

A NEW SERBIA?

THE LAST REVOLUTION of the twentieth century came late. It was only after the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević on 5 October 2000 that Serbia's official 'transition to democracy' began. With it came a bland new jargon, introduced by the Western donors and consultants who descended on the country in droves, preaching the new civic religion of 'reform' and gesturing vaguely towards a radiant European horizon. Serbia's new Democratic Party-led government set about privatizing state-owned enterprises and building state capacity, while NGOs devoted themselves to establishing the rule of law, empowering local communities, promoting gender equality, strengthening citizen participation and fostering respect for minority rights. 'Serbia will be dragged kicking and screaming into the twenty-first century,' vowed one Western diplomat.¹

Of this 'delayed transition', there have always been at least two stories. In the elite's telling, Serbia entered the new millennium diminished, but with an abundance of hope. After a decade of marginalization and immiseration under Milošević, the professional class would finally be restored to its rightful place in society. Serbia would come to terms with its past, atone for its multitude of sins, shun its suicidal nationalism and become a 'normal' country.² Its future was with the West. There was no alternative to Europe. This was the story told by the country's liberals, supported by powerful backers in the West, for whom Serbia in 2000 had a more global meaning. For American Democrats, British New Labourites and German Greens, Serbia represented the triumph of a foreign policy centred around military-backed humanitarianism. The rules-based order upheld by Western powers had a 'responsibility to protect' victims of aggression, wherever they may be. The International War Crimes Tribunal for Yugoslavia would be a model, set up to bring non-Western aggressors to justice. Kosovo's independence as a peaceful,

multi-ethnic democracy would be a rebuke to anti-war protestors—proof, as the British Foreign Secretary put it, of ‘an intervention that worked’.³ Serbia’s youth-powered and expertly branded uprising would serve as a template for others around the world; its Otpor! cadres would go on to train young activists from Egypt to Cuba in waging Gene Sharp’s non-violent struggle. The success of the US–EU intervention in Serbia could legitimate all future others.

There was always another story, though, one that was rarely transmitted in the West. This was the position held by the majority in Serbia. For them, life after the revolution did not improve, and in some ways, it got worse. The enrichment of the upper-middle class came at the expense of farmers and workers. Jobs disappeared and with them, class mobility. Globalization did not bring prosperity but exploitation. Far from being a revolution of ‘people power’, as its Western supporters hailed it, 5 October looked like a transfer of power from one corrupt elite to another. The word ‘democracy’ acquired a negative connotation. Many were quick to note the hypocrisy of its proponents, who recoiled at the idea of killing in the name of religion or the nation, but championed war in the name of human rights.

But the triumphant liberals would themselves experience disappointment in time. Relatively quickly, their story goes, the dream of democracy collapsed ‘under the weight of Serbian political reality and its medieval ways’.⁴ For some members of the elite, the Serbian nation was innately barbaric, with a penchant for corruption and violence, a love of strongmen and a stubborn refusal to accept defeat. The dominant national character, inimical to change, had stymied the consolidation of democracy. Some would say that the emergence of Aleksandar Vučić, the Progressive Party leader who has ruled the country for the past ten

¹ For the notion of ‘the last revolution’ and contemporary reflections on its realities, see the collection of papers from a March 2001 conference at the Belgrade Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory: Ivana Spasić and Milan Subotić, eds, *Revolution and Order: Serbia after October 2000*, Belgrade 2001, p. 7.

² ‘Normality’ is a key concept of the auto-orientalist discourse invoked by cosmopolitan circles in Serbia. In this view, a ‘normal country’ is a member of the European Union and provides a flourishing environment for big business.

³ Robin Cook, quoted in Jim Hoag, ‘Remember the Living Too’, *Washington Post*, 28 May 2000.

⁴ Vid Štimac, ‘The Revolt of the Masses 2.0: On Serbia’s Comedy Candidate, Trump and Brexit’, *Balkanist*, 5 April 2017.

years, has proven them right. A figure drawn from the worst of the Milošević-era past, Vučić swiftly transformed Serbia into a place where people nervously lower their voices when discussing politics in public and suspicions infect many social interactions. But there is another side to Vučić. During the anti-Milošević demonstrations in the 1990s, there was a famous banner which read: ‘Belgrade is the World’. Vučić himself seems the antithesis of this cosmopolitan message, but in his own way he appears determined to put Serbia back on the map.

Balkan backgrounds

The two stories reflect the popular idea that there are ‘two Serbias’, the first being nationalist, rural, uneducated, resentful of globalization, fond of folk music and emotionally allied to Russia, while the ‘other’ or ‘second’ Serbia is liberal, educated, unabashedly elitist, anti-nationalist, fond of rock music and looks to the West.⁵ But the divisions have always been more complex than that—and Serbia itself has always been characterized as much by flux as permanence. Serbia is a little bit bigger than Ireland, its elongated north-south orientation a somewhat jagged oblong at the heart of the Balkan peninsula. Its fertile northern plains are bisected by the Danube, connecting Belgrade to the other great cities of central Europe; the forested hills of its central regions are framed by broad mountain ranges, rich in thermo-mineral springs. To the north and east, Serbia is bordered by Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria; to the south and west, by its former fellow republics in the Socialist Federation of Yugoslavia. A person who has lived in Belgrade since the 1980s will have inhabited four different countries without moving: first, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which in 1992 became the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia; then, in 2003, the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro; and finally, since 2006, the Republic of Serbia, as it remains today. Yet the exact contours of the country still aren’t settled. Slowly but inexorably, Serbia is being excluded by Washington and Brussels from any say over its NATO-occupied former province and mythical-historical heartland, Kosovo, which today has an ethnic Albanian majority.

Slavs arrived in the Balkans in the mid-6th century, with the Serbs appearing in the 7th century; over the following centuries, these South Slavs

⁵ Marina Simić, ‘Exit u Evropu: Popularna Muzika I Politike Identiteta u Savremenoj Srbiji’ [Exit to Europe: Popular Music and Political Identity in Contemporary Serbia], *Kultura*, nos 116–117, 2007, pp. 98–122.

managed to absorb many of the local populations they encountered. It is from this admixture of Slavic settlers and older Balkan populations that the modern Serbs descend. The early Serbs established a series of principalities that veered between independence, vassalage and Byzantine and Bulgarian rule, until, in the early 13th century, Stefan (1165–1228) obtained a royal crown from the Pope. His brother and the future patron saint of Serbia, Sava, nevertheless kept Serbia in the Orthodox fold by convincing the Byzantine Patriarch to grant a separate self-governing church. The newly created Serbian Orthodox Church built many monasteries in Kosovo and the surrounding regions, making the area medieval Serbia's spiritual heartland.

