

## **SERBIA'S EMBATTLED OPPOSITION**

30 May 2000

## Table of Contents

### MAP OF SERBIA AND MONTENEGRO

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY &amp; RECOMMENDATIONS .....</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>I. INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>II. MAJOR POLITICAL TRENDS IN SERBIA .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>III. THE REGIME'S VULNERABILITIES .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>IV. GENERAL PROSPECTS FOR DEMOCRATIC CHANGE .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>V. PROSPECTS OF POLITICAL CHANGE OCCURRING PEACEFULLY.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>A. The Hague Factor .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>B. .... The Statehood Factor</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>VI. CAPACITY OF THE OPPOSITION PARTIES TO PROVOKE ELECTIONS .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>VII. CAPACITY OF THE OPPOSITION PARTIES TO WIN ELECTIONS .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>VIII. OPPOSITION PARTIES AND POLITICAL LEADERS.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>A. January 2000 Agreement .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>B. Relative Strength of the Opposition Parties .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>C. Political Orientation of the Opposition Parties .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>1. "Liberal" .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>2. "Patriotic" .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>3. Social Democratic .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>4. Regional Parties .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>D. Rise of Local Opposition Leaders .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>IX. POLITICAL POTENTIAL OF NGOs .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>X. SOURCES OF TENSION BETWEEN OPPOSITION PARTIES AND NGOs ..</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>XI. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....</b>	<b>20</b>

### APPENDICES

- A. Text of 10 January Agreement**
- B. Serbian Opinion Polls**
- C. Association of Free Towns and Municipalities of Serbia**
- D. Glossary of Acronyms**
- E. About the International Crisis Group**
- F. ICG Reports and Briefing Papers**
- G. ICG Board Members**



## **SERBIA'S EMBATTLED OPPOSITION**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The recent crackdown by the Belgrade regime on Serbia's independent media and political activists suggests that Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic is more vulnerable than it would appear. Since the Kosovo war ended, Milosevic has proven unable to expand his support base and must struggle with diminishing resources to keep restive constituencies intact. Despite its recognised weakness, the Serbian opposition is capable under certain conditions of removing Milosevic from power and offering better governance. The message of numerous public opinion polls over the past eight months is that there is an anti-Milosevic majority in Serbia, but that the opposition must work together in coalitions to exploit it.

At present the information provided by different polls conducted in the fall of 1999 and supported by polling taken this year, and the consensus among experts inside Serbia, is that the regime has lost a great deal of its most active supporters. According to these polls, more than 70 per cent of the population favours political change, despite the fact that a majority of the people can neither define the parameters of the change they desire nor agree on who should be the agent of change. More than 60 per cent of the population cites the improvement of relations with the West among the most important policy priorities facing Serbia, while Kosovo does not even appear in the list of the six most important areas of public concern. These polling results suggest that the opposition would benefit from turning elections into a referendum on Milosevic.

The international community, however, has yet to exploit this ripeness for change by adopting a coherent, unified approach toward strengthening Serbia's opposition forces. Indeed, these forces continue to be viewed — and are too often dismissed — as weak, disunited, and indecisive, while the regime is perceived to be securely in power. This assessment of the opposition may have some weight in relation to the Belgrade opposition party leaders, but not for most other large towns throughout Serbia, where courageous leaders have often kept the democratic forces together in local coalitions.

If these local leaders manage to harness and channel the frustration occasioned by Belgrade's latest crackdown on the independent media and the student-led resistance group Otpor, a groundswell of momentum for change could spread even to the more conservative Belgrade political elites. But to sustain such momentum beyond the current angry, localised responses to increased repression, opposition leaders must shape policies that build up and play to public attitudes, opposition strengths, and regime vulnerabilities.

The window of opportunity for formulating and publicising such policies is extremely narrow. The holding of federal parliamentary and municipal elections in Yugoslavia — due by the end of the year, according to the federal and Serbian constitutions and laws, but not yet scheduled on the calendar — may be more to Milosevic's advantage than is often assumed in Western commentary, especially as independent media willing to give attention to the opposition are being shut down or taken over. Local elections would enable him to try to oust democratically elected mayors from key Serbian municipalities. Federal parliamentary elections would give him the opportunity to exploit strains within national opposition forces and, in particular, to sow discord between Serbian democrats and reformist Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic over whether or not to boycott such a ballot.

To avert such possible eventualities, the international community must quickly become more effective in assisting Serbia's democratic forces. Serbia, after all, is the last great democratisation campaign of eastern Europe. Successes in Poland and the other communist bloc countries in 1989, and subsequently in Bulgaria, Slovakia and Croatia, provide useful lessons for those who wish to assist those promoting democratic change in Serbia. Support for the independent media should remain the first track for effective international support.

But the international community must go further. Scepticism about Belgrade-centred opposition leaders should not deter Western nations from channelling significant financial assistance to opposition leaders outside Belgrade. By providing recognition and support to local leaders who exhibit coalition-building skills, the international community will encourage them to overcome personality and other differences that divide them. This approach can be reinforced by tapping the potential of independent non-government organisations (NGOs) and other civil society actors to complement the work of the political parties.

Milosevic remains the single greatest cause of instability and conflict in southeastern Europe. Belgrade's desperate and oppressive measures of recent weeks reflect his apparent weakness in the face of the manifest popular desire for change. Western governments and publics should learn from past mistakes in dealing with the opposition, apply more effective measures and, above all, commit to staying the course with the opposition until democratic governance is established in Serbia.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Establishing a Donors Forum**

1. An international donors forum should be established, modelled after that which was created before the Slovak elections in 1998, to co-ordinate donors supporting democratisation, including support for independent media, political parties, NGOs, and municipal-level assistance.

### **Support for Independent Media**

2. Support for the independent media should remain the first track for effective international support. The international community should support the involvement

of professional media associations abroad to help independent Serbian media and enlist other non-government support groups to help protect the media.

3. Western governments should help counteract the impact of Belgrade's crackdown on the independent media by expanding the capability of radio and television broadcasting entities neighbouring Serbia (Montenegro and Bosnia's Republika Srpska) to broadcast into Serbia programming produced by media in the region and by independent journalists.

### **Support for Opposition Parties**

4. The international community should support pro-reform, non-nationalist coalitions throughout Serbia, encouraging opposition parties to agree on and implement a common list of candidates, common political manifesto and common electoral co-ordinating centres. If agreement cannot be reached at the national level for a fully unified opposition, coalition-building efforts at the local level should still be strongly supported.
5. Implementation of a broad support program should specifically include existing coalitions of ethnic minority political parties in Vojvodina and Sandzak, which can help deliver the nearly fifteen per cent of the voters that these parties represent.
6. Western governments should encourage the democratic opposition to establish offices in Washington and Brussels.

### **Support for Serbian NGOs**

7. The international community should support NGOs that are non-nationalist in their orientation, especially NGOs that are based in or reach beyond Belgrade. The donors forum should provide strong support for the many independent efforts of NGOs that are both directly and indirectly related to the election campaign through the conduct of public awareness and get-out-the-vote campaigns and monitoring of the electoral process, including registration.
8. In its efforts to assist co-ordination between NGOs and opposition coalitions, the international community should take care not to compromise the NGOs' authority and legitimacy in the minds of uncommitted or reluctant voters whom NGOs will have more efficacy reaching.
9. Special attention should be given to supporting the activities of NGOs in rural areas and activities targeting retired people and women, who comprise the majority of undecided voters.
10. Support should be made available for the development of independent policy institutes.

