

INSTEAD OF A PREFACE

By

Dimitris Keridis¹

Situated at the heart of Southeastern Europe where the north-south and east-west communication axes meet, Serbia remains central to the stability and prosperity of the whole Balkan peninsula. Furthermore, given the fragility of Bosnia and the contested final status of Kosovo, political developments in Serbia are bound to have wider regional implications. Many people inside and outside Serbia hoped that the toppling of Slobodan Milosevic in October 2000 would have opened the way for a quick convergence of Serbia with the European mainstream, following on the successes of its neighbors to the north and, even, to the east. Six years later, however, this process of “Europeanization” has proved more difficult and haphazard than initially imagined. Milosevic might be gone, having died as an indicted war criminal in a prison cell, but his politics and ideology survive keeping his country, to some extent, hostage to the failures of the past. Serbia continues to lie at the heart of the Balkan problem, as if it’s the final battleground where a two-centuries old Eastern Question awaits its final resolution.

This dark and pessimistic assumption underlines Milan St. Protic’s book. Furthermore, the author sets a more ambitious goal: to explain how and why the situation in Serbia turned sour. Protic is uniquely qualified for the job and he manages to apply his qualifications superbly. He offers to the international, English-speaking reader a unique account of events in Serbia

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from the time of Milosevic and the struggle of the democratic opposition to introduce political, economic, social and cultural change in Serbia to the present difficulties. Protic is an eminent historian. This means that he not only knows the facts of his country's history but that he is able to place a sequence of events in their broader historical context and uncover the underlying forces that move and shape human history and inform human actions.

He is also a political activist. He participated energetically in the opposition to Milosevic, he was elected mayor of Belgrade in 2000 and, subsequently, appointed as the first ambassador of the new democratic Serbia-Montenegro to Washington, D.C. He does not only know what went on from the inside, he participated and contributed to the political drama Serbia has been living through ever since Milosevic came to power in 1987.

Furthermore, Protic has lived and taught for many years abroad, especially in the United States. Thus, he has experience from the outside world and is uniquely qualified to make the Serbian story relevant and comprehensible to an international audience. There have been many books in English on the former Yugoslavia in general and Milosevic in particular. Most of them are of poor quality recycling stereotypes and simplifications of a complex reality. Very few books have managed to challenge the established truths of what happened and innovate: they include the works of Susan Woodward, Steven L. Burg, Lenard J. Cohen, V. P. Gagnon, Jr., and Robert Thomas. Now, having an activist Serbian insider to write his account of events contributes immensely to having a better, fuller, clearer picture of the Yugoslavia/Serbia story.

And yet, it would be a mistake to think of Protic's work as a Serb's biased account. Protic is passionate, holds some very strong opinions, is not interested in being pleasant, does not cut corners or spin truths. But he acknowledges other points of view, checks facts, tries to be fair and is often empathetic even with his political opponents. Thus, his is a first-rate account of recent history placed in the wider context of the transition from communism to more participatory politics. He writes clearly, lucidly even forcibly in a prose that retains a certain dramatic energy to keep the reader fully engaged from the first to the last page. For all the details and diversions that he offers, he never loses sight of the wider story he wants to tell and with which he wants to leave his reader.

Finally, Protic comes from a family with strong pre-communist roots. Endowed with a proud urban-liberal family tradition, he is able to place Titoism in its historical context without the beautification that Western intellectuals in search of a communism with a human face all too often provided. In that sense, this is a very personal story. Protic strives to settle his accounts with half a century of communism that devastated, impoverished and disoriented Serbian society. For him, Milosevic as evil as he was, was the product of and gave expression to a much deeper malaise long in the making: Serbo-communism. This is the ideology and the political project of a virulent, aggressive and expansionist nationalism devoid of its liberal, 19th-century traditions and European orientation, substituting for and covering up communism's political and economic failures.

