
DOS: The Second Year

ALEKSANDAR JOKIC

Audrey Helfant Budding's "The Man Who Overthrew Milosevic: Vojislav Kostunica, One Year Later,"¹ published in *The Fletcher Forum* Winter/Spring 2002 issue, is a welcome assessment of the Democratic Opposition of Serbia's (DOS) first year in power. Though the article primarily focuses on Kostunica's political standing since he overthrew Slobodan Milosevic as a result of the fall 2000 "euphoric" quasi-revolution² that installed him as president of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the piece attempts to offer a rare analytical look at the nature of the DOS as a political structure. This is a topic worthy of exploration for anyone interested in understanding the present political currents in Serbia and where they might lead. However, the article contains at least three types of common mistakes in the meager literature on post-Milosevic Yugoslavia that need to be corrected: mischaracterization of the events and main players, confusion of attitudes for descriptions of reality, and faulty inferences mostly due to misguided assumptions.

THE NATURE OF THE DOS

It is common, and Budding is no exception, to characterize the DOS as a coalition of political parties, though she probably goes overboard by calling it a "broad coalition." In fact, it is neither. One may think that it is "broad" because it is, or was initially, constituted out of 18 entities—thinking of those entities as political parties with diverse political viewpoints. This is the first important mischaracterization. For what has the DOS been since its origination in January 2000? It has been a conglomerate of two parties—the Democratic Party (DS) and the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS)³ (which for all intents and purposes has been pushed out of the conglomerate since fall 2001)—and 16 other entities, most of which are at best DS satellites.

I say "entities" and "conglomerate" on purpose, for the term "coalition" is usually reserved for groupings of political parties. The DOS is not made up exclusively,

Aleksandar Jokic is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Portland State University. Dr. Jokic is also co-founder of the International Law and Ethics Conference Series (ILECS), and editor of the paired volumes Humanitarian Intervention (2003) and Lessons of Kosovo (2003).

or even primarily, of political parties. For example, G17 Plus is officially a non-governmental organization (NGO), though it was set up more like a consulting firm on economic issues. Yet, this entity, whatever it is, supplies the vice president of the Federation, Miroljub Labus,⁴ and the governor of the National Bank of Yugoslavia—two out of three or four top posts/positions in the country.⁵ Other entities are political parties in name only, for they have no followers beyond their leaders, who are often ineffectual figures in their appearance and pronouncements. The prime examples here are Zarko Korac of the Socialist Democratic Union and Vladan Batic of the Serbian Demochristian Party. Therefore, many “leaders” of completely insignificant

Having no chance himself with the electorate to oust Milosevic, Djindjic always thought of Kostunica as a “transitional” figure.

political entities—and, absurdly, of NGOs—play roles of importance in the government that are massively disproportional to what they might have been assigned through some modest democratic procedure.

Budding credits Kostunica for “rallying Serbia’s fractured opposition behind him,” accentuating that this was his “feat.”⁶ This is incorrect in two ways: it gives too much credit to Kostunica, and it overem-

phasizes the achieved unity of the opposition prior to the 2000 elections. Citing the recent crisis of the federal state and the split within the ruling “coalition,” Budding rightly asks, does Kostunica still have an important role to play or is he just a transitional figure? It is a mistake to think that the characterization of Kostunica as merely a “transitional figure” is only a recent phenomenon. In fact, this was the hope and determination of the DS leadership that one could hear on the streets of Belgrade as early as August 2000. Having no chance himself with the electorate to oust Milosevic, Zoran Djindjic always thought of Kostunica as a “transitional” figure, at best.

Any analyst of the post-Milosevic period in Serbia must address the reality of the almost total absence, or at least remarkably slow pace, of political, legal, and economic reform despite loud promises for immediate and dramatic change. According to Budding, the enthusiasm for change evaporated for two reasons—uncertainty over the future of the federal state and the breakdown of cooperation within the DOS.⁷ Though these are important and plausible reasons, they are not nearly as good explanations as some other considerations. Budding is wrong to fault the DSS for the lack of cooperation. In his penetrating and aptly titled article, “DOS: Between Revolution and Reform,” Milan Brdar convincingly explains the lack of reform in terms of a systemic identity between the old communist regime and the current ruling group.⁸ Brdar leaves aside the fact that except for Kostunica, the DOS is largely made up of former members of the Communist Party (KP)—even officials belonging to the communist nomenclature and formerly dissident

professors of Marxism who promptly renamed themselves “liberals”—and focuses on the systemic, extra-institutional position of the DOS presidency, just as was the case with the presidency of the KP. There is an identical, uncompromising manner in pursuing the interest of remaining in power, expressed in the phenomenon of subordinating all proclaimed goals to this ultimate end. In summary, Brdar avers:

