

DETERMINANTS OF THE TRANSITIONAL STRATEGY OF THE DEMOCRATIC OPPOSITION IN SERBIA (DOS)

*Vladimir Goati**

1. The Origins of DOS

The relationship between Serbia's opposition parties was, from the beginning, marked by deep divisions. It is no exaggeration to say that between 1990 and the September 2000 elections, parties spent more time and energy on internal bickering than on efforts to topple the Milosevic regime. During this period, alliances between the major parties, such as the Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO), Democratic Party (DS) and Civic Alliance of Serbia (GSS), were generally short-lived and unsuccessful, enabling Milosevic to stay in power. The most striking example of the discord between the opposition parties was at the federal and local elections of November 3, 1996, when SPO, DS, and GSS ran jointly as the "Together" coalition. At the federal elections, "Together" had very poor showings, but won the local elections, held the same day, gaining the majority in the country's 40 major cities. Attempting to thwart the opposition's election victory, Milosevic resorted to altering the election results ("the great election fraud"). In reply to this, the coalition "Together" organized massive protests. As a result, the regime was forced to recognize the election results and, in early 1997, handed over power in these cities. However, "Together" failed to capitalize on the broad public support and the election victory. The long-suppressed differences within the coalition came into the open, leading to its split in the spring of 1997. The downfall of this coalition allowed Milosevic's shaken regime to consolidate.

In mid-1998, the Serbian opposition parties – threatened by an increasingly repressive regime -- established a more solid form of cooperation. The »Alliance for Changes« (SzP) included DS, GSS, Christian Democrats (DHS) and New Serbia (NS). The new alliance's goal was to dismantle the ruling authoritarian order by means of free and fair elections, and to bring Serbia and the FRY into Europe and the rest of the world. The

* PhD, Senior Researcher, Institute of Social Sciences, Belgrade

process of bringing the chronically divided Serbian parties closer together was temporarily suspended during the military conflict between the NATO Alliance and the FRY (March 24 – June 9, 1999), only to be sped up once the conflict was over.

In September 1999, the SzP firmly demanded all-level free and fair elections. To support this request, they organized continual civil protests. The regime's refusal to hold early elections urged the Serbian opposition to adopt the »Platform of the democratic opposition of Serbia«. Apart from the demand for free and fair elections and market reforms as initial steps toward a democratic Serbia, this document supported the normalization of relations with all states, »...including former Yugoslav states«.

Promises of Serbia's return to Europe and to the rest of the world (Serbia's return to »its geography«), which the democratic opposition incorporated into its political platform and strategy against the regime, were not just a more realistic political option, but also a choice based on the pro-European orientation of Serbian citizens which remained unshaken despite years of systematic anti-European propaganda. The results of many pre-election 2000 empirical research showed that ruling parties (SPS, Yugoslav Left, Serbian Radical Party) and citizens diverged most on the subject of Serbia and FRY's relations with Europe and the world. While the ruling regime – via the state media – constantly blamed the US, Germany, Great Britain, France and other Western countries for the country's hard situation, leaning to the "East" (mainly Russia) for support, Serbian citizens supported integration with Europe and the rest of the world. This was corroborated by opinion polls conducted by the Institute for Social Sciences in summer 1998 (IDN, CPIJM, 1998, JJM-132), showing that 79% of the respondents believed that FRY should become a member of the European Union. Results of the Institute's polls conducted nation-wide – in Serbia without Kosovo -- in December 1999 showed an unchanged pro-European stance among citizens even after the NATO bombing. The poll – conducted on a sample of 2,039 respondents – showed that a relative majority (43%) was in favour of cooperation with the West, 19% wished for stronger ties with Russia and Byelorussia, 18% supported cooperation with all countries, 3% answered something else, and 17% did not know (IDN, CPIJM, 1999, JJM-136). More than a mere predilection for a strategy of cooperation with Western countries, these views also revealed the support for the key values, notably democracy and free market, upon which those countries' systems are built.

In any event, the Democratic opposition of Serbia (DOS) – formed in January 2000 – is a heterogeneous coalition both in terms of size and political platforms of its members. Before the ousting of the previous regime on October 5, 2000, DOS was dominated by the Democratic Party (DS), the most numerous and influential of all. Parties united in DOS belonged to various »political families«: liberals, nationalists and socialists (more precisely: social democrats).

