

# US, Britain demand Milosevic resign after Yugoslav elections

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Yugoslavia's opposition parties have rejected the result of Sunday's presidential elections announced by the ruling regime of President Slobodan Milosevic Tuesday night, that necessitate a run-off on October 10.

According to the electoral commission, the main opposition candidate Vojislav Kostunica won 48.22 percent of the vote, against 40.23 percent for Milosevic. The Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS) coalition claims that Kostunica was the outright winner with 54.7 percent of the vote against 35 percent for Milosevic. Demonstrations took place yesterday demanding that Milosevic step down immediately.

Several European countries repeated calls for Milosevic to accept defeat, with Britain's Foreign Secretary Robin Cook stating that a second round would be "a waste of time". US President Clinton said that Milosevic had lost his "last vestige of legitimacy". Western governments had already declared their intention to ignore the result, unless Kostunica was declared the victor. The US and the European Union combined their voices to proclaim that anything less than a convincing defeat for Milosevic would prove massive electoral fraud. Clinton said the world must help strengthen the Serb opposition by not accepting a "fraudulent" Milosevic win.

There is little doubt that Milosevic has engaged in various forms of malpractice to keep his corrupt regime in power. His Serbian Socialist Party (SPS) claims to have collected 186,000 signatures endorsing Milosevic's candidacy in the tiny Yugoslav republic of Montenegro, constituting more than half of the electorate when his political allies there normally win just one third of the vote. The government's election commission also demanded that voters show their marked ballots to officials before placing them in the box. Aside from this, there has been little in the way of substantiation offered by the Western media to back up its charge of widespread irregularities and intimidation of the opposition. While the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe was refused entry to the FRY, there are 200 observers from overseas including an activist from US Democrat presidential candidate Al Gore's election campaign. They have attended election rallies of the three major candidates and witnessed no disturbances and a low police profile.

Whatever the true scale of procedural abuses by Milosevic, to identify this as the sole reason why the elections are undemocratic is hypocrisy of staggering proportions. Popular discontent and opposition to Milosevic are widespread. But this is not what has been given expression by the opposition movement. Instead it has functioned as a political vehicle through which the Western powers have asserted their authority against a regime they consider hostile to their interests.

For America and Europe, the Yugoslav presidential elections are nothing more than an opportunity to bring last year's shooting war to a successful conclusion and depose Milosevic. Their aim was to ensure that the elections vindicated the effectiveness of Western policies in the Balkans, confirming in the reverse the 19th century military strategist Clausewitz's famous dictum that "War is the continuation of politics by other means". They combined military threats and punishing sanctions to destabilise Yugoslavia with the creation of a quisling pro-Western opposition movement they have funded to the tune of tens of millions of dollars.

Last week the US and European governments both promised that sanctions against Serbia—in force in various forms since 1992—would be lifted only if Milosevic lost the ballot. Not content with this type of blackmail, the West literally held a gun at the head of the Serbian people to reinforce its demands. Fifteen British warships are in the Mediterranean near Yugoslavia on NATO exercises, including the aircraft carrier HMS *Invincible*, manned by 5,000 troops. The Adriatic manoeuvres also include 400 US soldiers and 200 Marines. On Tuesday morning US and Croatian troops launched a joint assault on an Adriatic island of Zirje. Croatia is Serbia's main rival in the Balkans and went to war against it over control of Bosnia in 1992. Romania and Bulgaria, bordering Yugoslavia to the northeast and east, are also planning a joint exercise at the Romanian Danube port of Turnu Magurele on September 28.

The opposition movement consists of 18 separate parties, but its political agenda has been largely dictated by the US and Europe. America has already spent \$35-37 million on funding the opposition and the EU has spent an equal amount. On Tuesday, the US House of Representatives passed a bill authorizing a further \$105 million to aid the opposition in Yugoslavia. The Senate already passed a similar bill.

According to the BBC, "Most of the money has gone to equipping opposition movements inside Yugoslavia with the necessary resources to fight the electoral campaign. Behind the scenes, Western governments have been instrumental in trying to forge unity between otherwise disparate and fractious opposition movements." *USA Today* adds that, "US funds have helped the opposition prepare an economic agenda and stage get out the vote rallies." Even the organisations charged with staging pre-election opinion polls included a firm with close ties to the Clinton administration.

An article in the French newspaper *Liberation* notes that one of the largest budget items of the US "assistance to the democracy" program was the installation of the "ring around Serbia"—"six radio transmitters in particular broadcasting Voice of America and Radio Free Europe".

Kostunica, a 56-year-old law professor at Belgrade University, is a

nationalist who opposes any concessions on the status of Kosovo and Montenegro as constituent parts of the FRY, denounces NATO's bombing campaign last year and has rejected any moves against Milosevic to try him for war crimes. At first glance, it appears strange that the US and Europe would endorse a candidate who is on record as opposing such key NATO objectives. But his candidacy was made necessary by the need to deflect criticisms that the opposition was a US puppet.

