

The Serbian opposition: a portrait of Zoran Djindjic

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Zoran Djindjic has become a favourite of the German media and politicians. Hardly a day goes by without some news sheet or broadcaster presenting an interview with him. Chancellor Schroeder has received him twice in Bonn. He is treated like a statesman, and indeed, they would like to see him at the head of the Yugoslav state today rather than tomorrow.

The Yugoslav population has not, so far, been asked for its opinion. And why should they? After all it is Washington, London, Paris and Berlin that decide who is a “democrat” and who is not, who belongs to the “world community” and who stands outside it. Zoran Djindjic has certainly grasped this. Already in December 1996 he boasted in an interview with *Der Spiegel*: “I am the horse which the West should back.”

Who is this man being extolled to the war-torn and embargoed Yugoslav population as the pledge for a better future?

To sketch a portrait of him is not easy. Djindjic embodies those characteristics—or rather the lack of definite characteristics—that count as the mark of a successful “modern” politician since Clinton, Blair and Schroeder made their careers. The first qualification is the absence of any clearly defined point of view.

Leafing through old articles about Djindjic, one reads much about his “almost accent-free, elaborate German”, his “smooth, exceptionally good manners”, his “purist Belgrade office decorated in black”, and his marked inclination to dress in black. But little or nothing can be found about his political opinions.

Ten years ago, when the Stalinist cadres of Eastern Europe flocked to the banner of free market economics, the phrase “turncoat” became proverbial. It is hard to apply this term to Djindjic. It denotes someone who has moved from one point of view to another, but Djindjic has no point of view from which to move. He evinces a

mobility, agility, even slipperiness which commentators often describe with the word “enigmatic”.

In June, *Die Zeit* wrote of Djindjic and his one-time ally Vuk Draskovic, that they “have, in the course of their careers, always asserted what looked most promising.... In the future as well, they will both follow nothing but their own will for power.” Already three years ago, the *Tages-Anzeiger* had accused Djindjic of concerning himself “less about human rights and democracy than about his own power”.

Zoran Djindjic was born in 1952 in the north of Bosnia, the son of an officer of the Yugoslav army. After finishing school he studied philosophy in Belgrade, where he was arrested in 1974 for establishing a group of oppositionist students and sentenced to several months in prison.

After his detention, he continued his studies under Juergen Habermas at the University of Frankfurt in Germany, which was still under the influence of the declining student protest movement. It is rumoured that he became very enthusiastic at that time about Habermas' “critical theory,” and was fascinated by the Baader-Meinhof terrorist group. He concluded his studies at the University of Konstanz, completing his doctoral dissertation on the topic “Marx's critical social theory and problems of justification”.

In 1979 he returned to Yugoslavia and taught as a lecturer at the universities of Novi Sad and Belgrade. He had obviously reconciled himself with the state authorities.

The actual beginning of his political career occurred in the year 1990. With some friends, he created the Democratic Party, entering parliament that year as its representative. He took over the party presidency in 1994.

His earlier democratic demands were soon replaced

by nationalistic slogans. “Today, I am no longer a politician of principles. I try to construct realistic policies, and I know the price for doing this,” he told *Die Welt* in January 1997. “I know that one cannot make a policy that will command a majority in Serbia without considering the people's national fears. If that is nationalism, then I am a nationalist.”

During the Bosnian war he did indeed play on “the people's national fears”. His Democratic Party argued for Bosnia to be divided and for the Serbian areas to be absorbed into Yugoslavia. In 1994, when Slobodan Milosevic gave in to NATO pressure, Djindjic travelled to Pale and demonstratively solidarised himself with the Serbian nationalist Radovan Karadzic. In regard to Kosovo, the Democratic Party also played the nationalistic card: from initial support for autonomy it went over to demands for measures to limit the birth rate of Kosovo Albanians.

Djindjic experienced his greatest political success in 1996-97. He succeeded in uniting three parties—the Serbian Renewal Movement of Vuk Draskovic, the Civic Alliance of Vesna Pesic and his own Democratic Party—against Yugoslavia's ruling powers. The resulting alliance, Zajedno (Together), won the local elections in Belgrade at the end of 1996. When the government used legal tricks to annul the election result, tens of thousands marched each day in peaceful demonstrations in the capital. Djindjic practised being a popular tribune. In February 1997 he finally entered Belgrade city hall as mayor.

But Zajedno's success was also its undoing. It turned out that apart from their common opposition to Milosevic, the alliance did not have any viable foundations, let alone an answer to the burning social and political problems that confronted the mass of the population. Draskovic, a Serbian nationalist and monarchist, hearkened back to the traditions of the Chetniks, who had fought against Tito's partisans during the Second World War. Pesic, a founding member of the Helsinki Committee in Belgrade, saw her mission to be the civil rights movement. Djindjic stood for opening up the country economically and politically to the West.

In June, just four months after Djindjic's triumph, the unequal alliance broke down. In September Djindjic was driven out of office by his former ally Draskovic, because of his “incompetence”. Draskovic threw in his

lot with the government parties and the ultra-nationalists of Vojislav Seselj, and later became Yugoslav vice-president under Milosevic. This time, nobody took to the streets to demonstrate. In his short term in office Djindjic had exhausted his popularity.

Since the Zajedno debacle, Djindjic has set his sights on a career as the West's man. He was clever enough not to openly support NATO's bombardment of Yugoslavia—which would have discredited him too badly in the eyes of the population. He even made some critical noises, saying NATO was pursuing a short-sighted and dangerous policy without a more extensive strategy. But he left no doubt that he was prepared to serve NATO as a willing replacement for Milosevic, and counted on NATO's political support.

On 9 May he published a joint declaration with Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic, in which he called on NATO not to get involved in any solution to the Kosovo crisis that left Milosevic in power. This was a barely veiled request to extend the war. Vuk Draskovic, who had, in the meantime, resigned his government office, was no longer seen as a viable partner of the West, but rather an instrument of Milosevic.

It is thus no surprise that Djindjic is popular with Western governments, and is celebrated as a “democrat”. However there is one thing he cannot yet provide: proof that the Yugoslav population regards him in the same way.

In all of his numerous interviews so far, one looks in vain for a response to the social problems of the country, which with the war have assumed the dimensions of a catastrophe. After all, Djindjic is a democrat and not a socialist. And, like the other Russian and Eastern European “democrats”, he understands democracy to mean the unrestricted freedom of movement for international capital, as well as those businessmen, nouveaux riches and semi-criminal elements who became wealthy in the shadow of the Milosevic regime, but now regard the old state structures and ruling elite as obstacles.



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