

What's Wrong With Serbia?

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Eight years ago, when Slobodan Milosevic was kicked out of office, Vojislav Kostunica, the man who defeated the dictator at the polls, was hailed as a hero at home and branded as “the dragon slayer” by the Western press. His popularity was unmatched in recent Serbian history, and it was widely believed that Serbia would soon become a candidate for European Union membership. Today, Kostunica is one of the least popular heads of government in the democratic world, both at home and abroad, and instead of moving towards the EU, Serbia seems to be on the fast track towards isolation, and even renewed conflict over Kosovo. What's more, Milosevic's nationalist ideology and his policies have been rehabilitated and incorporated into the political mainstream. Serbia seems to have slipped into a state of permanent crisis. If Milosevic were alive today, he would no doubt be well pleased at this turn of events.

How could things have gone so wrong? One explanation, popular among Serbian liberals and human rights activists, but also in the Western world, is that Serbs have failed to face the demons of their recent past, and are now doomed to repeat it. By failing to arrest and prosecute war crimes suspects such as General Ratko Mladic and by refusing to show proper respect for the victims of the Srebrenica genocide, so the argument goes, Serbs have sacrificed their future for the sake of nationalistic myths of the past. Another popular theory is that the course of reforms in Serbia was derailed by the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic in March of 2003; without Djindjic's energetic personality and charisma, Serbia simply couldn't keep pace with the future, and so naturally relapsed into its previous state.

Although these theories have some truth in them, they are insufficient to explain Serbia's recent trajectory. While it cannot be denied that Serbia did drag its feet over war crimes issues, its post-Milosevic's behavior wasn't much different from other countries in the region: all had problems turning over their suspected war criminals to the International Criminal Tribunal in The Hague, and all were equally reluctant to put them on trial at home. As far as the attachment to nationalist myths is concerned, the most recent available opinion poll, done in 2006 by Strategic Marketing¹, shows that Serbs are no more nationalistic and xenophobic than some of their neighbors, and that a large majority – some 69 percent – would like to see Mladic and other war crimes suspects arrested - not because they believe they're guilty, but because it would bring Serbia closer to the EU or help avoid international sanctions. The most recent study, conducted in March this year by Media Gallup Serbia, shows that 59 percent of Serbs favor Euro-Atlantic integration, despite the troubled issue of Kosovo.

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www.osce.org/item/23518.html?lc=SR

As for the impact of Djindjic's assassination, there is no doubt that his death was a heavy blow to Serbia's reforms. However, his premature departure cannot sufficiently explain the current problems of Serbian democracy. Other forces are at work, and in order to identify them one needs to look into the darkest shadows of Milosevic's legacy: his secret police, powerful and unaccountable, which outlived not only Milosevic's downfall but also three consecutive democratic governments, and is likely to outlive the fourth.

In order to understand the role of Serbia's security agencies in Serbian political life, it has to be noted that Milosevic's regime was not only aggressive, undemocratic and corrupt. It was in its essence a criminal regime, whose whole security sector was deeply involved not just in war crimes, but also in classic forms of organised crime: drug trafficking, extortion, kidnappings and targeted assassinations. As Sasa Jankovic notes in his paper "The Status of Serbia's Intelligence Reform and its Challenges":

"in fact it is hard to find a significant crime scene in Serbia of the nineties which was left without the fingerprints of at least one of the various secret services, or 'at least' the police, and which does not link to the political or economic interests of the corrupted 'elite'. To mention just a few: the murder of the former Serbian President, once a boss and rival of Slobodan Milosevic, Mr. Ivan Stambolic; the two unsuccessful murder attempts against Vuk Draskovic, at the time the most prominent opposition leader; the assassination of the owner of an opposition-leaning newspaper and former state security employee, Slavko Curuvija; the murder of the infamous 'king' of the Serbian underground Zeljko Raznatovic ('Arkan'), and hopefully the last stroke of the dying beast, the murder of the Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic in 2003."²

