

The divided opposition in Serbia

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Since the end of the Kosovo War, Western governments have been seeking to find a movement in Serbia capable of driving Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic from power. US President Bill Clinton has openly allocated millions of dollars to finance an ostensibly democratic opposition subservient to Western interests. The first big show of strength by the opposition on August 19 in Belgrade, however, proved to be a bitter disappointment.

Instead of the anticipated 200,000 to 500,000 people, only 100,000 turned up for the first centralised demonstration called by the various opposition groups and supported by the Serbian Orthodox Church. Even worse, instead of displaying the strength and determination of the opposition, the demonstration made clear its disunity and weakness. Speakers were wrenching the microphone from one another and swearing, while at the back of the stage the stewards were involved in a punch-up.

The call for the demonstration came from the Alliance for Change, which was founded in September 1998. It consists of about 40 opposition parties, groups and trade unions.

Among the leaders of the Alliance is the group G-17, founded by 17 “independent economists” (some others have since joined the group). The group has a strong orientation to the West and favours a course of economic “reform”, i.e., a radical program of privatisation. It has close relations with the government in Montenegro, which is striving, with Western help, to separate itself from Yugoslavia.

The G-17 is seeking to force Milosevic's government from power through peaceful measures and replace it with a transitional government of “experts”, whose task would be the preparation of new elections within a year's time. Discussions over the likely head of the proposed transitional government have focused on Mladjan Dinkic, the 35-year-old speaker of the G-17, and the eighty-year-old Dragoslav Avramovic.

Avramovic was head of the Yugoslav Bank of Issue until May 1996, and since then has maintained contact with the various opposition groups. As head of the bank, he reined in hyperinflation in the middle of the 90s, became known as the saviour of the dinar and therefore enjoys a certain amount of popularity. Aside from Montenegrin President Djukanovic, he was the only Yugoslav politician to be invited to the international “stability summit” presided over by Clinton in Sarajevo this past spring.

Other members of the Alliance are the Democratic Party of

Zoran Djindjic and the People's Alliance, which until recently was headed by Vesna Pesic. In the winter of 1996-97 these two parties joined with the Serbian Renewal Movement of Vuk Draskovic to form the alliance *Zajedno* (Together).

For a time *Zajedno* created problems for the government in Belgrade with mass demonstrations, and it won an overwhelming victory in local elections. However, as soon as it came to the division of power and privileges in those towns controlled by the opposition, *Zajedno* fell apart. It has never recovered from the loss of public confidence it suffered at that time.

At the August 19 rally in Belgrade, Djindjic declared that Milosevic had to “disappear” within two weeks, or the people would take to the streets in 50 cities and force him to resign. In light of the evident weakness of the opposition, no one took this threat seriously.

Djindjic, however, was immediately contradicted at the rally by Vuk Draskovic, who pleaded for a compromise with the government. Draskovic declared his opposition to a transitional government. It was impossible to establish a government on the streets and hand over power to unknown forces, he argued, while a section of the audience jeered.

Draskovic's Serbian Renewal Movement is regarded as the most influential of the opposition parties and he himself as the most enigmatic Serbian politician, turning up on occasion as an ardent nationalist and democrat, at times as an opposition spokesman, and at others as an ally of the government. After the collapse of *Zajedno*, he temporarily entered the Yugoslav government, only to leave again during the NATO war. Initially he did not want to take part in the Belgrade demonstration, but turned up unexpectedly on the platform and proceeded to attack the organisers.

Most observers regard the weakness of the Serbian opposition as a product of the hunger for power and disunity of its protagonists. That, however, is only half of the story. More fundamental is the gulf which separates the opposition from the people and their day-to-day problems.

There were already 830,000 registered unemployed in Serbia at the outset of the war. The destruction of most of the industrial areas has left more than half of the population without work. Of those who have employment, many have not been paid for months.

The country's infrastructure has been badly damaged, leaving

many without water, heat or electricity. Nevertheless, not one of the speakers at the Belgrade rally was able to pose a solution to the worsening social crisis. They had nothing to offer apart from a few vague hopes of help from the very governments that had just reduced Yugoslavia to rubble.

