



SPECIAL REPORT

1200 17th Street NW • Washington, DC 20036 • 202.457.1700 • fax 202.429.6063

ABOUT THE REPORT

This report focuses on the largely nonviolent revolution that led to the removal of Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic from office and the rise to power of the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS). Particular attention is paid to the role of nonviolence in the revolution and the role of Serbia's civil society in the country's transition to democracy. Written by Institute consultant Albert Cevallos, the report is based on numerous interviews with civic activists and representatives of the democratic opposition, student groups, independent media, and the United States government, as well as an analysis of available literature surrounding these events. It is also based in part on a conference cosponsored by the United States Institute of Peace and the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, "Whither the Bulldozer? Revolution, Transition, and Democracy in Serbia," held on January 30–31, 2001 in Belgrade.

The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not advocate specific policies.

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Whither the Bulldozer? Nonviolent Revolution and the Transition to Democracy in Serbia



Briefly...

- Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic fell from power in October 2000 after a concerted campaign of strategic nonviolent action that was similar to democratic revolutions in other countries, thus offering a paradigm for foreign-supported strategic nonviolent action against other autocratic regimes.
- The opposition's effectiveness depended on a broad coalition of political parties, nongovernmental organizations, media, and labor unions.
- While foreign assistance helped to build and sustain the broad anti-Milosevic coalition, indigenous organizations and action were mainly responsible for driving events.
- The transition to democracy in Serbia is far from complete, and continuing pressure from civil society is crucial to sustaining the process.
- The organizations that generated the movement against Milosevic need to re-energize themselves to be effective in a more democratic environment.
- These same organizations have a crucial role to play in pressing the new government to undertake effective anti-corruption, accountability, and truth and reconciliation efforts, as well as military and police reform.
- Foreign assistance should focus not only on political parties but should continue to support a broad range of nongovernmental organizations, labor unions, think tanks, and media.
- Long-term peace and stability in the Balkans continue to require the establishment of genuine and stable democracies in Serbia and the entire Balkan region.

Introduction

When Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic was forced from power in October 2000, few analysts could have predicted that he would be swept away by a massive nonviolent movement reminiscent of the East European revolutions of 1989. As president of both

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Serbia and Yugoslavia, Milosevic had presided over four wars in as little as ten years, including one against the NATO alliance. In addition, for the past year Milosevic had been stoking tensions inside Serbia itself through a vicious campaign of political repression. As harassment of opposition, civic, and media activists increased, one journalist lamented "the dawn of the Milosevic Dictatorship" (Laura Rozen, "Milosevic's Media Blackout," *www.salon.com*, May 18, 2000). If anything, Milosevic's heavy hand led most experts to predict that he would go the way of another European dictator—Romanian president Nicolae Ceausescu, who was removed in a bloody coup and whose execution was televised nationwide. "Save Serbia and Kill Yourself, Sloba" became a popular refrain throughout the country in the weeks leading up to presidential elections that Milosevic hoped would extend his stay in power.

But when protesters stormed the federal parliament and other key pillars of the regime, precipitating the collapse of the government, little blood was shed. To be sure, some of the demonstrators were prepared to fight. The democratic mayor of Cacak, Velimir Ilic, led a force of 1,000 armed, disaffected members of the police and military who had fought in Kosovo, Bosnia, and Croatia. Ilic's final orders to his men before they set out for Belgrade were, "Today, we will be free or die" (Timothy Garton Ash, "The Last Revolution," *New York Review of Books*, October 19, 2000, p. 12). Milan Protic, the mayor of Belgrade at the time, at one point stormed a police station, seized its weapons, and resolved to defend his office from Milosevic by force. Nevertheless, key units of the police and army refused orders to fire upon the demonstrators and instead melted away into the crowds. After all the violence of the past decade, the transition of power was thrust suddenly, almost unexpectedly, upon Serbia.

Months later, details continue to emerge about the final days of the Milosevic regime; they make clear that a complex combination of factors—including widespread frustration over Yugoslavia's many wars, its shattered economic infrastructure, and increased government repression—contributed to his demise. Of these, one factor that must be singled out for its role in mobilizing public opinion against Milosevic is the clever campaign of strategic nonviolent action wielded by the student-led Otpor ("Resistance") movement. Initially created in 1998 to protest government repression at Belgrade University, Otpor quickly emerged as a driving force behind efforts to promote democracy in Serbia. It did so by adopting the strategies and tactics of other successful nonviolent, pro-democracy movements. In the process, Otpor helped breathe life into Serbia's demoralized civil society and, in turn, the country's factionalized political opposition. The movement was also often forced to employ new, untested tactics along the way, thus lending the revolution—and Serbia's new democracy—its own unique character.