During the wars in Croatia and Bosnia, the main Serbian security service (Resor drzavne bezbednosti, or RDB) recruited, armed, and controlled Serbian paramilitary "volunteer" units such as Arkan's Tigers and Scorpions. The RDB also had a small but elite clandestine combat force called Special Operations Unit, also known as 'The Red Berets', under the direct control of Milosevic's security tsar, Jovica Stanisic (chief of RDB from 1991-98) and his deputy Franko Simatovic. Apart from being part of a clandestine war effort, the Red Berets were also escorting convoys of smuggled goods – cigarettes, petrol and weapons – during the 1992-1996 UN sanctions against Yugoslavia. After the war, The Red Berets switched to drug trafficking, kidnapping and extortion, until the unit was finally disbanded in 2003. An excellent and very detailed account of the history of the Red Berets, their role in the security sector and their connection to other paramilitary units can be found in Filip Schwarm's documentary "The Unit" (VREME Film, 1996).

It is important to note, however, that formidable as they were, the Red Berets were just an instrument of the RDB, which supplied the logistics and covered for their crimes. It can

² Saša Janković, *The Status of Serbia's Intelligence Reform and its Challenges* in: Anja H. Ebnöther, LtCol Mag. Ernst M. Felberbauer (ed.), *The Status of Serbia's Intelligence Reform and its Challenges*, 2007, p. 149-150.

be assumed, although it is hard to prove, that at least a portion of the illicit profits went to RDB's secret bank accounts.

After Milosevic's downfall in October 2000, no serious cleansing or reforms of these agencies occurred.

Radomir Markovic, Stanisic's successor as the RDB chief, quickly pledged his loyalty to Vojislav Kostunica, and kept his job for a full three months after Milosevic's downfall. During this time, much of the RDB's precious archive was systematically burned and shredded, especially the files containing information on the agency's criminal activities (see "The bonfire of Secrets", VREME issue 725, November 18 2004.) Almost a year later, an internal RDB investigation revealed the extent of the damage and the names of all officers implicated in the destruction of documents. However, no action was ever taken to punish the culprits.

In early 2001, Markovic was succeeded by Goran Petrovic, a young RDB analyst, who promised thorough reform. Instead, Petrovic appointed Zoran Mijatovic, a long-time assistant to Stanisic, as his deputy and RDB's Chief of Operations. Not surprisingly, there were no reforms, nor any investigations of the RDB's activities during the Milosevic era.

But even talk of reforms caused alarm in the most criminalized RDB circles. In November of 2001, the Red Berets launched a protest aimed at replacing the RDB leadership with a more conservative one. After the regular police refused to take any action against the Red Berets, and in view of Kostunica's public support of the protest, Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic backed down and replaced Petrovic with Andrija Savic, an elderly academic. Savic was merely a figurehead, but the real force in the new leadership was Milorad Bracanovic, the new Chief of Operations. As a former security officer of the Red Berets and close friend of the unit's commander Milorad Ulemek Legija, Bracanovic practically ensured the continuity of the agency's criminal activities.

In 2002, the RDB was officially renamed BIA (*Bezbenosno informativna agencija*, or Security Intelligence Agency) and removed from the auspices of the Ministry of Interior. Although this was advertised as an improvement, the effect was exactly the opposite: as an independent agency, BIA was effectively placed outside of the government's control. Simultaneously, some 300 officers, mostly young and reform-minded, were sacked and replaced with old cadre, some of whom were pulled out of retirement. By the end of 2002, Djindjic attempted to regain control over the agency and sacked Savic and Bracanovic, replacing them with Milan Milicevic and Goran Zivaljevic, two young and uncompromised officers. However, it was too late: in March of 2003, Djindjic was assassinated in a plot organized by Legija and Dusan Spasojevic, a notorious drug lord.

Not even after the assassination of Djindjic, when it turned out that the bulk of conspirators were actually active-duty BIA officers (Zvezdan Jovanovic, who fired the fatal bullet, was a Lt. Colonel), nobody bothered to investigate the security agencies. Aco Tomic, a close associate of Kostunica and the head of military counter-intelligence

(KOS) from 2000 until 2003, was arrested, but then released for lack of evidence after three months in custody.

