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Bentley finds uncertainty, turmoil in Yugoslavia, land of her ancestors

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BELGRADE, Yugoslavia — When Helen Delich Bentley first began coming to Yugoslavia as a U.S. congresswoman in 1989, political expression was not as free, and somehow the position to take — or not to take — seemed easier to choose.

Then, there was no street protest, no freedom of the press and no serious fears of Yugoslavia's breakup. Now, people debate the likelihood of civil war and swap accusations of who has persecuted whom more. And the 2nd District Republican seems caught in the middle of the strife that plagues the land of her Serbian ancestors.

"I just don't know which people to believe," Representative Bentley last week. "There are such bad feelings here. That's why I'm so disillusioned."

Emerging from a hectic schedule of meetings, briefings, dinners and interviews during her weeklong stay here, Mrs. Bentley has concluded that Yugoslavia's future is "very tough. Not impossible, but tough."

She has seen the main players on Serbia's and Croatia's political stage these days. Foremost of these is Slobodan Milosevic, the combative Serbian leader who brought his country to the brink of martial law a few weeks ago — and of whom Mrs. Bentley, until recently, was a forceful defender.

She met Croatian leader Franjo Tudjman, whom she found underhanded and dishonest.

She has also met with some of Mr. Milosevic's opposition inside Serbia. His best-known rival is Vuk Draskovic, a bearded man with flowing dark hair and who seems half-

madman, half-mystic.

Mrs. Bentley talked with leaders of the student opposition movement, who gave her their symbolic mascot: a stuffed teddy bear.

"Last fall when I was here, I was more optimistic about them staying together than I am today," Mrs. Bentley said of the various factions.

Mrs. Bentley has been criticized for her failure to speak up publicly about the lack of political pluralism and basic liberties in Yugoslavia before the Serbs themselves took to the streets. Observers here also said the ruling party has been known to cite the ambivalent statements she has made as proof of support.

In an October 1989 newspaper column she wrote upon returning home from a visit here, she said the international community should stop condemning Mr. Milosevic over the wholesale repression of Albanian human rights in Kosovo.

"At a time when Yugoslavia is making great strides in the arena of political reform and guaranteeing basic rights to all its citizens, it can only be counterproductive for the West to criticize the Yugoslavs for doing those things that are necessary to preserve some semblance of law and civil obedience in order to protect the territorial integrity of the nation of Yugoslavia and its constituent states," she wrote in *The Sun*.

Since then, the strong-arm tactics Mr. Milosevic used on the Albanians have been used on Croats and on his fellow Serbs to protect his administration.

And the nationalism Mr. Milosevic once used to rally Serbs has caught on with Croats, Slovenes, Bosnians, Macedonians, with every conceivable group busy clawing or courting the next.

Now, there are no more Yugoslavs as such. There are Serbs, who were brutally exterminated in concentration camps under the Croat fascists during World War II; there are Albanians, silently protesting their lost parliament and autonomy after Serbia changed the constitution two years ago; and there are Croats and Slovenes to the north, who see the Serbs and Albanians as little more than a drain on their pocketbooks and prestige.

"Everything has turned topsy-turvy," Mrs. Bentley remarked. "He [Mr. Milosevic] became a little too authoritarian. Now that people have gotten their pride, they truly want freedom."

She faults Mr. Milosevic for his monopoly on the media, although with the one-time Communist Party organ *Borba* now independent, there is more of a free press than when she championed Mr. Milosevic in 1989.

"I wasn't paying particular attention to the media back then," she acknowledged. "All of Eastern Europe has broken open since then."

In a broader sense, however, Mrs. Bentley said she walks a delicate line in her contacts with Mr. Milosevic, balancing her desire to be an effective agent for change against the value of ready access to the Serbian leader.

When students criticized her during the recent elections in which opposition candidates claimed limited access to the media, she told the students: "I can do a hell of a lot more good if I can talk to the man."

She is also walking the tenuous path of the well-meaning outsider, wanting to support Serbian causes abroad while sensing that the visitor who tells you how to run your own house may not be invited back.