

ATTEMPTED JNA INTERVENTION IN CROATIA, JANUARY 1991

Towards the end of 1990 and at the beginning of 1991 there was a great deal happening. The situation was becoming increasingly complicated. Incidents were occurring here and there in Croatia, especially in the Knin Krajina. Slovenia held a plebiscite; the Croatian parliament voted for independence. The Knin Krajina declared autonomy. Then there was a famous incident which became known as the Serbian "monetary invasion". Serbia "printed" around one and a half billion dollars worth of money for its own requirements, in flagrant violation of the monetary regulations and laws. This caused great alarm among the non-Serb public in Yugoslavia, especially in Slovenia. I think it was one of the factors which, combined with the earlier Serbian blockade against the sale of Slovene products on the Serbian market, further convinced the Slovene public that this country was a lost cause. With the events in Kosovo and the increasingly strained relations between Serbs and Croats, particularly in Krajina, and with these economic events, when it was becoming clear that there was no longer any hope for Yugoslavia's economic programme, the last doubts fell away, the last hope that Yugoslavia could be consolidated on the modern principles of a market democracy. The

whole time the question of how it would all unfold hung in the air, where and how the crisis would decisively erupt. Of course, the question of the JNA's role was ever present. The Yugoslav Presidency dealt with this issue while I was still a member. It was a matter of carrying through the decision taken at the plebiscite in a peaceful manner, by agreement, and avoiding military intervention and conflict. This question crystallised at the end of 1990 and broke out in full in January 1991. On 11 December 1990 the Ministry of Defence prepared a special report for the Presidency on the illegal acquisition of arms in Yugoslavia and on paramilitary formations, particularly in Croatia. The information was startling. The report spoke of extensive illegal procurement of arms, including the fact that the Krajina Serbs were arming themselves illegally, and that the HDZ (Croatian Democratic Union – the dominant political party in Croatia) was setting up an illegal army. The report said that while Slovenia was not setting up such paramilitary formations, it was acquiring military equipment. The difference was that Slovenia had retained some of the Territorial Defence's weapons while the Croatian Territorial Defence had been completely disarmed in May 1990. But the report focused on Croatia, and partly also on Kosovo. It was clear that Croatia was the main concern and that any measures to be carried out by the Army, if it had the approval of the Presidency, would be directed primarily against Croatia. The report was also accompanied by a proposal for a decree authorising the JNA to disarm all illegal formations. A ten-day ultimatum should be set, during which time everyone should voluntarily hand in their weapons, on which there would be an amnesty. If this did not happen, the JNA would disarm everyone who had not handed in their weapons and they would then be held criminally liable. Even at first glance I could see this was an extremely significant decree and that, in fact, it was what we had all been waiting for: the reaction of the JNA to all these events taking place in Yugoslavia. In December we had managed to postpone the debate on this point with various excuses and the absence of certain members of the Presidency; Tupurkovski, in particular, was always absent. And the pressure from the JNA and the Serbian bloc in the Presidency to have it all sorted out in December had not been that strong. They agreed relatively easily on a postponement until January 1991. They were probably waiting to see how things would unfold and for the picture to finally take shape – the outcome of the

Slovene plebiscite and the Croatian decision – before making their final decision on whether to go down the road of military intervention. If, for example, the plebiscite in Slovenia had not succeeded, the situation would have been entirely different. At the 9 January session of the Presidency we began by discussing the agenda: whether or not we should include this point. This time the Serbian section of the Presidency was adamant about it. So too was the JNA. Mesić and I tried to put it off, but this time without success. I cited a series of reasons and concentrated on the point that when it came to a matter of this nature we could not debate without the agreement of the Croatian leadership. Mesić backed me up on this. I insisted on finding a political solution to all the open questions and rejected the idea of the Presidency taking such an important decision without one last attempt to reach a political agreement. I also tried to get some other issue on the agenda, such as the Serbian monetary invasion. But the others rejected this. The discussion took the form of varying explanations of what came first, the chicken or the egg. The Serbs claimed that Slovenia and Croatia were destroying the constitutional system of Yugoslavia, the federation. I maintained that it was the Serbs who were destroying it, that they had begun to destroy it when they took away the autonomy of Kosovo, dissolved the Kosovo Assembly, and thereby changed the constitutional order of Yugoslavia. Arbitrarily. That they were destroying it through their blockade of Slovene products and that they had destroyed it with their illegal invasion of the monetary system. In this context, I maintained, the reactions of Slovenia and Croatia were entirely legitimate.