It was at Peć, on the western tip of present-day Kosovo, bordering on Montenegro and Albania, that the 14th-century ruler Stefan Dušan (1308–55), who proclaimed himself Emperor of the Serbs and Greeks, established the Patriarchate of the Serbian Orthodox Church, putting it nominally on a par with the churches of Rome and Constantinople. These rulers belonged to the Nemanjić dynasty, whose state was one of several local kingdoms that arose in the Balkan region between the waning of Byzantine power and the advent of the Ottomans; at its brief apex under Dušan, it appointed governors as far afield as Macedonia and northern Greece, aiming at the conquest of Constantinople itself. Dušan was buried in the monastery-fortress complex he founded at Prizren, Kosovo's second city. A generation later Prince Lazar, a powerful regional lord who emerged as Dušan's would-be successor, led Serbia's forces to what is remembered in folk tales as a glorious defeat by the Ottoman Army at Kosovo Field, close to Pristina, on St Vitus Day, 28 June 1389. Although historians usually consider the battle a tactical draw, with some Christians terming it a Christian victory, Serbia could not recover from the loss of manpower, and one by one, the surviving regional nobles accepted Ottoman sovereignty. But Lazar was canonized as a Christian saint and martyr and a cult formed around his remains, which were ceremonially transported from his burial place at Pristina to later centres of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Lazar's valorous deeds—and those of the outlaw heroes of the mountains and forests who fought the new Ottoman ruling class in the five centuries of occupation that followed—would be commemorated in Serbia's famous oral epics, hailed by the German Romantics as northern Balkan equivalents to the *Iliad*.⁶

⁶ Serbian nationalists have contrived to celebrate the battle of 1389 as a sort of spiritual victory; in the epic accounts, a grey falcon, sent by God on the eve of the Battle of Kosovo, asks Lazar to choose between an earthly Serbian kingdom

Divisions of the region have been imposed by external powers, as much as by local forces. In the 2nd century AD, the Danube–Sava line was the militarized northeastern frontier of the Roman Empire. After the splitting of the Roman Empire into East and West in 395 AD, a series of events—different powers fighting for the region, the Great Schism of 1054 and St Sava’s efforts to create an independent Serbian Church—left Serbia Orthodox while neighbouring Croatia became Catholic. Under the Ottoman *millet* system, which retained local religious leaders and aristocracies under a thin layer of Muslim military and administrative rule, the Serbian Orthodox Church continued to foster a sense of community resistance—for which the Ottomans abolished the Patriarchate in 1766. If outsiders have long noted a certain obstinacy among the Serbs, part of the explanation may lie in this history of pre-modern proto-national defiance, nurtured by the Church and by popular culture, on the borders of a ramshackle empire whose janissaries’ rampages only heightened the sense of a legitimate opposition to external rule. Later, as the Habsburgs consolidated their power to the north, Vienna found it easy to recruit Serbian fighters for their 400-year contest with the Ottomans, which again divided the region along the Sava–Danube.

Modern national consciousness in the region was catalysed at the start of the nineteenth century by the upheavals of the Napoleonic era. Since that time, Serbian nationalism has contained two streams. One was a conservative stream fostered by the Orthodox Church, still fighting the Battle of Kosovo.⁷ The other was an Enlightenment romantic-nationalist

and a heavenly one. The idea that, one day, heavenly Serbia might be territorialized within the profane borders of earthly Serbia has long animated fantasies of expansion (or for some Serbian nationalists, liberation). The battle looms so large that it seems to have engendered a kind of repetition compulsion around its anniversary, 28 June (15 June in the Julian Calendar). It was on 28 June 1914 that the young Serb Gavrilo Princip assassinated Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo, Ferdinand himself having picked the date for his disastrous intervention into Serbian affairs; it was on 28 June 1989 that Milošević gave his historic speech at Gazimestan, one incendiary in the breakup of Yugoslavia; and it was on 28 June 2001 that Milošević was delivered to The Hague to face trial for atrocities in Kosovo.

⁷ In May 1982, the Serbian Orthodox Church published an ‘Appeal for Protection of the Serb Population and its Holy Places in Kosovo’ which claimed: ‘There is no more precious word for the Serb nation, no dearer reality, no more sacred object past, present or future, than the existence and holiness of Kosovo. . . . The Serb nation has been fighting its battle of Kosovo without a break, fighting for just such a remembrance of its being, for its conscious presence and survival in these lands, from 1389 until today.’ Cited in Michele Lee, ‘Kosovo Between Yugoslavia and Albania’, *NLR* 1/140, July–Aug 1983, p. 70.

ideal, represented by Dositej Obradović (1743–1811), a widely travelled scholar who translated French, German and English classics into Serbian, and the philologist Vuk Karadžić (1787–1864), who edited the first collections of Serbian oral epics and lyric folk songs, admired by Goethe and Grimm, and compiled a Serbian-Latin-German dictionary. Denounced by the Church for his anticlericalism, Karadžić worked with Croatian and Slovenian intellectuals to create a common literary language based on everyday speech, a challenge to Orthodox Slavonic.⁸ This work, among others, gave birth to the Yugoslav movement, anchored in the idea that the Southern Slavs were one people and would be best off living together in a single state.