Planting the Seeds of Change

Opposition to the Milosevic government existed from its first days in power. But the state-controlled media, the country's security forces, and its financial resources consistently left opposition activists in Serbia with little room to maneuver. When massive anti-Milosevic demonstrations erupted in March 1991 in Belgrade, for instance, they were quickly, and violently, dispersed by police. Again in 1992, thousands of students chanting "Sloba, You Are Saddam!" wrapped a mile-long black ribbon around the federal parliament to protest the siege of Sarajevo. During another demonstration, state-run television abruptly ceased transmission rather than broadcast events—a pattern that would repeat itself over the next ten years. Protests also erupted when it was disclosed that the government had been secretly funneling funds out of the accounts of private citizens to finance the war in Bosnia.

Serbia's opposition was also often bitterly divided over its own strategy and tactics, its leadership seemingly more bent on destroying one another politically than in promoting democracy. Milosevic skillfully exploited these differences to remain in power.

This tactic was made clear after news was leaked of secret meetings between Milosevic and some of the opposition's most prominent political leaders at the height of protests against the government's theft of municipal elections in the winter of 1996–97. Compromising the leaders' role in the fledgling Zajedno ("Together") opposition movement, Milosevic then moved to the opposition's rank and file, again ordering his police to crack down and sending scores of demonstrators to hospitals.

But with each additional abuse, and with Serbia's economy falling further into ruin because of government corruption and international financial sanctions, the government's legitimacy wore thin. In a bid to silence domestic criticism, the regime adopted controversial laws in the spring of 1998 limiting media freedoms and political assembly at the country's universities, both venues being hotbeds of the small prodemocracy movement. But the laws did more than clamp down on dissent; they also signaled that the government felt increasingly vulnerable and threatened by the opposition. Though protest against the regime was not a new phenomenon, it would be an increasingly dangerous endeavor from then on as the government employed even more violent means to retain its hold on power.

Such was the case after war erupted in Kosovo in February 1998. As was the case with Bosnia and Croatia in the early 1990s, Serbian state media whipped the country into a nationalist frenzy. Propaganda portrayed opposition activists as unpatriotic and sympathetic to Kosovo's ethnic Albanian population. As clashes between Serbian police and the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) escalated, Milosevic labeled the opposition as traitors conspiring to revoke Serbia's authority over the province. NATO's subsequent bombing in March 1999 enhanced Milosevic's position at home as he sought to portray himself as the nation's lone defender. Anti-NATO and pro-Milosevic demonstrators defied the bombing and held rallies throughout Serbia, many of them on bridges NATO warplanes would most likely target. At the same time, Milosevic managed to bring the far-right nationalist leader of the Serbian Radical Party, Vojislav Seselj, and the leader of the Serbian Renewal Movement, Vuk Draskovic—his two strongest rivals—into the government as deputy prime ministers, again effectively splitting the opposition and limiting its maneuvering room.

In the first two weeks of the war, Milosevic swiftly seized the initiative and moved to silence dissent once and for all. Independent journalist Slavko Curivija was killed—by state security agents, some claimed—as he walked to his home with his wife. Fearing for their lives, opposition leaders, along with thousands of young men avoiding the draft, fled to neighboring Hungary, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Montenegro. The government increased harassment of the independent media by fining and shutting down those outlets that rebroadcast foreign news, an act that was explicitly outlawed by the notorious media law. As a result, journalists began censoring their own reports, careful not to challenge the regime directly.

Otpor's Strategy

Though the mass demonstrations against NATO helped Milosevic to consolidate his power in the short term, the regime's efforts to capitalize on the bombing and increase its authority ultimately backfired. Many Serbs grew angry with Milosevic for leading Serbia into yet another losing conflict as well as further into poverty and isolation. In addition, there was widespread disillusionment, even anger, with the opposition, especially as some of its leaders had proven to be no less nationalistic than Milosevic. This frustration was heightened during the war once Draskovic joined the government. Despite credible threats against his life, many were also disappointed that Zoran Djindjic, president of the Democratic Party, chose to wait out the bombing in neighboring Montenegro. As the war came to a close, dissatisfaction with both the government and the opposition was strong.

The question for democratic activists then was how to push into action a population

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cowed by a decade of repression, especially considering that opposition political leaders had failed to mobilize significant support in the past. By turning to nonviolent techniques of protest, such as marches and the performance of skits on busy street corners, the students who created Otpor—several of whom had been active in the mass street demonstrations of 1996—hoped to resuscitate Serbia with demonstrations of individual courage. The idea was to deprive the regime of the fear that had become its greatest weapon and thereby withdraw the consent of Serbia's governed. So Otpor launched a massive recruiting campaign, declaring that Serbia deserved better than what the Milosevic government was capable of delivering. The students immediately created a network of offices outside of Belgrade, where spontaneous expressions of discontent and unrest were growing. Such a network was noteworthy because opposition political parties often neglected to establish a credible presence outside of Belgrade by opening offices, canvassing support, and so forth.