### **Free and Fair Elections**

11. Pressuring the Belgrade regime to call elections and ensuring that such elections are as free and fair as possible should be at the centre of the international community's

strategy. The regime should be pressed to adopt the election law drafted by Serbia's independent Centre for Electoral Strategies and Democracy (CESID). Substantial international support should be provided for domestic monitoring efforts.

### **Appealing to Non-Criminal Elements of the Serbian Elite**

12. The international community should expand its dialogue with the least culpable end of the regime's political spectrum, offering guarantees of security and an ongoing role in government to members of the ruling elite not suspected of being responsible for crimes against humanity.

### **Regional Contacts**

13. Central and east European governments and NGOs have the capacity to play an effective role in facilitating political change in Serbia and should be encouraged to do so.

**Washington DC/Brussels, 30 May 2000**



## **SERBIA'S EMBATTLED OPPOSITION**

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Elections are supposed to take place in Serbia at the federal parliamentary and local levels this year, according to the federal and Serbian constitutions and laws. Federal President Slobodan Milosevic intends to use the local elections to remove as many of the more than 30 opposition mayors elected in 1996 as possible from their positions in Serbia's cities and towns. His recent intensification of the crackdown on local independent media throughout Serbia was intended in part to limit the capability of local democratic forces to communicate with the Serbian people in the run-up to these elections.

Milosevic appears to view the federal parliamentary elections as an opportunity to sow discord between Serb democrats — who want Montenegro's reformist President Milo Djukanovic to help buttress the opposition bloc against the regime — and the Djukanovic government, which is inclined to boycott elections it regards as a dangerous legitimisation of an anti-democratic federation. Milosevic also anticipates that the international community will pressure Djukanovic to take part, jeopardising the latter's international standing if he remains aloof, and straining his coalition if he opts into the electoral process.

The increasingly hostile electoral environment in Serbia will present challenges to Serbia's democratic forces and international supporters of Serbian democratisation.

- Nationalism has coloured the attitudes and agendas of many in the opposition. This tempts them to compete with Milosevic in the nationalist arena, where he excels in framing issues to his advantage, which undermines their ability to establish credibility in the West and leads them to devalue the benefits of co-operating with ethnic minorities in forming multiethnic coalitions.
- Serbia's national borders have not yet been fixed in the minds of most Serbs and the international community. The Kosovo Albanians seek independence and are effectively severed from Serbia under an international protectorate; Montenegro is trying to hold fast to its hard-won *de facto* separation; and many in Serbia have yet to accept — as the Croats have in the case of

Herzegovina — that Republika Srpska is a province of Bosnia rather than an extension of Serbia. This enables Milosevic to appeal to those in the opposition who reject his means but are sympathetic to many of his territorial aims. The ambivalence of international patrons toward final status issues affecting Kosovo and Montenegro leaves Serbia's non-nationalist democratic forces uncertain about Western attitudes. Does the West expect a transitional democratic government facing all the burdens of dismantling Milosevic-era policies also to be held accountable for resolving the final status of the immensely difficult Kosovo and Montenegro problems that Milosevic exacerbated?

- It took the West nearly ten years — until the aftermath of the Kosovo war — to establish normal relations with Serbia's democratic forces. During much of this period Western leaders were mesmerised by Milosevic and kept the opposition at arm's length. There are still residual anxieties among the opposition that the West could revert to earlier Milosevic-centred policies.
- The same countries that went to war for Kosovo are supporting the opposition, which leaves the opposition vulnerable to criticism for alleged lack of patriotism.
- Unlike elsewhere in eastern Europe, many in the national-level opposition have been in ideological or governmental alliance with Milosevic and are often perceived by the Serbian people as jointly responsible for the regime's policies and shortcomings.

Despite its recognised weakness, however, the Serbian opposition is capable under certain conditions of removing Milosevic from power and offering better governance. Concern about the inadequacies of the opposition to provide effective governance is exaggerated. Elected mayors from the democratic opposition have held office for nearly four years, often managing the resources at their disposal capably and with sustained public backing. Both the Bulgarian Union of Democratic Forces in 1996 and the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation in Macedonia in 1998, moreover, were perceived by the West as totally unprepared to govern, yet went on to win election victories, overturn the old order and establish governments.

This report is based on field research in Serbia earlier this year and input from a number of highly experienced Serbia watchers. Building on an earlier August 1999 International Crisis Group report<sup>1</sup>, it focuses on the state of the opposition political parties, their capacities to campaign effectively against the regime in increasingly hostile and difficult circumstances, and perceptions of the regime and opposition by the Serbian public as reflected in several opinion polls.

## **II. MAJOR POLITICAL TRENDS IN SERBIA**

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<sup>1</sup> See ICG Balkans Report N° 75, *Transforming Serbia: The Key to Long-term Balkan Stability*, 10 August 1999



Since 1991, the international community and Western media have regularly labelled Milosevic's regime as authoritarian and undemocratic. While this judgement is essentially correct, it fails to reflect the major changes that have taken place in Serbia in the last decade.

During the first half of its rule (1991-1995), the regime enjoyed a relatively high level of public support and legitimacy, initially on the basis of its nationalist appeal, and later, during the Dayton peace talks, on the basis of its ability to manipulate the West to acquiesce in its wartime military gains. Throughout this period, the regime kept open a number of democratic channels. The system might be described as one of "democratic despotism<sup>2</sup>," sustained by nationalism and free but unfair elections. The ruling coalition's defeat in local elections in 1996 and the mass street protests against Milosevic that stretched through the winter of 1996 and into 1997 provoked profound changes in the character of the regime. The adoption in 1998 of the repressive new University Law<sup>3</sup> and Media Law<sup>4</sup> marked the end of democratic despotism and the beginning of despotism without democracy.

Milosevic used the NATO air strikes from March to June 1999 as an opportunity to consolidate the authoritarian character of his regime. At present the regime has increased the level of repression by closing or taking over almost all significant independent media outlets, using legal and regulatory mechanisms to bleed the media financially, and escalating the tempo of intimidation against the democratic forces. Following the University Law and Media Law, the attempt to suppress the student resistance movement Otpor and closure of all Serbian universities one week early in May, there are reports that the regime is preparing drastic changes to the legislation regulating public rallies and demonstrations and to clamp down on freedom of expression and assembly. There are even fears that the regime will move to ban opposition parties following its crackdown against independent media.

Starting in March the regime began to crush systematically the independent media. In March, the independent daily *Vecernje Novosti* was put by the federal government under the control of the state daily *Borba*<sup>5</sup>; attackers wearing police uniforms stole transmission equipment from Belgrade's Studio B<sup>6</sup>; and the local Lav TV in Vrasac, Radio Boom 93 in Pozorvac, Radio Tir in Cuprija, Television Nemanja in Cuprija, and Radio Golf in Belgrade were closed for different "irregularities<sup>7</sup>." Studio B, Radio B2-92, Radio Indeks, and *Blic* were closed or taken over by the regime in May. The opposition has displayed a capability to resist the crackdown in some circumstances, such as the successful recovery of independent media in Kraljevo following several days of street demonstrations against the regime. The failure of Serbian Renewal Party (SPO) leader Vuk Draskovic to bring his party into the streets to oppose the takeover of Studio B,

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<sup>2</sup> The term "democratic despotism" with respect to Serbia before 1997 is borrowed from Ivan Vejvoda.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the Public Information Law, see *Human Rights in Yugoslavia 1998*, Serbian Center for Human Rights.

<sup>4</sup> *Human Rights in Yugoslavia 1998*, Serbian Center for Human Rights.

<sup>5</sup> *Serbia Watch*, 16 March 2000.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

which belongs to the SPO by virtue of the party's leading role in Belgrade municipal government, was a major disappointment to the democratic opposition and a further sign of Draskovic's accommodation to regime pressures.

