

“The fall of the Milosevic regime has much meaning in itself, and a strong desire to imagine a better future can be sensed everywhere. But nothing is assured unless the new government is able to make this desire concrete.”

Building a “Normal, Boring” Country: Kostunica’s Yugoslavia

ERIC D. GORDY

The political scene in Serbia changed dramatically in the fall of 2000 when Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic lost the September presidential election to an opposition coalition headed by Vojislav Kostunica. After two weeks of popular protests throughout the country, culminating in the takeover of the federal parliament and state television buildings in Belgrade on October 5, Milosevic was compelled to recognize his electoral defeat and leave office. Along with the members of the new federal parliament, Kostunica was inaugurated the following day.

The quick demise of the governing regime surprised many observers and not a few participants. But in retrospect some factors clearly signaled that the regime was collapsing. First, opposition to Milosevic, although not always apparent in Belgrade, was steadily growing and expanding beyond the capital city. Opposition governments in the provinces made independent media available outside the metropolis and steadily cultivated new centers of power. It is more than symbolic that the end of the regime came on the day when protesters from provincial cities and towns converged on Belgrade.

Second, the generation of young people who grew up during the Milosevic regime became politically active under the umbrella of the aggressive student movement *Otpor!* (Resistance!). The students in *Otpor!* offered an aesthetically appealing and fresh public face for the opposition, which was until then characterized by chronically unsuccessful and highly compromised political parties. Third, the regime’s support base, which had been steadily

eroding from the beginning, began to collapse as Milosevic’s coalition suffered increasing defections.

The two weeks between the September elections and the end of Milosevic’s rule also saw the regime’s control steadily collapse. Regime-sponsored “victory celebrations” in the main squares of major cities fizzled as audiences failed to materialize and the artists hired to entertain them opted out at the last minute. Police declined orders to act against opposition supporters demanding recognition of the election results. Party leaders squabbled openly over whether to hold the line. In several cities and towns, journalists at state-owned radio and television stations either went on strike or refused to rebroadcast news from the state information bureaus. The final blow came October 5, when police units withdrew rather than follow orders to intervene (dozens of police officers openly joined the protesters), and the army refused commands to retake government buildings.

Kostunica’s coalition, the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS), quickly established itself in the federal government, declaring a new democratic order. Some changes in the atmosphere are already clearly visible: people talk about having “kicked away their fear” and must no longer suffer through the kitsch and propaganda that were once displayed on state television.

However, concrete changes have been blocked by two factors. First, to allow a peaceful and legal transition, DOS has entered into a kind of cohabitation with the remnants of the old regime. At the federal level, DOS has joined with Milosevic’s former coalition partners from the republic of Montenegro (most people in Montenegro—which, along with the republic of Serbia, constitutes what remains of Yugoslavia—boycotted the September elections to protest the election law, diluting Montenegro’s representation in the federal parliament). In Serbia, a tran-

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sition government composed of DOS members and ministers from Milosevic's party has been shakily exercising power with the old parliament while waiting for the newly elected government and parliament to assume control. The result has been a semilegitimate government with little capacity for action.

Second, the new government is faced with the severe long-term consequences of a decade of isolation and misrule. The economy is in a state of utter collapse, with most industry not working or operating far below capacity. Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic has announced that the debt held by state-owned enterprises is greater than the gross domestic product, while his counselors have gone public with their advice that the government should declare bankruptcy. The economic problems are partly the result of mismanagement and sanctions, and partly the result of corruption and embezzlement. Personal income continues to hover at around half the amount that the state statistical organization estimates is necessary to cover minimal expenses. Average income in December was around 4,000 dinars (\$67), while the official estimate of minimal monthly expense for a family of four was around 9,000 dinars (\$150). The degree of collapse became appar-

ent in December when the electric utility could not meet consumer demand, leaving large parts of the population with no electrical power for three to four days at a time.