The regime retaliated, harassing and arresting scores of activists within the organization's first few weeks of activity. But the sight of police abusing nonviolent demonstrators, many of them young students, only helped to swell Otpor's ranks. Recruitment soared, transforming Otpor from a student-led organization into a popular movement that ultimately claimed more than 70,000 activists, including pensioners, parents, and representatives of political parties and independent media. Even judges who owed their positions to the government risked being fired to join the campaign. As the movement grew at the end of 1999 and into the beginning of 2000, civic activists from many of Serbia's other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) became emboldened and intensified their own prodemocracy efforts. All of this led one member of Otpor to surmise, "Fear is a powerful but vulnerable weapon because it disappears far faster than you can recreate it" (Roger Cohen, "Who Really Brought Down Milosevic?" *New York Times Magazine*, November 26, 2000, p. 46).

International Assistance: Slow but Crucial

Political and financial assistance from the West ultimately proved crucial to the birth of democracy in Serbia, but it was slow in coming. Until the war in Kosovo, many in the international community regarded Milosevic as a potential partner rather than the source of many of the region's problems. During the war in Bosnia, for instance, countless diplomats visited Belgrade, implicitly treating Milosevic as the key to peace. State media reinforced this image inside Serbia as Milosevic was pictured shaking hands and sipping drinks with international emissaries. The view of Milosevic-as-Peacemaker was only reinforced when he signed the Dayton Accords in 1996, formally bringing the Bosnian war, which he had done so much to incite and sponsor, to a close.

The story was much the same with Kosovo. As tensions mounted there in 1998—much of it directly instigated by police and paramilitaries under Milosevic's command—negotiators rushed to Belgrade to secure cooperation with efforts to avert a larger conflict. By now a master at stoking conflict for his own political gain, Milosevic balked. In Kosovo, a massive nonviolent movement led by Ibrahim Rugova buckled under the pressure of the regime's increasing violence. Kosovo's ethnic Albanians increasingly threw support behind the KLA, which was engaging the Yugoslav Army and Serbian police more and more in a lethal game of cat and mouse.

By mid- to late 1998, reports of massacres were grabbing headlines in newspapers around the world. As pressure mounted for action, and after negotiations in Rambouillet, France failed to secure any meaningful solution, NATO delivered on its promise to intervene militarily. International condemnation spread as the Yugoslav Army expelled thousands of civilians into neighboring Macedonia and Albania. Grim footage of atrocities committed by Serbian police and paramilitaries sparked further outrage. Contributing to the country's isolation, Milosevic and four of his top aides were subsequently indicted in

May 1999 by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) for war crimes and crimes against humanity. As the war drew to a close, the situation as far as the international community was concerned was clear: Milosevic had to go.

That consensus opened the way for significant support to be directed toward the country's genuine pro-democracy activities. Donors and governments around the world began combing Serbia for organizations and activists willing to take the risks associated with working in Serbia. Anti-Milosevic sentiments soared high inside the country following the war, providing ample opportunity to work with human rights NGOs, student groups, and opposition political parties. Support was also given to international organizations with similar experience building democracy in Eastern Europe. A massive infusion of aid went to support independent media and alternative means of distributing news, such as the Internet. The U.S. government went so far as to erect a series of radio transmitters around the periphery of Serbia in the hopes of providing genuine news content from a stream of services, including Voice of America, the BBC, and Agence France-Presse. Although reports differ on the amount of assistance the U.S. government contributed to democratization efforts in Serbia, most reports cite the total at around \$25 million.

The Strategic Use of Nonviolent Action

As the international campaign to promote democracy in Serbia began to merge with efforts under way inside the country, Otpor devoted itself to developing the strategies and tactics of successful nonviolent action. The movement learned such elements in part from the work of retired Harvard professor Gene Sharp, whose books *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973) and *From Dictatorship to Democracy: A Conceptual Framework for Liberation* (Bangkok: Committee for the Restoration of Democracy in Burma, 1993) have become the cornerstone of nonviolent movements around the world.

In addition, Robert Helvey, a retired U.S. Army colonel who worked closely with Sharp in the past, traveled to Budapest on behalf of the International Republican Institute in early 2000 to assist Otpor in developing its strategy. Helvey encouraged the students to approach their campaign more systematically by helping the movement define its objectives and identify challenges in promoting democracy in Serbia. At Helvey's insistence, Otpor also analyzed the sources of power within Serbian society, including the "pillars of support" that sustained the regime—such as control of the media and the country's security forces—and potential pillars of support for the democratic opposition as well.