The leader of the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), Serbian Deputy Prime Minister Vojislav Seselj, has played a prominent role in this policy shift. In an address to the congress of his party in January, Seselj argued that there would be only two parties in Serbian politics — the SRS on the right, and the Serbian Socialist Party (SPS) allied with the United Yugoslav Left (JUL) on the left<sup>8</sup>. These remarks, coupled with his accusation that independent journalists were responsible for the assassination of Yugoslav Defence Minister Pavel Bulatovic, signalled the willingness of the regime to criminalise any dissident activity. The recent series of killings in Belgrade could even be used by the regime as a pretext for banning the opposition parties and introducing martial law. In the words of Alliance for Change co-ordinator Vladan Batic, "this is a transition from concealed to open dictatorship<sup>9</sup>."

But several factors constrain the regime in its move toward classical dictatorship.

- The merger of the political and criminal elites, and widespread corruption, erode the regime's capacity to organise its activities around only one centre of power;
- The difficulties of dealing with more than one "internal" front simultaneously;
- The fact that the opposition controls the major cities of Serbia limits the ability of the regime to move against it. A military takeover by the regime can be realised only against the will of the local governments in the larger Serbian municipalities. Such an action cannot be accomplished within a constitutional framework. In places like Nis or Novi Sad, but also in some of the smaller towns, the regime will most probably face well organised, popular resistance led by the mayors, as happened in Kraljevo when the local independent media was threatened; and
- The regime is uncertain about the international reaction to a violent crackdown possibly leading to civil conflict.

### **III. THE REGIME'S VULNERABILITIES**

At present the information provided by different public opinion polls<sup>10</sup> conducted in the fall of 1999, supported by polling taken this year, and the consensus among experts inside Serbia, is that the regime has lost a great deal of its most

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Beta News Agency, 14 March 2000.

<sup>10</sup> The public opinion polls most relied upon in this report are those conducted by the Center for Policy Studies in Belgrade; commissioned by the National Democratic Institute of the United States and conducted by Penn, Schoen and Berland; and conducted by the Strategic Marketing and Media Research Centre. For selected excerpts of from key polling taken in Serbia during the past year, see Appendix B.

active supporters. According to these polls, more than 70 per cent of the population favours political change, despite the fact that a majority of the people can neither define the parameters of the change they desire nor agree on who should be the agent of change. The regime's success in shoring up public support during the NATO bombing campaign appears to have been short-lived, based more on patriotic sentiment than confidence in the regime. The striking failure of the regime to mount counter-demonstrations to the post-war street protests of the opposition last year reinforces the primary message of the polls: that there is an anti-Milosevic majority in Serbia.

The polls also suggest that the agenda of the regime does not reflect that of ordinary people. More than 60 per cent of the population cites the improvement of relations with the West among the most important policy priorities facing Serbia, while Kosovo does not even appear in the list of the six most important areas of public concern. On the basis of these polls, there are strong similarities between Serbian public opinion today and Bulgarian public opinion in the fall of 1996, Slovak public opinion in the summer of 1998, and Croatian public opinion in the late 1999<sup>11</sup>, preceding those countries' democratic transitions.

Analysing the conditions for political change in Serbia, the evidence is that the protests of the Alliance of Change in towns across Serbia in the summer and autumn of 1999 succeeded in polarising society. The protests organised by the Alliance were successful in destroying the "national unity" born in the days of bombing. Despite their failure to mobilise active public backing, the rallies re-focused public attention on Milosevic and his regime. The large mid-April demonstration in Belgrade this year was a reminder of the potential for street rallies to build public support. Milosevic's consolidation of the regime's base has cost him peripheral support.

The side effects of the war and the preoccupation of the population with daily survival have caused a weakening of the grip of the official media, the awareness of which by the regime probably contributed to the recent crackdown on the independent media. Serbian state television (RTS) is still the most influential information agent; following the end of the war there had been a decline in the number of people watching information programmes and an increase in the audience of now shuttered radio B2-92<sup>12</sup> and the many independent local broadcasters throughout Serbia, until the crackdown intensified in May. The bombing of many key state transmitters was an appreciable factor in cutting down the audience for state broadcasting media. The circulation of the official daily newspaper *Politika* remains a state secret but, in the opinion of the independent publishers, is also declining.

In this environment, any attempt by the regime to reproduce the mobilisation of society that took place during the war would almost certainly fail. Serbian public opinion has the potential to produce a "Croatian scenario," in which a coalition of democratic forces could mobilise a disgruntled public to oust a regime seemingly impervious to democratic change (although in Croatia the success of the

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<sup>11</sup> The major characteristic of public opinion in the three countries cited was increasing disapproval with the policies of the regimes, low level of confidence in the opposition, and desire for change.

<sup>12</sup> Results of the February 2000 poll conducted by Strategic Marketing and Media Research Institute.

opposition was aided by the long illness and death of President Franjo Tudjman prior to elections).

#### **IV. GENERAL PROSPECTS FOR DEMOCRATIC CHANGE**

The present tendency to dismiss the prospect of a mass movement forcing Milosevic from power stems from an assumption that opposition activities in Belgrade are the sole barometer for determining the success or failure of the democratic forces in Serbia. The break-up of the Zajedno (Together) opposition coalition in Belgrade in 1997 and the collapse of the Belgrade protests of the Alliance for Change in autumn 1999 masked the continuing vitality of Zajedno governing coalitions and protest movements in towns throughout Serbia. As a consequence, the politics of low expectations based on a misperception of the broad-based strength of Serbia's democratic forces has now replaced the politics of high expectations as the prevailing attitude of Western policymakers. In reality, such pessimism is exaggerated, as was shown by the success of the opposition in bringing over 100,000 supporters to the streets of Belgrade in April.

Despite the regime's recent success in silencing opposition voices, in some respects the situation is more promising than in the fall of 1999.

- For the first time since 1997, it is clear who stands in opposition to the regime;
- Opposition leaders in non-Belgrade towns have demonstrated a durability and effectiveness that contrasts favourably with the fecklessness of many Belgrade leaders and has significantly expanded the base and reach of the democratic forces;
- Public expectations that the regime can deliver prosperity and stability are very low;
- The capacity of the regime to enlarge its present political coalition has been exhausted. Milosevic suffers from both external and internal isolation. For the first time most NATO governments have cut all contact with Milosevic and senior regime officials; and
- The NATO intervention re-shaped the psychological make up of the regime. Serbian authorities are becoming openly paranoid and inclined to make major political mistakes. The apparent assassination attempt against Serbian Renewal Party leader Vuk Draskovic on 3 October 1999 and the assassinations of indicted war criminal Arkan and Yugoslav defence minister Pavel Bulatovic have created new levels of tension and uncertainty in Belgrade about where such violence will lead. The clampdown on independent media, attempts to suppress the student-led Otpor resistance movement, and the early closure of all university campuses in May 2000 reflect the level of uncertainty by the regime toward the strength and direction of opposition resistance to Milosevic.

## **V. PROSPECTS OF POLITICAL CHANGE OCCURRING PEACEFULLY**

Many observers have noticed a striking inconsistency in the way the majority of Serbs discuss the possibility of political change. Publicly all opposition parties develop their strategy with the assumption that peaceful political change is possible. Privately, almost all Belgrade opposition leaders confess they do not believe that Milosevic will permit peaceful change to occur. They expect him to intervene to rig the electoral process and overturn the results, if necessary deploying the military to preserve his control of the country. It is important to stress that the public does not appear to support the violent overthrow of the regime, while any peaceful process of change is contingent upon the regime respecting the constitutional process and handing over power in the event of an opposition election victory.

