

# Serbia: Milosevic's Manoeuvres

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**The Serbian Socialist Party has dominated politics ever since the Communist league dissolved itself in 1990. Manipulation of the electoral law and the media are only part of the explanation.**

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The population sees Milosevic as their best defender in a context they perceive as characterised by “anti-Yugoslav” and “anti-Serb” conspiracies. The crisis of the explosion of the Yugoslav federation is intimately linked in peoples’ minds and in practice with the mechanics of the “transition” from one system to another. The war for territory and property was carried out in the name of a redefinition of the ethnic frontiers. The socio-economic transformations underway across central and Eastern Europe have been slowed down in Serbia, partly as a result of the economic sanctions imposed on the country, and partly through the conscious choice of the regime.

The moment for taking stock, and making changes is fast approaching. There is a huge gap between the old promises of a state that would gather in all the Serbs, and the policies which have been followed. Hundreds of thousands of frustrated Serbian refugees and a miserable host population have witnessed the obscene enrichment of war profiteers.

The Serbian regime is not exhausted. Milosevic’s political savvy creates a certain room for manoeuvre, particularly faced with heterogeneous and rather unattractive opposition proposals. This reality explains the apparently contradictory results of the federal and municipal elections held at the beginning of November.

## Municipal problems

On 3 November 1996 the ruling Socialist Party and its allies in the “Left Alliance” won two thirds of seats in the Yugoslav federal elections (Yugoslavia now comprises only Serbia and Montenegro). The centre-right opposition coalition Zajedno (“Together”) [[1](#)] received a much lower vote than it had hoped. Surprisingly, several days later, Zajedno won municipal elections in fifteen cities, including the Serbian and federal capital Belgrade.

The annulling of these results provoked daily demonstrations of 10-100,000 people. A heterogeneous crowd united in the demand for a state that respects the rule of law, including the results of elections. Blocs of student marchers not only demonstrated their vitality at these daily

demonstrations, but were keen to distinguish themselves from the opposition parties, which range from liberal democrats to nationalist and royalist currents (supported by the Orthodox Church, which would like to play a larger role in state affairs) to the extreme right..

Although they have mainly taken their distance from Serb nationalism, younger people are still unable to face, and evaluate Serbia's past. Their preference for "apolitical" demonstrations expresses this weakness. A weakness which, however, is a great force in the short term. After all, the struggle for the creation and recognition of independent organisations and for democracy is the main struggle at the moment. This is the struggle which makes it possible to boost and generalise the mobilisation. And this is a struggle where victories are possible.

As for the development of a credible, alternative left force, that is more difficult to imagine in Serbia than elsewhere. The ruling parties are in open crisis, which is taking its effects on all the currents: Stalinist and social-democratic neo-Communists, old and new apparatchiks. This differentiation would be accelerated if they lost power.

### **Sophisticated voters...**

Faced with such imponderable dynamics, the population votes to express a range of aspirations which are not met by any coherent political project. In the federal elections, people voted for internal and external stability. In the municipal elections, people voted against the corrupt incumbents.

There is a town/country difference in voting behaviour. The pauperised urban middle classes voted for the opposition, while the regime's main social base was in the countryside, and among blue collar workers in the state enterprises. Peasants and workers, many of whom grow vegetables on a small patch of land, are worried about losing the meagre advantages offered by the social security system, and the goods and services which the official trade unions still distribute. As a result, the independent trade unions which support the opposition (and often support privatisation proposals) have remained marginal and divided. Their appeals inviting workers to join the opposition demonstrations went unanswered.

The liberal opposition accepts International Monetary Fund thinking about how to reform the Serbian economy. So, despite the ruling parties responsibility for the disastrous socio-economic situation (more than 60% of the population live below the poverty line), the "devil you know" seems to offer ordinary Serbs more protection than the opposition.

Many Serbs credit Slobodan Milosevic with the signing and implementation of the Dayton Accords. In other words, with stopping the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and achieving the end of sanctions against Serbia-Montenegro.

As for the Zajedno opposition, leader Zoran Djindjic had appeared in public alongside the ultra-nationalist Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic. The Bosnian Serb SDS party openly supports the opposition to Milosevic in Serbia.

