

EXCERPTS FROM THE DEBATE AT THE 9 JANUARY 1991 SESSION OF THE PRESIDENCY

Janez Drnovšek: “On the basis of everything I've heard I am all the more convinced that it is impossible to solve this problem in the manner proposed here [with forcible disarming carried out by the JNA], and that it needs to be solved through political discussion. Dialogue with the Croatian leadership and their inclusion remains an indispensable element in finding a solution to this problem... and if it concerns other republics and provinces as well then we need to include their leaders, too, and find a constructive solution with them... What is most important for me is the need to avoid any activity which could aggravate the current situation, which could lead to new conflict, before we begin seriously to find a political solution, before we try to reach a new political agreement. From what I have heard and read, I think there is a possibility of serious conflict between the JNA and the Croatian authorities if we carry on in this direction... I want to stress that I will not participate in any activity or conclusions by the Presidency which I believe may lead to conflict, or to a deterioration, rather than to a political solution to the problems.”

General Veljko Kadijević: "There exists irrefutable evidence that the

Croatian internal affairs and defence ministries and their staff at the highest level have been involved in the setting up of paramilitary organisations in Croatia and the procurement of weapons. What has actually happened in this part of the country? There has now been fully formed – in view of its method of organisation and its tasks – a terrorist, paramilitary organisation to fight the JNA. Plans for its use have been drawn up and tasks allocated. There are documents showing precisely what sort of tasks these are – by garrison, by unit; how to attack a garrison, and so forth... The main organisers and the main culprits for all this would, if this decree is adopted, be legally pardoned. But they would have to bear the political consequences; no one would be able to absolve them of their political responsibility. And finally, as far as the involvement of the foreign factor is concerned, we must get to the bottom of this and show what each individual country that is involved here is actually doing, and react accordingly. We would propose that, too." Borisav Jović: "I think the limits of our responsibility are very clearly defined. Here we have facts which are leading us into a very dangerous situation if they continue to escalate. And if it does continue to escalate, then there could be conflict between the peoples of Yugoslavia and conflict between these units. We cannot even consider, if this has already been uncovered, not putting it through the judicial process and a trial. We are in a situation which is a fact from which we, as the Presidency, cannot escape; we cannot do other than adopt this decree, whereby it is understood that all the responsible bodies will do their duty. But all the causes and effects that we have discussed today – it's like this: someone starts with 1918, someone with 1941, someone with Cankarjev Dom, someone with the blockade of the market. We can start where we like but we have to defend constitutionality and legality... I think that the majority of the members of the Presidency have expressed themselves in favour of adopting this decree, with the exception of Drnovšek and Mesić, who disagree."

Presidency session, 22 January 1991

Jović: "We are in the situation that the decree has not been implemented. That is very clear. Mr Mesić told me that if we try to carry out the decree on their territory, i.e. in Croatia, if it concerns the confiscation of weapons which they have bought with their own money and which

are now with the police reservists, then Croatia would do the following:

1. declare its secession;
2. demand from the Security Council the intervention of UN peacekeepers;
3. withdraw all its personnel from the bodies of the federation;
4. cease paying its share for the financing of the federation;
5. confiscate all the federation's property on Croatian territory;
6. withdraw all its officers and soldiers from the Yugoslav Army;
7. anyone who fires on Croatian people will be tried as a war criminal.

"It is very clear that Croatia has taken the decision not to carry out the demands of the decree on its territory and that it has opted for the most radical action if attempts are made to implement this decree. Therefore the Presidency of Yugoslavia has found itself confronted with the situation of the decree not being implemented voluntarily there. Now it remains for the military or judicial authorities to begin carrying out all the measures envisaged by law. During this time I also received a telex from Sarajevo. I rang Mr Izetbegović immediately. They are ratifying the Presidency decree and believe that it needs to be implemented... that the situation must be brought to a peacetime state, that laws be respected. That alone is necessary."

Stipe Mesić: "When a gypsy kills his father, he says: now is the best peace."