Two factors are relevant when considering the prospects for national-level peaceful political change in Serbia.

### **A. The Hague Factor**

The decision of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague to indict Milosevic on charges of war crimes in Kosovo separates the Serbian transition from the prevailing central and east European pattern. Some post-communist transitions in the last ten years have guaranteed an exit/safe haven for the key figures of the old regimes. It is not easy to see how these models could be applied to Serbia.

Most Belgrade opposition leaders, however, appear convinced that their task of removing Milosevic and ushering in a democratic transition would be facilitated by the West tacitly granting Milosevic an escape route by offering him the right of exile in a friendly country<sup>13</sup>. On 16 February 2000 the opposition parties discussed a document prepared by Professor Dragoslav Avramovic, prime ministerial candidate of the Alliance for Change, suggesting that the opposition, in exchange for fair elections and a peaceful transfer of power, should guarantee to Milosevic that he will not be extradited to face criminal charges abroad. SPO leader Vuk Draskovic has reportedly sought Russian assistance in arranging a safe haven. Those who advocate this view, including many close to the opposition, believe that any moral objections are far outweighed by the potential benefits for Serbia as whole.

That is not a view that is widely shared within the international community. There is a basic question of principle involved in giving safe haven to a war criminal indicted by the UN-mandated Tribunal, which is too much for the international community to accept. Since the US and others have rebuffed these

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<sup>13</sup> See for example the G 17-Plus Miroslav Labus's interview in the Belgrade-published *Economist* magazine, December 1999.

overtures, it may be more accurate to observe that key opposition leaders are counting on war crimes not being punished.

The Tribunal's indictment of Milosevic and other senior officials sets Serbia's transition apart from those that took place in other central and east European countries in another way. In the cases of the Polish and Bulgarian transitions, for example, the West was successful in openly building alliances within the parties of the old regimes in favour of peaceful change. In the case of Serbia, the West has understandably been more circumspect in openly approaching officials of the ruling Socialist Party, including those who have not been indicted by the Hague tribunal.

In this context, non-criminal elements of the Socialist leadership and the administration often look for guarantees not just from the West and opposition moderates but from nationalist radicals or, in the case of a number of Serbian business leaders, from the Djukanovic government in Montenegro. The international community should continue its previous efforts to exploit tensions within the elite and build bridges between the opposition, non-indicted members of the Serbian establishment, and the international community. Obtaining the political support or neutrality of the moderate part of the ruling elite should be a key element of any successful democratisation strategy.

## **B. The Statehood Factor**

The other factor complicating prospects for a peaceful transition and democratisation is the fact that Serbians do not yet feel confident of their statehood. This is in marked contrast to the situation in Croatia, where transition to democracy occurred only after a period of "state-building" during the mid-to-late 1990s. The process of building a Serbian state is incomplete. Serbia is a state with disputed and ill-defined borders, uncertain of its state symbols and its future structure.

The fact that the question of the Serbian state remains unresolved lies at the heart of much of the uncertainty and insecurity inherent in Serbian society. Public opinion polls indicate that almost every second person in Serbia is afraid of becoming a refugee<sup>14</sup>. Kosovo, which used to excite such strong nationalist sentiments, is no longer the greatest source of insecurity for Serbs, most of whom accept the province's loss. The crisis in the relationship between Serbia and Montenegro has as its consequence that the Serbian public worries about its future much more in terms of a Serbian nation-state than in terms of Yugoslavia. The confusion surrounding the intentions of the international community regarding Kosovo and Montenegro causes genuine anxiety and fuels support for the nationalists in Belgrade.

This confusion about the future of Serbia vs. the future of Yugoslavia spills over into opposition attitudes toward the minority political parties of Vojvodina —

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<sup>14</sup> Belgrade's Centre for Policy Studies (CPS) poll.

which has a significant ethnic Hungarian population — and the Muslims of Sandzak. Together, the Vojvodina and Sandzak political coalitions of minority parties can deliver nearly fifteen per cent of the vote, which is essential for the opposition to carry. Along with many of the opposition forces outside Belgrade, these coalitions favour a decentralised Serbian state that shifts significant powers from Belgrade to local administrations.

Both the war crimes and statehood factors profoundly affect the chances of peaceful transition in Serbia — making a peaceful transition to democracy less likely. At the same time these two factors do not make peaceful change impossible or unthinkable. There are several countervailing factors that nurture the chances of peaceful change.

- The general public sees the “constitutional” character of the present regime as the only legitimate reason for their loyalty to it;
- The non-indicted Serb power structure fears that the alternative to peaceful change could be NATO intervention;
- Even the most radical supporters of the regime are afraid that closing off the option of peaceful change risks condemning Serbia to civil war<sup>15</sup>; and
- The regime itself shows signs of overestimating the size and durability of its own support base — leading Milosevic and senior regime officials to believe that they can win elections. In this sense, the regime has become a victim of its own propaganda machine.

In summary, the chances of peaceful political change occurring in Serbia are higher than generally perceived. While the model for negotiated change in its east European version is not applicable to Serbia, there remain important opportunities for promoting non-violent change that can and should be exploited.

## **VI. CAPACITY OF THE OPPOSITION PARTIES TO PROVOKE ELECTIONS**

On the day after the end of NATO’s air campaign, Serbia’s opposition parties faced a strategic dilemma: whether to focus their efforts on a call for early elections, or instead to call for the prior resignation of Milosevic.

In the eyes of many — including most Western analysts — the opposition could not expect free and fair elections with Milosevic still in power, and the call for new elections could be misused by the regime to re-legitimise itself. The fear of “snap elections” was one reason why the Alliance for Change insisted last year on Milosevic’s resignation and the installation of an interim government of technocrats pending free elections. This position, however, proved unrealistic. As the January agreement makes clear, the demand for early elections is the only platform on which the opposition has been able to mobilise mass public support. The key questions are whether opposition pressure can force early elections on

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<sup>15</sup> Different polls have indicated that support for peaceful solutions is even stronger among SPS supporters than among supporters of the opposition.

all levels (federal, republic, local; federal and local elections are required this year but not republic elections) as foreshadowed in the January agreement, and what the opposition's response should be in the event that the regime decides to call federal and local elections only, which is all that Milosevic is legally and constitutionally required to do.

The prevailing view among experts in Belgrade<sup>16</sup> is that even a united opposition does not have the strength to force the authorities to call elections. Opinion polls indicate, however, that 20 per cent of the population has already participated in street protests and another 20 per cent are willing to do so. The caution reflects other important factors apart from the polling data available to them.

- Their general sense of insecurity
- The lack of a well articulated alternative position by Belgrade opposition figures;
- The common conviction that street protests did not work there last year; and
- The preoccupation of Belgrade residents with the problems of daily survival, with shortages of food and fuel forcing many people to spend long hours in queues. The public is exhausted after a decade of economic decline and last year's NATO bombing.

Attitudes differ in towns outside Belgrade. Even in Belgrade, the present situation is not immovable. A major slip by the government, a mishandling of the ongoing crackdown, or a fresh scandal could yet provoke mass protests and help to radicalise the public. The split between opposition passivity in Belgrade and activism outside the capital undercuts the power of the opposition to force the regime to call elections against Milosevic's will.

The most probable scenario is that the regime will hold legally required federal and local elections this year. Local elections would put at risk the gains made by the opposition in the 1996 local elections, when they won control of over 30 of the most important municipalities in Serbia, including Belgrade<sup>17</sup>. It is important to note, however, that the opposition subsequently lost control of Belgrade in 1997 when SPO leader Vuk Draskovic broke with his democratic coalition allies and established a *de facto* governing partnership with Milosevic's SPS. SPO parties elsewhere in Serbia did not follow Draskovic's policy of sacrificing his democratic partners for an informal alliance of convenience with the regime.

