

JNA WITHDRAWAL FROM SLOVENIA

On our return from Brioni, where on 7 July 1991, with the cooperation of the European Community, we had obtained an agreement on a ceasefire with the Yugoslav federation, the days following it were spent on various activities connected with this agreement. The Slovene leadership continued to meet intensively. They were of the opinion that we should respect the agreement and fulfil it, although within Slovenia certain voices were saying that we should not. I myself was firmly convinced that any other course would represent a fearful adventure and a great risk, as well as being entirely irresponsible if it led to a renewed outbreak of hostilities in Slovenia. I spoke to Genscher, who implored me to make sure Slovenia confirmed the Brioni agreement, since any alternative was far too dangerous, and in any case Europe could not support anything else.

On Wednesday 10 July a session of the Slovene Assembly was scheduled, at which the Brioni agreement was to be debated. Directly before the session I spoke to the European Community president, Dutch foreign minister Hans Van den Broek, who was anxious and appealed specially for Slovenia to confirm the Brioni agreement. I reassured him

that the Slovene leadership would propose this to the Assembly, and that we expected a positive outcome from the Assembly vote. At the expanded session of the Slovene presidency the view was formulated that the decision in favour or against the Brioni agreement meant a decision for peace or a decision for war. Fortunately the session in the Slovene Assembly confirmed it, and the Brioni agreement was passed by a convincing majority (189 for, 11 against and seven abstentions). It was opposed by just a few individuals who claimed that it meant capitulation. When I passed on the news of the vote by phone to Van den Broek and Genscher, they congratulated us on choosing the right path and making the right decision. The Slovene Assembly had also passed a resolution which in all the excitement over passing the Brioni agreement had somehow been overshadowed: this was a resolution to propose to the Yugoslav republics and the federation that the JNA withdraw from Slovenia. This resolution was proposed by me at the expanded session of the presidency, since I wished to obtain formal authorisation to negotiate with the federation on the withdrawal of the JNA from Slovenia. The Slovene leadership was sceptical, believing it to be very unrealistic, although they agreed that it would not hurt to propose such a resolution in the Assembly. During the ten-day war in Slovenia I proposed that we begin negotiating with certain republics and federal bodies about the withdrawal of the JNA from Slovenia. I identified in particular Serbia, since it had the greatest influence. It is interesting that Bavčar and Janša were immediately in favour of negotiations, while some other senior members of the Slovene leadership viewed such a possibility with derision and incredulity. I continued my Brioni conversation with Jović and Kostić. My anticipation that it would be possible to achieve something in this direction was based on the numerous conversations I had had in the preceding months with representatives of Serbia and the JNA on resolving the Yugoslav crisis and on Slovenia's independence. With the possibility of war being significantly reduced now that the ceasefire was in place, these talks again became a realistic prospect. The important question now was choosing the right moment to make such an agreement. The situation was still very tense, and the conflict in Slovenia had aroused considerable feeling, at home, in Yugoslavia and around the world. I believed, however, that the JNA chiefs had only two choices:

either have a final showdown with Slovenia, or accept the fact that Slovenia was leaving Yugoslavia, and make sure that this happened in a way that was least painful for them. The Brioni agreement incorporated a three-month moratorium on the implementation of Slovenia's independence, which meant that I would have to return for those three months to the Federal Presidency. Such was the price of the agreement. I shuddered to think that after this war in Slovenia I would have to go back to Belgrade. Immediately after Brioni, Presidency sessions were again being called in Belgrade, and my presence was requested. For a time I resisted by sending to Belgrade written standpoints, and I demanded from Mesić, who was now President, that he call a session of the Presidency somewhere other than Belgrade. We agreed that in that event I would participate in the session. The following week Mesić did indeed call a session of the Federal Presidency. I suggested to him that a session be held on Brioni, with the idea that since we had achieved the agreement on an end to hostilities there, why not continue there with sessions of the Presidency. I left for Brioni on Monday 15 July in the early evening. I had been on the phone several times to Borisav Jović. He invited me to come to Belgrade to resume our talks on the departure of the JNA from Slovenia, but I persuaded him to come to Brioni. At first it looked like the Serbian members of the Presidency would actually come to Brioni, but then they had second thoughts and demanded that the Presidency meet in Belgrade.

