

Otpor and the Struggle for Democracy in Serbia (1998-2000)

Dr. Lester R. Kurtz
Professor of Sociology / Anthropology, George Mason
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Summary of events related to the use or impact of civil resistance
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Conflict Summary:

When a group of students founded the new organization Otpor (“Resistance”) in October 1998, the regime of Serbian dictator Slobodan Milosevic seemed firmly entrenched. Only two years later, he was driven out of office after a massive mobilization of civil resistance inspired and in many ways shaped by Otpor organizers. The Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS), the broad reform coalition that ousted Milosevic, dominated parliamentary elections in December 2000, took control of the government, and restored democracy to that war-torn country.

Otpor was initially founded to resist the regime’s repression of the universities after a University Law of late May 1998 restricted the Belgrade University’s autonomy and free expression. Otpor shifted its main focus, however, to ousting Milosevic and leaving other issues on the margins until that primary objective was achieved. The strategy to achieve this was to transform the political culture; as Srdja Popovic, one of the movement’s founders put it, “Our ambition is to change the political consciousness of the Serbian populace” (Paulson 2005 319).

On 24 September of 2000, Serbian dictator Slobodan Milosevic was defeated in elections he had been forced to hold in order to end sanctions against his regime. The Federal Election Commission failed to accept the victory and called for a runoff between Milosevic and his opponent Vojislav Kostunica, a constitutional lawyer who lacked charisma but enjoyed a high reputation. Opposition members of the Commission declared the decision fraudulent and DOS refused to accept the decision, calling for massive resistance. Patriarch Pavle of the Serbian Orthodox Church met with Milosevic, urging him to concede, and publically supported resistance. At a Belgrade rally, Kostunica called on the army and police to “protect the people, not one man and his family” and strikes among media workers and miners broke out, including a coal miner’s strike at the Kolubara mines that produced coal for the power station that produced almost half of Serbia’s electricity. The newly elected mayor of Belgrade called for a general strike.

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A general strike began on 2 October in an effort to nullify Milosevic's control over the country; it was at first ineffective in Belgrade, but widely supported in the provinces where several cities were completely shut down because of blockades by cars, trucks, buses, and people, as well as closed businesses and schools. Threats of a government crackdown and an apparent assassination list failed to thwart the opposition and reports of divisions within the security forces began to circulate.

On 5 October, nonviolent demonstrators invaded Belgrade, the deadline set by resisters for Milosevic to step down. Motorcades crowded the highways into the city, some bringing bulldozers to knock down barricades erected by government security forces to impede the flow of resistance. The Parliament building and the offices of Radio Television Serbia were surrounded by nonviolent demonstrators, whose leaders were in touch with special police forces, most of whom refused orders to attack the protesters and in some cases even turned on officers who had not defected to the opposition. The central police station surrendered to the opposition followed by a bulletin from the official Tanjug news agency declaring Kostunica the "elected president of Yugoslavia."

The following morning Milosevic and Kostunica met together along with Russian Foreign Minister Igor S. Ivanov, who (without authority) told Milosevic that he would not face war crimes charges if he resigned. The Constitutional Court reversed its earlier ruling and declared Kostunica the winner of the election and before midnight Milosevic conceded on national television that he had lost the election. Kostunica was sworn in as President of Yugoslavia on 7 October.

Political History:

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the nation of the "South Slavs"—Yugoslavia (founded at the collapse of the Hapsburg Empire after World War I)—went through a period of chaos and war as various groups struggled to assert control over the region. Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic used brutal methods to establish his regime, fanning the flames of Serbian nationalism, leading his country into wars with Croatia and Bosnia, and NATO,

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and creating a massive internal system of repression while unemployment reached as high as 50 percent.

Following the death in 1980 of Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito, who had walked a tightrope between Moscow and various ethnic demands in Yugoslavia, tensions increased in the multi-ethnic state that included many minorities, especially the Slavic Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Bosnian Muslims, Macedonians, and Montenegrins.

With two failed wars and a ruined economy, the credibility of the Milosevic regime was shattered and challenged in municipal elections on 17 November 1996 when a fragile opposition known as Zajedno (“Together”) won majorities in 40 cities. Milosevic-packed local election committees refused to certify the victories. Students outraged by the regime’s failure to recognize the elections demonstrated daily and demanded their certification and the recognition of top University of Belgrade officials. After 55 days of daily protests, a government delegation met with student representatives and agreed to allow the elected opposition candidates to take office in all 40 cities. That victory—and the disintegration of the Zajedno coalition through infighting—set the stage for the creation of Otpor by student veterans of the demonstrations.

Strategic Actions:

Rather than focusing on large-scale demonstrations or organizing a political party, Otpor began with creative street theatre—public protests that mocked Milosevic and focused on shifting the political culture of the nation toward opposition to his regime and empowering people to see its vulnerability and overcome their fear of sanctions. Oppositionists also deliberately targeted people within the regime and its pillars of support, such as security force members, insisting they were not the enemy and trying to get them to defect to the opposition.

A second strategy was to build on grassroots opposition outside of Belgrade, building a decentralized movement that took advantage of the culture of resistance to the regime in the countryside. Otpor leaders, rather than standing for office themselves, organized civil society and put pressure on party leaders to transcend power ambitions to focus on defeating the dictator.

