

Paralysis grips Yugoslav leadership

by Konstantin George

The Central Committee Plenum of the ruling Yugoslav League of Communists, held Oct. 17-20, has thoroughly discredited the country's party and government leadership, leaving a political vacuum at the top. The plenum was unable to reach any decision on what to do about the economic and ethnic fragmentation. Instead, the four days of squabbling ended with an "agreement" to postpone for six weeks any sweeping personnel changes or decisions on the economy.

This sets the stage for the eruption of a Balkan crisis of dangerous international strategic dimensions.

Yugoslavia's social-economic fabric has unraveled, thanks to its submission to International Monetary Fund austerity policies, which have produced a collapse of living standards, in which a majority of the population is at or below the Yugoslav definition of poverty level. Unemployment is 20-25% of the workforce, and an IMF-dictated wage freeze has been accompanied by inflation of 250% per annum. The IMF policy has been supported by the Slovenian and Croatian leaderships, who are strongly influenced by the financial oligarchy known as the "Venetian nexus," and its tentacles in the former Austro-Hungarian Empire. In all the years in which the Kosovo crisis, caused by Albanian-supported ethnic Albanian separatists, has been raging, neither Slovenia nor Croatia moved to support Serbia's pleas for early and effective support to crush the Albanian insurrection.

Due to this Venetian-manipulated stance, the phenomenon of Great Serbian chauvinism has been resurrected, personified by the demagogic Serbian party leader Slobodan Milosevic, who took over the Serbian party in a cold coup last year.

The coming Serbian power play

Contrary to what most of the Western press is reporting, the plenum has immeasurably strengthened the hand of Milosevic and the Serbians. The plenum "accepted" the resignations of four Presidium members, all non-Serbs and all opponents of Milosevic. No replacements were voted in, and Presidium membership now stands at 19.

The Serbian leaders exploited the bankruptcy of the federal leadership to the hilt. Their speakers at the plenum masterfully echoed the population's view, by denouncing the plenum as "yet another exercise in futile babbling," while Yugoslavia's existence is in danger.

The coming growth in political power of the Serbian

group was revealed through their skillful call at the plenum for immediate implementation of an "alternative" austerity package, which would exempt the industrial labor force from austerity, and level budget cuts instead at the organs of the centralized government bureaucracy. Milosevic's plan was presented by Serbian CC member Radovan Radonjic, and constitutes a rejection of further implementation of IMF demands. It calls for a 20% cut in state expenditures, which would hit only the party and state bureaucracy. Within six months, the party and state bureaucracy would be reduced by one-third, and the number of paid "career politicians" by one-half; travel by bureaucrats and managers would be cut by one-half; the number of official cars cut by 40%; all hotels and restaurants which exist to serve the privileged caste would be closed.

In contrast, the party leaderships of Slovenia and Croatia demanded an expansion of the IMF program, focusing on eliminating unprofitable industrial enterprises, which are largely located in the other four Yugoslavian republics. The Serbian plan would instead shove at least one-third of the added unemployment burden upon Croatia and Slovenia (given the more or less equal numbers in the bureaucracy for each republic), and puts Serbia in an excellent bargaining position with the poorer republics, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Bosnia, to say nothing of ensuring a continuation of the mass support for Milosevic.

The next manifestation of that support begins Oct. 22-23, when huge Serbian demonstrations are scheduled to be held in Belgrade and Kosovo.

More important than mass demonstrations, Milosevic has the backing of the armed forces leadership. At the plenum, Serbian generals thinly disguised their threats of a military coup. For example, Defense Minister Veljko Kadijevic declared: "The demand that the military take over by a coup is just as malicious and false as is the demand that the military stay out of politics altogether." The Serbian chief of staff, General Smrkovic, was not so reticent, attacking those "who advocate a civilian society."

Serbia is already functioning as a state within a state, making its own decisions, regardless of what the federal government says. On Oct. 19, the Serbian authorities announced that commissions of the Serbian parliament had completed drafts for instituting a "state of emergency" in Kosovo, "should the federal plenum fail to adopt" the necessary emergency measures. Serbia has thus granted itself national, as opposed to federated republic status. It is only a matter of time before other republics attempt to do likewise. Then a coup and/or civil war will be imminent.

Yugoslav fragmentation will not be allowed to occur in a vacuum. A dangerous cast of foreign actors will enter the stage. Albania, the Soviet Union, Bulgaria—with its territorial claims on Yugoslav Macedonia—and Hungary, with its eyes on the Hungarian-inhabited Vojvodina region of Yugoslavia, are all waiting to strike, when the time is ripe.