From as early as 1804, successive Serbian uprisings led by local figures like Karadjordje ('Black George') Petrović (1762–1817) and Miloš Obrenović (1780–1860) won *de facto* independence from Istanbul, establishing in 1838 one of the most advanced monarchical constitutions in Europe, under which an elected assembly could—and did—eject one royal family and install another.⁹ International recognition for the Kingdom of Serbia came with the Berlin Treaty in 1878, with crucial Russian support. The Yugoslav idea won out among Serbs. By the end of World War I, in the minds of many, this was based on the idea of an integral Yugoslavism, which stated that all Southern Slavs were different tribes of one nation. A united Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was endorsed by the victors at Versailles. While embraced enthusiastically by the Serbs, other Yugoslav nations, and especially the Croats, were less enamoured of the idea, with many suspicious that it was a thinly veiled attempt at assimilation. The new Kingdom's land reform dispossessed former feudal landowners in favour of peasants. In Kosovo, this meant privileging both local Serbs and new settlers over Albanian lords. Albanian feudal landowners thus lost much of their richest agricultural land to newcomers. For many Albanians, these events were a critical turning point in what they call the Yugoslav colonization of Kosovo. More than 100,000 Albanians are believed to have left Kosovo between 1918 and 1945.

After the 1941 Axis invasion and partition of 'Versailles Yugoslavia', the Communist-led Partisan resistance under Tito, himself of mixed

⁸ Fred Singleton, *A Short History of the Yugoslav Peoples*, London 2008 [1985], pp. 87–90.

⁹ Two dynasties, one descended from Karadjordje and the other from Obrenović, contested the throne until the latter went extinct in 1903.

Slovenian-Croatian parentage, promoted a different kind of Yugoslavism, one in which Yugoslavia was a community where clearly distinct nations, respectful of each other's differences no matter how minor, came together as full equals to build socialism. During and right after WWII, Tito called at times for the unity of Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Greece and Albania in a pan-Balkan Socialist Federation.¹⁰

After Tito

In practice Tito's multinational Yugoslavia, for all its achievements, always depended upon an unstable compromise. On the one hand, under the 1946 Constitution, Serbian power was limited by the division of the republic of Serbia into three units: Serbia proper, the autonomous province of Vojvodina and the autonomous region of Kosovo. In granting two parts of the republic autonomy, Yugoslav authorities hoped to assuage fears of Serbia's 'centralizing tendencies'. On the other hand, in order to avoid antagonizing the Serbs who made up a plurality, Kosovo was denied the status of a national republic, although Albanians were soon as numerous as Slovenians or Bosnian Muslims. An initial Kosovan uprising against Serbian rule in 1945 was brutally crushed by a 30,000-strong occupation force of the Yugoslav People's Army. The most powerful representative of the centralizing approach was Aleksandar Ranković, interior minister and head of military intelligence, charged with implementing the state of emergency in Kosovo before he was sacked in 1966 for overstepping his bounds (he had reportedly been spying on Tito). Yugoslavia liberalized somewhat from the late 1960s. A decentralized confederal constitution was introduced in 1974 which empowered nationalist elites, despite the recent unrest of the Croatian Spring, effectively shifting power from the federal government to the republics. The 1974 constitution made Kosovo a republic in all but name. Its security forces were Albanianized, language rights were recognized, and a newly established University of Priština became the crucible for the flowering of Albanian national consciousness.

In the 1980s, as the Yugoslav republics began to polarize along nationalist lines after Tito's death, under intensifying economic pressure from the IMF, Serbian nationalism resurfaced in the figure of Slobodan Milošević. Born in 1941, Milošević was the son of a Serbian Orthodox theologian and

¹⁰ The history of hopes for a pan-Balkan Socialist Federation are traced in Lee, 'Kosovo between Yugoslavia and Albania'.

Russian literature teacher from Montenegro who committed suicide in 1962; his mother, a schoolteacher and devout Communist, who worked hard to instil in her sons a sense of duty to the Party, hanged herself in her living room in 1974. When he graduated in law from the University of Belgrade around the time of his father's death, Milošević clung to a college friend with family connections in the leadership of the Serbian League of Communists. With their help, he built a business career in the gas industry and banking, while mobilizing Kosovan Serb grievances to climb the ranks of the party, emerging as president of the Yugoslav republic of Serbia in 1987. His nationalist ambitions were manifest in the spectacular rally he organized on 28 June 1989 at Gazimestan, the commemorative site near Kosovo Field, for the 600th anniversary of the battle. A million-strong crowd was bussed in with the help of the Party, the remains of Saint Lazar were reinterred, after being carried in procession through Serb nationalist strongholds, and Milošević trumpeted the return of Serbian rule over Kosovo under his 1989 constitution, which stripped Kosovo of the autonomy it had achieved in 1974.

Milošević's inner circle was dominated by the formidable figure of his wife, Mirjana Marković. An ardent Communist, Mirjana's dark family history matched Milošević's own. Mirjana was born in a forest to a 24-year-old partisan fighter named Vera Miletić, known by the *nom de guerre* Mira. In 1942, the year Mirjana was born, the Gestapo captured her mother. Under brutal torture, she allegedly gave away secrets, which may have included the names and locations of other partisans. (Accounts of this vary; in another telling, Mira herself was unmasked as a fascist collaborator and murdered by partisans.) The exact circumstances have never been clarified, but Vera Miletić was killed. According to one account, Vera's father ordered his own daughter shot for treachery. Later in life, Mirjana Marković adopted her mother's *nom de guerre*, refusing to believe that her mother had been anything other than a partisan hero. She wore a flower in her jet-black hair in her mother's honour, and most of all, she compensated for the rumours of her mother's treachery by becoming a strident communist. She taught Marxist sociology at the University of Belgrade, and in 1994 started her own party, described as far-left, the Yugoslav Left, or JUL, a frequent collaborator with Milošević's Socialist Party. She met Milošević when the two were students, and it was said to have been love at first sight. The CIA would later describe Marković as Milošević's 'mother replacement'. Critically, Marković was fiercely ambitious, a trait Milošević lacked.