So for several days we wrangled in public over where to meet – in Belgrade or on Brioni. The Serbian members of the Presidency met in Belgrade, while following his calling of the session, Mesić and I met on the Tuesday on Brioni and waited for the others to turn up. Tudjman and Kučan came, and of the members of the Presidency only Vasil Tupurkovski appeared, along with the Dutch ambassador as representative of the European Community. Tupurkovski tried to persuade us to go to Belgrade, since the eastern section of the Presidency would not come to Brioni. Mesić was ready to go to Belgrade, but somehow I managed to convince him that we should call another session of the Presidency on Brioni the following day, and then see what would happen. Tupurkovski was unhappy, since he had not succeeded in his mission, and returned immediately to Belgrade with the Dutch

ambassador. There were a lot of journalists on Brioni observing this to-ing and fro-ing, and it was not altogether clear to them what was going on. In the evening I was on the phone again to Jović, and had pretty much the same conversation as the day before. On the following day, Wednesday 17 July, Tupurkovski, Bogićević, Ante Marković and Lončar arrived on Brioni. The Presidency was of course not quorate, with only four of us there, and some very sharp words were exchanged with Marković, who was infuriated that we would not go to Belgrade and, as he put it, we were just hanging around here on Brioni. Mesić then agreed to call a session of the Presidency on the following day, Thursday 18 July, in Belgrade. Marković, Tupurkovski and Bogićević then left immediately for Belgrade, while I stayed on Brioni. In the meantime I was trying to gather up all my strength in the beautiful summer weather. I thought that it would be better to sit tight on Brioni rather than quarrel in Belgrade, since I still felt an actual physical block about going back there. On Wednesday evening I had another phone conversation with Borisav Jović. He told me that the deadline had run out on the time the Yugoslav Presidency had given to Slovenia to come back to the situation it was in before the conflict. In other words, for Slovenia to resume being a Yugoslav republic. The Yugoslav Presidency passed these resolutions, which were truly severe and which at the time inflamed the public, particularly in Slovenia, on the insistence of the JNA high command.

A formal political manoeuvre was conducted. The JNA demanded from the Presidency – as the commander-in-chief – that it ensure the proper conditions for the maintenance of the Army in Slovenia, for otherwise it had two options: attack or withdraw. While the JNA was holed up in its Slovene barracks, it could not continue its normal existence, and such a situation was untenable – this was their logic. Each was looking to cover his back. The JNA was doing this through the commander-in-chief, i.e. the Presidency, and the Presidency was able to do so through the Brioni agreement, in other words through the ceasefire and under the aegis of the European Community, which had accepted the new political situation.

Wednesday, therefore, was the deadline set at the session of the Presidency, and Jović told me that the conditions had not been fulfilled for us to debate on the following day the withdrawal of the JNA from

Slovenia. Naturally I would have to be there in Belgrade, since the Serbs could guarantee four votes, and with my fifth vote we would have the necessary majority in the Presidency. I agreed now to come. So at last the great game on Brioni, which nobody at the time fully understood, was over. On the morning of Thursday 18 July 1991, I got up and jogged for about 10 km, had breakfast and rested, but was still very tense when I set off for Belgrade. At Pula airport, where I caught a special plane for Belgrade, a kind of war psychosis had taken hold. All the air force jets were parked by the runway armed with rockets. The feeling was quite unreal. Army units, with full combat equipment, were dug in around the airport. I reckoned it was high time to get us out of this mess. The session of the Presidency started at 2 p.m. in Belgrade. The mood was sombre and tense. For the first time since the conflict in Slovenia I was back in Belgrade, and even during the ride in from the airport I had some very strange feelings. I did not actually feel altogether safe. The special unit which protected federal bodies had been sent during the conflict to Slovenia, and had returned from there none too friendly towards the Slovenes. For the first time it seemed to me that my bodyguard in Belgrade was genuinely anxious. At the very start of the session, I submitted a motion for the withdrawal of the JNA from Slovenia. After me the floor was given to General Veljko Kadijević, the defence minister. He confirmed that the demands of the JNA, which had been passed by the Yugoslav Presidency as the commander-in-chief, that conditions for the JNA in Slovenia be returned to normal, had not been fulfilled. For this reason, and to the obvious surprise of some of those present, he then also proposed the withdrawal of the JNA from Slovenia.