It is futile to keep asserting that DOS is a coalition, for it behaves through its unified leadership (the DOS Presidency) as a single party with 18 factions. More importantly, the DOS Presidency as a body operates above and outside of all political institutions, including the parliament and the government (even the Supreme Court). In its status the DOS Presidency is “bound by no laws” (as comrade Lenin used to say) including the republic and federal Constitutions. Consequently, it is abundantly clear that DOS has become the supreme purpose of the “new democratic politics.” The “new” is, unfortunately, identical to the “old.” No wonder the pace of institutional change has been halted to a crawl.⁹

No analyst of the most recent chapter in the Balkan saga can fail to notice the awkwardness of the fact that, now already well into its second year in power, the “coalition” is still called the Democratic Opposition of Serbia. Budding finds this “significant” and expresses optimism that this is a sign that the leaders within DOS will “heal the rift and restore the coalition’s unity.”¹⁰ Leaving aside her implicit but dubious and unproven assumption that this kind of “unity” is something necessarily good (and one may wonder for whom), it is still a good question to ask: why indeed is the DOS so desperately hanging on to its trademark “DOS”? No understanding, however, could be gained if we assume, as Budding does, that this has anything to do with the issue of “unity,” mistakenly assuming that it was there to begin with but somehow got lost along the way. Elsewhere, I have explored three hypotheses that explain why the DOS is still called the “DOS”: (1) the DOS is a conglomerate of 18 entities, and it is exceedingly hard for them to come to an agreement regarding a new name; (2) there is much symbolic capital in the name “DOS,” which is associated with a successful overthrow of the old regime, and it therefore makes sense to stick with a winning symbol; and (3) the name serves just to remind people, i.e., the potential electorate, that however miserable a failure they may be in the

The label “DOS” serves as a reminder that should allegiance to the current ruling group falter, the tragedy of descending back into the Milosevic era will unfold—a reminder which also functions as part of an argument that no new elections are necessary.

spheres of economy and reform, they could not possibly be as bad as the prior regime.¹¹ I opted for the last explanation as the best one: the label “DOS” serves as a threatening reminder that should allegiance to the current ruling group falter, the tragedy of descending back into the Milosevic era misery will unfold—a reminder which also functions as part of an argument, recited literally on a daily basis, that no new elections are necessary.¹²

ATTITUDES, NOT DESCRIPTIONS

Whenever a new leader emerges, it is natural for analysts, historians, or journalists to want to place him or her in historical, political, ideological, and other contexts by comparing them to other important figures, past and present. Hence, it is no surprise that Budding tries to describe how Kostunica might differ

*The phrase “non-nationalist”
as a characterization
of Djindjic is revealing.
For how could a
“non-nationalist” be in
the interest of any nation?*

from Milosevic or Djindjic. This can be done in many ways, some more serious or responsible than others. Unfortunately, however, too often this becomes simply a search for the most “appropriate”—according to some always unspecified criteria—phrase almost regularly consisting of two words that allegedly best “describe” the individual. Thus, Budding, having implied that Milosevic was a “hard-line nationalist,” struggles between three possible labels for

Kostunica—“moderate nationalist,” “principled nationalist,” and “democratic nationalist,” while she easily settles on “pragmatic non-nationalist” as the best characterization for Djindjic despite sensing some problems with it.

Whatever could be gained from trying to find fitting two-word labels for political figures, it is important to realize that they are not what they are explicitly presented as—descriptions of anything. In fact, they help us learn more about people who use them than individuals so labeled. This is why statements in which these phrases figure, despite their pretense to a descriptive role, only manage to signal attitudes of their users.