Together, they plundered Serbia, with Cyprus serving as a hub for a complex money distribution system. Through Cyprus, billions were funnelled out of Serbia and distributed to various points around the world. Two rounds of Western sanctions in the 1990s also helped to forge a lasting symbiosis between the state and organized crime: during the embargoes, smuggling routes were controlled by the police and intelligence services; once the sanctions were lifted, these networks simply adapted to serve different criminal ends. The ultra-nationalist Serbian Radical Party (SRS) was given ample space in the Milošević-controlled media and entered parliament in 1993. Its insolent leaders—Vojislav Šešelj, a Hannibal Lecter-like court jester (and Yugoslavia's youngest ever PhD), Tomislav Nikolić and Aleksandar Vučić, a hulking 6'6" top University of Belgrade law graduate—made Milošević's ruling Socialist Party look a paragon of stability and moderation.¹¹ In March 1998, while stepping up the violent campaign of repression in Kosovo, Milošević appointed the 27-year-old Vučić as minister of information, giving him free rein to bully the Serbian press, shut down critical newspapers and hound the opposition.¹²

If Milošević's Gazimestan speech was a vital propellant for the break-up of Yugoslavia, it was not the only one; as so often in Balkan history, internal and external interests once again collided and colluded. First Germany, Austria and the Vatican gave their backing to the secession of Slovenia and Croatia in 1991, helping to instigate the first Balkan wars in half a century; barely 45 years after the mass ethnic slaughters committed by the Croatian Ustaše, local Serbs had grounds to be wary of Franjo Tuđman's new state.¹³ The Clinton Administration then promoted Bosnia and Herzegovina's independence in 1992, triggering the secession of the Bosnian Serb regions and initiating a nightmare

¹¹ Charged with conspiring in the deportation of Croats during the 1990s, Vojislav Šešelj surrendered to the ICTY in 2003 and spent eleven years in custody at The Hague before being released on health grounds in 2014. Šešelj described the SRS as 'not fascists, just chauvinists who hate Croats'. On his politics, see B92, 'Politicka karijera Vojislava Šešelj: Najmladji doktor nauka, haski optuženik i cetnicki vojvoda' [The Political Career of Vojislav Šešelj: Youngest PhD, Hague Indictee and Chetnik Duke'], *B92.com*, 8 April 2022.

¹² 'Attacks on the Press 1999: Yugoslavia', *Committee to Protect Journalists*, 22 March 2000.

¹³ On the balance of the right to self-determination and the protection of minorities in the period, see Robin Blackburn, 'The Break-Up of Yugoslavia and the Fate of Bosnia', *NLR* 1/199, May–June 1993.

of inter-communal slaughter and population flight before the same Administration stepped in to impose a halt with the 1995 Dayton Accords. Finally, Serbian military repression of an independence uprising led by the Kosovo Liberation Army would be represented as a *casus belli* by the NATO powers.

NATO's official motive for the bombing of Yugoslavia was the failure of the Rambouillet negotiations on the status of Kosovo, after two years of brutal counter-insurgency. The location for these talks—the Château de Rambouillet, near Paris—seemed chosen to communicate that the Europeans were capable of settling security matters independently from the US. Yet the proposed Rambouillet Agreement would not only have granted NATO sweeping political and military control over Kosovo, but free rein over the territory of the rest of Yugoslavia: 'NATO personnel shall enjoy, together with their vehicles, vessels, aircraft, and equipment, free and unrestricted passage and unimpeded access throughout the FRY including associated airspace and territorial waters. This shall include, but not be limited to, the right of bivouac, manoeuvre, billet, and utilization of any areas or facilities as required for support, training, and operations', the proposal read. The occupying NATO forces would have been granted total immunity: 'NATO personnel, under all circumstances and at all times, shall be immune from the Parties' jurisdiction in respect of any civil, administrative, criminal, or disciplinary offenses which may be committed by them in the FRY.' The wording of the ultimatum seemed designed to be rejected; Rambouillet is remembered by many as little more than a thin pretext for war. Two months into the 78-day bombing campaign, a senior State Department official told a group of journalists off the record that the bar had been set higher than they knew the Serbs—or any other sovereign nation—would ever accept.

After NATO

NATO's 78-day bombing campaign in the spring of 1999 saw some 23,000 bombs and missiles loosed on what remained of Yugoslavia, among them depleted-uranium and cluster munitions (the latter would be banned by the Oslo Convention a decade later). NATO intelligence operatives had picked out over 900 targets, including oil refineries, bridges, trains, petrochemical factories and the state broadcaster, Radio Television Serbia. The Zastava factory, which produced the much-maligned Yugo car, was hit by repeated NATO airstrikes, despite the

presence of workers gathered in a human chain around it (124 were injured). In one notorious incident, US B-2 Stealth warplanes attacked the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, killing three.¹⁴ Some five hundred civilians were confirmed killed, though controversies about precise numbers abound. Estimates of the cost of the devastation have ranged from \$30 billion to \$100 billion, though no Serbian government has ever calculated its total.

From the West's perspective, the war was a resounding success. There were no casualties among NATO forces, in the first such campaign conducted entirely by air. The main objective of the bombing was met: the withdrawal of Serbian forces from Kosovo and their replacement by KFOR, a 50,000-strong NATO-led mission, which established a military base at Camp Bondsteel. A peace deal, the Kumanovo Agreement, was backed up by UN Security Council Resolution 1244, which established a UN interim administration, UNMIK, headed by Médecins sans frontières co-founder Bernard Kouchner. The KLA leaders were ushered into a provisional legislative assembly. A UN protectorate was born. A further triumph was the overthrow of Milošević in October 2000. Washington and Brussels helped to tempt and pressure the motley political opposition—Vojislav Koštunica's conservative-nationalist Democratic Party of Serbia, Zoran Djindjić's pro-EU Democratic Party, the civic movement Otpor! (formed by student activists), along with *nomenklatura* capitalists and smaller parties from Vojvodina—into a united electoral front, the DOS, backing Koštunica against Milošević in the September 2000 presidential election. Milošević's attempts to rig the results provoked mass protests, with hundreds of thousands converging on Belgrade—for once unhampered by the much-feared state security forces. An excavator driver aiming his vehicle at the State TV building became the symbol of the uprising—hence, the 'bulldozer revolution'. Milošević resigned on 5 October 2000.