Otpor and Helvey also considered some of the operational aspects of how to develop a successful nonviolent movement: tactics for recruiting support from a wide spectrum of Serbian citizens, including winning support from within the ranks of the government itself; the psychological effect of fear, and methods and techniques for overcoming it; psychological methods designed to improve public opinion of Otpor and its objectives; crisis management and the importance of leadership in moments of crisis; and how to avoid unnecessary risk that could jeopardize the movement or, worse, the lives of its activists.

The rigor of Helvey's approach conveyed an important feature of nonviolent action: "Strategy is just as important in nonviolent action as it is in military action" (Sharp, *Politics of Nonviolent Action*, p. 493); the point for both is to maximize impact by capitalizing on available resources and a conflict's ever-changing dynamics. Using time effectively or retaining a psychological edge over an opponent, for example, are both keys to successful strategies in waging conflict, be it nonviolent or violent. As Gandhi himself once observed: "An able general always gives battle in his own time on the ground of his choice. He always retains the initiative in these respects and never allows it to pass into the hands of the enemy" (as quoted in Sharp, *Politics of Nonviolent Action*, p. 500).

Otpor understood that it had entered a war against the government and that the

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consequences of its campaign could bring increased repression, or even death, at the hands of a much more powerful adversary. To guide its strategy in this high-stakes effort, Otpor looked at other successful nonviolent movements—how they were created and what tactics were useful in their struggles.

Otpor leaders distributed Serbian-language versions of Sharp's *From Dictatorship to Democracy* to its activists. And, with assistance from his *Politics of Nonviolent Action*, they developed a list of tactics that had proved effective in challenging authority elsewhere, including organizing sit-ins, protest marches, and consumer boycotts. The point was to indirectly and consistently challenge the government on many levels. In so doing, Otpor hoped to change the power imbalance in the country by exposing the regime's weaknesses and lessening the grip of fear it held on the population. Sharp's work proved so useful that Otpor subsequently praised it as "an astoundingly effective blueprint for confronting a brutal regime" (e-mail to Albert Cevallos, March 22, 2001). Helvey's impact was likewise apparent: "We are grateful for what he did for democracy in Serbia" (comments by Otpor activist Srdja Popovic at the "Whither the Bulldozer" conference, January 30–31, 2001, Belgrade).



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"He's Finished!"

With its youthful membership and strict adherence to nonviolence, Otpor won the sympathy of the broader population. The movement also directly challenged Milosevic's authority by plastering its symbol—a clenched black-and-white fist that riffed off of Communist propaganda, and the slogan "Gotov Je!" ("He's Finished!") throughout Serbia. To aid in this effort, the movement created a marketing wing responsible for designing the sleek and highly visible posters, t-shirts, and leaflets that would make it one of the best-known "brands" in Serbia. In one instance, Otpor activists throughout the country, hoping to send a powerful message to the government about their strength, posted tens of thousands of posters in dozens of towns and cities in just one hour.

In a bid to attract more recruits, while at the same time exposing the brittleness of the regime, the movement also employed humor and sarcasm in its campaigns and posters, a tactic that it had learned from Sharp's *Politics of Nonviolent Action*. This tactic increased exponentially the arsenal of options available to the nonviolent movement. In one highly publicized incident, after police had raided Otpor's Belgrade office and confiscated hundreds of the movement's posters and information bulletins without a search warrant, one of the movement's spokespersons announced it would in any case receive a new shipment of materials the next afternoon. When police arrived and, again without a permit, confiscated the boxes, they were embarrassed to find that they were in fact empty. Otpor had not only exposed illegal police tactics in front of the media, it also regained the upper hand in its tit-for-tat battle with the regime by highlighting police ineptitude.

Otpor worked hard to keep the regime off-balance in a variety of additional ways:

- *Building a decentralized network of local Otpor chapters.* The movement concentrated on developing its own institutional strength, challenging the regime not only in Belgrade but throughout Serbia as well. It opened offices throughout the country and recruited activists from all walks of Serbian life, including prominent athletes and representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church. To limit Milosevic's ability to co-opt its leaders, or simply arrest or "disappear" them, Otpor intentionally decentralized its activities. Its leadership was kept secret and it hardly ever met as a full group. Only one or two key individuals oversaw control of the movement's resources. Otpor branches around the country acted on their own initiative, with little direction from the center.
- *Chipping away at Milosevic's traditional power base.* Another central element of a strategic nonviolent movement is its ability to deprive its opponent of control. This means attacking an opponent's ability to consolidate control, lessening the impact of violent

retaliation while at the same time maintaining nonviolent discipline, and most crucially, alienating an opponent from its traditional bases of support. Accordingly, Otpor worked to “turn” against the regime constituencies traditionally supportive of it—from pensioners to police officers. By joining pensioner strikes, sending flowers to the military on Army Day, and building an umbrella big and welcoming enough to accommodate diverse members of Serbian society, Otpor silently recruited sympathizers in numbers that would not become entirely apparent until the final days of the regime. Also, by cultivating external assistance in the form of diplomatic and financial support, Otpor had the resources to develop its internal infrastructure and image abroad.

