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Yugoslavia: Testing the Chances of a Military Coup

Periodic complaints by the Yugoslav military about the civilian leadership's inability to resolve the country's serious problems have suggested to some observers the possibility of a military coup. The most recent instance came last fall when Defense Minister Mamula publicly lambasted the leadership for a variety of weaknesses.

we judge that Yugoslavia does not now face this danger. Nevertheless, there are enough indicators to make this prospect plausible at some later date should conditions seriously deteriorate. Moreover, military leaders in the coming months seem likely to become even more politically outspoken.

Factors Working for Military Intervention

Yugoslavia registers high on several indicators that sometimes have presaged a military takeover. One factor is growing tensions among ethnic groups, and various sources indicate the military is particularly concerned about frictions between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo Province. Although the military does not want to become involved itself, it has issued strong statements urging officials to take action to prevent unrest. The government, probably responding in part to military concerns sent a special police unit into Kosovo in October; but tensions are likely to sharpen once the shock of the deployment wears off.

The regime's inability to address serious long-term economic problems is another factor that could eventually spur military intervention. The Mikulic government in November imposed controversial new price controls and other austerity measures to curb triple-digit inflation. The measures, however, probably will be ineffective in improving economic performance or helping Belgrade cope with its large foreign debt. Public confidence over time in the government is likely to ebb further, and discontent almost certainly will lead to more strikes and work slowdowns that could provoke open defiance of federal

law by some regions. The military could grow increasingly disgruntled, especially if strikes threaten defense industries or, less likely, if troops need to be called in to confront violent workers.

The military's self-perception as guardian of the federation is a third potential indicator of intervention—especially if military leaders start to believe that civilian incompetence is undermining the Army's ability to fulfill its mission. The military probably was angered by a budget cut of 5 percent last year and resentful of recent government attempts to control its large revenues from arms sales. A further spillover of ethnic tensions among recruits—such as that caused by the highly publicized slaying of ethnic Slav soldiers last September by an Albanian—could prompt heightened military concern.

Factors Militating Against Intervention

Nonetheless, the military has no history of factionalism or coup attempts. It already has a legitimate say in the political system and exercises this through its representation in top Communist Party bodies. Succession procedures in most leadership bodies are well-defined, and chances are remote of a constitutional crisis drawing in the military even if the Mikulic government falls in an unprecedented vote of no-confidence. Disagreements between military and civilian leaders so far have centered over implementation rather than policy.

Outlook

the military in the coming months probably will continue to rely on behind-the-scenes lobbying and strong public statements to elicit government actions. Military leaders appear to recognize that civilian

authorities are taking steps—albeit stopgap ones—to address ethnic and economic problems. They probably know also that intervention, in the Yugoslav case, could provoke new unrest because several ethnic groups view the military as a harbinger of unwanted ethnic Serb domination [REDACTED]

Nonetheless, the mood could change quickly if events convince military leaders that civilian authorities have lost control. In such circumstances, the military establishment could be prompted to intervene more forcibly to restore order and a semblance of centralized Communist rule. [REDACTED]

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