Kadijević: "We in the Federal Secretariat for People's Defence believe that in this situation we find ourselves at a critical point for the present and the future of our country; the solution will determine whether we continue down the path of peace or set out on the road to war... The situation in Croatia yesterday, and tonight, is such that all their forces are prepared, with an entire army, which is highly diverse, and is composed, created, to a large extent as a party army, the army of the HDZ, illegally armed with weapons acquired through special arrangements with Hungary, which with this act has in fact begun some sort of aggression against Yugoslavia. I myself have approached the Hungarian defence minister in this regard. The army that has been formed in this way has been placed on the highest level of readiness and is in battle array. Buildings are occupied, routes barred, key territorial points, preparations

have been made for the blockading of barracks, senior JNA officers are being followed, members of this army are carrying out psychological terror against senior JNA officers and their families; they are marking their apartments, writing symbols on the entrances, on the doors, telephone threats, and so on... Because the armed formations in Croatia have established such a level of readiness, I appeal to the Presidency to demand that it be stopped, immediately. If that is not done, then we will be prepared to raise the combat readiness of the Yugoslav Army to a level which will guarantee the implementation of the criminal procedure. All of this can be concluded under the rule of law: criminal procedure, judicial authorities, a public trial, a defence, lawyers. Because the deadline set by the decree has expired, a process is running that is necessary in order to proceed to another, indeed the only remaining option, i.e. that the military and judicial authorities implement the criminal procedure."

Janez Drnovšek: "As far as this situation in Croatia is concerned, I am certain that it could be calmed down immediately if we said clearly that there will be no intervention whatsoever by the JNA upon the expiry of this deadline. At the outset I said that I feared there would be all kinds of speculation concerning this decree. And that is just what has happened and it would be extremely damaging and dangerous if this situation were to continue."

Presidency session, 25 January 1991. Stipe Mesić: "This is now the third time that the Presidency has debated the situation in Croatia without asking the Croatian authorities about it. Therefore I demand that it be withdrawn from the agenda, otherwise I will take no further part in the debate. Firstly, because in Croatia there are no ethnic conflicts whatsoever. But they could be incited. Ethnic conflict could be provoked and a state of emergency introduced. I believe that this proposal is, in fact, the prelude to the introduction of a state of emergency, with the very likely possibility of conflict being provoked between the two peoples..."

Borisav Jović: "...tension is mounting, mobilisation is increasing, a lot of propaganda is being fed to the people about the threat from the Army; and at the same time a fear is being created that the military formations of one side and the other will clash. Among the Serbian population there

is a great psychosis of fear, especially as they have handed over their weapons, and they are threatened with a settling of scores at the hands of the official bodies. Under no circumstances must we make light of the fear of the people, who are exposed to direct threats and chicanery by the Croatian leadership: that they will quickly settle their score with the *Hajduk* bandits in the Knin Krajina – these are words from official statements. But this is not banditry, and they cannot settle scores with them." Stipe Mesić: "Shooting people in the street, that's not banditry? Murdering, that's not banditry?"

Janez Drnovšek: "I wrote a letter to you today before I knew about this session. In it I put my views, as I did at the session on Tuesday. I wanted to say that the situation had worsened since our session on Tuesday, that the tensions had increased, that tensions in Croatia have escalated to breaking point, and that it has brought us to the verge of conflict. I hear that the Croatian Assembly is in permanent session with the aim of pronouncing radical measures in the event of any action whatsoever against that republic. So the situation is extremely serious. I was surprised at the public statement released by the Secretariat for People's Defence on the day after our session, in which it announced the combat readiness of its units. I think that at that moment this was a straining of the situation when it should have begun to calm down after our session... I said then, and I stand by it today, that this decree provides no basis for any combat readiness or even mobilisation by the JNA. For any kind of special activity by the JNA a separate decision would be necessary within the framework of a declared state of emergency, if we wanted to respect our legislation. If we want to adopt a position of legality, then in this element we cannot act illegally... I think that today we should do what we tried to do on Tuesday, to calm the situation down with our public statement, to reduce tensions, to stop these developments, both by the Croatian authorities as well as the JNA, and that we call for the political dialogue to continue." Bučin: "Let's adopt what has been proposed to us, these three points. Let us draw the line here. There is no drawing back from this line. or it would be more honest from our side to say, thank you, we aren't up to this situation, which in fact we probably aren't, on the whole, and to draw back, although the moment for retreat would not be the most propitiously chosen."