- *Staying flexible and one step ahead of the regime.* From its earlier work with Helvey, Otpor also understood that a successful strategic nonviolent movement must be able to reconceptualize its role vis-à-vis the fluid and evolving conflict in which it is engaged. This means assessing previous events in light of results, adjusting offensive and defensive operations accordingly, and sustaining continuity between actions and objectives. Otpor exercised these options by adopting a defensive posture in the summer of 2000 after hundreds of its activists had been arrested that spring and, in order to conserve resources and personnel for future actions, refraining from further activity until elections were called in July. By this time, owing to a tip from a sympathetic government insider, the movement had already printed upwards of sixty tons of election-related materials in anticipation of the coming campaign.

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Forging Alliances: Keeping the Opposition United

Otpor realized early on that it had to overcome the intransigence and fractiousness of opposition political parties. This meant spending countless hours behind the scenes pressuring the parties' leaders, who had come together to form the Alliance for Change in June 1998, to remain united. Members of Otpor remained affiliated with various parties or their youth wings, assisting in this effort. Otpor also actively recruited sympathizers from within the ruling party's youth wings, from whom it learned valuable information such as what events were being planned to counter its own efforts.

Once the opposition finally began to coalesce, and hoping to capitalize on newfound popular discontent with Milosevic, to call for elections, Otpor continued to insist that the opposition remain united. At its rallies, which dwarfed those sponsored by the political parties, the students shoved political leaders on stage en masse, determined to show a united front. The sheer size of the Otpor movement demanded the political opposition's attention. Thanks in part to these efforts, and despite the breakdown in late 1999 of the Alliance for Change—yet another victim of the interrecine rivalry that plagued earlier opposition efforts—negotiations that would ultimately create the much stronger Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS) coalition were already under way.

Significant alliances were also forged between Otpor and representatives of the country's civil society, including NGOs and the independent media. Whereas these groups once represented a disparate opposition coalition, the circumstances under which they now worked yielded collaboration unseen before in Serbia. After journalist Miroslav Filipovic was imprisoned in July 2000 for reporting atrocities committed by the Yugoslav Army in Kosovo, for instance, dozens of local NGOs and Otpor distributed nationwide petitions calling for his release.

Following another incident in which a journalist was arrested for displaying a poster in his window decrying the lack of press freedom, Otpor activists constructed makeshift jails—out of newspapers, no less—on city streets to represent the prison Serbia had become. Reflecting its rapid growth, the coalition of NGOs, Otpor, and the independent media also cosponsored a caravan of large prodemocracy rock concerts that traveled throughout Serbia. In addition, a significant number of civic and special interest

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groups—supported by international NGOs, such as the National Endowment for Democracy, the National Democratic Institute, and the International Republican Institute—expanded their presence throughout Serbia during this period by working and recruiting actively outside of Belgrade. Such was the case with the Nezavisnost labor union and G17+, the latter a political movement that evolved out of a group of prodemocracy economists. By the summer of 2000, civil society had laced Serbia with a network of NGOs and prodemocracy activists.

The end result of these expanding alliances was far from assured. The prodemocracy movement's successes brought with them even harsher repression. Arrests and beatings of Otpor and other civic activists were so frequent that the U.S. Department of State warned that Milosevic had plunged the country "closer to open dictatorship than ever before" (Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2000, "Federal Republic of Yugoslavia," February 2001). NGOs allied with the nonviolent movement, such as Women in Black and the Humanitarian Law Center—usually no more than an irritating thorn in the side of the regime—came under increasing attack (Amnesty International, press release, August 18, 2000).

The broad coalition persisted, however, believing that the government could not remain in power forever simply by relying on brute force. Whenever an Otpor or NGO activist was arrested or beaten, local media were alerted, which in turn brought citizens out onto the streets demanding an explanation and a stop to the violence. Over the previous year the movement had worked hard to develop relations, and thus sympathies, with the international community. Every arrest brought with it increased scrutiny and condemnation of the Milosevic regime from outside Serbia, highlighting the importance of developing a concrete infrastructure and support network. Each event ultimately served to undermine Milosevic and embolden the growing pro-democracy movement.

Elections Provide the Moment

Desperate to keep up the appearance of his government's legitimacy, and confident that he had sufficiently neutralized the opposition, in July 2000 Milosevic called for elections to be held in late September. With the assistance of international NGOs and donors, opposition political parties and domestic NGOs were determined to avoid the mistakes of previous election campaigns. Unity, getting out the vote, and monitoring the elections became crucial.