### **... and a pragmatic leader**

Slobodan Milosevic is a pragmatist, capable of pulling various strings, one at a time, or all simultaneously. In the late 1980s, he rose to power by appearing more reassuring to the population than the nationalist opposition, which was turned towards the royalist past. Milosevic made his first

steps up the power ladder by supporting purges against the corrupt party-state apparatus. He had a pro-Yugoslav discourse, but spoke of the necessity of redefining the federation to the benefit of the Serb majority. When Slovenia and Croatia declared their independence in 1991 Milosevic still hoped to keep Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina inside the Yugoslav federation.

Meanwhile, Serb Renaissance Movement leader Vuk Draskovic was calling for “a Greater Serbia wherever there are Serbian graves” and making strongly anti-Muslim and warlike speeches. The nationalist and anti-communist right began to form their militias. Beginning in 1989, Milosevic began to steal part of the nationalists’ thunder, re-imposing central control on the mainly Albanian province of Kosovo (cradle of the first Serb state in the middle ages), and presenting himself as a defender of Serbian minorities everywhere; from Kosovo to Croatia and Bosnia.

In 1991 the Yugoslav army withdrew from Slovenia (after a 10-day confrontation) and that republic became independent. After the subsequent purges, the Yugoslav Army became a vast reserve force for the various far-right militias who used ethnic cleansing strategies to try to build Serb states in Croatia and Bosnia. During this period, Milosevic consolidated his power in Belgrade through an alliance with the extreme right Serbian Radical Party of Vojislav Seselj.

Milosevic quickly realised that the sorcerer’s apprentice threatened to de-stabilise his regime. The president’s partner, Mirjana Markovic, created the Union of the Yugoslav Left (JUL), which pushed the Socialist Party to break its alliance with the far right allies. It did so in 1993. The JUL denounced the crimes of Radovan Karadzic’s Bosnian Serb nationalists, and proclaimed its attachment to the multi-cultural tradition of Titoist Yugoslav Communism.

The JUL consciously sought to stabilise the Socialist Party regime, by shifting responsibility for war crimes to the far right, and by exploiting the traditional methods of clientelism and corruption among the managers and ministries. The JUL also addressed itself to the most socially disadvantaged sections of the population, in the countryside and the state enterprises. JUL propaganda increasingly included denunciation of IMF pressure, and attacks on the liberal opposition as “serving the west, and paid by the west”. Unfortunately, this is largely true.

### **Slobodan the statesman**

From 1993, Milosevic shelved any plans for a Greater Serbia, and supported the international peace plans against his former ally, the Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic. The evolution of Milosevic’s politics have divided and disturbed the opposition on more than one occasion. When Milosevic broke with the far right, the left opposition current New Democracy (pro-self management, anti-war) joined his coalition. The regime’s new pacifist line disoriented the liberal democratic Civic Alliance, and the Serbian Renaissance Movement, which had switched to an anti-war position when Milosevic had been in favour of war.

The opposition bitterly regretted that they were no longer the favoured interlocutors of the western powers. They decided to make a coalition with the Serbian supporters of Radovan Karadzic, in a front against Milosevic. In Spring 1996, this provoked a split in the Civic Alliance, with half of the leadership and most of the youth forming a small social democratic current which is hostile to any further unprincipled opposition coalitions, with opposition to Milosevic as their sole unifying feature. This new current accused the Civic Alliance of wanting to eliminate the social measures introduced by the Yugoslav regime, and to privatise social property. They are the eighth such small group to articulate such a position.

After the Dayton Accords and the end of the war the major powers have relied on Serbia and

Croatia, the strongest regimes, to try to stabilise the region. This meant dealing with the regime in place. To what extent do the massive anti-Milosevic demonstrations of recent months threaten to change this scenario?

## **The beginning of the end**

The crisis is already provoking the decomposition of the majority power block. The Socialist Party of Montenegro looks more like Poland's ex-Communist Social Democrats than their "big brother" party in Serbia, which, in turn, is much more enthusiastic about the idea of a "Chinese model" combined with limited political pluralism. Montenegro's privatisation law is much more liberal than Serbia's. The smaller republic's rulers have already provoked concern in Belgrade with their desire to control Montenegro's foreign currency income (the Montenegrin coast is Yugoslavia's main tourist centre). The Montenegrin leadership is exploiting the current crisis to expand their own room for manoeuvre and their own autonomy. They even threatened to "re-examine" the Yugoslav federal arrangement if the municipal election victories of the Serbian opposition were not respected.

