

# Survey finds huge disillusionment with capitalism in Serbia

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A recent survey sheds light on the devastating consequences of more than two decades of capitalist restoration in Serbia, and what the country's population thinks about it. Their views are in stark contrast to the remarks of US President Barack Obama during his recent European tour when he praised capitalist reunification and what it had brought in terms of freedom and democracy for the peoples of eastern Europe.

The survey was carried out by the Serbian non-governmental organization (NGO) Center for Free Elections and Democracy (CeSID), which by its nature, cannot be suspected of any hostility to the free market.

CeSID's network, consisting of 21,000 volunteers and observers, 165 municipal teams, 16 local and five regional offices, which monitors elections and political parties and conducts public opinion polls, is supported by the European Commission, the OSCE, several Western embassies and just about every US and European Union governmental front organisation imaginable.

Nevertheless, the CeSID survey offers a damning commentary on the Western-orchestrated breakup of Yugoslavia and the succession of governments since, which have carried out privatisation and economic reform.

In answer to the question "When was the best [time] in Serbia?" 78 percent of respondents replied "between the end of WW2 and 1990"—the year the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia began to break up. Even with young people in the 18-29 year-old age bracket, with no direct experience of the period, the response was 55 percent.

Only 8 percent of those questioned thought the "best" time was "Between 1990 and 2000," the year the Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic was ousted

following the 14-week US-led bombardment of Serbia and 10 percent "Between 2000 and 2012."

The feeling that life was better before 1990 applied not only to categories such as "living standards," "security," and "economy," but also to "political freedoms."

In reply to a question about their living standards, only 5 percent of those surveyed said it was good; 37 percent said it was "unbearable" or "hardly bearable." Some 40 percent expressed a fear that "my family and I will not have enough for food." Less than a third thought they were better off than their parents.

Around 40 percent predicted "larger protests and unrest" in "the near future" for "economic reasons," and 25 percent expressed readiness to join such protests.

When asked, "How much of the responsibility for the wars of the 1990s lies with the peoples of former Yugoslavia, and how much with the international community?" around 75 percent said the wars were partly or entirely the fault of the international community.

Only 15 percent of those questioned in the survey believed that Milosevic's fall was "the beginning of the democratic transformation of Serbia." Nearly half said, "Everything remains the same, only one set replaced the other."

The report warns, "In Serbia, in the last 20 or so years, the distrust of the social institutions, especially the political ones, is [...] so high that it poses the question of survival of the state, and even of the society itself."

It reveals the "distrust" of various official institutions—politicians (74 percent), parliament (65 percent), political parties (64 percent), government (62 percent), judges (58 percent), prime minister (57

percent), European Union (52 percent), police officers (54 percent), military brass (53 percent), the president (50 percent) and the trade unions (46 percent).

While the trade unions continue to be supported by the “educated upper middle class” they are “completely distrusted by the ... bottom of the social pyramid, that is ... the declassed members of the precariate that the unions were not able to protect.”

Union membership is down from about 1 in every 3 employed workers in 2007, to about 1 in 4 now. The fall in absolute number of union members is even greater, as the total number of jobs has fallen over the last decade from 2.2 million to 1.74 million.

Asked, “When did you have the most trust in the institutions?” 45 percent cited the period of Josip Broz Tito, the post-World War II Stalinist leader who died in 1980. Only 23 percent supported the period of Zoran Djindjic, the Western-backed former prime minister who replaced Milosevic but was assassinated in 2003.

The nostalgia for the Tito period is understandable, but wrong-headed. The legacy of the partisan war endowed Tito with a degree of legitimacy and popularity unknown in other Stalinist-controlled states. He was able to use Yugoslavia’s unique geopolitical position to obtain favourable economic relations with the West, the Soviet bloc and the so-called developing countries, which played a substantial role in the initial successes of Yugoslavia’s system of “market socialism” and rising living standards.

At the same time, Tito cultivated a new, pan-Yugoslav nationalism that served to provide each of the ethnic groups in Yugoslavia with some security against fratricidal war and the atrocities of the past. A system of separate republics was created, with Tito balancing between the various national and regional forces as a Bonapartist-type figure.

Soon after his death, however, these unresolved national problems and the economic backwardness of the country broke out into the open. The disparities between the richer and poorer republics emerged more openly, unleashing economic and political forces for which powerful sections of the bureaucracy became a major conduit.

The Tito regime had become extremely vulnerable to the sweeping changes in international relations, which began in the 1980s. The turn of the USSR and eastern Europe toward capitalist restoration spelled the end of

the US’s special relationship with Yugoslavia. It no longer needed it as a military bulwark against the Soviet Union and began to view the federal Yugoslav state as an obstacle to privatisation of the country’s economy as demanded by the IMF and World Bank. In a bid to speed up the process of capitalist economic “reform,” the US and the other major powers threw their weight behind those political forces in favour of dismantling the old Titoist structure, many of them actively promoting ethno-communalism, including the Serbian nationalist Milosevic and Croatian nationalist Franjo Tudjman.

German imperialism, anxious to flex its political muscles after reunification, promoted the secession in Slovenia and Croatia and rushed to extend full recognition once these republics broke with the Yugoslav federation in 1991. There followed a decade of war.

Following the ousting of Milosevic, the Western powers hailed the overwhelming victory for the Democratic Opposition of Serbia led by Zoran Djindjic (as prime minister) and President Vojislav Kostunica. However, the quick fix trumpeted by the advocates of economic liberalisation has failed to materialise. Official unemployment is 26 percent and above 50 percent for youth. The average monthly wage is about €380 (US\$515). Huge jobs losses and wages cuts are in the pipeline for the 800,000 workers employed by the state. Serbia is under the dictates of the International Monetary Fund and the European Union, which is also demanding the country sever its links with Russia if it wants to continue progress towards EU accession.

As last week’s record-low 40 percent turnout in the Kosovo elections shows, the Serbian survey results are very likely representative of opinions throughout eastern Europe and the Balkans where in many countries living standards are even worse than in Serbia. The same point applies to the distrust of the political elites, where a narrow layer of former bureaucrats and *nouveau riche* have been able to get fabulously wealthy at the expense of the majority.



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