Despite these disappointments, DOS received a resounding endorsement in the elections for the Serbian parliament on December 23. As of mid-January, DOS is in a position to form a new Serbian government on the basis of 64 percent of the popular vote, which guarantees it 176 of parliament's 250 seats, more than the necessary two-thirds to enact constitutional changes and other legislation. Kostunica himself enjoys astonishingly high levels of popularity, with some surveys showing approval ratings as high as 80 or 90 percent. Most people in Serbia now favor discarding the remnants of the Milosevic regime and building what Kostunica likes to call a "normal, boring state."

BECOMING "NORMAL"

Before the new government can achieve its goal of boring normality, it must solve several immediate problems. Some arise from the character of the coalition that has come to power, while others are,

in the words of Milan Milosevic (no relation to Slobodan), a commentator for the weekly magazine *Vreme*, "poisoned apples which Milosevic left on the table."

One major burden of the new government will be keeping the DOS coalition together. Formed in response to long-standing demands that the opposition to Milosevic present a united front, DOS is a coalition of 14 parties ranging from social democratic and liberal to nationalist and conservative, and also includes several regional parties and those representing minority populations. The new government has planned a cabinet with five to seven party leaders as vice presidents, most of whom have threatened to leave the coalition if some condition was not fulfilled. Major differences have already appeared in the coalition over negotiations with Montenegro, management of the police and military, and treatment of people charged with war crimes. At some point the coalition is certain to divide into two or three parts, but it is a critical question whether this occurs before or after necessary structural reforms are made.

Some of the previous regime's legacies are criminal in nature. Citizen groups, human rights organizations, and journalists are

actively trying to ascertain, for example, who kidnapped former President Ivan Stambolic in August 2000, and who murdered independent journalist and editor Slavko Curuvija in April 1999. These problems are highlighted in the controversy over high-level police and military personnel. One object of contention has been Radomir Markovic, chief of the State Security police. Several political leaders had demanded his ouster, declaring it a condition for solving these crimes and openly speculating that Markovic was personally involved. President Kostunica kept Markovic (as well as other prominent Milosevic-era holdovers, such as army Chief of Staff Nebojsa Pavkovic), possibly reasoning that he owed them a political debt for not intervening against protesters in October.

One of the first acts of Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic's government, which took office in January, was to fire Markovic. However, there are indications that Markovic still has an active network: two days after Goran Petrovic was named to head the State Security police, an armed attacker shot the new police chief's driver in the hands, which has generally been interpreted as a warning from the organized

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crime apparatus around Markovic that out of office does not necessarily mean out of power.

The new government also came to power with support from autonomist parties in the Vojvodina and Sandzak regions, both of which have resisted strong central control from Belgrade. Kostunica will have to tread a fine line between meeting their demands to keep them on board and responding to nationalist parties in his coalition who strongly oppose any autonomy. A test of strength between these forces is likely to come this year if the government attempts to introduce religious instruction in state schools, a move certain to provoke responses from nonreligious citizens as well as from minority groups that are predominantly Roman Catholic or Muslim.

Finally, even if Kostunica can keep together the diverse political forces that made him president of the Yugoslav federation, he may find himself with no federation over which to preside. The government of Milo Djukanovic in Montenegro seems to have decided that now is the time to press for separation from Yugoslavia and international recognition. Although Djukanovic and the Serbian democrats enjoyed strong personal ties during the past few years, those ties have become frayed with the exchange of increasingly severe accusations over whether the federation ought to survive. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that Djukanovic's supporters are currently not represented in the federal government because they boycotted the September elections.

PROMISES MADE . . .

Although the change of regime in Serbia is promoted and usually regarded as a democratic transformation, most of the people who shifted their support to DOS did so not because of their democratic values or moral convictions. The shift occurred because the economy had collapsed under Milosevic, and because DOS made persuasive promises: an end to international sanctions, increased foreign aid and investment, a stable currency, and relief from massive poverty. A television advertisement from the National Bank currently in heavy rotation throughout the country shows a fantasy family two years in the future buying appliances and furniture for its new home, flying off for vacations, buying a new car on credit—all made possible by sound economic management and a stable currency. The commercial's ambitious promises, which are reminiscent of the "Swedish standard" Milosevic promised in the early days of his rule, annoys everyone who has seen it.