The overthrow of Milošević was a victory for cosmopolitan Serbia—the urban elites who had been marginalized under his rule. Despite the devastation all around, many liberal Serbs would say that the early years of the new millennium were the best of their lives. Among beneficiaries of the 'bulldozer revolution', hopes were so high that it was easy to overlook the fatal flaws embedded in the new order. First, the ideological heterogeneity

¹⁴ George Tenet, 'DCI Statement on the Belgrade Chinese Embassy Bombing', CIA, 22 July 1999.

of the DOS, an ‘unholy alliance’ of pro-EU liberals and national conservatives, became a liability once in government, with Koštunica as president and Djindjić as prime minister, leading the government in the National Assembly. Riven by infighting, the coalition was frequently ineffective and soon fell apart. Djindjić was something of a political chameleon. A liberal reformer who had studied under Habermas in Germany during the 1970s, he flirted with nationalism in the early 1990s, before making EU accession the cornerstone of the DP’s platform at the beginning of the 2000s. (Many believed then that EU membership would be Serbia’s reward for overthrowing Milošević; 23 years later, it has yet to arrive.)

Likewise, when Washington made clear that receipt of aid would be contingent upon cooperation in delivering Milošević to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia—the *ad hoc* court set up in The Hague, at the height of the Bosnian War—Djindjić grudgingly obliged. Unsurprisingly, the ICTY was highly unpopular in Serbia, where such tactics by the West were perceived as blackmail. What Washington and Brussels wanted, it was felt, was a collective *Kniefall*, an acknowledgment that Serbia had been the sole aggressor in the wars of the 1990s. Instead, political leaders, including pro-Western liberals like Djindjić, rationalized their unpopular decisions to send indictees to The Hague as a necessary evil, the price to be paid for economic assistance and European integration. Indeed, the day after Djindjić delivered Milošević in 2001, the ‘international community’ pledged \$1.28 billion in aid to Serbia.¹⁵ Koštunica opposed sending Milošević to The Hague, but more importantly, had clashed with other members of DOS that summer over the unsolved murder of a former state security official, reportedly killed before he could reveal state links with organized crime. Incensed, Koštunica pulled his party out of Djindjić’s parliamentary coalition.

A third problem was that Milošević’s security forces—indeed, the whole power bloc he had constructed—remained largely untouched by the Bulldozer Revolution; this was the original sin of Serbia’s ‘transition’. In an effort to bring them onside during the anti-regime protests in October

¹⁵ Naturally, economic aid was conditional on neoliberal measures. In late 2001, the Paris Club agreed to write off 66 per cent of the \$4.562 billion Yugoslavia owed, on the understanding that the country would implement ‘a medium-term economic program in agreement with the IMF’: ‘Pariski klub otpisao 66 odsto duga Jugoslaviji’ [Paris Club Writes off Two-Thirds of Yugoslavia’s Debt], website of the Serbian Government, 16 November 2001.

2000, Djindjić had made a pact with Zoran ‘Legija’ Ulemek, leader of the JSO, the Special Operations Unit: the security services would disobey any order to crack down on protesters, and in exchange, the new democratic government would agree to let them stay in their positions after the revolution, thus leaving critical elements of Serbia’s vast security-criminal apparatus in place.¹⁶ But Djindjić came under increasing pressure to confront them. He declared 2002 ‘the year of the fight against organized crime’ and replaced the head of BIA (Security Intelligence Agency) in January 2003, after learning that the mafia had been receiving state secrets and approved a new court set up to address organized crime. The secret services suspected that the prime minister would take action against them soon. Before he could, they killed him. On 12 March 2003, Djindjić was gunned down by a sniper with a high-powered rifle in front of a government building in Belgrade. Legija had sent his deputy to pull the trigger, but the sweeping operation had been perpetrated by the Zemun clan, figures from the unreformed security services with ties to the criminal underworld.

Recovery?

Djindjić’s assassination marked the definitive end of the optimistic period that had followed Milošević’s overthrow. It also helped inspire an irresistible mythology, central to the second Serbia’s understanding of itself: a pro-Western liberal reformer, cut down in his prime by figures emblematic of the country’s dark past, tragically preventing its transformation. Future failings could be explained away by this event. Yet for much of the country, the ‘transition to democracy’ had brought little reward anyway. By the year 2000, Serbia was in ruins, its real GDP half what it had been in 1989. Civilian industrial capacity and public works were devastated; an estimated 600,000 jobs had been lost. The average monthly salary was just \$45, while by 2001 annual inflation was running at over 80 per cent. Under the tutelage of Djindjić’s liberal reformers, the costs of consumer goods soared. The price of milk doubled, while that of vegetable oil jumped fourfold.

Privatization was a protracted disaster. From the outset, Yugoslavia’s novel system of ‘workers’ self-management’—introduced in the years

¹⁶ Filip Ejodus, ‘Democratic Security Sector Governance in Serbia’, *PRIF Reports*, no. 94, 2010, p. 10.

following the 1948 Tito–Stalin split—made privatization more challenging than in the other former state-socialist countries.¹⁷ The dismantling of self-management started under Milošević: an initial law in 1991 permitted ‘internal shareholding’, which favoured workers and managers but also allowed the old *nomenklatura* to amply help themselves.¹⁸ In 2001, with extensive support from the World Bank, the Djindjić government introduced a new, more destructive law to enable commercial sales. Domestically, the chosen method—tendering and auctions—virtually ensured that only the *nouveau riche* class of war profiteers would become investors. Predictably, many of these privatized companies became fronts for organized crime. When troubled industries underwent rapid transfers of ownership, these were often accompanied by mass layoffs. Small towns and cities that had been industrial powerhouses under self-managed socialism became veritable ghost towns after privatization. Yugoslavia’s industrial heritage was largely destroyed. Signs of devastation were everywhere. Serbia’s population had declined by nearly 4 per cent in the 1990s, as hundreds of thousands of the most educated left the country. This was partially offset by the arrival of nearly half a million refugees, most of them displaced ethnic Serbs from Bosnia–Herzegovina, Croatia and Kosovo—the largest refugee population in Europe, with few jobs or welfare services to greet them.

It is hardly surprising, then, that despite the considerable sums the West had spent on democracy promotion in Serbia—\$80 million on ‘overt democracy assistance initiatives’ in 1999–2000 alone¹⁹—the advent of liberal-democratic institutions was met with a shrug by much of the country. Voter turnout frequently fell below the 50 per cent required by Serbian law for an election to be judged legitimate. As a result, repeat elections became a regular occurrence. Between September and December 2002, there were three presidential elections, none of them producing the necessary 50 per cent turnout. In 2003, barely 39 per cent

¹⁷ Under workers’ self-management, firms were neither private nor state-owned but ‘collective property, controlled by their employees’; workers had extensive decision-making rights and had long viewed themselves as owners—creating confusion about who had the right to sell a firm and who should profit from the sale. See Karim Medjad, ‘The Fate of the Yugoslav Model: A Case Against Legal Conformity’, *American Journal of Comparative Law*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2004.