Vladan Batic, co-ordinator of the rally and chairman of the Christian Democratic Party, openly admitted in an interview with the *Sddeutsche Zeitung* (August 30) that the opposition seeks to come to power on the back of the misery caused by NATO. He argued for sanctions against Yugoslavia with the words: “We want to increase social tensions. We can then canalise them into political demands.”

Goran Svilanovic, the new leader of the People's Alliance, explained his social orientation to the French newspaper *Le Monde*: “We demand the resignation of Milosevic and the construction of a transitional government.... I anticipate that the dynamic for such a change will come from those in Serbia with money. Milosevic is not just an obstacle for the opposition, he is a hindrance for the rich who are close to the positions of power, control the finances and run companies.”

State power, presently in the hands of Milosevic, representing the old Yugoslav *nomenclatura*, in coalition with the ultra-nationalists under Vojislav Seselj, has no problems dealing with this sort of opposition.

The attempt on the part of the Western governments to construct a powerful opposition to Milosevic is proving to be an impossible task. In order to be effective, such a movement requires grass roots support. But every grass roots movement necessarily opposes the Western governments who are responsible for the social misery in Yugoslavia—not just because of war damage, but also because of the economic programme which has transformed all of Eastern Europe into a poor house.

In light of the impotence of the opposition, attention is being directed more and more to possible props inside the government itself. There, the number of candidates who are ready to work with the West is increasing.

Some of them have openly recognised the opposition. Momcilo Perisic was relieved of his post as commanding general of the Yugoslavian army and went on to found the Movement for a Democratic Serbia in August 1999. Some critics maintain he is just trying to save his own skin. For his role in the shootings which took place in Zadar and Mostar in Croatia, Perisic has been condemned, in absentia, to a long prison sentence.

Others—above all in the so-called “moderate wing” of Milosevic's Socialist Party—are maintaining a low profile. Among them is Milorad Vukelic, former vice-president of the party, director of Yugoslav customs, and a successful businessman, who packed off to Greece with all his wealth in the course of the war.

It is notable that his name has never appeared on the list of 300 high-ranking Yugoslav functionaries who have been denied

a visa for travel to the European Union and whose international bank accounts have been frozen. The accounts of one of his closest friends, the former head of the secret police, Jovica Stanisic, have in the meantime been unfrozen—a measure which has increased speculation over splits within the Serbian leadership.

On closer inspection, the gulf between the government and the opposition is much less dramatic than it appears from the outside. There are practically no programmatic differences between the two camps, and most of the opposition figures were at one time or another connected to the government. Exemplary in this respect is the president of Montenegro, Milo Djukanovic, a key figure in the opposition with close connections not only to the G-17, but also to the Democratic Party of Djindjic.

Djukanovic belongs to a group of young Montenegrin Communist Party members who contributed considerably to Milosevic winning the upper hand in Montenegro with a putsch at the end of the 1980s against the old CP leadership. Djukanovic was rewarded with the post of head of government and in this function supported the wars in both Croatia and Bosnia. Today he is one of the richest men of the region.

His wealth is based on the smuggling of cigarettes and fuel, for which Montenegro has become a focal point. It is therefore in his interest to dissolve the federation with Yugoslavia. For the 630,000 inhabitants of the region, on the other hand, independence for the bare, mountainous region is not a realistic economic prospect.

The real gulf in Yugoslavia runs not so much between government and opposition as between government and opposition on the one side, and the majority of the population on the other. Up to now, however, the people have been unable to articulate their needs—apart from fleeing the ravaged country. According to estimates, half a million people have emigrated from the remains of Yugoslavia over the past 15 years, most of the emigrants coming from more educated layers of the population. In a recent opinion poll 70 percent of students in Belgrade declared their intention of emigrating.

Replacing the emigrants are refugees from Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo who, often poor and ill-educated, are easy prey for competing demagogues.



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