- *Opposition unity.* Opinion surveys sponsored by international organizations and conducted by local NGOs showed that a united opposition could in fact defeat Milosevic at the polls. The surveys also revealed that public distrust of Draskovic and Djindjic, the opposition's two most prominent leaders, ran high. To be successful, the DOS not only needed to quell its own rivalries but also had to put forward a candidate who could credibly challenge Milosevic. After conducting additional opinion surveys, the opposition chose Vojislav Kostunica, the leader of the Democratic Party of Serbia and a relative unknown outside of political circles, as its candidate. Draskovic's refusal to recognize the DOS decision to field a single candidate against Milosevic, and his insistence on putting forward a Serbian Renewal Movement candidate, isolated him from supporters, many of whom were by now abandoning the party to join the DOS. Montenegro's decision to boycott federal elections deprived democratic activists of a sizable anti-Milosevic voting bloc and added to the great strain that the opposition was already under.
- *Getting out the vote.* In conjunction with a large coalition of NGOs and the DOS, Otpor again used its network to launch a massive get-out-the-vote campaign, focusing on Serbia's youth, which traditionally had not participated in the electoral process and thus represented a large, untapped constituency. Under the dual banners of "He's Finished" and "It's Time," Otpor activists around the country, in coordination with dozens of NGOs as well as the DOS coalition, once again organized

concerts featuring prominent Serbian musicians and actors, culminating in a large demonstration in Belgrade just days before the elections.

- *Election monitoring.* DOS also began recruiting election monitors who could deter the government from stuffing ballots. It did this in conjunction with an NGO, Center for Free Elections and Democracy (CeSID), training opposition activists to conduct exit polls and tabulate parallel vote counts during elections. Preparations were so extensive that by the time elections did roll around upwards of 15,000 volunteers had been trained. The opposition used additional opinion polls sponsored by prodemocracy NGOs to focus its efforts, and campaign messages were tested in front of sample audiences before being used in public.

The campaign worked. According to various monitoring groups and independent media, more than 70 percent of Serbia's eligible voters had gone to the polls, and a majority of votes were for DOS candidate Kostunica. Milosevic's refusal to recognize the results sparked outrage that in turn led the opposition to call for nationwide strikes. The country responded: schools, public transportation, theaters, and, perhaps most important, miners—long a bastion of support for the ruling party—joined.

By this point, opposition leaders had spent countless hours meeting with high-ranking police and military officials to get a promise that violence would not be used at peaceful rallies. In addition, as one opposition leader pointed out, the seemingly spontaneous revolution on the streets of Belgrade following Milosevic's dismissal of the electoral results was carefully planned, much like a military campaign. "We wanted to keep the police preoccupied in different places, that's why I said only one bus [of protesters] from Kolubara," referring to the massive miners' strike that forced police to travel there instead of consolidating its forces in Belgrade (*New York Times*, October 15, 2000, p. A12).

In the capital itself, the opposition likewise organized what seemed to be spontaneous protests in an effort to preoccupy police. This included the "sudden" breakdown of cars in the middle of the downtown area's busiest intersections at the height of rush hour. Other "spontaneous" protests and strikes were planned throughout many of Belgrade's neighborhoods and outlying suburbs in order to further consume valuable police resources. Support for the strikes was so widespread that even the police and military seemed to hesitate, unsure which way the political winds would blow.

That answer would come on October 5: After weeks of uncertainty, a teeming crowd, many of whom came from outside the capital, stormed the Yugoslav federal parliament. As the police retreated, leaving behind their weapons, the crowd surged forward and—with the assistance of a local farmer's bulldozer—crashed through the parliament building's doors. Realizing that the revolution would be left incomplete if it stopped there, the crowd then took over state-run media facilities.

To be sure, there were some violent clashes with the police on the streets of Belgrade that day, and reports filtered in of both police and citizens being injured in the chaos. One young woman died, though reports differ on the circumstances surrounding her death. But once again displaying the importance of strategy in successful nonviolent action, it has since been revealed that the popular liberation of the parliament and some of the media facilities was a carefully choreographed event (Misha Glenny, "Letter from Belgrade: The Redeemers," *The New Yorker*, October 30, 2000, p. 77). After months of escalating conflict, a movement wielding strategic nonviolence had helped to bring down the government of Slobodan Milosevic, who resigned the next day.

Problems in the Transition

In the period immediately following the revolution, efforts focused on shoring up the gains of the opposition, especially in advance of Serbian parliamentary elections in December. These efforts included significant donor support in alleviating the energy

. . . as one opposition leader pointed out, the seemingly spontaneous revolution on the streets of Belgrade following Milosevic's dismissal of the electoral results was carefully planned, much like a military campaign.

. . . once again displaying the importance of strategy in successful nonviolent action, it has since been revealed that the popular liberation of the parliament and some of the media facilities was a carefully choreographed event



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crisis that the opposition had inherited from the previous regime. There were in addition a host of other problems that the new government, headed by Kostunica, needed to address: among them, investigating the many crimes of the previous regime and rescuing an economy that had been plundered by Milosevic.