¹⁸ Avlijas, interview by author, 5 November 2022.

¹⁹ Marlene Spoerri, *Engineering Revolution: The Paradox of Democracy Promotion in Serbia*, Philadelphia 2015, p. 75.

bothered to vote in the November elections. An almost proud political apathy became a defining feature of Serbian life. The reasons for it were complex, though a disdain for politicians and democratic disappointment were part of it. For Vid Štimac, this resolute non-participation was voters' refusal to 'tie the noose around their own necks. It was their dignity fighting back.'²⁰

In June 2004, Serbia at last elected a president after three failed attempts, having tweaked the election law; turnout was 48 per cent. The new incumbent was Boris Tadić from Djindjić's Democratic Party, a young psychologist who beat the ultranationalist Serbian Radical Party candidate, Tomislav Nikolić, by 54 to 46 per cent. Like Djindjić before him, Tadić's platform rested heavily on support for Serbia's EU path. NGOs proliferated, in anticipation of a bright European future. However, there was little agreement about what 'European integration' actually meant, or why it was so important. EU membership was pursued as a 'political if not economic and geo-strategic coping mechanism,' a stand-in for any real vision for the future.²¹ Koštunica meanwhile became prime minister, leading a minority conservative-liberal coalition government with external support from the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), Milošević's former machine. The far-right Radicals under Nikolić and Vučić, the largest party in parliament, formed the opposition.

The post-2000 period has been described as a time of 'middle-class restoration', relative to the position of the working classes.²² In 1989, 32 per cent of the political elite had working-class fathers, whilst another 31 per cent were born to farmers. In 2003, those numbers had shrunk to 14 and 7 per cent. Further, in 1989, only 2 per cent of the political elite hailed from the ruling class; in 2003, that had jumped to nearly 28 per cent. Middle-class representation also increased, from 21 to 38 per cent. By this stage, a modest economic recovery was underway: the standard of living improved, purchasing power increased, net wages quadrupled and the poverty rate fell by half. But this was largely 'jobless growth', based on consumption, imports and credit; inflows of FDI were mostly directed towards boosting domestic consumption through the banking sector, telecommunications and retail. As one IMF representative said

²⁰ Štimac, 'The Revolt of the Masses 2.0'.

²¹ Marek Mikus, *Frontiers of Civil Society: Government and Hegemony in Serbia*, New York 2018, p. 71.

²² Mikus, *Frontiers of Civil Society*, p. 68.

at the time, ‘the Serbian economy consists of people walking around shopping malls, purchasing consumer goods on credit while talking on their mobile phones.’²³ The economic crisis of 2008 would hit correspondingly hard.

Lost lands

With economic difficulty came further state shrinkage. Serbia and Montenegro had emerged as a single unit from the break-up of Yugoslavia, entering the new millennium together as the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY). The Montenegrin Prime Minister Milo Djukanović, himself the son of a party apparatchik, had been a loyal Milošević ally through the late 1980s and early 90s, and like him combined outward support for communism and hardline nationalism with mafia links. Indeed, perhaps no figure has better embodied the fusion of the state and organized crime than Djukanović, who became Europe’s youngest prime minister in 1991, at the age of 29. As in Serbia, that symbiosis was strengthened by Western sanctions: during the war, the police and intelligence services controlled the routes through which oil and cigarettes were smuggled for foreign currency; once the fighting was over, those networks were adapted to serve different ends. By the turn of the century, the Montenegrin government was earning up to \$700 million annually from the illicit cigarette trade. Djukanović was accused of working with the mafia to smuggle mass quantities of illicit cigarettes into Western Europe, speedboats regularly departing Montenegro for the two-hour trip across the Adriatic to the Italian port of Bari.²⁴

Sensing the winds of change, Djukanović soon abandoned Milošević and pivoted to the West. His embrace of NATO would dramatically increase his political longevity. He and his party clique decided they wanted independence from Serbia. They believed—erroneously, it would turn out—that an independent Montenegro would be fast-tracked into the EU. Serbia, in their eyes, was a deadweight. The US and EU also lavished ‘unconditional financial aid’ on Djukanović—some 765 million Deutschmarks

²³ Sonja Avlijas, interview by author, 20 October 2022.

²⁴ Djukanović was charged by Italian prosecutors in 2003 with having ‘promoted, run, set up and participated in a mafia-type association’, but he enjoyed diplomatic immunity and in 2008 the indictment was dropped. See Leo Sisti, ‘The Montenegro Connection’, *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project*, 20 October 2008.

between 1999 and 2001—which helped shore up his policy of ‘creeping independence’. On the eve of the independence referendum in 2006, only 40 per cent of the population identified as ‘Montenegrin’. Secession was highly unpopular with most of Montenegro’s Serbs, who comprised about a third of the population, but the pro-independence campaign successfully courted Montenegro’s Bosniak and Albanian minorities. In the end, the referendum passed with 55.5 per cent support. This brought the number of countries formed out of the ashes of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to six, leaving Serbia landlocked. For many Serbs, Montenegro’s independence represented a further amputation of its land.

Kosovo’s departure two years later would be more politically explosive. The erstwhile southern region covers 10,887 kilometers of territory, roughly half the size of Wales, and is dotted with some 1,300 Serbian churches, monasteries, hermitages and other religious possessions. Kosovo also contained 70 per cent of Serbia’s mineral wealth and 90 per cent of its coal reserves. In the mid-1990s, Kosovar Albanian resistance to growing state repression began to take the form of armed struggle, with the growth of the Kosovo Liberation Army. From 1998, KLA guerrilla actions met with ferocious Yugoslav Army reprisals and counter-terrorism. Ethnic cleansing escalated dramatically with the onset of the NATO bombing in March 1999, when hundreds of thousands of Albanians fled over the border into Albania. After the entry of NATO forces into Kosovo in June, the KLA unleashed what a Human Rights Watch report described as a ‘widespread’ and ‘systematic’ campaign of retributive violence and revenge killings against Kosovan Serbs, Roma and Albanian ‘collaborators’, forcing over 200,000 to flee.²⁵ NATO turned a blind eye, greenlighting the installation of the KLA leaders responsible, including Hashim Thaçi and Ramush Haradinaj, as key figures on Kosovo’s political stage. At a critical juncture, the UN administrators and KFOR opted not to follow through with the planned disarmament of the KLA.