An example may clarify this. Most of us remember the 2000 presidential elections when George W. Bush presented himself as a “compassionate conservative.” Now, we could ask ourselves, does this two-word self-label describe Bush or anyone else? Quite obviously, it does not. Its purpose is not to describe; rather, it is clearly a self-serving attempt by a candidate to communicate the message that he thinks of himself as a nice guy wanting others to think the same. The word game is always played based on a negative or positive connotation of one or both words that make up the label of choice.

Having exposed the nature of the word game in question, we may ask, what do we learn from Budding's choice of labels for Milosevic, Kostunica, and Djindjic? We learn little about these Serbian politicians, but we can surmise from the fact that "hard-line" and "nationalist" have negative connotations¹³ while "pragmatist" and "non-nationalist" have positive connotations. Budding believes, or wants us to believe, that Milosevic is a terrible character, that Kostunica is better, and that Djindjic is even better—for he is the only one for whom both chosen characterizing words are loaded with positive meaning. It would be extremely interesting to know what criterion of "better" is operative here, and particularly, better for whom. Here the phrase "non-nationalist" as a characterization of Djindjic is revealing, for it suggests clearly that the relevant criterion of "better" is not something that takes people of Serbia or Yugoslavia as intended beneficiaries. For how could a "non-nationalist" be in the interest of any nation? Imagine a presidential race in the U.S. where a candidate were to run on a platform that he will always, on every occasion, subjugate the American national interest to, for example, the interest of Israel, some other country, or perhaps something as bizarre as the "international community."

However, there is another problem here—what do the individual words of choice mean in this context, and are they properly chosen? For example, what does it mean to call Djindjic a "pragmatist"? Is its purpose perhaps to spin or mask his subservient attitude to the real power in the world of today? Or is its purpose to support the intended contrast with respect to Milosevic and Kostunica as "nationalists," so that if we were to see, for example, the footage of Djindjic feasting on a roasted veal in the war capital of Bosnian Serbs, Pale, back in 1995 with Radovan Karadzic and others, we would then characterize this as his "pragmatist" feature and not the "nationalist" one. Finally, if I had space for a more detailed analysis, I would challenge all of Budding's characterizations of choice except perhaps "principled" in the case of Kostunica. It surpasses the confines of this paper, but a more careful analysis of Milosevic would show that he was not a nationalist,¹⁴ as no communist could be; he was not interested in what was good for the Serbian people beyond his personal struggle to stay in power for as long as he could.

PREDICTIONS

Budding is interested in taking a look ahead and predicting what is in store politically for Kostunica who, based on her analysis of the DOS's first year in power, is "no longer a leader of a truly united coalition." She agrees with Djindjic's formulation that, because of his popularity, Kostunica will remain important as "a bridge between traditional and reformist Serbia." This conclusion is incorrect on several counts and is possibly even contradictory depending on

how one takes Djindjic's words. It is true, but trivially so, that Kostunica is not a leader of a "unified coalition" because, as we have seen, the DOS is not a coalition nor has it ever been truly unified. The talk of a bridge towards "reformist Serbia" is moot, since reforms are for the most part nonexistent chiefly because, as Brdar has demonstrated, the DOS presidency operates outside of institutional confines just like communist Politburo used to. Finally, there is an apparent contradiction in the idea that Kostunica could remain important—in other than a historical sense—in the event reformist Serbia ever comes into being. The statement by Djindjic looks to me much more like the suggestion that Kostunica will no longer be needed once true reforms take place and will only be remembered as someone who helped to facilitate the transition.

However, rather than try to predict what will happen to Kostunica or anyone else in Serbia, I would like to end by arguing that we should not expect that any positive institutional change could be instigated either by the media or by civil society in Serbia.

Contrary to what might have been expected in the aftermath of political change, the media in Serbia did not assume an objective stance. That expectation seemed natural given that, during the previous period, the media was quite regu-

Kostunica will no longer be needed once true reforms take place and will only be remembered as someone who helped to facilitate the transition.

larly subjected to various pressures and often drastically sanctioned for alleged defamation of the previous regime. The previous regime felt the burden of illegitimacy and had the tendency to stick to the letter of the law in cases of explicit anti-regime activity—opening the door for criticism. In the new situation, the media just continued doing what it was doing all along, but this time "freely," without restriction.

