some extreme viewpoints in Slovenia suggested. During the election campaign I had already thought about how to respond to questions about the JNA and concluded that it would be most unwise to attack or criticise it. What would I gain from that? What would Slovenia gain? The most prudent option would be to win the military over and pursue democratic and free-market reforms and integration with Europe. And in such a way that the Army would be neutralised and serve the sole purpose of defending the state, rather than acting as a political force in support of this or that set of changes or as an obstacle to change. I therefore based my relationship with the generals on correct conduct, and on that basis we even exchanged quite contrary opinions and stances at times. Yet this never developed into irrational argument or intolerance. I had the feeling that the generals too were seeking a way out of the situation, an exit from the crisis. They would have settled for the prospect of retaining their status, ranks and duties while the state forged ahead with its development. Certainly there was an ever-present awareness, especially in Slovenia, that the Army had real power and was even capable of mounting a coup and forcibly putting a stop to any changes within the federation. No one believed this could succeed in the long run, although a coup might have meant it would be some years before the situation returned to normal. Such were the thoughts on my mind in the week leading up to Saturday 22 July as I prepared for my address. I shuddered when I read the speech written by the military bureau. The Federal President had a military bureau responsible for all the duties and preparations to do with the office

of commander-in-chief. It was headed by a lieutenant-general. The bureau had come up with a speech that had been approved by the military leadership under General Kadijević. The speech, already brushed up, reworked and given the seal of approval, arrived on my desk some five days before the event. I told the head of the bureau I would rather resign than read this. It was clichéd and full of outdated phrases. It was stiffly written and somehow reflected everything the JNA represented to one section of the public – a hidebound, antiquated organism that was heavily indoctrinated and seriously adrift from the other processes of democratic reform in the country. What was I to do? To refuse the engagement and fail to make the ceremonial speech would have caused a major scandal. I would have to have a very good reason. It would incur the grave displeasure of the Army and the whole matter would be further blown up by the media. On the other hand, if I were to read a speech like the one the military bureau had prepared I would not have been able to look the voters of Slovenia in the face. I searched for a way out. For those few days, during which I had a fair number of other duties, I agonised over the problem, shedding three kilos in the process. I then thoroughly revised the speech. I rewrote it and kept only two or three sentences of the original. I then reviewed both texts. I decided to appear at the ceremony and speak, but in my own words. It was a speech in my own style. In it I spoke of the political and economic crisis in Yugoslavia and the need for economic and political reform, even mentioning political pluralism. I spoke of the need to associate with Europe, of the protection of human rights and of the rule of law. To broach such subjects at a large, traditional military occasion was a true act of defiance. However, I cast the Army in a positive role, as the guarantor of the necessary changes within the federation. In some sense I confronted the existing doctrine of self-management socialism, which along with the Party was deeply entrenched in the Army, with an entirely new conception.

I also spoke of the need to reduce tensions between the peoples of the federation, and of tolerance and reason. The night before Saturday 22 July, I slept poorly. I felt unwell and I think I must have had a fever. In the morning General Kadijević arrived at my residence in order for the two of us to leave for the ceremony together. We had coffee and exchanged a few pleasantries. I told him nothing

about my new speech. Everyone had already assembled on the ceremonial stage. The event had been planned with full military pomp, with an inspection of a guard of honour and all kinds of salutes. I was none too sure whether I would carry it off. But a moment before I began to speak I became entirely calm, as if suddenly infused by some ambient energy. Once I started speaking, everything clicked. I believe I delivered the speech quite effectively, forcefully. I sensed the growing nervousness among the generals behind me. We were stood on a kind of high pedestal. Below us were row upon row of officers and soldiers, with a crowd of others behind them. Watching the television coverage afterwards I saw the generals swap looks as I began a speech that was quite different from the one that had been planned. But I carried it off effectively. It was followed by polite applause of medium duration, after which the military ceremonies continued. An informal reception with the generals of the JNA leadership had been arranged for after the ceremony. They were visibly relieved. It seemed to me they had initially expected something even worse. I knew it was a good speech, perhaps even a very good one in the circumstances. It was fairly revolutionary and was balanced by those few words of praise for the JNA. A number of journalists attended the ceremony and the reception. A woman journalist from Serbia asked me where I had done my military service. Somehow I managed to dodge the question and change the subject, so that it still did not become generally known that the commander-in-chief of the JNA had not had the slightest military experience before coming to office. The event as a whole, including my speech, attracted a good deal of media attention throughout Yugoslavia. The speech was generally broadcast or reproduced in full, with different excerpts being highlighted in different sections of the media or in different republics. Interestingly, it received the least attention in Slovenia, where, for example, the main newspaper did not even publish it. There were no extracts, just a brief note that a ceremony had been held and that I had given a speech. In all the other republics it was front-page news. I think it was one of the hardest yet most successful speeches I have ever made. The speech was a rather typical example of the way I operated in the prevailing circumstances. I was alone, albeit in the highest office. How could I change things without some kind of organisation or movement

behind me? What I was offering was a kind of mixture of bold substantive changes and acceptable ways out for those whom such changes would inconvenience or offend the most. And yet I often had the feeling that I was treading a fine line, or rather, a tightrope.