Even during the debate on the agenda there was an exchange of arguments. For instance, Jović had some figures at hand to show that the total foreign exchange reserves of Yugoslavia had fallen in the month of December from ten billion dollars to six billion, that the Slovenes had bought up 600 million dollars in foreign currency in one day, and so forth. But his argument that the Serbs had merely lent themselves money from the Yugoslav monetary system and would pay it back was just laughable. There was a majority in favour of keeping the report on paramilitary formations and a decree authorising their disarmament on the agenda. All the arguments which we had begun to exchange earlier were carried on into the debate itself. I persisted with my demand that

this question be solved politically and that the Croatian leadership be included in the debate. The next argument, which I built upon at this *and* subsequent sessions, was the question of the legality of such a decree. It would grant to the JNA powers that also belonged to the police: to disarm and to uncover weapons. I maintained that this would only be possible if a state of emergency were introduced, otherwise the decree would be unlawful. The argument carried a certain weight, particularly for Kadijević and the defence ministry, which depended despite everything on the legality of a decision and always avoided action not covered in legal terms by a decision of the Presidency or a law. Eventually it was put to the vote: Mesić and I voted against, so the decree was passed by six votes to two. Thus within ten days everyone had to voluntarily hand in their weapons in order to take advantage of the amnesty. At the end of this period the JNA would have the authority to disarm them and criminal proceedings would follow. The situation was becoming increasingly tense. Fresh incidents were occurring in Croatia. The Presidency met again on 22 January. In the meantime the validity of the decree had been extended, by telephone, by two days, adding an extra two days to the deadline for handing in weapons. Once the deadline had expired, the Presidency met immediately and discussed what had happened, what the response to the decree had been. The Army said that it had been largely ineffective. Again they talked about the large quantities of illegally acquired weapons, about the 20,000 Kalashnikovs in Croatia, about how everything had come mainly through Hungary; that the Hungarian authorities knew all about it. In short, that Hungary was tacitly supporting the arming of Croatia and that Italy and Austria were also involved. To a large extent, the debate was a repeat of the one at the previous session of the Presidency. I continued to insist on the need for a political agreement, arguing that the implementation of the decree would lead inevitably to conflict. This was the point at which we were approaching a military solution to the crisis in Yugoslavia and so we were obliged to seek a peaceful way out. I was countered with attacks and arguments that this was illegal acquisition of arms. How could the state tolerate it? The Presidency had to intervene, the JNA had to intervene, etc. I replied by asking whether we could talk now about legality merely in the one area: what about all the other illegality that the Serbs were responsible

for in Kosovo and elsewhere? Were we not applying double standards: one set of criteria for Serbia and another for Kosovo, Slovenia and Croatia? The whole time I made it clear that we were responsible for finding a political solution to the problem. There was no point taking a legalistic approach when we were deciding between war and peace. And if we did want to talk about a legalistic approach, I repeatedly pointed out that under the law, under the Constitution, the JNA had no such powers as were granted to it by this decree – and therefore it was unlawful. On this day it went no further than the debate. The Presidency passed no further resolutions. But we continued at a session on 25 January, three days later, when the debate was conducted on this issue alone.

The Presidency session of 25 January 1991 was absolutely critical. The Army leadership had demanded the disarming of the paramilitary formations, and drew up proposals on how to go about it. Everything was directed at Croatia. They hardly mentioned Slovenia. They prepared a report, even a special film – it was later broadcast on television – showing how former JNA General Martin Špegelj was supposed to have taken part in the procurement of arms for a Croatian army. They had intercepted a consignment of weapons coming from Hungary. The Army leaders had prepared their information and arguments so that the whole thing seemed very convincing, and the Presidency would have no option other than to accept the report and confirm the accompanying resolutions for the disarming of military formations in Croatia. The session began in a way that had clearly been very carefully rehearsed, as if Jović had agreed on a scenario with the generals. Everything was put in the context of the constitutional responsibility of the Presidency, the responsibility to guarantee the territorial integrity of the state. They used tones that at that time were still acceptable in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia. The Croatian representative, Stipe Mesić, objected. At the beginning he spoke animatedly, but then grew silent. From experience I thought that the JNA proposals would be voted through if the session were concluded and it came to a vote. Apart from Mesić and me, everyone would vote in favour. Although the whole thing was directed against Croatia, I knew that with a resolution like this Slovenia would be next in line. I put every effort into preventing the Presidency from passing the resolution. With it the JNA would obtain formal backing from

the commander-in-chief – the Yugoslav Presidency – which could provoke serious armed conflict in Croatia. At a certain point in the Presidency session I brought about an interruption. As so many times before, I clashed sharply with Jović and Zelenović, and left the session. I slammed the door, saying I was leaving the Presidency and going back to Ljubljana to call a press conference where I would make everything public. In the Presidency they took a break and gave Bogić Bogičević the job of convincing me to come back to the session. I consulted with Mesić. We agreed to persevere and that Tudjman would have to come with the rest of the Croatian leadership. We would have to discuss everything directly with the Croatian leadership since the fate of Croatia was at stake. I gave notice that I would return to the session under these conditions. After discussing the matter in the interval, they agreed and I returned to the session, where we continued for a short while and then decided to invite Tudjman and to take a break. The tone had already calmed down. Ante Marković helped; he joined us in this part, coming from a session of the government with somewhat more moderate proposals concerning the positions of the JNA and the Croatian Assembly. But something must have happened in the meantime. Evidently the outside world could already sense the extreme seriousness of the moment. A dispatch arrived from the British Foreign Office with a warning from the British government that force should not be used against Slovenia or Croatia and that they were alarmed by JNA movements towards the borders. During the pause I also spoke alone with some of the members of the Presidency and tried to make clear to them what it was all about. Tudjman and his entourage arrived around 8 o'clock in the evening and gathered in my office: President Tudjman, accompanied by then Prime Minister Manolić, speaker of the parliament Domljan, and the head of Tudjman's private office, Sarenić. As coincidence would have it, right at that moment when they were gathered in my office and I was telling them briefly what was happening and what my assessment was, they started to show the film about Špegelj and the smuggling of arms into Croatia on television. What General Kadijević had been talking about a few hours earlier in the Presidency was now being shown on Belgrade Television. It was now clearer still that the whole thing had been planned and orchestrated. The Presidency was supposed to have adopted

