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Milosevic' Lethal Legacy[†]

Just days after the final decision was taken to yet again change the name and constitutional structure of Yugoslavia – this time formally to Serbia and Montenegro – after allegedly several earlier attempts, the Serb Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic was killed by an assassin's bullet. With this act, once more, Europe was violently reminded that its heart – the Balkans – remains a zone of crisis still without stability even two and a half years after the dictator Slobodan Milosevic was ousted from power. The following report is an analysis of the tragic events, its possible causes and the ramifications for the nation.

Theories

Almost immediately following the assassination regional commentators began to surmise which individual or groups could be responsible for the attack. Amongst the reasonable as well as potentially far-fetched explanations to date we have heard theories to the effect that the assassin – who has been recently apprehended – was working for: the ultranationalist politician Seselj; Mladic and his former paramilitaries; Milosevic and his son Marko; extremist Albanians; or various criminal organisations. However, the reality, as with most things in the Balkans, is more complicated. In fact, the responsibility may not even be isolatable to one particular interest group, but rather to an interwoven group of actors that had most to gain by seeing Djindjic forcibly removed from Yugoslav politics.

The Price of Progress: rogue security forces

One does not have to be cynical to accept the fact that in order to come to power, in order to be able to wrest the reigns of government control from the hands of Milosevic, Djindjic and the then opposition DOS movement had to negotiate with those elements of the then regime that could have had the capability to keep Milosevic in power, or at least to make the 2000 September transition much more difficult. At this point it is essential to understand how in fact Milosevic was able to maintain control of the country for so long, even during the two month bombing by NATO forces in 1999.

From the point in 1998 when Milosevic realised that the cause of radical Serb nationalism would serve his career much better than Communism or Socialism, not only did he use this tool to manoeuvre himself into higher positions of power, realising the violent effect such an ideology would have on his ability to maintain

[†] A version of this article was published in *JANES Terrorism and Security Monitor*, April 2003



control of the country, Milosevic decided to “improve” upon the existing mechanisms of government. In the intervening 12 years until his fall, Milosevic subsequently created a state within a state. The most obvious element of this internal power structure was a very strong and politically powerful Army, the VJ, more importantly the army’s counter-intelligence arm, KOS and the various military and quasi military groups that given their lethality could be the extended arms of ethnic cleansing, such as Franko Simatovic’s Red Berets. Also essential to maintaining control were the non-military security services, foremostly the BIA (former DB).

Over the years, however, these state elements would cooperate and in certain areas meld with the rapidly growing organised crime elements which flourished under the embargoed regime and which in many cases were begun or at last abetted by key members of the then nomenklatura which wished to look after its own interests, as well as being forced to find ways to finance Milosevic’s war. Foremost among these criminal gangs were those individual who reside in the Zemun district of Belgrade, collectively referred to as the Zemun Clan. It was with the leaders of this “second state” that DOS and Djindjic had to make a devil’s pact in order to be able to once and for all remove the dictator who had plunged the country into bloody civil war. In fact, despite many rumours to the effect that Djindjic was himself implicated in shady organisations or organised crime groups, it is this author’s belief that the stories are just that and were in fact fed by the need to negotiate with these groups and not the result of true involvement in them. Even so, it is no exaggeration to state at this point that it is this agreement and its ramifications that is responsible for the murder of the Serb Prime Minister and for plunging the nation once more into a state of emergency.

For the last two plus years, for the most part, on the surface, it seemed as if the bargain was being kept to. However, beyond the external appearance there were signs that not all was well. To begin with, it was clear that the country did not evince one of the fundamental characteristics of a stable and well-functioning democracy, to wit: democratic and civilian control of its armed forces. The government’s inability to remove and replace key military leaders after the change of regime, or to do so only much later, the public protests and even strikes by paramilitary / commando units – inconceivable in a stable democracy – were clear symptoms of a larger illness. Add to that the fact that several military leaders, indicted by the Hague War Crimes Tribunal, were simply not being surrendered, and even allegedly were being protected by their former military subordinates, and it is clear that the reigns of power did not reside fully in the hands of the duly elected politicians.

Despite these renegade elements, the Prime Minister demonstrated more and more a willingness to meet the demands of the international community where he could and to bravely push forward with the necessary economic as well as political reforms of the country, to even include the recommendation to make the relationship with Montenegro even more politically correct and sacrifice forever the moniker: Yugoslavia. However, in this the PM made a rival of President Kostunica. As a result of the difference of opinion that existed between the two, especially over the speed and depth of economic reform, over time and increasingly so in recent months, room to manoeuvre for the extant military, crime and nomenklatura groupings grew, deft as they were in exploiting the differences between the President and Prime Minister.



Now we can safely say that Djindjic was too brave in pushing his reform agenda and in the level of cooperation he demonstrated with the Hague and other international actors. The “great tactician of Yugoslavia’s prudent revolution”, as he has been called, failed to eradicate or gain control of the second state. As a result, various interrelated groups felt that they have more to lose by his maintenance of power than by his death and as a result one of the military arms of this empire reached out to solve the problem in the only way it knew how: with a bullet.

Yes, the alleged perpetrator has been arrested and his former parent unit, the Red Berets, has been dissolved. The fact remains that in the heart of Europe there exists a nation in which there are forces able to violently disrupt the state and even kill its head of government. One should not believe that with the dissolution of the Red Berets, that the government has suddenly imposed democratic and civilian control over its armed forces. Serbia remains potentially at the mercy of the Zemun group and its collaborators. Add to this the fact that in recent months Serb nationalism has been on the rise, especially church sponsored nationalism and youth extremism such as embodied by the fascist Obraz movement, and the future looks bleak, at best unsure. The question now is will the new leadership be strong enough to use the valiant death of their role model as the spark to light a fire of true reform, or will the nation re-Balkanise, as one specialist report has phrased it, will it become the new Belaruss? Can Europe pay the price of having an unstable mini Belaruss at its centre?

With this last death, following the 100,000s witnessed over the last 13 years, Serbia has demonstrated the level of penetration into its life-blood by violent anti-democratic elements. To quote a recent report by the International Crisis Group: “Serbia’s polity and society are still firmly in the heavy hand of their recent past.” A new tough leadership is now needed along with a renewed commitment by the West in which the yardsticks of transition are raised and not lowered. Together they must prove true the fatal words of the late Prime Minister when he stated that: “If someone thinks law and reforms can be stopped by eliminating me, then that is a huge delusion”.

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