The economy, in fact, is a wreck. Most major factories will require new equipment to resume operations, and the energy system in turn must be rebuilt to power these factories. The only economic sector not severely affected is agriculture, but it too is weakened by the poor state of the energy and transportation systems. People who receive paychecks scrape by on an average of approximately 100 dollars a month, while huge numbers are unemployed, have never been employed, or remain on indefinite layoff. To a certain degree international assistance has helped ameliorate some effects of general poverty, but Serbia will not become productive and debt-free for years. The new government is also promising to act against corruption and illegal business, moves that could conflict with plans for economic recovery. Enough people rely on illegal businesses, such as the trade in smuggled goods, as a source of income that any serious action against this kind of activity could worsen the employment situation.

Perhaps one of the most surprising signs of the new government's strength is the patience people have shown with it. DOS received overwhelming electoral support in December just when the electrical system was repeatedly demonstrating its inability to meet demand, and as it was becoming clear that no speedy improvement in the standard of living would occur. People will continue to blame the former regime for these difficulties, but if some concrete changes are not visible fairly soon, they will look more like consequences of the new government's ineptitude.

. . . AND PROMISES FULFILLED

Another major promise DOS made was to restore Yugoslavia's membership in international institutions and to a position of international respectability. To a large degree, this pledge has been met swiftly, with much of the world proving receptive to the political leaders who defeated Milosevic. Problems and controversies remain on this front, however.

The issue of Kosovo's status was not resolved by the imposition of a United Nations protectorate in 1999. Most of the province's Serb inhabitants have fled, and those who remain are subject to violence, kidnapping, and other forms of intimidation that the UN forces have proved unable or unwilling to curtail. An offshoot of the officially disbanded Kosovo Liberation Army—the guerrilla force that fought Serbian police and Yugoslav military forces in Kosovo—has been active in southern Serbia, which has added to the tension. Aside from the real problems created by this continued violence, the

ongoing conflict also provides material for the rhetoric of nationalist forces in Serbia.

At the same time, there could be a regional backlash to the enthusiasm with which the rest of the world has greeted the political changes in Serbia. Some of the controversy is related to the expectation that Serbia might receive international funds that neighboring states believe would have been theirs if Milosevic had remained in power. Political leaders in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia have complained that Serbia has been "rehabilitated" without paying a price for it, and several have demanded that apologies for Serbia's role in the wars of succession in Yugoslavia should be a condition for future engagement.

Whether there will be apologies or not is certain to be a topic of debate in the near future, but a more immediate problem concerns how the new government will approach the problem of those charged by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia with war crimes and crimes against humanity, among them Slobodan Milosevic. Many in Serbia would like Milosevic to be prosecuted first (or only) in Serbia for crimes not necessarily related to the wars, and fear that The Hague tribunal's demands for extradition could make this impossible. It has also become increasingly popular to argue that the new government could demonstrate its capacity to form an independent judiciary by trying suspected war criminals, possibly in cooperation with The Hague tribunal, on Serbian territory and with Serbian judges and prosecutors playing some role. The position that The Hague court is an entirely illegitimate institution now seems to be increasingly held only by supporters of the former regime and extreme nationalists. However, Kostunica has repeatedly argued against extradition and tried to downplay cooperation with the tribunal (in January he declared he was "too busy" to meet with the tribunal's chief prosecutor), a position that has brought him into conflict with several members of his coalition. He eventually agreed to meet with the prosecutor, Carla del Ponte, but he has in the meantime turned up the nationalist rhetoric.

The fate of Slobodan Milosevic has become emblematic of the questions about Serbia's new international position. Neither Serbian prosecutors nor The Hague tribunal has clearly stated what he is to be charged with, although no one seriously doubts that he will soon be tried and convicted of something, somewhere. The issue of extradition has spread to other parts of political discourse as well—

for example, Kostunica's vice president, economist Miroljub Labus, declared in January that Serbia might not be accepted into international financial institutions if the government does not take a clear stance regarding Milosevic's fate.

