

# Decay of Serbian Social Democracy

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**Serbia has a long tradition of social democracy which goes back to the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. State of modern Serbian social-democracy isn't that much different from the situation in which social democrats find themselves in other European countries. Contemporary Serbian "descendants" of social democratic movements have completely abandoned their original values, but unlike many of their foreign counterparts they also completely lost their political influence. Ideologically, for the last twenty years, they were leaning on western and bourgeois values. This was their undoing as former nationalist radical Aleksandar Vučić became favourite Western's favourite politician in contemporary Serbia.**

Roots of socialist ideas in Serbia date back to the days of Principality, in the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century. Principality of Serbia, factually independent but still unrecognized diplomatically and under the administration of Prince (later King) Milan, used to send a certain number of gifted young men to get their education abroad. Svetozar Marković, born in the town of Zajecar, was among them. During his education in Russia, he came into contact with Narodnichestvo and started with his political work in revolutionary circles. During this time, the influence of Chernishevsky, Hercen and Dobroljubov left a mark on Marković. After Russia, he continued school in Switzerland where he started studying scientific socialism. Svetozar Marković lived for only 28 years, but his impressive work heavily influenced not only the development of social thought but also literary and cultural field.

Alongside with bringing socialist ideas in rural Serbia, Marković marked the end of romanticism and transition to realism in art with his work "Pevanje i mišljenje" (Singing and thinking). Very early he came into conflict with the regime of Milan Obrenović which at the end indirectly contributed to his death. During his school in Zurich, he published an article in newspaper "Zastava" based in Novi Sad and lost his scholarship as the result. Left without funding for his education he returned to his homeland and started publishing magazine "Radenik" which was issued in 1871 and 1872. Because of his political work and anti-government articles, he was sentenced to nine months in jail in 1874. By the time of his release, he was so sick from tuberculosis that he died in Trieste in 1875.

The legacy of Svetozar Markovic runs very deep, especially if we bear in mind not only his early death but also the composition of 19<sup>th</sup> century Serbian society in which workers represented barely existing group inside the general population. The number of literate people was even fewer. In the year of his death, the socialist movement which he created and formed achieved first electoral victory. In November 1875 on local elections in Kragujevac, the coalition of socialists and radicals has beaten pro-regime liberals by 7:1. Regime orchestrated a gathering in February 1876 and tried to overthrow the elected administration, but the plan was uncovered and demonstrations which stopped it followed. This event is remembered under name "Red banner" because protestors carried a large red flag with Cyrillic inscription "Self-management" through the city. This had been a first political victory for the young socialist movement, not just in Serbia but also on a broader scale.

Svetozar Marković set deep foundations of new ideology; he was a revolutionary, not a reformist. In

one of his key works "Serbia in the East" he carried out an opinion opposite to then dominant one, according to which it was necessary to allow step by step development of capitalism which would then collapse in its final form. Markovic argued that these steps can be skipped, and considered family community, similar to Russian "obschina", some kind of embryo of a new society in which the means of production, like all property inside family communities, would be collectively owned. Also, he was advocating the idea of Balkan Confederation as a response to the expansionism of the newly formed countries.

## **Radicals U-turn**

Radicals used to value ideas of Svetozar Markovic, but after his death, they have gradually abandoned them. Founding of People's Radical Party in 1881 under the leadership of Nikola Pašić marked the great turn, primarily in terms of agrarian policy, because Marković was an advocate of collective land ownership. They were advocating constitutional reforms, peoples instead of the regular army, representative democracy and universal suffrage. Some of Svetozar Marković's closest associates and followers took key party positions. However, the Timok uprising in 1883 marked a total reversal. The 10-day uprising which broke out because authorities decided to confiscate privately owned weapons from the population was bloodily crushed. Because of two articles about this event in their party newspaper, King Milan Obrenović arrested almost whole Radical party leadership, except Pašić who managed to escape to Bulgaria. Some of them, including Pašić, were sentenced to death, but the penalty was not carried out. Radicals were demoralised and ready to compromise. After a while, they became a part of the establishment, and later on, a real pro-government political force. Serbian social democracy was waiting on its next generation.