In Serbia itself, the social democrats of New Democracy threatened to leave the government coalition if these opposition victories were not recognised. Even the Socialist Party is polarising: the mayor of Belgrade resigned in protest and was then expelled from the Socialist Party. The most inflexible neo-Communist part of the coalition, led by Milosevic's spouse Mirjana Markovic is playing an active role in the purges which are now beginning.

In short, the Socialist Party is in transition. The army has stressed its neutrality, and the general staff seems to be playing a conciliatory role. No repressive measures have been taken against those units which declared their support for the opposition, and the general staff has promised Belgrade's students that the army will not intervene. In 1991 Milosevic sent tanks to break up demonstrations.

All is not sweetness and light. Most of the low blows of the Milosevic regime have come from the paramilitary groups and the police, rather than the army. Nothing excludes such "incidents" in the future. Faced with growing public protests, Milosevic for a while seemed to have adopted a strategy combining concessions and threats. He refused to admit that the regime had played any role in annulling the municipal election results. Regional leaders of the Socialist Party in Belgrade, and the far-right Radical Party have continued to support the electoral commission's decision to annul the Zajedno victory in the Belgrade municipal elections. But the regime has proposed that Belgrade be placed, provisionally, under central administration, so that the electoral law can be changed, and new elections organised. In other words,

Milosevic is pretending that the law was respected, but that it was a bad law, and it will be changed. At the same time, the ruling party is "tightening discipline in the ranks" - a purge of "bad apples" including the Socialist Party boss in Nis, Serbia's second largest city. Wherever Zajedno's victory is to be recognised, local Socialist Party leaders are blamed for the electoral mess. As well as these "hard-liners", the purge is also striking some Socialist Party bosses considered "too soft", including the Mayor of Belgrade, who dared to condemn the initial decision of the electoral commission.

## **Endgame?**

The United States sees Milosevic as, if not too socialist, then certainly too independent. Will Clinton increase support for the opposition? Zajedno is doing everything it can to prove itself to the western powers as an alternative government. The coalition recently came out in favour of the Dayton

Accords. Zajedno may even adopt a more flexible position over Kosovo, the Serbian province where the Albanian-speaking majority continues a massive civil disobedience campaign in defence of their civic and national rights.

Milosevic is not under immediate threat, but he is hesitating in the face of a double risk which will not go away. Admitting opposition victories in fifteen large towns, including Belgrade, is admitting that there was massive electoral fraud. Reversing that fraud gives the opposition considerable power, especially since much of Serbia's media is controlled by local government. This would weaken Milosevic's position in next year's parliamentary and (Yugoslav) presidential elections.

One alternative would be to admit only a few partial "errors" by the electoral commission. But this would mean another loss of international credibility. The solution Milosevic chose was to ask the Serbian parliament to approve a law which recognised the validity of the OSCE commissions which, formally speaking, Milosevic had invited to Serbia to examine the election results. The Serbian leader evidently decided that this was the lesser of two evils.

He will presumably proceed with piecemeal concessions (including a compromise over the speed and extent of privatisation in Montenegro). His goal is to consolidate the majority coalition at the federal level, and increase the (currently symbolic) powers of the Yugoslav Federal President a post which becomes vacant in 1998, and which he would like to fill himself. The questions to watch in Serbian politics in the months to come include the redefinition of the federation, attempts to deal with the Kosovo problem, and clarification of the socio-economic choices of the regime, including privatisation, and the management of the foreign debt.

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## **P.S.**

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## **Footnotes**

[1] Zajedno has four components: the Civic Alliance led by Ms Vesna Pesic, a very small group of anti-nationalist liberals which has led the anti-war movement since the beginning, and three movements which, to varying degrees, are Serb nationalists: Vuk Draskovic's Serbian Renaissance Party, Zoran Djindjic's Democratic Party and the Serbian Democratic Party, which split from the Democratic Party, and presented its own lists in the municipal elections.