A WASTED OPPORTUNITY

It was just recently that I became aware of Laura Secor’s article “Testaments Betrayed—Yugoslav Intellectuals and the Road to War” (September issue of Lingua Franca) in which she accuses me of (“open”) Serbian nationalism. Ms Secor does not even try to explain what she means by nationalism, as if it were not a highly contested term. Instead of a lengthy letter I am attaching my text “Nation, Nationalism and Citizenism”—which I hope will provoke a serious discussion on the topic in your journal. In what follows, I will briefly touch upon only some issues in Ms Secor’s account.

Ms Secor seems to have been in a great hurry to publish the article, given that of all the people interviewed and quoted in the article, not a single one was from the Belgrade “Praxis” group she writes about. So much for her post-modernist perspectivism, not to mention modernist fairness and objectivity.

Ms Secor suggests that it was only in 1997 that I began condemning Serbian atrocities as well, namely in my book “The Fall of Yugoslavia—Why Communism Failed.” Fact 1: The book she mentions is the English translation of the Serbo-Croatian original published in 1995 (and submitted for publishing a year earlier). Fact 2: Assuming Ms Secor does not read Serbo-Croatian, she could have consulted my text published in 1995 in the special issue of the Fordham International Law Journal entitled “The Destruction of Yugoslavia.” Fact 3: I have also published dozens of articles and gave numerous interviews prior to 1995. Ms Secor chose to ignore these. Why? (By the way, Ms Secor’s inability to read Serbo-Croatian does not absolve her from responsibility for factual mistakes such as claiming that Serbs constituted a majority in the former Yugoslavia, which they never did.)

Since Ms Secor focuses on my being the main advisor to the former President of FRY Dobrica Cosic, the following are some
basic facts about it. Fact 1: In June of 1992 he became President of what remained of Yugoslavia. Four weeks later, with his support, an American businessman of Serbian origin, Milan Panic, became Prime Minister. Although Cosic’s constitutional power was ceremonial and Panic’s dominant one, Ms Secor does not even mention Panic and the fact that those two worked in concert against Slobodan Milosevic. Why? Fact 2: In the autumn of 1992, I conveyed Cosic’s message to the U.S. government (through the former U.S. ambassador in Belgrade, John Skelton) in which he expresses a desire for the immediate improvement of the relations between the two countries and the inclusion of FRY into NATO. Though the message was positively received the answer we received was that it was unfortunately too early for such steps to be taken. I made public those facts in the Belgrade opposition press in 1996. Further, the opposition Democratic Party, openly supported by Cosic and Panic, asked me to be their MP candidate for the federal elections in December of 1992 but I was not elected. Slobodan Milosevic, then President of Serbia, sabotaged the efforts of Cosic and Panic to promote peace, democratize the country, create conditions for a market economy and improve relations with the West. In January 1993, with the help of the Serbian ultra-nationalist Vojislav Seselj, Milosevic succeeded in removing Panic and four months later Cosic as well. I resigned and returned to my position in the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory (IPST), Belgrade, and to teaching at the University of Kansas, U.S.

Ms Secor calls me a nationalist. I bet this would come as a surprise to Mr. Milan Panic and his former anti-Milosevic and anti-nationalist government ministers I closely cooperated with: Varadi, Ivic, Grubac, Djukic, Perisic. The same could be said of the presidents of the leading opposition democratic parties who are even now senior research fellows in IPST where I am the director: Fesic, Micanovic, Djindjic, Kostunica? Finally, Ms Secor should also check her characterization of me with notorious Vojislav Seselj, who has repeatedly publicly called me „a Western agent“.

Ms Secor claims I have not been politically active since the removal of Cosic. Fact 1: I stated my positions in 1995 in Wilton House, England, at the British Foreign Office conference on „Europe’s Balkan Wars: Lessons for the International Community.” Fact 2: I stated my position in 1996 in Belgrade at the hearing organized by the International Commission on the Balkans, established by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the Aspen Institute. Fact 3: I gave a speech in 1996 at the conference on „National Questions and Boundaries: How to Reconcile Them Peacefully?” organized by the British Embassy and the British Council in Belgrade. Fact 4: In the winter 1996-97 I spoke at a dozen protest rallies throughout Serbia against the ruling regime’s attempt to rig the local elections. Fact 5: In 1997 I organized and became chairperson of the Council for Cooperation of the Non-Governmental Organizations in FRY. Fact 6: In July 1998 I was elected chairperson of the newly formed Council for Democratic Transformation of Serbia. Fact 7: In July 1999 I was elected chairperson of the newly formed Council of the opposition radio station „Index” in Belgrade. Finally, since the removal of Cosic dozens of my articles, interviews and letters have been published in journals and newspapers in FRY and in the West.

Ms Secor quotes Sheyla Benhabib on our six-year co-editorship of the former „Praxis International” journal. Anyone who is familiar with the journal contents knows that numerous articles (along with one special issue) critical of what was going on in Yugoslavia and Serbia were published in the journal in those years. I must „confess” that for all practical purposes Sheyla Benhabib was the main editor since I let her make all basic decisions. Consequently I am unable to understand what it is exactly she is blaming me for in her interview to Ms Secor.

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