It should be emphasized that even under Milosevic the media for the most part had an anti-regime character; it took an active part in producing the atmosphere of protest and constituted an element of the process that led to political change. This was in part true even for the element of the media that was deemed as pro-regime. Now we have a situation in Serbia where the former pro-regime media is in a kind of competition with the former anti-regime media in terms of who would supply greater support to the current regime. As a result, while during Milosevic's rule some sense could be made of the distinction between pro- and anti-regime media, this is no longer the case. Today, we are witnessing a contest in apologetic endeavors with a total silencing of all criticism.

The state of civil society in Serbia is not any better, and it cannot be a force for change and progress in the foreseeable future. Serbian civil society as a network

of nongovernmental organizations came into existence during Milosevic's reign mostly due to the Western financial support to help overthrow his regime. Civil society and the DOS were allies in this respect, and since October 5, 2000, when the DOS assumed power, the demarcation line between the civil society and the state has almost completely disappeared. This can be seen in the fact that a nongovernmental organization, G17 Plus, is not only a part of the DOS, but its representatives also hold some of the most important posts in the government. More pathetically, this can be seen in the frequent whining by some "deserving" (in their mind) nongovernmental "human rights" warriors resentful of the fact that not enough of them have a place in the ruling echelons.¹⁵ The expectation is, therefore, that yesterday's civil society leaders must be today's political leaders. This attitude spells the death of civil society and makes it utterly useless for any meaningful change.

The expectation is that yesterday's civil society leaders must be today's political leaders. This spells the death of civil society.

Recalling the old saying that there is "nothing new in the West,"¹⁶ the conclusion here should be that there is "nothing new in the East either." The likelihood that the current political leadership in Serbia can execute serious political, institutional, and economic reform is very low, but the possibility that it will cause long-term, serious damage is unfortunately quite apparent. ■

NOTES

- 1 Audrey Helfant Budding, "'The Man Who Overthrew Milosevic': Vojislav Kostunica, One Year Later," *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, 26 (1) (Winter/Spring 2002): 159-164.
- 2 For an analysis of why the usual label "democratic revolution" is a misnomer, see my "What Should American Peace Activists Know about the Balkans," *Peace and Change*, 27 (3) (July 2002): 451-460.
- 3 Budding in a way recognizes this by calling them DOS's "two most important parties." It is unclear, however, what is gained by calling any other entity a political party.
- 4 Labus wants to be the next president of the Republic of Serbia and had the ambition of being the prime minister, causing a serious political crisis within the new power structures.
- 5 Another example of an entity within the DOS with an unclear status as to whether it is an institute or NGO, but which has not declared itself a political party, is the Democratic Center. It is run by Dragoljub Micunovic, who simultaneously serves as the president of the Council of Citizens of the Federal Parliament. Imagine, for example, the Executive Director of the CATO Institute serving as Speaker of the House of Representatives. Try pondering this contradiction of nongovernmental organizations constituting the essential parts of a government.
- 6 Budding, 159.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 160.
- 8 Milan Brdar, "DOS: Between Revolution and Reform," *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law*, 15 (2) (June 2002): 185-201.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 Budding, 162.
- 11 "(Op)position, Democracy, and National Interest in Serbia" (unpublished manuscript).
- 12 One may wonder if there really is no need for elections and where the need to insist on this comes from.

- 13 The term “nationalist” in the context of the media satanization of the Serbs during the 1990s has acquired perhaps almost as bad a connotation as the term “Nazi.” But there is nothing wrong with almost any other form of nationalism. For example, would there be anything wrong if a Dutch politician made Dutch national interests a priority of his political platform?
- 14 In this respect the most absurd and truly bizarre feature of Budding’s piece is the new verb she coined, to “out-Serb Milosevic”—something she attributes to Djindjic early in his political career.
- 15 Most recently, Obrad Savic, Belgrade Circle leader, exclaimed: “The political project [entitled] ‘the Second Serbia’ has experienced a total failure. Where are now people from Belgrade Circle? They are not to be found in the institutions, no one needs them” (as reported by www.beograd.com on March 10, 2002).
- 16 Perhaps not readily recognizable to all readers, this “old saying” is a play on the title of Erich Maria Remarque’s novel *In Westen Nichts Neues*, translated into English as *All Quiet on the Western Front*. But it really means “nothing new in the West.”