The context was Yugoslavia itself and the post-Versailles mistaken entangling of Serbia's national project into a wider hegemonic project for aggrandizement and the domination of Southern Slavs. The failures of Titoism and the systematic suppression of all liberal alternatives in post-1945 Yugoslavia led to a new synthesis. These failures, obvious to everyone by the 1980s, did not lead to an outright rejection of communism but to an attempt to breathe life into it with nationalism. The more communism died, the more steroid-nationalism was pumped into its lifeless body to preserve the socio-economic order and the communist elites' prerogatives. Originally, in the 1960s, Serbo-communism was an intellectual project. With Milosevic in the 1980s it entered and dominated Serbian politics. For all its grand historical failures, leading to the shrinking of Serbia and to its international political and economic marginalization, its "truths" continue to have currency in Serbia.

October 5, 2000, promised to be a clean break from Milosevic's politics and Serbo-communism. Protic painfully explains how the promise was quickly forgotten, how the old regime even without Milosevic survived protected by new leaders like Vojislav Kostunica and how Serbia has somehow continued to confront with and isolate itself from the world. The new leadership, Protic's former comrades, has been consumed by personal antagonisms and an inability to read dispassionately the international conditions within which Serbia, a small and much belittled nation, finds itself operating. The assassination of Zoran Djindjic in March 2003 eliminated a powerful reformer

who, irrespective of his character flaws, had the determination, energy and wit to stir Serbia towards a new direction.

Here we are then, at the end of 2006, worrying once more about Serbia. How can we, the international community, sell Kosovo's separation to the Serbs? How can we safeguard Bosnia's unity following Kosovo's independence? How can we support reformers and Europeanists inside Serbia? On the basis of past Western policies, Protic often appears unhelpful. He remains venomous towards Westerners, people like Holbrooke and his associates, who, in the past, cooperated all too willingly with Milosevic to score easy political points at home to the detriment of Serbia's democrats. Furthermore, many Westerners appear vindictive even today believing, as ambassador Alex Rondos puts it, that "the Serbs mortgaged themselves morally with Milosevic and that they have not paid their mortgage off."² Protic is right: we in the West have repeatedly failed Serbia's democrats and reformers. Is this failure irreversible? Or, can the prospect of EU enlargement set to rights the fallout of our past actions and reignite a self-reinforcing process of engagement and reform in Serbia?

One thing is certain: the Balkan problem will not be resolved without Serbia. And the West's costly engagement in the former Yugoslav lands cannot be declared a success without winning Serbia. For all the pessimism and frustrations, Protic's story is full of Serbia's extraordinary resilience in the face of war, sanctions, economic ruin and political turmoil. It is this resilience, coupled with the dynamics of European integration, which ensures change, even in Serbia, the last post-communist land of non-Soviet Europe.

² Alexander G. Rondos, *Testimony to the House of Representatives, International Relations Committee, Sub-Committee on Europe and Emerging Threats, September 20, 2006*

Preface

This is an inside story about contemporary Serbia.

Many books have been published about Serbia, its past and present, but almost all were written by foreigners. Some of them no doubt deserve full recognition for their effort to describe and understand present-day Serbia. However, the international public clearly lacks an account of Serbia written from within (by a Serb).

In this volume Serbia and the Serbs are observed from two different perspectives. The first comes from an active participant of the major political events organized by the Serbian opposition from 1991 to 2000, when Milosevic was ousted, and of developments following his downfall. The second perspective is of a historian whose scholarly career focuses on Serbian and European history in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The book is divided in two parts.

The opening chapter describes crucial events that brought down Slobodan Milosevic and his regime (September-October 2000) and most important episodes during the first year of the new democratic government (2001). It is followed by political profiles of five key figures of contemporary Serbia (Slobodan Milosevic, Vuk Draskovic, Zoran Djindjic, Vojislav Kostunica, and Dragoslav Avramovic) whose roles and activities left the deepest imprint on Serbian politics from 1990 to the present.

Part two focuses on major historical developments in modern Serbia, especially regarding relations between Serbian and the big powers. In subsequent chapter, ideological origins and characteristics of Milosevic's policies are examined together with those of Tito's Yugoslavia.

The book was previously published in Serbian in two volumes (*Izneverena revolucija* in 2005 and *Lica i nalicja* in

2006). The English version is substantially revised in order to be more understandable to a foreign reader.