In 2004, after Kostunica was elected Prime Minister, BIA got a new boss – Rade Bulatovic, a former diplomat and Kostunica's security adviser from 2000 to 2002. Just like Tomic, Bulatovic was suspected of being a part of a plot to kill Djindjic and in 2003, during the state of emergency, he was detained for two months and questioned about his association with Legija. However, he was never charged. Bulatovic still runs the agency, essentially as his own fiefdom. He has refused to appoint a deputy. During his tenure, hundreds of new young officers were employed by the agency. Again, this was advertised as "rejuvenation" and "reform". In fact, most of the new cadre has affiliations with Kostunica's Democratic Party of Serbia or family ties with retired Agency officers from the Milosevic era.

The only real step towards reforming the security systems was placing the two military agencies (KOS, now renamed as VBA or Military Security Agency, and VOA, the Military Intelligence Agency) under the auspices of the Ministry of Defence and, indirectly, under the control of the President. Also, in 2007, two small security agencies attached to the Ministry of Foreign affairs (SB and SID) were disbanded, simplifying the system. Serbia now has only three security agencies: BIA, VBA and VOA.

In December 2007, after much delay, the new Law on Oversight of Security Services passed through Parliament, giving more authority to the Parliamentary Security Board, which can now exert some control over the agencies (until recently, the Board was a toothless body without authority to investigate or request detailed reports on agency activities). Also, the law established a new state body – The National Security Council – for coordination and control of the agencies. The NSC consists of the Serbian President, the Prime Minister, the Ministers of Interior and Defense and the Chiefs of Agencies, under the chairmanship of the President. Although most experts agree that the law is a step forward, it remains an empty frame until new laws on the security agencies are passed. Given the present political situation in Serbia, this will not happen in the near future. And as for the National Security Council, it meets rarely, such as in the aftermath of the February 19 riots when several Western embassies were attacked by hooligans and the US Embassy was burned.

Despite these feeble attempts to establish some oversight, the three main security agencies still control parts of the media, economy and political life in Serbia. Any politician who dares to confront them risks finding incriminating details about his private life published in one or more of several tabloids known to be affiliated with the agencies (*Kurir*, *Press* and *Pravda*, who frequently attack pro-Western politicians and often publish information which clearly comes from intelligence or police sources). Also, BIA is suspected of regularly supplying the Serbian Radical Party with incriminating details about their political rivals. In most countries, even in the Balkans, security agencies take orders from their political masters, but in Serbia this is reversed.

This is the most important explanation for Serbia's present state, and its unique position in comparison with its neighbors. This explains Serbia's failure to arrest the fugitive General Ratko Mladic and other war crimes suspects. For them, keeping Serbia away from European integration is not just a matter of ideology, but of their very survival.

But there is one important difference from Milosevic's era: while Milosevic was in power, his secret police worked for him. After his demise, they chose not to allow anyone to boss them around. When Djindjic tried, he was killed. The present situation is convenient for Serbia's security organisations: as long as the country is in crisis, the government weak, and there is tension in Kosovo and on the international stage, no one will question their privileged position, nor dare to investigate their activities.

Why are Serbian politicians so reluctant to deal with this viper's nest? One answer is simple: they are afraid. Some members of the "democratic bloc" worked secretly as informers in the Milosevic era, and going up against their former handlers would ruin their careers; others have skeletons of different kinds in their closet. BIA keeps files on all of them. And finally, they all learned their lesson when Djindjic was killed. Nobody wants to be next, least of all Kostunica, who is all too aware to whom he owes his present job.

In fact, what needs to happen to bring these services under control is the following: an urgent and radical reform of the agencies, which involves drafting new laws aimed at reducing their present powers (among others, the power to arrest) and introducing strict judicial control of surveillance of citizens; selecting a strong Investigation Committee, appointed by the state and composed of security and legal experts of good public standing to investigate past activities and crimes; and opening up the files on informants and collaborators, as was done in most Central European countries after the fall of communism. Until these reforms are undertaken, Serbia will remain a hostage of its own watchdogs.