This Belgrade problem contrasts with the durability of opposition democratic coalitions outside Belgrade, where more dynamic and impressive local leaders rely on inclusivity and co-operation to resist the divisiveness of central party leaders in Belgrade. It also accounts for the tendency of many in the West to

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<sup>16</sup> Professor Vladimir Goati, Professor Sergan Bogoslavlevic, and others.

<sup>17</sup> The leader of the New Democracy party, Dusan Milhailovic, has commented that "the closure of the independent media is...a sure sign that the authorities are getting ready for elections." Beta News Agency, 13 March 2000.



mislabel the overall democratic opposition — rather than just the Belgrade leadership — as weak, divided, and indecisive.

Local elections provide the non-Belgrade opposition with an opportunity to rally support for maintaining the municipalities they captured four years ago. At worst, they stand to lose ground won in 1996. The regime is likely to use the elections as an instrument for claiming democratic legitimacy. The campaign will be used to attack the opposition for corruption and inefficiency in running major municipalities. According to Serbian law, election results are valid even if only 10 per cent of the population votes. An opposition boycott, therefore, is not a practical option since, quite apart from splitting the opposition, it would guarantee the transfer of control of municipalities currently held by the opposition to parties supporting the regime.

The opposition should take on the challenge of local elections and participate with the aim of turning the polls into a referendum on Milosevic. By participating in the elections with a common opposition list and using the campaign to attack the regime, the opposition parties can take the initiative and intensify pressure on the regime for change.

Federal parliamentary elections pose a different set of problems, of which Western governments should be aware. Milosevic hopes to use federal elections to drive a wedge between the democratic forces and their Montenegrin allies, and between Djukanovic and international backers wary of the implications of any Montenegrin actions that might bring the independence issue to the fore or provide Milosevic with a pretext to intervene militarily. While Serbia's democratic forces want Djukanovic supporters to participate in the polling, many in the latter camp are averse to joining the federal electoral process because they seek to distance Montenegro from Belgrade's control. They point out that Milosevic has refused to abide by federal election results in the past and has never treated Montenegro as a full partner in the federation. Serbian democrats often display a blind spot toward Djukanovic, expecting him to exert all possible efforts on their behalf while ignoring his legitimate political concerns.

## **VII. CAPACITY OF THE OPPOSITION PARTIES TO WIN ELECTIONS**

Various public opinion polls send a signal that is often neglected by both Serbian and outside experts: if the democratic forces were to fight elections with a common list they would win, notwithstanding the likelihood that Milosevic will try to rig the results in favour of the regime. The polls also indicate that more than twice as many voters would support the opposition if a common list was offered, compared with the total number currently indicating support for individual opposition candidates and parties. Moreover, support for opposition groups is more homogeneous than support for the ruling coalition: it is more probable that a Serbian Renewal Party voter will vote for a candidate of the Democratic Party (DS) (or vice versa) than that an SPS voter will vote for a candidate of the Radicals (or vice versa)<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Professor Goati, *Free and Fair Elections in Serbia Today: How to Achieve Them*, paper presented at the meeting of the Task Force for the Future for FRY, 28 January 2000.

The international community should concentrate on assisting the opposition to work together in coalition in Belgrade, maintain existing coalitions outside the capital, improve its campaigning strength, and not be distracted by fears of unfair elections. If the opposition can agree and stick to a common list of candidates — something that will be easier to achieve for local than national elections — it will have cleared the most important barrier to democratic change in Serbia.

A joint election campaign and co-ordinated political message should back up a common list. The regime has traded to date on the inability of the opposition to formulate and unify around its own policy agenda. The opposition has a crucial opportunity to tap into the everyday concerns and aspirations of ordinary people across Serbia by turning the political agenda away from nationalism, Kosovo, Montenegro, and sanctions and towards economic and social issues, where Milosevic is weakest. Although some parts of the opposition fear a public debate on corruption, the experience of Croatia, Slovakia, and Macedonia demonstrates that the democratic oppositions in these countries have won elections by focusing on the economic records of the regimes and their pervasive corruption.

This could be a winning strategy for Serbia. The opposition should emphasise that its reform agenda will return Serbia to Europe and the international community and away from the regime's dead-end courtship of pariah and communist states in the Middle East and Asia. If Milosevic tries to steal the elections from the opposition, the democratic forces maintain the option of mobilising public hostility against him through countrywide street protests that could weaken and possibly topple the regime.

## **VIII. OPPOSITION PARTIES AND POLITICAL LEADERS**

Three important components of opposition to the regime are the opposition political parties, the anti-Milosevic media; and civil society. Relations between these components have long been far from constructive. However, during the early part of this year, a number of developments occurred that pointed to a new tendency of consolidation among the various opposition groups.

### **A. January 2000 Agreement**

An important step in this respect was the signature, on 10 January 2000, of an agreement among the opposition parties (see Appendix A). The agreement was reached almost two years after the painful break-up of the Zajedno coalition, which briefly challenged the political hegemony of the regime in 1996 and 1997. The relationship between Zajedno's two main political partners — the Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO) and the Democratic Party (DS) — degenerated into hostility in the wake of the collapse of the electoral alliance, with the SPO joining the ranks of the regime in government. SPO leader Vuk Draskovic served as federal deputy prime minister during the early days of last year's NATO air campaign against Yugoslavia and remains openly distrusted in the West.

Even after Draskovic's departure from government, relations between the parties remained mutually suspicious, with Draskovic refusing to join forces with the DS and the new Alliance for Change coalition in the wake of the Kosovo conflict to press for Milosevic's resignation. The SPO still governs Belgrade in *de facto* alliance with Milosevic's SPS on the Belgrade municipal council, as part of an informal deal with the regime that has, until mid-May, provided Draskovic with access to the Studio B broadcasting outlet and tax revenues to support his political activities. Milosevic has thus retained significant leverage over Draskovic and has frozen non-SPO democratic forces out of Belgrade municipal governance.

Many in the Alliance for Change and the international community believe that Draskovic functions as a Trojan horse for the regime within opposition ranks. Even amidst the intensified crackdown on the independent media and student-led resistance movement Otpor in May, Draskovic continued to urge unconditional lifting of the sanctions against the regime. He also did not co-ordinate with the Alliance or Otpor to bring his followers into the streets in May in protest over the regime's crackdown. After failing to deliver on promised street demonstrations in March, Draskovic had dragged the Alliance through interminable negotiations over the ground rules for holding them in the spring, using the talks in part to punish some in the opposition who do not fully support his leadership. With Belgrade opposition leaders mired in internal discussions about side issues, the regime stepped up its crackdown against the independent media and Otpor, leaving local coalitions and citizens once again to defend the media.

In view of the traumatic history of relations between the major opposition parties, the fact that the January 2000 inter-party agreement was reached at all initially seemed remarkable. At the same time the significance of the agreement should not be overestimated. The opposition parties have over-delivered in signing agreements and under-delivered in co-ordinating joint actions.

The January agreement was the result of several major factors.

