

How the West organised Milosevic's downfall

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The Western media uniformly portrayed the overthrow of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic as the result of a spontaneous popular democratic revolution. Overwhelming evidence to the contrary shows that this depiction of events in Belgrade as “people's power” in action was a deliberate attempt to dupe the public.

The media's aim was to legitimise what they knew to be a political coup organised by the United States government and the European powers, to ensure their undisputed control of the Balkan peninsula, in alliance with a section of Serbia's ruling elite whose politics differed in no fundamental respect from those of Milosevic.

An example of the type of press commentary on offer is the article by Neal Ascherson in the October 8 edition of the *Observer* newspaper. Without blushing he asserted that the October 5 events had “No leaders, no savvy controllers, not even any heroes,... Revolution, the real thing, is always like what the world saw in Belgrade.”

There were, in fact, leaders and savvy controllers in abundance, which the *Observer* knows full well. It is a matter of public record that millions of dollars, high-level advisers and personnel numbering in the hundreds were provided by the US and Europe for the election campaign of the Democratic Opposition (DOS) of Serbia. Former US diplomat William Montgomery, who ran what the *New York Times* dubbed the “Yugoslav embassy in exile” in Budapest, coordinated much of its campaign on the ground.

Money and expertise were provided either directly through government agencies, or through NGOs like Germany's Friedrich Ebert Foundation and the US Freedom House, which are listed as the main sponsors of the opposition's media network.

The Friedrich Ebert Foundation is one of the main vehicles through which German imperialism advances its interests globally. (The *World Socialist Web Site* has written on its activities in a recent article “Zimbabwe: Promotion of the MDC by middle class radicals politically disarms the working class.”)

Freedom House brings together leading Democrats, Republicans, business and trade union leaders to promote pro-capitalist movements friendly to the US. Its backers include the National Endowment for Democracy, a semi-official body that receives funding from various US government agencies and the Centre for International Private Enterprise. It boasts that it sponsors volunteer “American professionals” and trains “Serbian political party members”.

The task the Western powers set for themselves was to galvanise social and political discontent against the Milosevic regime and channel it behind their handpicked representatives within the DOS. To this end a sophisticated, well-funded electoral and propaganda network was not enough, given that the DOS was viewed with deep suspicion as a tool of the NATO powers who had only recently been bombing Belgrade. The US and Europe developed a two-pronged initiative based on building social support in areas already controlled

by opposition forces and securing the cooperation of leading elements within the state security forces, police and army with its plans.

A graphic account of the former strategy was presented in Germany's *Der Spiegel* magazine this week. The magazine acknowledges the leading role played by the US in the DOS campaign to bring down Milosevic, but focuses on the significant contribution made by its own government.

“For months the [German] federal government has discretely and purposefully supported the Serbian opposition against Milosevic,” it begins.

“Substantial political and material support from Berlin, as from other western capitals, contributed to the fact that opposition groups and parties could develop the strength to force Milosevic to give up and take over the government themselves.”

On the genesis of the DOS's electoral challenge, *Der Spiegel* writes, “On December 17 last year, [German Foreign Minister] Fischer and [US Secretary of State] Albright met the most well known Yugoslav opposition figures in a windowless room of the Interconti hotel on Budapest Strasse in Berlin on the fringes of a G-8-meeting. Zoran Djindjic and Vuk Draskovic were part of the proceedings, both Milosevic opponents who had never been able to unite for any length of time. A participant of the meeting said today: ‘At that time the opposition was given a bollocking [slang for a stern dressing-down].’”

“The Milosevic opponents really willing to cooperate agreed on Kostunica, up to then largely unknown, as the presidential candidate. The discussion round withdrew any support from the unpredictable populist Draskovic.”

“Approximately \$30 million, predominantly from America, were channelled into the country via an office in Budapest, in order to equip the opposition for the election campaign with computers, telephones and office materials. Hundreds of election helpers were prepared abroad for their tasks,” the magazine asserts. As a result, “On election day the opposition was so well equipped and organised that it could control the outcome of the election better than Milosevic. Election helpers monitored the counting of the votes in 180 of approximately 9,200 polling stations and sent the results over their own radio network to the head office of the opposition.”

The German government also provided funds and materials to run opposition newspapers, radio and TV stations, to the tune of 4 million marks, while *Deutsche Welle*, the German overseas broadcaster, invested approximately 10 million marks in 1999 alone.

The campaign to secure a social base for the opposition took a new tack in the attention paid to building up anti-Milosevic sentiment in the Yugoslav provinces. Politicians, organisations and parties in cities and municipalities that had opposed Milosevic in the 1996 and 1997 elections had financial aid channelled their way. Germany did this through the expedient of “twinning” its cities with those chosen as recipients in Yugoslavia. “In this way, about 45 million marks [\$20

million] arrived directly in some 40 cities where the opposition governs. The big operations sponsored by the West were dubbed 'Energy for peace', 'Education for peace', 'bitumen [to build roads] for peace'."

