

West steps up threats against Yugoslavia

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The NATO powers have tightened their military encirclement of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) in the run-up to the presidential and federal elections on Sunday.

According to a Croatian news source, two US navy ships carrying 3,500 troops are presently stationed at the ports of Split and Dubrovnik. An aircraft carrier, the *George Washington*, is to be deployed to the Adriatic from the Persian Gulf by September 30. The British Royal Navy aircraft carrier, *HMS Invincible*, is also stationed off the Montenegrin coast. In the words of the British Ministry of Defence, this is to “send the right message to Belgrade.”

The threat of renewed military action has been coupled with increased Western interference in the country's electoral process. Western powers are backing the candidacy of Vojislav Kostunica, from the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS). This umbrella group of 18 parties has been described as “democratic” and “independent” solely because it is seeking to unseat President Slobodan Milosevic.

The atmosphere is now extremely tense. At the end of August, Ivan Stambolic, a former President of Serbia who had been considering standing against Milosevic, was abducted and has not been seen since. Milosevic has clamped down on the media and earlier this month three members of the student-based opposition movement Otpor were jailed for 10 days, for spraying graffiti on walls in the capital.

The Yugoslav government has also staged a war crimes trial of Western leaders responsible for organising last years bombing, accusing them of crimes against humanity and violating the country's territorial sovereignty. The trial, which is due to end immediately before Sunday's elections, is expected to hand down “sentences” of 15-20 years on US President Clinton, British Prime Minister Blair, former NATO Secretary General Javier Solana and NATO's European commander General Wesley Clarke, among others.

At an election rally last week, Milosevic denounced his opponents as “rabbits, rats and even hyenas” and accused them of being funded by the Western powers. Whilst Milosevic uses such charges to justify his clampdown on

democratic rights in a bid to retain power, there is no doubt that the official opposition is on the payroll of the US and European Union.

The *New York Times* of September 20 stated openly that, “The United States and its European allies have made it clear that they want Mr Milosevic ousted, and they have spent tens of millions of dollars trying to get it done...”

“The money from the West is going to most of the institutions that the government attacks for receiving it—sometimes in direct aid, and sometimes in suitcases of cash carried across the border between Yugoslavia and Hungary or Serbia and Montenegro. Most of those organisations and news media could not exist without foreign aid in this society, which is poor and repressive and whose market is distorted by foreign economic sanctions.”

The fact that these organisations, publications and media groups are so dependent upon US and EU patronage does not prevent the article's author, Steven Erlanger, from describing them as independent.

Finance has been channelled to the opposition forces through the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). Though routinely referred to as a non-governmental organization, the US Congress funds it. The NED, which was founded in 1983, serves in practice as an adjunct to the CIA—procuring agents and groups in foreign countries to function as appendages of US foreign policy.

According a report published by the NED two years ago, the Serbian opposition forces have been provided with monies going back as far as 1988. Many of the recipients included media outlets described in the West as the tribunes of “free speech”, such as Radio-92.

Information on recent contributions has not been so forthcoming. Figures on grant recipients in Serbia are a matter of public record. Officially, however, the NED has refused to release data without a formal request under the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act. The protracted nature of such proceedings means that such figures would not be available until after polling day.

The reluctance to publish this data probably reflects criticisms made by opposition forces within FRY that the US has acted too clumsily in its support. The way in which

opposition leaders have been summoned to meetings by US representatives, and the open declarations of future financial support in return for political obedience, have compromised them in the eyes of the general population.

According to US Congressional hearings into the crisis in Kosovo, in the two years preceding the NATO intervention Serbian opposition forces received \$16.5 million and the President of FRY's smaller republic, Montenegro, \$20 million.

The DOS has signed up to the platform of the G17, a think-tank of market economists again funded by NED. This economic blueprint calls for the adoption of the German mark as the main currency for all of FRY, following in the footsteps of the Montenegrin republic last year. Other proposals include reduction of public spending, ending subsidies on food and other forms of social protection.

The continuation of US and European economic sanctions on the FRY is being cynically exploited to bludgeon the population into accepting these terms as the condition for ending their economic isolation. On September 18, EU Foreign Ministers in Brussels stated openly that if the voters ditched Milosevic at the polls economic sanctions would be lifted forthwith. Javier Solana, who is now the EU's foreign and security policy representative, commented, "A change from Milosevic to Kostunica would be welcome for all democrats and all citizens of Europe."

The Western media has already made clear that a victory for Milosevic will be interpreted as proof of ballot rigging. This would be utilized to encourage civil unrest amongst the population and any ensuing confrontation could provide the pretext for NATO military intervention.

As recently as August 17, the International Crisis Group (ICG), a Western policy think tank funded by the billionaire George Soros, stated in a press release entitled "Montenegro 'Right' to Boycott Milosevic's Phoney Elections": "Serious doubts remain about the capacity of the opposition to mount a credible campaign. United or not, opposition leaders are not held in great respect by the majority of Serbian people, nor is there any consensus behind one figure as an agent of change and an alternative to Milosevic. In the present circumstances, the participation of the opposition and of the Montenegrins in federal elections runs the risk of handing Milosevic a sham victory.

"The international community should not lend further support to these flawed and illegal elections. The West's willingness to endorse phoney elections is an act of desperation, which rests on the hope that if Milosevic blatantly steals the elections the Serbian people will rise up against him."

Now the ICG is calling for Serbs to vote in elections they previously denounced as phoney, stating that, "Despite all

the reservations legitimately felt about the intensely nationalist opposition candidate, Vojislav Kostunica, ICG recommends international support for him, and full participation in the election by the Serbian people."

The plans of the ruling coalition government of Montenegro, led by Milo Djukanovic, to secede from the FRY are also supported by the ICG. It has lobbied for the NATO Security Council to pass a resolution committing itself to military engagement on the side of the breakaway province in the event of hostilities with Belgrade. Joining them, the former leader of Britain's Liberal Democrats Paddy Ashdown wrote in the *Independent* newspaper: "On the military side, it means [the West] drawing up proper contingency plans for the various eventualities, including the most overtly dangerous one of attempted coup; considering in what circumstances we could impose a no-fly zone: immediate judicious employment of Western warship units in the Adriatic, etc.

"On the economic front, it means continuing to expand Western economic assistance to Montenegro. And doing some very clear but rather small symbolic things to show our presence and active engagement in Montenegro—the establishment of an EU office in Podgorica, for instance."

Already, thanks to Western financial support, the paramilitary police forces loyal to President Djukanovic outnumber Federal troops stationed in Montenegro by approximately 20,000 to 15,000. Evidence continues to grow that this force is receiving training by Western military experts. According to the July 30 *Independent*, Montenegro's Special Police, the Spezijani, has received training from Britain's SAS. The newspaper's correspondent interviewed an experienced officer named Velibor, who explained, "It was great. We learnt a lot. Some of the techniques they use are different to ours."

These developments reveal that the Western powers are not interested in the democratic process or preventing a new outbreak of war in the Balkans. Their support for the oppositionist forces in Serbia and secession in Montenegro are merely a means towards an end—destabilizing the FRY in order to extend their economic, political and military domination of the Balkans.



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