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The students of Otpor called a National Congress outside of the official political parties and proclaimed themselves a national movement, thus becoming one. They blanketed the nation with posters, T-shirts, and slogans showing Otpor's iconic clenched fist (a parody of Milosevic's symbol of a bloody clenched fist) and slogans such as Gotov Je! "He is Finished!" and finally "It's Time" to focus public attention on ousting the dictator. By May 2000 Otpor had organized in more than 100 towns nationwide and recruited large numbers of members outside of their original student base.

Otpor's publication of a grassroots training manual "Resistance in Your Neighborhood: How to Resolve the Serbian Crisis Peacefully" focused on how to analyze and defeat the pillars of support for the regime while maximizing the opposition's assets. Thousands of activists were trained across the country and decentralized symbolic protests sprung up from the grassroots nationwide.

Otpor used its growing legitimacy as a popular grassroots movement to shame the fractured coalition parties into uniting behind a single opposition candidate to face Milosevic in the 2000 presidential elections and to downplay their differences during the campaign in order to succeed in his ouster. Isolated efforts to use violence against the regime failed to gain traction and were overwhelmed by the momentum of nonviolent civil resistance and were rendered ineffective and scarcely noticed (except for a small fire set in the parliament building on the final day of demonstrations).

The movement creatively managed efforts to repress it and the regime's crackdown backfired in favor of the resistance. Otpor created "rapid reaction teams" to respond to police actions with lawyers and NGO members, showing up at police stations where protesters were incarcerated in order to maximize publicity of the repression and provide legal defense. Otpor also effectively used images of beaten demonstrators to promote sympathy with its cause to decrease the legitimacy of Milosevic's government.

When Milosevic refused to concede power in the September 2000 elections, the opposition developed a strategy for escalating pressure over the next few days, beginning with strikes and public demonstrations, school boycotts, and blockades. The popular mayor of Cacak, Velimir Ilic, even called for a total blockade of his own city. Protest and persuasion gave way to economic, social, and political noncooperation and finally nonviolent intervention as disciplined

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crowds of nonviolent demonstrators from around the country swarmed into Belgrade, surrounded key buildings, and eventually occupied them, forcing the dictator to resign.

Some of the major strategic actions of the civil resistance campaign included:

Protest and Persuasion

- Street theatre and humorous skits mocking Milosevic performed throughout the country to transform the political culture and empower widespread opposition;
- Ubiquitous postering and displays of public symbols (such as Otpor's iconic clenched fist) and slogans on posters, leaflets, and T-shirts, and in television spots;
- Large public rallies, marches, and demonstrations;
- Electoral politics – coalition-building and campaigning;
- Holding music concerts and cultural celebrations;
- The widespread distribution of anti-Milosevic materials;
- Use of the Internet, cell phones, fax machines, and alternative media to disseminate resistance messages and organize opposition;
- Public and private communication with security and church officials, media, union leaders, municipal politicians, and others to cultivate potential allies and defections;
- Petitions, press releases, public statements and speeches;
- Workshops and training sessions for activists, distribution of training manuals.

Noncooperation

- Strikes and boycotts by workers and students, artists, actors, business owners;
- General strike;
- Defections by security, military and police forces cultivated by careful communication with them and public calls for their noncooperation;
- Defections by members of the media;
- Organizing by Otpor outside of the electoral system;

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- Parallel election monitors and an election results reporting system to detect and report election fraud.

Nonviolent Intervention

- Blockades of highways and railroads with cars, trucks, buses, and large crowds of people to shut down economic and political activity and demonstrate parallel sources of powers and debilitate the political regime;
- Physical occupation of space surrounding key public buildings (e.g., parliament and media), then in some cases, storming and nonviolent invasions of the buildings;
- Bulldozers moving aside police barricades (a later symbol of the resistance).

Ensuing Events:

After DOS won the December 2000 elections and controlled the government, sanctions against the country were lifted and a new constitution was written to replace Milosevic's authoritarian governance structure. Milosevic was arrested six months after Kostunica took office for war crimes and crimes against humanity in 2001. He stood trial at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague until his death in 2006.

The transition was not smooth, however; the DOS coalition that took over the government was organized around removing Milosevic and beyond that it had serious internal divisions. President Kostunica had to rely on a coalition government and competition between him and DOS's Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić meant continued disagreement over the extent to which reforms could be implemented. Two major institutions in Serbian society—the Serbian Orthodox Church and the military—favored the elimination of Milosevic's rule, but were suspicious of some reforms that threatened to undermine their place in traditional culture. Moreover, in 2003 plotters from nationalist and former security forces assassinated Prime Minister Đinđić, although the backlash from that event facilitated a crackdown on organized crime and the implementation of other democratic reforms. In 2006 Montenegro broke away from the successor to Yugoslavia, "The Union of Serbia and Montenegro," after a referendum approving independence was narrowly approved in Montenegro.

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After three attempts to elect a president in 2003-2004, because of low voter turnout, reform president Boris Tadic became president and advanced the dismantling of many of the lingering pillars of the Milosevic regime.

Serbia's efforts to join the European Union have been complicated by an initial condition that Serbia cooperate with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia; many were reluctant to turn over key Serbian figures and especially to extradite Ratko Mladić, who remains a fugitive (with the government claiming that he is no longer in Serbia). Beginning 1 February 2010 an Interim Agreement goes into effect between the EU and Serbia that may lead to its eventually joining the EU, as formally requested in December 2009.

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