The leader of this generation was Dimitrije Tucović. Ideas of Marković, betrayed by his contemporaries, became more influential at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1901 a modest propaganda group decided to renew "Belgrade worker's society", and later "Movements central committee". They were leading the demonstrations against Pašić and advocating the foundation of unions. Because of the demonstrations against King Aleksandar Obrenović, Tucović was forced into exile. After May Coup and murder of the King in 1903, Tucovic returned. During the same year Serbian socialdemocratic party (SSDP) was founded.

SSDP became the member of Second International, where they clashed with predominant Austrian social democrats, primarily around the question of annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Alongside vivid propaganda and educational activities, this period of SSDP history is characterised by principled anti-war policy. Although there were anti-war factions in other parties that were rebelling against Second International opportunism, SSDP was the only party whose MPs voted against war loans in their national parliament. Despite this attitude which was in that time on the same line advocated by Lenin, members of SSDP, including Tucović, could not escape the participation in WWI. Reason for that was two-sided: Firstly, they were considering the Austro-Hungarian invasion of Serbia as an aggressive action of imperialist power; secondly, they were sharing the fate of most of the Serbian people. In a letter to his father, Tucović wrote: "I was never even thinking about shielding myself from the fate that is following the entire people, I will not be thinking about it now". He died at the very beginning of the war, in 1914 during The Battle of Kolubara, near Lajkovac.

## **The Legacy of Dimitrije Tucovic**

The political legacy of SSDP is deep and significant, and the same can be said about the work of Dimitrije Tucović. Alongside with translations of Marx, Bebel, Kautsky and the others, Tucović was publishing his own works which were unique in that time, but also today. The best example of that is the book "Serbia and Albania: A Contribution to the Critique of the Conqueror Policy of the Serbian Bourgeoisie". In this book, Tucović was criticising the policy of the Kingdom of Serbia towards

Albania, as well as war crimes committed against Albanians. It was published after two Balkan wars (in 1912 and 1913) and it was reflecting events which were described by the public of that time, and later historiography, as the end of Turkish rule and military presence after several centuries. During victory celebrations, no one was worried about civilian and innocent casualties. There was even lesser possibility that someone would criticize the Army, who reached the peak of its reputation. In an atmosphere of fired up nationalism, looming pressure from Austro-Hungarian Empire and upcoming World War, Tucović published this historic work in which he stated that "there was an attempted forethought murder of entire Albanian nation", and he qualified this as a crime for which there must be a punishment. Serbian troops which entered Albania were characterized not as brotherly liberators, but as invaders. Year in which the book was published was also the year of Tucović's death.

On the other hand, he was attacking attitude of Austrian social democracy towards the national question. Politics of Austro-Hungaria was qualified as colonial and socialdemocrats were accused of supporting it. This was only one aspect of disagreement with parties of Second International.

At the end of WWI, members of SSDP mostly held Bolshevik positions. Those who did not accept the revolutionary programme of newly formed Socialist workers party of Yugoslavia (communists), were called "centrists" and they were working as a party faction in the beginning. However, after the Second Congress during which the Party changed its name to Communist Party of Yugoslavia, "centrists" published their "Manifesto of CPY opposition" and were excluded. After that, alongside their allies from Bosnia and German socialist groups from Banat, they again formed Socialist workers party of Yugoslavia, which later - after unification with two similar groups - became the Socialist Party of Yugoslavia.

Because of its opportunism, this organisation could not become relevant political factor between two World Wars. Nothing of any political significance was left behind it. Živko Topalović, party Secretary, supported Draža Mihailović's Chetniks during WWII, Serbia's biggest collaborationist movement. He was even member of Chetnik organization leadership. As Mihailović's delegate, he flew to Italy and stayed there until his death in 1972. During his absence, he was sentenced in 1946 to 20 years in prison.