Resentments simmered, amid anger at the ‘neocolonial’ UNMIK administration. Minority communities were subjected to continuing harassment, with a series of drive-by shootings at local Serbs; the Serbian communities responded by throwing up roadblocks, which

²⁵ Fred Abrahams, *Under Orders: War Crimes in Kosovo*, Human Rights Watch, 2001.

UNMIK and KFOR forces were slow to dismantle. March 2004 witnessed the worst violence since the end of the war, after UNMIK arrests of former KLA fighters for the murder of fellow Albanians in 1998–99 led to angry protests by KLA veteran associations, further inflamed by (false) reports that Serbs were responsible for three children drowning in a river. Over the course of three days, violent riots involving tens of thousands of Kosovan Albanians erupted across the territory. Nineteen people were killed, more than 4,000 were displaced and hundreds of houses belonging to Serbs were torched, along with dozens of Orthodox churches and monasteries.²⁶ Some would later claim that the riots were planned. The destruction convinced the US–EU powers of the urgency of Kosovo’s independence; in the words of one top US diplomat some years later, ‘The riots showed that violence works.’²⁷ Fears of renewed unrest were fuelled in part by the dismal state of Kosovo’s economy, with youth unemployment running at 75 per cent. A steady flow of remittances, along with unprecedented international aid—between four and ten times more per capita than any other Balkan country—kept discontent more or less at bay. But the US promise of a referendum on independent statehood was perhaps most critical to keeping a lid on things.²⁸

An American Frankenstein

Meanwhile, in Belgrade, Koštunica decided it was time to make good on an old promise to change Milošević’s constitution. The UNSC resolution mandating roles for KFOR and UNMIK to secure and administer Kosovo had preserved Serbia’s titular sovereignty over the NATO-occupied territory. Now the ‘international community’ demanded talks with Serbia on Kosovo’s status, chaired by a Finnish factotum, Martti Ahtisaari. Koštunica offered the fullest possible degree of autonomy within Serbia’s nominal borders; at the same time, he adopted a new preamble to the Constitution that declared Kosovo an autonomous province within Serbia, a clear rearticulation of Belgrade’s claim to the territory.

In March 2007, Ahtisaari presented a plan for Kosovo’s independence, with ‘international supervision’ to guarantee minority rights. A

²⁶ Peter Bouchaert, *Failure to Protect: Anti-Minority Violence in Kosovo*, Human Rights Watch, March 2004.

²⁷ Andrea Lorenzo Capussela, *State-Building in Kosovo: Democracy, Corruption and the EU in the Balkans*, London 2015, p. 8.

²⁸ Capussela, *State-Building in Kosovo*, p. 4.

few months later George Bush, on a triumphant tour of NATO-aspirant Albania, announced in swaggering neocon fashion that Kosovo would be independent, irrespective of Serbia's wishes.²⁹ Talks on Kosovo's status intensified, mediated by 'the troika': the EU, Russia and the United States. Moscow's support came at a price. In January 2008, the Serbian government signed an energy agreement with Gazprom, giving the Russian company a 51 per cent stake in NIS, the Serbian oil and gas company, at the bargain price of €400 million, with an additional €500 million committed to modernizing its storage facilities. Deloitte would estimate the actual value of NIS at €2.2 billion euros; the reason for the discount was clear. As President Tadić told reporters at the time, without Russian support, Serbia would find it 'far more difficult to defend its position on Kosovo.'³⁰ In the end, neither side was willing to compromise on the fundamental principle of sovereignty. On 17 February 2008, Kosovo's parliament published a statement unilaterally declaring Kosovo 'an independent and sovereign state'. Kosovo was rapidly recognized by most allies of the United States, while Serbia had the backing not only of Russia and China on the UNSC, but Spain, Greece, Romania and Slovakia within the EU. Citing principles of territorial integrity and sovereignty within international law, each had its own interests in discouraging separatist movements.

Though Priština's declaration of independence was expected, the response in Serbia was swift and violent. A 'Kosovo is Serbia' rally in Belgrade, organized by the government and attended by Koštunica and other high-ranking officials, drew up to 200,000 people. (Tadić was conspicuously absent, having scheduled a trip to Romania; this strengthened the impression that he was something of a lightweight.) The events of that night would be historic in more ways than one. Some 300 rioters, most of them young men and many very drunk, stormed the American Embassy in Belgrade and set it on fire. Documents were tossed from the windows and the US flag was torn down. The charred body of one of the rioters would later be found inside. American Ambassador Cameron Munter had specifically requested that riot police guard the Embassy but, moments before the attack, they disappeared. When it emerged that Koštunica had effectively allowed the storming of the Embassy to

²⁹ Capussela, *State-Building in Kosovo*, p. 8.

³⁰ Oleg Shchedrov, 'Serbia Signs Strategic Energy Deal with Russia', *Reuters*, 25 January 2008.

go ahead, Munter decided to get rid of him. ‘The best revenge’, he told a journalist, ‘was making sure this guy lost the next election.’³¹

Munter’s revenge would require violating a Western taboo in post-Milošević Serbia: courting high-ranking members of the old regime. The Kosovo crisis led to an early election, in May 2008. The American Embassy persuaded the leader of the Serbian Socialist Party (SPS), Ivica Dačić, to abandon coalition talks with Koštunica’s Eurosceptic DSS and the ultranationalist Radicals, and to join Tadić’s ‘pro-EU’ Democratic Party bloc instead. To help Dačić make up his mind, the Americans called in favours from Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero and Greece’s soon-to-be Prime Minister George Papandreou, who purportedly ‘wined and dined’ Dačić, a bon-vivant *kafana* singer with a taste for Cuban cigars, holding out the promise that the SPS might join the Socialist International, a form of legitimacy that ‘Little Sloba’ craved.³² That didn’t happen—neighbouring social-democratic parties balked at the idea—but Dačić aligned the SPS with Democrats and the pro-EU bloc. Brussels helped to put wind in its sails by agreeing a Stabilization and Association Agreement with Serbia a month before the 2008 election, advertised as a major step towards eventual membership. At the same time, Fiat announced that it was in talks to take over Zastava. All this seemed to confirm that the slogan of a new student-NGO movement, ‘There is No Alternative to Europe’, had got it right. Opinion polls at the start of 2007 had confirmed that 62 per cent of Serbs viewed EU membership for Serbia favourably.³³ With so much in their favour, Tadić’s Democrats and their coalition partners eked out a narrow victory in both the presidential and parliamentary elections of 2008. Dačić joined the new government, becoming Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Internal Affairs, and Koštunica was out in the cold.