- Grassroots pressure from some of the most influential local branches of both the SPO and DS was instrumental in imposing a degree of discipline on bickering Belgrade party leaders. In some municipalities where the Zajedno coalition won power in 1996, the two parties maintained good relations. Pressure from these municipalities, and in particular from democratic mayors, created the impetus for the January 2000 agreement;
- Pressure from the West caused Draskovic to reconsider his tactics. According to some of Draskovic's closest advisors, the fact that the SPO leader was placed on a U.S. visa blacklist for several weeks played an important role in clarifying his stand. Draskovic became apprehensive that the international community would openly stand behind the Alliance for Change and that the SPO would carry the blame for opposition disunity.
- The car crash involving Vuk Draskovic, which many, including Draskovic himself, believe to have been a regime-orchestrated assassination attempt, stimulated him to reconsider his previously un-cooperative relationship with the Alliance;

- The fear that Milosevic might call early local elections pushed some of the business figures close to the SPO and DS to support the January Agreement. The business people supporting the opposition are closely connected with the municipalities and fear that a boycott of the elections would lead to their ouster from established business niches.

The fact of the agreement initially seemed to be a generally positive development for Serbian society. In view of the scepticism with which external observers and ordinary citizens viewed the prospect of reconciliation between the opposition parties, the January agreement was counted as a major opposition achievement. The sceptics presciently doubted, however, that the agreement would work in practice or endure more than a short period of time before Belgrade party leaders reverted to rivalry and bickering. As has been seen subsequently, the agreement did not overcome the mistrust between the opposition parties, reconcile personal animosities between some of the party leaders, nor create a common platform or a common strategy for action.

## **B. Relative Strength of the Opposition Parties**

The SPO and the DS are the only two opposition parties that have branches in most of Serbia's municipalities and can cover the almost 9,000 polling stations in Serbia on their own. All the figures presented by the parties with respect to their local branches, membership and capacity for mobilisation should be viewed with caution. But most observers agree that the DS has more than 140 functioning local organisations and about 40,000 members. The SPO has more branches and members but is less well equipped and its members tend to be less well educated than those of the DS <sup>19</sup>.

In terms of their structure and organisation, the DS and SPO differ significantly. The SPO is built around the personal charisma of Vuk Draskovic, with strategic decision-making in the party largely confined to a close circle consisting of Draskovic's wife Danica and his personal advisors. The DS is also dominated by the figure of its leader, Zoran Djindjic, but Djindjic's grip on his party is not comparable to that of Vuk Draskovic's on his. At the end of February Djindjic was re-elected as party chairman in a close contest with one of his deputies, but there are several other strong figures in the party that will likely play key roles in the future, among them Zoran Zivkovic, the mayor of Nis. The failure of Belgrade street protests organised by the Alliance for Change in the autumn of 1999 significantly weakened Djindjic. His absence from Belgrade during the NATO air strikes has also been exploited by Djindjic's enemies and rivals to undermine confidence in his leadership of the party.

The ethnic Hungarian parties in Vojvodina and the Muslim parties in Sandzak are particularly well organised. In Vojvodina, which has voted against Milosevic in all previous elections, hostility to the regime is running high. But in both cases,

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<sup>19</sup> It is impossible to find independent sources on the structural capacities and membership of the opposition parties. The figures presented here are the figures given by parties themselves. Most of the local experts accept these figures as likely.

support for the opposition is concentrated in the respective minority constituencies that these parties represent.

### **C. Political Orientation of the Opposition Parties**

#### **1. "Liberal"**

The Democratic Party and most of the parties in the Alliance for Change coalition can be vaguely defined as liberal. Their support is drawn mainly from the urban and better-educated parts of the population. They tend to be pro-Western and less nationalistic in their approach than other parties. The Alliance for Change includes the Civic Alliance, led by Goran Svilanovic, which has a long and honourable record of fighting for civil rights and political freedoms. The success of the Alliance for Change in getting the endorsement of figures like Professor Dragoslav Avramovic, former head of the Central Bank and internationally recognised market reformer, enhances the prospects of the Alliance within Serbia and its appeal to the West.

#### **2. "Patriotic"**

The SPO, the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) and some other small parties represent the "patriotic" wing of the opposition. Their support comes not only from the cities but also from some rural areas, particularly those areas associated with the World War II Chetnik movement headed by Dragoslav Mihailovic<sup>20</sup>. These parties are anti-communist, but their major goal is the transformation of Serbia into a strong nation-state. The new, close relationship between SPO leader Vuk Draskovic and DSS leader Vojislav Kostunica has reinforced the strength of the "patriotic" wing but may yet threaten the unity of the broader opposition alliance. The DSS is a small party, but its leader retains the image of an uncorrupted politician who has been consistent in his political behaviour: attacking Milosevic for the regime's failures to advance its Greater Serbia agenda, rather than criticising that nationalist agenda itself.

#### **3. Social Democratic**

Social democratic groups are marginal players on the Serbian political scene, organisationally weak and virtually invisible outside the major cities. Social democrat strategists hope to win support from disillusioned Socialists, but the chances of a breakthrough appear slim. One lesson of voting behaviour in eastern Europe is that in critical elections voters surprisingly neglect the moderate options<sup>21</sup>. The success of the Social Democratic Party in Bosnia's 8 April 2000 municipal elections among Bosniaks, while not duplicated in Republika Srpska, nonetheless suggests that there may be at least some role for Serbian social democratic parties if they can improve on their message and organisation.

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<sup>20</sup> The Chetnik movement was a militant anti-communist and nationalistic movement fighting both the Nazis and Tito's partisans during World War Two.

<sup>21</sup> Parliamentary elections in Bulgaria in 1991 and in Macedonia in 1998 are the best illustrations of this tendency. In 1991 none of the moderates in the opposition managed to enter the Bulgarian Parliament. And in the case of Macedonia the centrist Liberal-Democratic Party scored below expectations.

Vuk Obradovic's recently established Social Democracy party is one of the few opposition parties working hard to create local structures; but the party remains weak and too preoccupied with establishing its own independent profile to blend comfortably into a larger coalition. Nevertheless, European social democratic parties and their foundations — on whose advice, apparently, Social Democracy was created in the first place — should exercise pressure on Obradovic to join the common efforts of the opposition.

The other significant social democratic movement is DAN, a coalition of three left-of-centre parties. DAN consists of the Democratic Alternative, the New Democracy Party, and the Democratic Centre. The grouping trades on an image of moderation and hopes to provide shelter for disaffected Milosevic voters when elections take place.

#### **4. Regional Parties**

The four Hungarian parties in Vojvodina and the Muslim party in Sandzak are well organised and have a reputation for political consistency. Both regions have voted against Milosevic in all elections since 1990. However, a working coalition between the regional parties and other parts of the opposition is possible only if they can agree on the character of the post-Milosevic Serbian state. The legitimate demands of the regional parties for decentralisation and greater self-government cause widespread fear among many Serbs that regionalism will lead to weak central government and national disunity. The international community is the only effective mediator between the regional parties and the Belgrade opposition.

The Association of Democratic Parties (ADP) is a seven-member coalition of small social democratic and regional parties (including the Albanian Democratic Party, the Albanian People's Party, the League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina, the Sandzak Coalition, the Social Democratic Union, and the Sumadja Coalition based in Kragujevac). It is the only political coalition that includes minority parties and is one of the few consistently liberal and anti-nationalist voice in Serbian politics. The largest party is the League, which has been in a municipal coalition government with the SPO and the Reform Hungarian Democratic Party. The League and its leader Nenad Canak caused a stir with its public restatement in favour of not only autonomy but also republic status for Vojvodina. This position, however, has not broken the overall coalition, nor harmed the Association's participation in the coalition established by the 10 January agreement. The Association's co-leader is Zharko Korac, chairman of the Social Democratic Union, an anti-nationalist and University of Belgrade psychology professor who played an important role in establishing the agreement and has become a popular opposition spokesman.