2. The October Revolution

Milosevic's government scheduled elections for September 24, 2000, believing that was the most propitious moment. In those elections, Serbian and Montenegrin citizens chose the federal president, members of both chambers of the federal legislature and – only in Serbia – members of the provincial and local legislatures – all in one day. The critical vote was the one for federal president, which was to weigh the strength of Slobodan Milosevic, by far the regime's most influential person, against the opposition leaders, including Vojislav Kostunica, the unique candidate of DOS. SPO, the strongest opposition party for many years, contested the elections independently.

Kostunica won by a landslide in the first round of elections, receiving 50.2% of votes; Milosevic came second with 37.1%, while the remaining three candidates together won less than 10%. DOS also triumphed at the elections for federal parliament and at the local level. SPO was brutally defeated; its presidential candidate (Vojislav Mihajilovic) won only 3 % of the votes. This party won just one out of 20 seats in the Chamber of Republics, and not a single one in the Chamber of citizens.

Milosevic's electoral defeat and the failure of the ruling parties -- SPS, JUL and SRS – sent a wave of shock through the regime's establishment. And then, as was to be expected, they began covering Milosevic's loss, a desperate try that lasted from September 25 to October 5, 2000. As was to be expected, since the political leadership of Serbia's and Yugoslavia's authoritarian regime were neck-deep into illegal doings and violence and losing power for them meant facing criminal and civil charges. In addition, the international tribunal in The Hague had on May 24, 1999, indicted Milosevic and his closest aids. Losing power made their extradition to the tribunal look very realistic.

Acting as the *longa manus* of the regime, the Federal Election Commission was instrumental in its attempt to forge the electoral will of the citizens of Serbia. By breaching electoral and other legislation, the Commission's permanent members announced the forged results on September 28, saying that Kostunica had not fulfilled the legal condition to become president of FRY (50% plus one vote). This meant that a second round of elections had to be held on October 8, 2000, giving Milosevic the opportunity to prepare a new election fraud. In order to prevent this, the leaders of DOS led a campaign of civil disobedience (on September 29) and mass protests, until the results of the presidential elections were recognized. Apart from hundreds of thousands of citizens demonstrating every day on the streets of Belgrade and other cities, about 13,000 miners from the country's major coal mine, Kolubara, halted production and joined the protesters. Milosevic's regime tried to force them back to work threatening to use the police and army against them, but thousands of citizens joined their strike, which is the most probable explanation as to why the regime restrained from using force.

Many days of demonstrations reached a climax on Thursday, October 5, 2000, when more than seven hundred thousand citizens from all over Serbia poured onto the streets of Belgrade and other Serbian cities demanding that the will of the citizens be recognized. The demonstrators seized the federal parliament and national television buildings, despite the interventions of the police, who used clubs and tear gas. Bloodshed was avoided as the elite police units (Special Units, Special Anti-Terrorist Unit, and Special Operations Unit, better known as the Red Berets) refused to open fire on the crowd, joining the citizens instead. A »soft democratic revolution« took place in the streets of Belgrade on October 5. In light of its enormity, it was likened to the events of 1989 in Prague. Despite the similarities, however, there were differences. There was violence in Belgrade (police used clubs and tear gas, and the demonstrators used rocks, sticks and bulldozers) as well as casualties (two people died and dozens were wounded), which was more reminiscent of the »Romanian scenario«.

It should also be emphasized that on October 5 in Belgrade, the potential force of the demonstrators exceeded that of the force (violence) used, which can be explained by the fact that many protesters were armed and the takeover of the federal parliament and national television buildings showed their resolve to use any means to defend their

electoral rights. Bearing in mind the authoritarian nature of the ruling regime in Serbia, the importance of force – which, to repeat, mainly remained latent – should not be underestimated. Under the pressure of hundreds of thousands of demonstrators, the ruling regime was forced to recognize Kostunica as the new federal president-elect, as well as the victory of DOS at the federal and local elections. The latent force in the October events was not an accidental, unimportant side phenomenon, but rather of central importance since, without it, the citizens' plight would have fallen on deaf ears and the regime would have continued to rule just as before.