## **Period of Socialist Yugoslavia**

The legacy of Serbian Socialdemocratic Party and Svetozar Marković was highly respected in post-war Yugoslavia. Remains of Dimitrije Tucović were transferred from Lajkovac underneath a monument on Slavija square in Belgrade in 1949. A large number of schools in Serbia was named after Svetozar Marković. Nowadays the town of Jagodina, for some period was named Svetozarevo in his honour, as well as one University who got its name changed during the 1990s.

During Yugoslav self-management period, there were no opposition groups who would describe themselves as socialdemocratic. Dissident circles in Belgrade were a mixture of nationalists and liberals who later formed many political parties which were considering Milošević's regime as communist or leftist. Milošević's Socialist Party of Serbia was occasionally trying to present itself as an ally of Spanish or Swedish socialists. There were several parties with term social democracy in their name, founded at the beginning of the 1990s, one of them formed by former Milošević's associates, but those parties never succeeded in gaining mass support.

## **Post-Milošević setting**

During the second half of the 1990s we witnessed a wave of newly formed socialdemocratic parties such as the Social Democratic Union and the Socialdemocracy founded by former general Vuk

Obradović. Democratic Party also began to flirt with ideas of social democracy. This generation was mainly reducing social democracy to superficial ideas imported from Western countries. Because of this, average voter could not differentiate them from liberals, if there was any difference between them in the first place.

After the fall of Milošević in October 2000, various socialdemocratic parties participated in ruling coalitions. For example, the current government enjoys the support of Aleksandar Vulin's "Movement of socialists". Nevertheless, it's not proof of strength of socialdemocratic option, but of its weakness. Although polls suggest that the majority of people has a positive opinion about principles that can be considered as socialdemocratic (solidarity, equality etc.), that kind of parties are unable to achieve greater electoral success. Most they can do in the end is to become a junior partner in ruling coalitions.

### **Blurry concept**

The very definition of social democracy is unclear for most of the aforementioned political parties. This not unusual considering the fact that most of the western socialdemocratic parties such as German, French, Scandinavian and British Labour party abandoned the content of their politics in the 1990s, preserving social democracy only in their names. In contemporary Serbia, social democracy is often reduced to ambition to win over voters who, according to analysis, are showing sympathies for this ideas. However, this kind of analysis does not give the answer to the crucial question: Do these voters even participate in elections or do they choose to abstain, considering that the turnout is around 50%?

Regardless of their rhetoric, among socialdemocrats of today, it is impossible to find someone who would challenge privatization as an idea. Reason for failure of socialdemocratic parties in post-Milošević period is that voters identified them as passionate advocates of the new regime, patrons of economic reforms and unconditional collaboration with Western forces. All in all, they were recognized as a part of corrupt partitocracy.

In the end, if we define social democracy in terms of contemporary centre-left, we will see that this policy never played a significant role in Serbia. Svetozar Marković and Dimitrije Tucović were very significant political actors a long time ago, but they had nothing to do with the political centre. They were revolutionaries who fought against imperialistic domination, first of all against Austro-Hungarian Empire. Nowadays, socialdemocrats cherish extremely uncritical pro-western policies and - as we already mentioned - are hard to differentiate from liberals, especially because they often form coalitions together.

Their argumentation was the logic of "lesser evil" - nationalists will lead us into isolation, that's what they were saying for twelve years. However, when the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) (one that gathers former radicals under the leadership of Aleksandar Vučić) came into power, it appeared that the West is fond of them. It is also obvious that SNS is a good and exemplary student of the West. This caused destruction on the so-called centre-left, or we can say on ideological centre. That parties are in chaos because their only asset - alleged reputation in the western world - was taken over by former radical. Even worse news for bourgeois opposition was when Prime Minister of Serbia became openly gay Ana Brnabić. What's left for them? They can hope that SNS will arrive on the brink of collapse after the descent from power. That is exactly what happened in Serbia to all earlier ruling parties.

Deep gap between the tradition of Serbian social democracy and its self-proclaimed descendants is clear. Nevertheless, Marković's and Tucović's greatness is unquestionable. Their images and examples are left behind as guidance for Serbia, regardless of the words and actions of those who

call themselves social democrats today.

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## **Nenad Glišić**

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