In interviews prior to the elections, he stated his belief that, "we have to distance ourselves from declarative, counterproductive support coming from the present, departing, American administration which has proved to be absolutely useless for the opposition and democratic forces in Serbia... Consequences of Western policy, above all of the American policy, are objectively such that at the moment they are more helpful to Slobodan Milosevic than to his opponents."

He has demonstrated a preference for relations with Europe, citing this as proof that his criticisms of the US are "pro-Western rather than anti-Western." This may cause serious problems for America in the long term, but ones they were prepared to accept given the priority placed on removing Milosevic. The US may also calculate that Kostunica is only a cog in the larger machinery of government they are seeking to install. His party is small and it will be reliant on other major parties in the coalition, such as Alliance for Change and Zoran Djindjic's Democratic Party considered as trusty retainers of US imperialism.

The opposition's program, moreover, was drafted by a think-tank of free market economists G17. This group depends on finance provided by the Centre for International Private Enterprise (CIPE), a component part of the National Endowment for Democracy. This organisation was set up by US President Ronald Reagan and has functioned as a semi-official adjunct of various CIA operations, with the participation of the AFL-CIO trade union bureaucracy.

Authors Michel Chossudovsky and Jared Israel point out that the guiding figures of the G17 have held key positions in the World Bank and International Monetary Fund for many years. Professor Veselin Vukovic is the former Minister of Privatisation under the Yugoslav Premier Ante Markovic. He orchestrated the Financial Operations Act under the influence of the World Bank. This led to 50 percent of Yugoslav industry being broken up—1,100 industrial companies were eradicated between January and September 1989. Over 600,000 industrial workers were laid-off out of a total of 2.7 million. He has been appointed Deputy Chief of the Privatisation Commission in Montenegro by the pro-Western regime of President Milo Djukanovic, his one time student.

Dr. Dusan Vujovic, a senior economist at the World Bank, acts as an intermediary between the G17 and Washington. In August he was in charge of negotiating the World Bank's program for the Ukraine. Dr. Zeliko Bogetic holds a key post at the IMF. He was one of the main players in drawing up the structural adjustment program for Bulgaria between 1994-96. Another figure in G17, Dragoslav Avramovic, was together with Djukanovic the only Yugoslav politician to be invited to the Balkan Stability Summit last spring.

These figures would help shape economic policies favourable to the West and hostile to the interests of working people, whatever the formal political designation of any government that replaces Milosevic.

It is instructive to contrast the scale of US interference on the Yugoslav elections with the recent Republican Party inspired scandal alleging that the Chinese government had made illicit contributions to

the 1996 Democratic election campaign. This was advanced as proof of a fundamental threat to US national interests and unpardonable involvement by a hostile power in America's political process. In Britain, one of the first acts of the Blair Labour government was to make foreign donations to political parties illegal. In Yugoslavia, however, the imperialist powers shamelessly assert their right not only to massively finance political parties, but even draw up their program. And to date, they have met virtually no criticism for doing so in the world's mass media.

The liberal press—where one would in the past have found an occasional denunciation of CIA operations to destabilise political regimes in underdeveloped countries in Latin America and Asia—now praise an overt and large-scale example of such measures within Europe as a shining example of democracy. In this they continue and deepen their role as apologists for NATO's bombing of Belgrade last year. This became the occasion to reject any commitment to the national sovereignty of small nations and assert the untrammled right of the major powers to intervene politically and militarily in any country they see fit—a position championed by Europe's social democratic governments and shared by the Greens.

The West's intervention in the presidential elections is of a piece with the criminal policies they have carried out in the Balkans over the past decade. Their drive to restore capitalist property relations in Yugoslavia saw them endorse right-wing nationalist movements in all its constituent republics as allies, including initially Milosevic himself. Only when they decided to support the break up of the FRY by endorsing Croatian, Slovenian and Bosnian independence was Milosevic designated as the Balkan Saddam Hussein or Hitler. The national and ethnic conflicts this process of dismemberment unleashed twice provided the pretext for military intervention by NATO, culminating in last year's 78-day bombardment of Serbia that cost thousands of lives and destroyed much of its infrastructure.

Unless he decides to go quietly, the destabilising of Milosevic's regime may yet result in further bloodshed and even threaten a renewed military intervention by NATO. Even if this does not take place, no opposition that functions as the creature of the Western powers can provide a genuine democratic alternative to Milosevic's rule.

The political repercussions of these events go far beyond the Balkans. The western powers have proved yet again their willingness to resort to intimidation and old-style gunboat diplomacy to achieve their ends. This represents a grave threat to the peoples of the entire planet. Neither is there a Chinese wall separating the attitude of the imperialist ruling class towards democratic rights in the less developed and oppressed nations and those of workers in their own countries. History has repeatedly demonstrated that a turn towards militarism is invariably accompanied by the suppression of democratic freedoms at home.



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