The operation, led by former Social Democratic parliamentarian Josef Vosen, involved 16 German cities, 41 European municipalities and 4 from Ohio in the US. "The town partnerships were certainly only a trick, in order to hide the fact that Germany, like other states, had taken the opposition in Yugoslavia directly by the arm," *Der Spiegel* concludes. "The 16,951,800 marks [\$7.5 million] sent up to today in German cash for town partnerships really originated from Foreign Office funds for the Stability Pact. Many German municipalities, once won to the plan even gave something extra from their own city coffers."

The opposition's standing was thus reinforced by a classic carrot and stick combination. The choice presented to Serbia's people was: Either support Kostunica's challenge and the West would become lady bountiful, or support Milosevic and face continued sanctions and the threat of renewed war.

The second prong of the West's campaign was to win over a section of the secret police and armed forces to back Milosevic's potential replacements. Just how successful this operation was is shown by reports now emerging of the actual course of events on October 5.

On October 9, the *Guardian* newspaper ran an article based on an interview with Zivan Markovic, a former Special Forces soldier with the elite 63rd Parachute brigade. Markovic claimed that the storming of the Federal Assembly and the offices of the state television RTS was in reality spearheaded by more than 100 active or former soldiers who did so in liaison with sympathetic police supposed to be guarding the buildings.

"Special anti-terrorist forces from the police and police intervention squads were involved," he said, refusing to be drawn on Yugoslav press reports that 10,000 men were carrying arms.

Backing for Markovic's claims is provided by reports in the *New York Times* and Britain's *Channel 4* television of the key role played in the storming of the Federal Assembly by the town of Cacak, which lies 60 miles from Belgrade.

The town's mayor, Velig Ilic, was formerly a leading member of the opposition Serbian Renewal Movement led by Vuk Draskovic, and now runs the New Serbia Party. He told the media that he had planned and organised the storming of the Federal Assembly in collaboration with four senior members of Serbia's elite Interior Ministry police force. Under their guidance, Ilic began to organise a core team to take to the capital at least a month before October 5.

"We established a team of young professionals, paratroopers from the Yugoslav Army and young policemen, and we coordinated this with the most elite units of the Interior Ministry Police in Belgrade. We got martial arts experts and professional boxers to join us. We even had plainclothes police coordinating with nearby towns," Ilic told the *New York Times*.

In the early morning of October 5, 10,000 people set off in convoy from Cacak—filmed by a team from *Channel 4*—who went on to play a leading role in Belgrade. Ilic says that the actual storming of the parliament building was planned with his secret police contacts, who coordinated the action to coincide with a mass defection of the police guarding the building between 3:00 and 3:30 p.m.

That the singular event epitomising the movement against Milosevic was coordinated and planned by the imperialist powers and the Serbian secret police speaks volumes. Far from a demonstration of

"people's power", Milosevic's downfall was the product of Western political intrigues that culminated in the modern-day equivalent of a palace coup, rather than the oft-proclaimed democratic revolution.

It was left to an op-ed piece by Robert D. Kaplan in the October 6 edition of the *New York Times* to give the most unalloyed explanation of why the Western media rejoiced over October 5, boasting that the events in Belgrade were a demonstration of US power.

"NATO has truly become an imperial overlord in the former Yugoslavia, given that Russia's historic power in the Balkans has waned.... President Clinton and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright deserve credit for applying the realist principle that projecting power is a prerequisite for the spread of one's values. In the 1930's, it was the Nazis who were applying military pressure and supporting local political parties in the Balkans with money, intelligence, printing presses and other aid. Not surprisingly, fascist ideals were then ascendant."

Kaplan adds, "We should not delude ourselves that the spread of open societies in the Balkans and elsewhere is necessarily a natural development: it is a direct result of the expansion of American imperial authority—albeit soft and undeclared—which local populations now see as their self-interest to get along with."

The West was able to manipulate political events in Yugoslavia to such an extent only because of the deeply reactionary character of Milosevic's regime. Together with the other ethno-nationalist leaders that came to prominence in the 1980s, his greater Serbian chauvinism paved the way for the division of Yugoslavia along ethnic lines, economic penetration by Western capital and the ensuing bloody conflict between the various ethnic groups in the Balkan region.

But however much Milosevic's regime deserved to perish, the manner of its demise is by no means incidental. Genuine democratic and social renewal within the Balkans can never take place under the political tutelage of the Western powers and their local quislings. It requires a unified and independent political mobilisation of the working class throughout the region. Should such a genuinely democratic mass movement develop, it would meet nothing but hostility from all those in the media who acted as cheerleaders for October 5.



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