

Opinion

Ellen Kennedy: Tightening government? A laudable goal, but beware the ‘anti-bureaucratic revolution’



Bosnian Serbs march carrying a giant Serbian flag in Sarajevo, Bosnia, Sunday, Jan. 9, 2022. Amid Bosnia’s greatest political crisis since the end of its 1992-95 inter-ethnic war, the country’s Serbs celebrated an outlawed holiday Sunday with a provocative parade showcasing armored vehicles, police helicopters and law enforcement officers with rifles, marching in lockstep and singing a nationalist song. (AP Photo)

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Friends of mine work for the federal government. We spoke some days ago about the chaos that the new administration has unleashed in the U.S. and the repercussions around the world. More than a hundred countries have lost life-giving medicines that come from USAID, leaving millions of people vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other deadly diseases; U.S. security organizations are being dismantled, to the delight of autocrats everywhere, access to personal data in our financial institutions is available to unvetted, untrained, and unelected people – all in the name of cutting the size of the government and its departments, laudable goals but terrifying in the unplanned and devastating effects on individuals, families, communities and entire countries.

My friends are originally from Bosnia, previously a republic in former Yugoslavia. They told me that their father remembers with great anguish that actions like these in Yugoslavia, led by Slobodan Milošević, were called the “anti-bureaucratic revolution,” the destruction of the government and its agencies that had held the economy, the country and the ethnically- and religiously-diverse population together for decades.

That so-called “revolution” served as the beginning of a vicious civil war and genocide from the early 1990s to 1995, killing 140,000 people. The Bosnian city of Sarajevo was under siege for 1,425 days, the longest siege in modern warfare history, during which nearly 14,000 people perished.

Milošević was ultimately arrested by an international tribunal on charges of war crimes, and he died in a prison cell in 2006.

Anti-bureaucratic revolution, my friends said with sobs — it’s what they see now in the U.S.

Several years ago a prominent article in the Observer was titled “Warning: Donald Trump is America’s Slobodan Milošević” (Schindler, 12-27-2017). Former National Security Analyst John Schindler compared the two leaders’ platforms of populist nationalism and the manipulation of angry, disenfranchised people. He concluded that, in 2017 when the article was written, U.S. institutions were strong enough to

withstand the challenge, while weaker former Yugoslavia had crumbled into chaos and violence. But he issued a warning.

My friends are terrified. Their country's history shows what happens when unelected people amass huge power; sycophants swear loyalty to a leader at all costs; longstanding institutions that protected individual rights break down; and civil society organizations are harassed, threatened and ultimately collapse.

The Guardian is calling it out quite plainly. "Donald Trump's power grab: a coup veiled by chaos" (Feb. 3, 2025). The editorial board writes, "The U.S. president is testing the limits of executive authority, sidelining Congress and enriching allies while destabilizing the global economy." They conclude by describing Trump's attempt to centralize financial power in the executive branch. "If he succeeds, Nobel laureate Paul Krugman warns, it would be a 21st-century coup – with power slipping from elected officials' hands."

It is becoming obvious to us. Yet where are the strong protests, the loud voices, the masses of people taking to the streets, to the courts — making it stop before it's too late?

The loyalists in Washington today pledge fealty not to the Constitution but to the administration through all three branches of government: the legislative, Congress; the judicial, the Supreme Court; and the executive, with key Cabinet positions and departments staffed by many notoriously unqualified people. The brave federal judges who stand up for the rule of law are likely to face harsh recriminations or even violence on their own doorsteps, especially now that the Proud Boys and their ilk have the president's personal imprimatur.

We have been warned. What will we do?

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<https://www.twincities.com/2025/03/17/ellen-kennedy-tightening-government-a-laudable-goal-but-beware-the-anti-bureaucatic-revolution/>