Otpor launched several new campaigns, including one capitalizing on the image of the bulldozer that had been used to storm the parliament. In a thinly veiled warning to the ousted government, its posters read, "In Serbia there are 5,675 registered bulldozers and several million potential drivers. . . . WE ARE WATCHING YOU!" As December neared, a new get-out-the-vote campaign encouraging Serbia's voters to "Finish the Job," "Seal the Deal," and "Use Your Brain" was launched.

Nevertheless, concerns mounted that support for many of the organizations that contributed to the revolution had evaporated. Instead, foreign assistance shifted its focus from the opposition and civil society activities to those of the new Yugoslav government. When Otpor first launched its "Bulldozer" campaign, foreign diplomats suggested that the message that would instead be conveyed would be one against the newly elected, and ostensibly fragile, government. The movement was threatened with a retraction of political and donor support if the campaign proceeded. Otpor refused to relent, suggesting instead that it was in any case just as important to remind the democratic forces that they, too, would be held accountable for their actions.

Other organizations faced similar threats to their support. Such was the case with the Student Union of Serbia (SUS), which promoted democracy and tolerance in its activities and which represented thousands of university students across the country. SUS collaborated with many of the NGOs that advocated democracy and was an active participant in the "It's Time" campaign. But the lack of functioning computers and photocopiers (and even heat) in its Belgrade headquarters signaled that the organization was struggling to make ends meet even as money rushed in to support Serbia's new democratic government. Nonetheless, SUS remained active and is currently working with the new government to repeal the repressive laws that Milosevic imposed on the universities.

Perhaps a more basic question confronting Serbia was what role—if any—groups such as these should assume in the country's transition to democracy. As many observers pointed out, the primary objective of these organizations—indeed, their very *raison d'être*—had been fulfilled. Now they could either dissolve or, if need be, remain a watchdog of the new government. Others, however, interpreted the democratic changes to mean increased opportunity, or even responsibility.

The answer did not come easily. When Otpor announced at the beginning of 2001 that it would be transforming itself into a political party, controversy erupted. Many of the movement's own activists regarded this decision as treason. It smacked of the same political ambition that they had initially set out to defeat. News reports circulated that Otpor offices outside of Belgrade would not recognize the move, and its future role remained ambiguous. At the same time, other politically active NGOs, such as G17+, also put forward plans to develop into legitimate political parties.

As a result, anxiety swelled that genuine democracy in Serbia could not be built by focusing solely on political parties. Experience in postwar transitions elsewhere, as well as the transitions from communism to democracy in other central and eastern European nations, suggested instead that a vibrant civil society was crucial for the successful transition to peace and democracy. Democracy—like the revolution before it—needed to be built from outside the center, and from the ground up, with the support of a wide breadth of organizations active throughout all of Serbia.

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What Now?

Although Otpor may have set off the initial spark, it is in the end impossible to credit any single individual or organization with the downfall of Milosevic. Countless brave and

unnoticed individuals and organizations played a critical role behind the scenes, helping to create the wave that would wash away the old guard. In addition, there was a significant number of people from within the Milosevic government who were for whatever reasons also willing to collaborate with the democratic opposition. But in assessing the impact of Serbia's nonviolent movement in the aftermath of the revolution, a senior U.S. diplomat declared, "We hope the new generation of leaders will come from Otpor's ranks" (Roger Cohen, "Who Really Brought Down Milosevic?" *New York Times Magazine*, November 26, 2000, p. 118).

Such a sentiment is more than a reflection of the role that the movement played in mobilizing Serbs to take to the streets. It is also an insight into the critical role that a nonviolent movement plays in a civil society and a nation's fledgling democracy. Many of the organizations and individuals responsible for successful nonviolent movements elsewhere have gone on to positions of increased responsibility and authority. In short, revolutionary leaders sometimes make good leaders of democratic states. Though additional analysis is needed to fully understand the relation between nonviolent movements, civil society, and the development of democracy in such places, it is possible to infer from the existing evidence that support for such organizations during the transition counts almost as much, if not more, as it did prior to the transition.

In Serbia, this means that support must continue to be forthcoming for groups that helped create the revolution in the first place, especially because many representatives of the old regime—such as Serbian president Milan Milutinovic, indicted alongside Milosevic by the ICTY, and a host of police and army personnel with questionable pasts—remain in place. Along those lines, priority must be given to the efforts of a wide swath of NGOs devoted to the many serious challenges now facing the country. The creation of a larger network of prodemocratic forces, including dynamic political parties, independent media, free trade unions, open universities, and an independent judiciary, remains crucial. New organizations anxious to become involved in the democratic process should also be given political and donor support wherever feasible. Finally, support should be aimed at long-term grassroots efforts, not individual leaders or short-term results, especially because virtually all observers predict the eventual disintegration of the DOS coalition.