The DOS in Power

Immediately after the »October Revolution«, the federal government, together with President Kostunica, undertook a number of activities in the area of foreign policy that re-introduced the country to the UN and other important international organizations. Moreover, FRY re-established formal relations with NATO on January 10. After the ousting of the previous regime, the desire of Serbian citizens to re-enter Europe and the international community grew stronger, as shown in the results of a Medium Index poll. Conducted in April 2000, the results suggest that around 80% of the citizens of Serbia supported joining the European Union and around 60% (in June 2001) were in favor of joining the Partnership for Peace.

The internal changes (economy, police, judicial system, etc.), which were the responsibility of the Republic of Serbia, were considerably slower than the changes in international policies. This may be explained by the fact that, apart from DOS, until January 25, 2001 the government was comprised of some parties from the old regime, with the power of veto over all decisions. Elections for Serbian legislature were held on December 23, 2000. Prior to these elections, the leaders of DOS signed a document called »Contract With Serbia« listing measures to be taken after the election victory. This document contained promises of rapid democratic reform and integration of FRY into all the major international organizations. In fact, this text contains all the key points of the »Platform of the Democratic Opposition« (democratic transformation, thorough market reforms, rapid integration into the international community), which got the support of the majority of citizens at the September federal elections.

From Triumph to Disintegration

At the December elections, the victory of DOS was even more vibrant than in September – 64.4% of the votes, which translated into 70.4% of seats in parliament (176 MP's out of 250). By contrast, the former ruling parties SPS and SRS won only 60 seats (37+23). SPO again suffered a fiasco, winning no seats at all and failing to even reach the 5% census.

As noted before, the 18 parties comprising DOS were different in both size and political agenda. Until October 5, the joint anti-Milosevic effort kept them in one piece. But with the old regime now gone, DOS was left without the main ingredient that kept it together. This became painstakingly obvious as soon as the new Serbian government set to work and the two main parties – DS and DSS – started to disagree bitterly over relations with the international community. Even before the October changes, DSS was falling behind DS in size and influence. After the election of its leader, Kostunica, as federal president DSS experienced sudden growth, outshining DS in political influence, as the polls suggested.

The reason for the June 2001 dispute between DS and DSS is two-fold. Firstly, there was an acute asymmetry between DSS' huge popularity and its minute political influence and, secondly, the two parties had very different political programs. DS came across as pro-European and ready to meet all the conditions for the country's readmission to international institutions. DSS had a rather reserved stance towards the West (especially the US) and its readiness to comply with its conditions was not unconditional. The crystallizing point of this long-lasting dispute was the conflict between DS and DSS over FRY's obligations regarding the extradition of The Hague's war-crimes indictees. This issue was raised in a tense atmosphere before the republican government in June 2001, when the leading Western powers linked the holding of the donor conference for Yugoslavia to the extradition of the individuals indicted by the tribunal, Milosevic above all. After the decision to extradite Milosevic was refused at the federal level, that is, when the Constitutional Court declared the federal government's decree on his extradition unconstitutional – the Serbian government passed and carried it out on June 28, 2001. This prompted a strong reaction from DSS, which culminated in this party's decision to

leave the government, on August 17, 2001, thus marking the beginning of the demise of DOS.

With DSS leaving, the government's support in the parliament dropped from 70.4% (176 seats) to 52 % (130 seats). Although it still had an absolute majority, the government's position became unstable, since a possible departure of any other of the remaining 17 coalition members could jeopardize it.

The actual split of DOS has far-reaching consequences, not only because DS and DSS found themselves on the opposite sides, but also because their leaders hold two strategically important positions in the new political order, that of the prime minister of Serbia and president of Yugoslavia, respectively.

DSS' moving to the opposition enabled the parties of the previous regime -- SPS, SRS, and SSJ -- which together had only one fourth of the house seats -- to make a comeback from the political margins where they were pushed after the December elections, into mainstream politics. In the subsequent months, DSS will be faced with a difficult dilemma: either to refuse to cooperate with these parties and remain powerlessness, or to accept cooperation and form a strong anti-European bloc with them. This bloc could, in the future, pass a vote of no confidence to the government thus extorting early elections. This controversial teaming up could damage DSS' voter support, especially among its followers from October 5, thus diminishing its chances of electoral success. However, it is not impossible that at the next republican elections, DSS, together with the three parties, could win the majority in the parliament. Still, this would not be enough for it to form a stable government in light of the unbridgeable differences between them. Such an outcome would definitely slow down the democratic and market transformation already under way in Serbia.