The debate then lasted a considerable time. Even though I knew that the thing had already been sewn up, with five votes guaranteed, I was still racked with anxiety: Would it go through or not? For the JNA now to withdraw peacefully from Slovenia was such an important issue, that I could scarcely bring myself to think about what might happen if things became complicated. Ante Marković was very much against this resolution. Over and over again we debated it. Mesić was also against it, as were Tupurkovski and Bogićević to begin with. During the break I spoke to them, and tried to convince them to vote for it all the same. I succeeded in winning over Tupurkovski and Bogićević, but Mesić voted

against. This resolution was rescuing Slovenia, but not Croatia. Ante Marković was clearly infuriated by this turn of events. Things became complicated over the issue of the return to Slovenia of those Slovenes who were doing their military service in the JNA elsewhere in Yugoslavia. There were still around 2,100 Slovenes in the JNA in other republics. This was a particularly painful issue for me. For some time now I had been receiving phone calls, letters and telegrams from parents of Slovene soldiers posted elsewhere in Yugoslavia. They begged me to help them get their sons sent home. In the end we simply passed a resolution that the JNA would withdraw from Slovenia within three months, and that in that same time those Slovenes doing their Yugoslav military service outside Slovenia would return to Slovenia. When all the complications were untangled and we finally passed this resolution, I felt like a great rock had been lifted off me. Immediately after the session I called Milan Kučan in Ljubljana, and told him what kind of resolution we had managed to obtain. He could hardly believe it. A number of Slovene journalists were waiting for me in my office in the Belgrade Presidency building, and I told them of the resolution and made a statement. I said that I had never waited so anxiously for the end of a session before, and that this was the most difficult session of my life, since so much hung in the balance. I returned that night to Slovenia. When I arrived home in the early hours, I heard people in the neighbourhood celebrating, setting off fireworks and generally making merry. They had already heard the news. The next morning I briefed the Slovene presidency on what had happened. In that first moment of surprise, in that excitement, they all congratulated me sincerely, although later on some of them wanted to forget this.

I gave a short press conference, and was then due to fly to Madrid. I was scheduled to speak at an international conference at the University of Madrid. So I raced through everything – including the press conference – got in the car and went hell for leather off towards Klagenfurt. Ljubljana airport was still closed, so we had to fly again from Austria. At the Ljubelj border crossing we were stopped by police officers who told us that General Kadijević had called and wanted me to call him back urgently. So I called Belgrade, and Kadijević was all worked up, saying there was some complication about the JNA in Slovenia, and that if we

were serious about the withdrawal agreement both sides must guarantee that there would be no possibility of incidents. He asked me to intervene, which I did. However, I continued my journey to Klagenfurt, and at the airport there I wondered what to do – should I go on to Madrid or return to Ljubljana? I decided that I had better turn back. If things became difficult, I wanted to be home. I immediately cancelled my trip to Madrid and set off back to Ljubljana.

In the three months that followed I had a lot of contact with Belgrade, with Kadijević and with Admiral Brovet. Occasionally there were complications in connection with the withdrawal, and particularly with the return of the Slovene soldiers from other parts of Yugoslavia. The parents continued to beseech me to do what I could to really get these Slovene boys home. Although the resolution had been passed in the Presidency, many of the junior commanders around Yugoslavia prevaricated and would not let the Slovenes home. I intervened in numerous such cases, so that in the end all the Slovene soldiers were fortunately returned home. And the JNA left Slovenia. With this, Slovenia became de facto independent. A few months later came international recognition of the independent Slovene state.