While providing the type of support necessary to further the democratization of Serbia, donors should, however, be careful not to create the type of dependency that has suffocated civil society in other transitional countries. In Bosnia and Croatia, for example, many local initiatives suffered once attention, and thus financial resources, shifted to Kosovo. Likewise, civic organizations in Kosovo decry the loss of support that the fall of Milosevic, and thus the restructuring of international priorities, has meant for their own initiatives. The point for donors and civil society alike is to grow beyond the revolution and the region's many conflicts. Cultivating a self-sustaining civil society increases the likelihood of successful democratic transitions.

For their part, NGOs, student groups, and other representatives of Serbia's civil society must continue to ask what their role is in a new, democratic society. Some, such as Free Serbia, have already suggested that they can export their own experiences and lessons promoting democracy to other countries, most notably Belarus and Burma. Others have noted that perhaps the greatest contribution of civic organizations would be to focus on the rampant corruption that plagues the country. Indeed, the widespread criminalization of most all of the Balkans over a decade of wars will continue to plague efforts at stability for some time to come.

The current government in Serbia took a step in the right direction when, under strong pressure from the international community, it arrested Milosevic in March 2001. The government's announcement that the former president would be tried for corruption and related crimes fell short of what many, including representatives of the country's civil society and international donors, considered necessary to truly establish democracy. Yet Milosevic was handed over to the ICTY on June 28.

If Serbia wishes to move into the future, it must do so by addressing the larger, and

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more explosive, question of war crimes. Establishing accountability would not only distance the current government from the crimes committed by the previous regime, it would also set the standard by which future crimes are judged. As Serbia attempts to re-establish its legal and judicial systems, both of which were badly ravaged by Milosevic, the engagement of civic groups in these endeavors can yield significant advantages. For one, the process of establishing a proper historical record provides citizens an opportunity to learn about the country's role in the region—including its past, present, and future. Indeed, experience suggests that a nation cannot move beyond a debilitating sense of collective guilt until it learns to assign individual responsibility and accountability.

This will not be easy in Serbia. Accountability raises uncomfortable questions for many people, including some of those who currently constitute the new, democratic government. NGOs, student groups, and other representatives of civil society may thus wish to focus their efforts on the many aspects of reconciling Serbia's past. Independent media can assist in the process by devoting attention to the mechanics of justice and other human rights issues, further disseminating the underpinnings of a strong democratic state. B92, the independent radio station that for so long was a favorite target of Milosevic, is a prime example of the role civil society can play as it endeavors to promote the establishment of a credible truth and reconciliation commission that addresses Serbia's recent past.

Serbia faces an additional number of challenging issues, any of which its civil society may choose to engage. For instance, as long as there is confusion over the independence of Montenegro (as the tentative member, next to Serbia, in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) and Kosovo, Serbia will continue to exhaust itself trying to define what it is. Civic groups can, in the interim, continue to promote democracy, including the core values of mutual tolerance and respect for human rights, until issues of final status are resolved. Civic organizations may also choose to focus on the establishment of a genuine rule of law or privatization efforts (both of which are intrinsically tied to anticorruption efforts and the issue of accountability). Reform of Serbia's police and military is another important area in which the country's civic organizations may play a role. Finally, to address any or all of these issues, Serbia's civil society may choose to realign itself into a watchdog role, representing the many aspects of Serbian life and the many challenges the country faces.

Conclusion

After a decade of devastating wars and crippling international isolation, the extent to which the new democratic government of Serbia can honor a commitment to nonviolence will go a long way in bringing the country back into the fold of the international community. Recent events in the Presevo Valley area of southern Serbia, where violence has erupted between local ethnic Albanians and Serbian police, suggest that this may already be the case, as the government seeks to reach a diplomatic solution. As one Otpor activist commented, "Nonviolence made the revolution; nonviolence should make the peace" ("Yugoslavia: An Incomplete Revolution," United States Institute of Peace, October 17, 2000).

In sum, long-term peace and stability in the Balkans continue to require the establishment of genuine and stable democracies in Serbia and throughout the region. Establishing such polities would greatly increase the chances of solving the Balkans' many complex tensions and conflicts by changing, in effect, the context in which problems and issues are addressed. Civil society is key to this process. Democratization of the Balkans would in addition go a long way towards integrating the region with the rest of Europe. Of course, such a goal remains a long-term process that will not in and of itself resolve all of the immediate crises in the region. However, the development of a new generation of leaders who respect political pluralism, market reform, rule of law, tolerance, and, in short, democracy will hasten the return of peace and stability to the region.



**United States
Institute of Peace**
1200 17th Street NW
Washington, DC 20036