Some of the regional parties in the ADP have strong local or ethnic backing but, aside from the League, are usually ignored or excluded by other opposition parties. There are a number of other more nationally or ethnically oriented regional parties (Hungarian Union, Vojvodina Coalition, Banat Coalition, and several in Sandzak and southern Serbia), but these generally have less support.

The ADP (soon to become the Association of Democratic and Social Democratic Parties), while small has a regionally broad infrastructure and reaches out to traditionally excluded constituencies whose votes will be important in any election.

#### **D. Rise of Local Opposition Leaders**

A recent and potentially important development is the rise of local opposition leaders. Their emergence dates back to 1997 and the collapse of the Zajedno coalition. In some municipalities, Zajedno survived the national-level break-up, and in others, DS and SPO continued to govern together, though not in Belgrade. Some democratically elected mayors succeeded in building power bases of their own, drawing on the support of local media and local business, and gradually became visible on the national stage.

The period following NATO's military intervention was especially favourable to the rise of these local leaders, for the following reasons:

- Mass street rallies, organised by the Alliance for Change in September 1999, attracted an average of 10,000 protesters a day in Nis and Novi Sad compared with only about 1,000 a day in Belgrade, adding to the perception that the provinces were more radical than the capital and that opposition disunity was a Belgrade disease;
- Local opposition leaders were interviewed by the international media, becoming increasingly well-known to Western policymakers and members of the public, and were invited to international conferences and seminars;
- The international community, looking for ways to assist the opposition without benefiting Milosevic, began to focus its aid on the democratic municipalities; and
- The more pragmatic approach of democratically elected mayors appeared to work better in the prevailing political situation. Mayors are more concerned with the everyday problems of the citizens — heating, health, and the supply of food — and they often communicate better with the voters.

The increasing importance of local opposition leaders has had three positive consequences for the consolidation of the democratic opposition:

- The pressure exerted by local branches to mend splits between the opposition parties was one factor behind the negotiation of the January agreement;
- The pressure exerted by local leaders makes it more difficult for the regime to succeed in reopening opposition wounds; and
- The involvement of local leaders will help the opposition develop a political agenda focused on the everyday concerns of the public.

The democratic opposition has already established effective coalitions outside Belgrade, where it is hamstrung by its relationship to Draskovic from adopting a version of the pro-reform, pro-Europe, and anti-corruption program that succeeded so well in Croatia, Slovakia, and Bulgaria in the past three years. Instead, the Belgrade opposition leaders have adopted key items of the regime's agenda, including the unconditional lifting of sanctions and the return of the military and security forces to Kosovo cited in the January agreement. Western governments, by downplaying the significance of opposition coalitions in the democratically controlled towns outside Belgrade and insisting that the Alliance for Change unify with Draskovic, have undermined the galvanising potential of the regional democratic forces.

## **IX. POLITICAL POTENTIAL OF NGOS**

The focus of the international community should be on gauging the potential of civil society to complement the work of political parties in bringing about near term political change in Serbia. Since 1990 approximately 1,200 NGOs have been registered in Serbia<sup>22</sup>, of which around 150-200 are citizen action groups with the potential and commitment to support the democratic process<sup>23</sup>. Politically active NGOs, most of which are centred in the large cities controlled by the opposition, can count on around 10,000 activists<sup>24</sup>. Like the opposition parties, NGOs generally have little or no outreach in rural areas.

In general the NGO sector in Serbia is under-funded and under-developed in comparison with NGO sectors in other transition countries. While there are a number of well-established NGOs in the fields of human rights, media and education, public policy think tanks have only appeared recently and their access to opposition decision-making is still very limited.

Several NGOs are particularly well-placed to assist the opposition parties in their efforts to mobilise support for democratic change.

- Otpor (Resistance) is the most politically active and effective student organisation. Prior to the May crackdown by the regime, Otpor had 20 local branches and could rely on about 5,000 activists, according to their own estimates. These numbers have expanded significantly since then as Otpor welcomed large numbers of new members, including prominent members of the political elite. In view of the failure of the Belgrade opposition parties to co-ordinate an effective response to the May crackdown, particularly the failure of Vuk Draskovic to bring his Serbian Renewal Party members into the streets in protest over the takeover of his Studio B broadcasting station, many Serbs have come to perceive Otpor as the most prominent vehicle for mobilising resistance to the regime.

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<sup>22</sup> The source is the Center for Development of the Non-Profit Sector.

<sup>23</sup> The figure reflects the estimates of several leaders of the third sector.

<sup>24</sup> The figure reflects the estimates of several NGO leaders.



- The Centre for Electoral Strategies and Democracy (CESID) a well-established NGO specialising in election monitoring, plays a key role in regulating the electoral process. CESID experts have prepared a new draft election law which has been endorsed by the opposition parties. The organisation has experience in assessing voter registration and identifying electoral fraud.
- G17-Plus, a new civic group composed of economists and other professionals, is active in the field of economic reconstruction and the Energy for Democracy initiative. The group is the most controversial player among the NGO sector. Many view G17-Plus as the driving force of the new democratic movement. The group, which recently changed its name from G17 to G17-Plus to reflect efforts to expand its base, is in the process of building a local-level infrastructure and is working on an opposition economic policy program for the post-Milosevic period. Some of the leaders of G17-Plus, however, have a tendency to act as an alternative to, and not as a genuine part of, the opposition.
- There are dozens of other civic groups that can be mobilised in public awareness campaigns and election monitoring efforts. The last several months have witnessed a more active involvement of NGOs in political activities. NGO "get-out-the-vote" and monitoring efforts need to be pursued by coalitions of NGOs. Unfortunately, these efforts are proceeding in an increasingly fragmentary way that bodes ill for success.

## **X. SOURCES OF TENSION BETWEEN THE OPPOSITION PARTIES AND NGOs**

Relations between the NGO community and opposition parties are tense. In general, NGOs work more easily with the smaller parties of the Alliance for Change and with the Democratic Centre.

The role played by the NGO community in the democratic transitions that took place in Bulgaria, Slovakia and Croatia suggests that the question of NGO-party relations is important. An analysis of tensions between the NGOs and opposition parties suggests that the West is at least partly to blame for the current situation.

Tensions between NGOs and the opposition parties are rooted in four major factors:

- **Misunderstanding of NGOs' role:** Neither the political parties nor Western governments understand the role that independent NGOs can play in Serbia. The political parties persistently try to take over and control NGOs, displaying little respect for the independence of the NGO sector. Western governments that support the democratisation effort tend to undervalue NGOs' potential for contributing to democratic change.
- **Competition for money:** Since the Kosovo conflict (but also before it), Western governments are seen to have promised large amounts of money to assist the Serbian democratisation process but have not delivered on these promises. The political parties blame the NGOs for "eating" Western money without making a public impact.

- **Competition for influence:** The popularity of some NGO leaders and their ambiguous role with respect to the political parties is another source of tension. This is especially true with respect to G17-Plus. G17 coordinator Mladjan Dinkic's attempt to play non-party politics and mount a political campaign, without being a political party, united the opposition parties in their criticism and suspicion of G17-Plus and Dinkic's personal motives.
- **Mutual mistrust:** Political parties do not believe that the NGO sector has the potential to mobilise and affect the voting patterns of large numbers of voters. NGOs mistrust the democratic credentials of the opposition parties. Recently the president of CESID, Professor Vladimir Goati, accused the opposition of passivity. "There is a conflict between the regime and civil society going on in Serbia at the moment in which the opposition is acting like an observer<sup>25</sup>."

While some of the concerns of opposition parties in relation to NGOs are legitimate, a greater degree of understanding and respect for the independence of the NGO sector could be a critical factor in providing the NGOs with the space they need to help mobilise a popular majority for change, as the NGOs have demonstrated their capacity to do in Croatia, Slovakia, Bulgaria and other relevant cases.