the proposed resolutions in the afternoon, and the military would probably have begun to carry them out in Zagreb immediately that evening. They would prepare the public for it by showing this film about these great traitors and about the arms smuggling. As the session continued, together with the Croatian leadership and with the support of Marković we managed after a stormy debate to defuse the situation. Even to the other members of the Presidency it became clear that this was not a question of some academic resolutions by the Presidency but actual military intervention, and ultimately, despite the opposition and raising of tension from the Serbian bloc in the Presidency, we concluded the session with some sort of compromise resolution – a public statement that in practical terms meant nothing at all. The Army did not get a mandate to intervene in Croatia, to disarm the paramilitary forces, or to do any of the other things proposed. The session ended around midnight. Tudjman was in a hurry to get home. He said Croatia was on its feet. In Zagreb he declared: "Our people can sleep peacefully again."

The following morning a huge crowd gathered in Zagreb, and Croatian President Tudjman spoke to them of how they had managed to thwart the intentions of Belgrade and the Army and save Croatia from intervention. Of course, no one mentioned the part I played. Several times I wondered how everything might have unfolded if their clearly well-prepared scenario had worked and the Presidency had adopted the necessary resolutions for the Army to intervene in Croatia. At that time Croatia was still unprepared militarily for confrontation and the Yugoslav Army would, in all likelihood, have succeeded in crushing any armed resistance in Croatia. Clearly, after crushing Croatia, similar military intervention or a similar ultimatum would have followed in Slovenia. When I talked to General Kadijević about these events some months later, after the Brioni agreements had been reached, he expressed regret that the Army had not struck then. He thought it was a mistake because then there had still been time for such a move. Perhaps at that time, from his point of view, intervention could still have been carried out successfully, and the further direct disintegration of Yugoslavia prevented. But the big question is how long the military pressure would have held, when would it have begun to crack, would there have been any fewer victims than there were anyway over the subsequent years? Perhaps there would have

been even more. At any rate, from Slovenia and Croatia's perspective, preventing action then meant gaining important time and with it the possibility to actually go through with independence. In Slovenia, fairly smoothly; in Croatia, with huge complications. I also wondered whether such seemingly small things really could decide such important and historic events. If I had not figured out what it was all about in time, the Presidency could very quickly have passed the appropriate resolutions and the whole scenario would have played out. I managed to get an interruption, a delay, and a gradual softening of the hardline measures that had been prepared. Obviously time was a crucial factor. Even the international diplomatic intervention which occurred in the subsequent hours could have been too late if it had not been for this delay of a few hours. There is no doubt the plot had been well prepared; witness the timing of the film on Špegelj and the "traitors" on Belgrade Television in the evening, together with all the other elements which, with the benefit of hindsight, give a clear picture. I asked myself how on earth I had managed to achieve the interruption. In this situation, when the Army and Kadijević in particular wanted to be covered for whatever action, my warnings about the illegality of such a decree on the use of the JNA obviously carried a certain weight and raised questions, or at least helped to bridge those moments when everything could have erupted. On the other hand, everyone was aware that once the die was cast, it would be cast for good. With the entry of the Army there would be no stopping things, no turning back. This is why Kadijević and certain members of the Presidency agreed to postpone and discuss it again, in order to achieve a greater level of accord within the Presidency or perhaps to reach a political agreement after all, which might put off or prevent military conflict altogether. With all these factors acting together, my efforts were able to achieve a surprising amount – i.e. that military intervention in Croatia did not come about that day, that it was held off. Later, Kadijević's opinion was that the optimum moment when the further development of events could still have been prevented was missed. But if it had not been for all the other dilemmas, uncertainties and also the international warnings, then this manoeuvre of mine would probably not have been enough. Nevertheless, during these months everything revolved around the question of whether or not the Army would obtain a mandate from the

Presidency, as the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, for intervention. Amid the general uncertainty and the unpredictable outcome, the Army could not decide to take illegal action, which is why these sessions of the Presidency in January were of vital importance. Would the Serbs manage to secure a resolution which would mean intervention by the Army, in their interest – that was the key question.