Janez Dmovšek: "I have to say that such a legalistic approach, appealing to the law and legality, doesn't sit too well with me either in this situation. Because in a way to take such an approach is too late for the situation in which we find ourselves in this country. But I am forced to join in this legalism because the other side is trying to defend this legalistically; they are running away from the essence of the matter – they are insisting on the implementation of certain laws even though we have gone well beyond constitutionality and legality in this country. From the fact that they dissolved the Assembly of one of the provinces, that there is no longer any autonomy, to the country's monetary system being broken up. I am not going to repeat the story which Nenad Bučin is familiar with, sometimes it interests us, sometimes it doesn't. There is a continual insistence on how today we must uphold legality and act in accordance with the law, and what will be, will be – we must uphold the law. But it's not as simple that. In the end that excuse won't go down too well." Borisav Jović interrupts me several times and then I continue:

Janez Dmovšek: "Perhaps my views might seem naive, I have to admit I feel the same myself, when I keep on calling for a calming of the situation. But it really is a question of whether we continue to escalate this conflict and continue so that the JNA clashes with one of the republics, with the lawfully elected leadership of that republic, with its lawful institutions, with everyone. That's where we are now." Borisav Jović: "Even the Army has to respect the law; like anyone else." Janez Dmovšek: "I've already spoken about respect for the law. But it's a matter of whether we can retrieve the situation legalistically in this way. I think we can only retrieve it politically, and that's where the essence lies. The approach we have here could be forced through; but it could be different, without the situation constantly escalating, as it is doing here, but with some other way, in some other manner. This escalation option here, this means that we agree on tackling an ethnic conflict, in this case between Croats and Serbs, through pressure, through the use of force. I haven't given up hope of it being done differently, politically, through political agreement and dialogue... A situation like the one that has arisen over these past days, it's a situation on the verge of conflict, which could slip out of control at any moment. This is what it is all about and the question is whether we here today can agree and find a solution and

influence all sides to calm everything down, so that they return at least approximately to normal. That we agree on this being done in Croatia and in the JNA. Whether it's possible, that's the question. Whether we are going to press on, because we have a scenario, a vision, that we are creating certain positions, perhaps the further untangling of our Yugoslav crisis by solving ethnic conflicts, for instance the establishment of autonomy [Knin], a new territorial division. That is probably what some have in mind."

Zelenović: "One question. First of all. Say what we should do. You haven't said anything. How should we do it differently? Let's say that we get ethnic conflict in Yugoslavia. What would you suggest should be done? What steps do you propose we take now?" Janez Drnovšek: "At the moment we are in a position where we can still prevent this through peaceful, political means, and not continue down a road that will certainly lead to conflict." Borisav Jović: "I have to say something about Janez's contribution to the debate. We're discussing very openly here. Janez, when such important matters are at stake – the arming of illegal paramilitary formations, the planning and carrying out of terrorist activities against members of the Army, their families and Army installations, everything that's written here – for which we have available very clear documentation and against which judicial proceedings must be instigated, because the security of the state is in question here, you think that carrying out the law in this instance is taking some sort of legalistic approach. I ask you, in all honesty, what country in the world could handle this differently? Given that the first method, that they disband voluntarily and hand in their weapons, didn't help. Come now, saying that in Yugoslavia these things can only be solved politically is ridiculous... We have said it many times, we're not talking about some sort of legal institution of the state – an assembly, a presidency, a government – we are talking about armed organisations, illegal paramilitary organisations, which have to be crushed... It has to be demonstrated, proven, punished, put down... The insinuation that the goal is to sort out ethnic conflict between Croats and Serbs by force is shameless; please excuse the expression. What this is about is that the Army must ensure the upholding of the law and act against political crime or crime against the state. It is not about using force to solve ethnic conflicts but about implementing the law. Because if

we don't implement it then there could well be conflict, genocide, anything... I don't think we can tolerate insinuations of that sort. That manner of discourse is absolutely unacceptable. It seems you couldn't give two hoots for how the people there feel – they can't sleep, they want to get into the barracks, they want to move from Croatia to Bosnia. What do you think, that we should just sit by and let the bloodshed happen there? That would be dishonest. Why are we sitting here, just to give in to those who provoked the situation, or to those who want to demolish Yugoslavia; that we say – here you are, there's nothing we can do, bye. No, we will not give in. We have the right to implement the laws. Please, nothing will come of this idea that we would give in." It all became very heated. There were breaks and interruptions. Several times I asked to speak but Jović didn't want to allow me. We reached a point where I thought that an interruption could be brought about, and then I would demand that the Croatian leadership be called in.