Tensions between the opposition parties and the NGOs can be reduced if:

- Opposition parties and NGOs both clearly define their respective and complementary roles in the movement for change, and the parties demonstrate greater respect for the independence of the NGOs and cease trying to treat them as adjuncts to opposition parties;
- The opposition parties consult and seek advice from NGOs and other civic groups in crafting their political strategy; and
- NGOs, in developing their public campaigns and messages, take into account the strategy of the opposition parties.

But, above all, the pre-condition for successful co-operation between opposition parties and the NGOs is the willingness of the political parties to work together in coalitions.

## **XI. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

There is little reason to expect that the steady and continuing deterioration of economic conditions in Serbia will automatically lead to political change. In order to maximise the chances for peaceful change, the opposition needs to agree on common lists of candidates in municipal — including Belgrade — and federal elections later this year, and on a political agenda centred on social and economic

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<sup>25</sup> *Serbia Watch*, 16 March 2000.

issues of concern to ordinary citizens rather than nationalist themes that echo the regime's message.

### **Establishing a Donors Forum**

Establishment of an international donors forum is a pre-condition for the success of democratisation in Serbia. The donors forum for Serbia should be modelled after that which was created before the Slovak elections in 1998, to co-ordinate donors supporting democratisation, including support for political parties, NGOs, independent media, and municipal-level assistance. Donors should co-ordinate their decision making and avoid unilateral actions. Separate, unconsulted agendas and strategies among donors will hinder effective coalition building in Serbia.

### **Support for Independent Media**

Support for the independent media has been the most effective and best organised of the international community's democracy assistance projects in Serbia. Existing support should continue. This should remain the first track for effective international support. The international community should look for ways to help protect the media through professional associations, sister media relationships abroad, and other non-government support groups. In view of the ongoing regime crackdown against the independent media, it is crucial that the media receive practical support during their period of need.

It would be useful for Western governments to help counteract the impact of the Belgrade regime's crackdown on the independent media by expanding the capability of radio and television broadcasting entities neighbouring Serbia (Montenegro and Bosnia's Republika Srpska) to broadcast into Serbia programming produced by media in the region and by independent journalists.

### **Support for Opposition Parties**

The international community should support pro-reform, non-nationalist coalitions throughout Serbia. Support should flow to coalitions that can agree on and will implement a common list of candidates, common political manifesto, and common electoral co-ordinating centres. To fully unify the whole opposition movement — including the Belgrade parties — is probably an unattainable goal, but that should not stop strong support for coalition-building efforts at the local level where some significant successes have already been achieved. Some of the most effective opposition leaders in eastern Europe have come from outside capitals, most prominently, Lech Walesa of Gdansk, and encouragement of the emergence of locally based leadership can only have a beneficial impact in terms of co-operation and dynamism at the national level. Belgrade national political actors should have no veto over support for locally based movements in Serbia: the local level should not be penalised for the failures of the Belgrade leaders, but rather rewarded for moving ahead.

Implementation of a broad support program should specifically include existing Serbian minority parties such as those in Vojvodina and Sandzak. Ethnic minorities comprise about 15 per cent of the vote; the support of the parties that

represent them will be crucial to the opposition's electoral success. Opposition leaders should be prepared to accommodate reasonable demands from the minority parties for regional decentralisation through formal or *de facto* agreements before the elections.

Western governments should encourage the democratic opposition to establish offices in Washington and Brussels to communicate more effectively with governments, the media, and supporters of the Serbian democratisation campaign.

### **Support for Serbian NGOs**

The international community should promote the establishment of NGOs that are independent of the regime and the opposition parties and relatively non-nationalist in their orientation. The donors forum should provide strong support for the many independent efforts of NGOs that are both directly and indirectly related to the election campaign, especially in reaching independent-minded voters not affiliated with or fed up with opposition parties and politics, as well as key target groups like minorities, youth, and lower educated women (identified in targeted polling as making up a large proportion of the undecided vote). Instead of trying to force co-ordination among the NGOs or between NGOs and the political parties, donors and the political parties should understand that the strength of the NGOs' work lies in their independence and that trying to establish too much co-ordination would compromise their authority and legitimacy in the minds of uncommitted or reluctant voters whom NGOs will have more efficacy reaching.

In providing support to the NGOs, the donors forum should be modelled along the lines of the forum created in Slovakia<sup>26</sup> on the eve of elections there in October 1998, consisting of European and U.S. private and government agencies interested in supporting activist NGOs. The forum should oversee the allocation of assistance in a flexible and responsive way while at the same time supporting the establishment of NGO coalitions to co-ordinate activities among the NGOs. Donors should be aware that NGOs are well placed to support political change through the conduct of public awareness and get-out-the-vote campaigns and monitoring of the electoral process, including registration. Special attention should be given to supporting the activities of NGOs in rural areas and activities targeting retired people and women, who comprise the majority of undecided voters. Care must be given in targeting retirees, however, many of whom are allied with Milosevic.

Support should be made available for the development of independent policy institutes (think tanks). There is a lack of professional local knowledge that goes beyond daily analysis, and even that work is flawed. The Serbian opposition urgently needs independent sources of relevant information concerning social and economic issues. Presently, the opposition parties are too reliant on information coming from within their own ranks and have too little access to

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<sup>26</sup> In 1998 the Slovak NGO community initiated an OK'98 campaign aimed at raising public awareness and voter education. The Donors Forum, consisting of a group of mainly private Western foundations, supported the campaign.

external sources of advice. Independent advice could also be an impetus for building and supporting coalitions.

### **Free and Fair Elections**

Pressing the Belgrade regime to call elections and ensuring that such elections are as free and fair as possible should be at the centre of the international community's strategy. While it is unrealistic to believe that any elections held under Milosevic's auspices would be free and fair in the generally accepted sense, it is important that pressure and scrutiny be applied to improve political conditions and minimise the occurrence of electoral fraud. In particular, the regime should be pressed to adopt the election law drafted by Serbia's independent Centre for Electoral Strategies and Democracy (CESID) and endorsed by the opposition, and to introduce measures to avoid double-voting<sup>27</sup>. The opposition has been seeking Russian support to pressure the regime to end the crackdown and move toward elections; the West should strongly urge Russia, at a minimum, to refrain from legitimising the illegal suppression of independent media and political movements and the implementation of undemocratic electoral practices. Substantial international support should be provided for domestic monitoring efforts, as was done in Croatia and Bulgaria, especially by groups from central and eastern Europe.

### **Appealing to Non-Criminal Elements of the Serbian Elite**

The international community should open up and expand a dialogue with the least culpable end of the regime political spectrum. The international community should offer guarantees of security and an ongoing role in government to members of the ruling elite not suspected of being responsible for crimes against humanity. The reformed ex-communist parties in central and eastern Europe and the democratic political forces in Russia could be the natural bridge between such elements in the regime and the West.

### **Regional Contacts**

Central and east European governments and NGOs have the capacity to play an effective role in facilitating political change in Serbia. Contacts between leaders of the Serbian opposition and governments of the neighbouring democracies should be intensified. NGOs have experience in mobilising public support for the democratic opposition in non-democratic conditions. Their presence and activity inside Serbia would be a sign of solidarity with the Serbian people. Western assistance should be provided to enable these NGOs to help the democratisation process.

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<sup>27</sup> For example, the method of marking the fingers of those who have voted with a special chemical that cannot be washed away in the next 24 hours has been used in Africa and Latin America and provides an effective constraint against double voting.

**Washington DC/Brussels, 30 May 2000**