"WE ARE WATCHING YOU"

One way to gain a perspective on the mixed character of Serbia's transition is to look at the iconography that has developed around the change of regime. Without a doubt, two of the most widely recognizable symbols of the change are the bulldozer that was used to break through the police lines at the state television headquarters on October 5, and the raised black-and-white stylized fist that was the symbol of the student resistance movement Otpor!. The raised fist, together with other symbols and slogans of Otpor!, is widely visible, and the students are generally considered to be the catalysts and heroes of the "revolution." A biography of the former factory foreman and small businessman, picturesquely nicknamed Joe, who drove the famous bulldozer, has become a bestseller. Otpor! managed to combine the two symbols into a post-transformation poster that presents an image of a bulldozer in the movement's characteristic white-on-black graphic style, together with the vaguely threatening slogan, "We are watching you."

Self-celebration aside, Otpor!'s style of confrontation seems to have lost its purpose as many members feel that the group's goal has been achieved. Certainly the conservative Kostunica has little sympathy for the kind of revolutionary imagery or demands for social transformation Otpor! promoted. His campaign posters in December featured respectable-looking politicians behind the slogan "Normally."

Some leaders of Otpor!, including the prominent students Branko Ilic and Vukasin Petrovic, have begun to declare failure, arguing that although the Milosevic regime has ended, their project of transforming civic democratic culture has not been picked up by political leaders or realized in more autonomous ways. One newspaper reported that Otpor! planned to change its signature colors to suggest that the period of presenting issues in "black and white" has passed. To the extent that the group remains active, this belief has taken the form of smaller groups working "normally" on more limited political goals, such as changes in the administration of universities and cultural centers and a campaign to shorten

the term of obligatory military service from 12 months to 6.

Since October 5, Otpor!'s image seems to have assumed a double character. It still stands as a symbol for the courageous political action of young people in Serbia, and for the sense that political change would not have been possible without this engagement. Yet the fate of Otpor! can also be interpreted as symbolizing the directionlessness of this engagement. For at least a significant proportion of young people, participation in political action was required to dismantle the regime but is no longer necessary now that the job is done. The results of the December elections also indicate this. Although DOS received a large majority, it was less than most surveys predicted, which can largely be attributed to a low turnout among younger voters.

RESTORING A SENSE OF HOPE

Even without Milosevic, Serbia faces severe problems in the near future. Any long-term projects for economic and social stability will depend on massive investment in the country's industry and infrastructure, an investment that is by no means certain. At the same time, conflict along the southern border and in Kosovo offers a continued source of national frustration and might encourage a resurgence of right-wing nationalism.

Some positive changes, however, are certainly apparent since the fall of the regime. Most obvious is the less-visible police presence, once so constant and ominous. Print and electronic media are increasingly reporting the news in a more objective manner, the reestablishment of international contacts is

noticeable, and the currency appears to be holding its value even as wages are slowly increasing.

But the most important and visible changes are emotional. The success of the October protests made many people feel that their fate depends less on the will of a distant system and more on their own engagement. Many declare that, even without material changes in their standard of living, they are no longer ashamed and afraid of their government. The realization that such changes are now possible appears to be spreading. Admittedly some painful emotional processes, such as coming to terms with the question of responsibility for the collapse and criminality of the past decade, are largely being avoided, especially with respect to the issue of war crimes in the conflicts that followed the destruction of Yugoslavia. But the trials that are likely to come soon will provide an impulse for that emotional process to begin as well.

Concretely, neither the success of the new government nor the prospect of economic and social recovery is certain. Momentum hangs on the question of how issues such as privatization and economic reform; the transformation of the military, police, and judiciary; relations with neighboring states and international institutions; and the establishment of a legitimate and credible government will be confronted in the coming year.

The future depends on restoring a sense of hope among the people of Serbia. The fall of the Milosevic regime has much meaning in itself, and a strong desire to imagine a better future can be sensed everywhere. But nothing is assured unless the new government is able to make this desire concrete. ■