The ultra-nationalist Radicals were suborned as well. An early sign came in April 2008, when Ambassador Munter is said to have attended a student-organized University of Belgrade political-science seminar, held in the mountain fastness of Kopaonik, in southern Serbia. He reportedly asked the assembled students whether any of them were interested

³¹ Quoted in Nicholas Kralev, ‘America’s Other Army’, *Foreign Policy*, 13 September 2012.

³² Kralev, ‘America’s Other Army’.

³³ Gallup Poll, December 2006/January 2007, published in *Gallup News*, 18 January 2008.

in joining ‘a new party in the making’—a modern right-wing project, oriented towards the West.³⁴ After that, changes on ‘the new Serbian right’ happened very quickly. In September 2008, the ultranationalist SRS—whose leader, Šešelj, was in custody at The Hague—split in two. Tomislav Nikolić, its presidential candidate, announced the formation of a new pro-European outfit, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), distancing it from Šešelj’s chauvinist rhetoric. Vučić had once proudly told the media that Šešelj, his ‘political father’, had baptized his children and been the best man at his wedding. It is something of a custom among Serbian politicians to betray your best man. Shedding Shakespearean tears, Vučić—a career politician—would do the same. He had started to sense that hardline Euroscepticism of the SRS variety would not win elections. According to a leaked American Embassy cable from Munter, the tycoon financiers behind Nikolić also estimated that the Serbian electorate was turning towards Europe. Munter naturally welcomed the new Progressive Party, which claimed to promote ‘equal justice before the law, neutrality, tolerance, anti-corruption and social justice.’ Of all the forces on the Serbian right, he thought the *soi-disant* Progressives could ‘tap into the widest cross section of the Serbian population disenchanted with the status quo’, even if they might still resort to their ultranationalist heritage ‘when pro-European rhetoric becomes politically inconvenient.’³⁵

With the emergence of the Progressives—and rehabilitation of the SPS—the party-political landscape in Serbia had been transformed. At the time, few among the country’s comfortable pro-EU politicians perceived the threat, though they should have seen it coming. The 2008 financial crisis, boomeranging to the Eurozone in 2010, hit Serbia especially hard, exposing the many shortcomings of its post-2000 economic strategy. Corruption had become endemic, in a growth model based on increasing imports and consumption, with little attention paid to institutions. The crisis also revealed the extent of the clientelist

³⁴ Igor Jaramaz, interview by author, 23 October 2022.

³⁵ Embassy Belgrade, ‘Serbia: New Configurations on the Serbian Right’, Wikileaks cable 08BELGRADE1189_a, 19 November 2008. Munter reported that Vučić and Nikolić would ‘condition’ the Serbian public to realize that Greater Serbia was a dream that could not be realized, although doing so too quickly risked making them appear hypocrites or opportunists; they estimated a permanent resolution on Kosovo could be achieved within four or five years, though it would help if the EU sent more positive signals. Munter also noted the view of the royalist SPO leader Drasković that the SNS leaders were tools of Milošević’s secret police, which had split the SRS because it realized Serbia’s future now lay in Europe.

system that had spread throughout the public sector; many of those excluded from these networks were now in desperate straits. The unemployment rate jumped from 14 per cent in 2008 to 24 per cent four years later.³⁶ All this would be brought to bear in the 2012 election, undoubtedly the most consequential in post-Milošević Serbia. The Progressives ran a campaign centred largely on anti-corruption, pillorying the incumbent Democrats.

As erstwhile political pariahs, however, Nikolić and Vučić still needed to overcome a certain unease about their Progressive Party in US and EU corridors of power. To this end, they hired one of Munter's predecessors, former US Ambassador William Montgomery, who boasted of his role in having personally overseen the overthrow of Milošević and now took on the role of the Progressives' lobbyist. For \$7,500 a month Montgomery would help 'introduce them in the most favourable way to US and European leaders' and advise on 'the best methods for them to be perceived as a legitimate European democratic party fully eligible to play a leading role in Serbia and the region.'³⁷ In the run-up to the May 2012 election, the Progressive Party also hired the consulting firm of former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani, who joined Vučić for a tour of Belgrade. Images of the two men appeared on billboards, both pointing off into the distance, looking purposeful.

That Western diplomats and politicians would even consider backing Vučić and Nikolić was testament to their frustrations with Tadić and the Democratic Party, which had long been their vehicle of choice. Though Tadić had eventually sent Bosnian Serb war-crimes suspects Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić to The Hague, he had dragged his feet for years and had made scant progress on bringing Serbia into line on the Kosovo question. This left a security issue festering in Europe that offered a continuing toehold for Russian influence in the region.³⁸ As a result of

³⁶ World Bank Data, 'Unemployment, % total of labour force (national estimate)'.

³⁷ Foreign Agent Registration Act database, 'Registration Statement', Exhibit A, William Dale Montgomery; available at fara.gov.

³⁸ At the 2011 Belgrade Security Forum, an annual meeting of largely pro-NATO politicians, academics and NGOs, the Russian Ambassador to Belgrade, Aleksandar Konuzin, launched a spectacular intervention. Shouting 'Are there any Serbs in this room?', Konuzin went on to chastise those present. 'Do you care what is happening in Kosovo? What will happen in Kosovo will have an impact on other countries in this region,' he warned ominously. 'Russia will defend your interests!' Six weeks

this dissatisfaction, the Progressives also won support from some rather unexpected circles inside Serbia: pro-EU liberals from the NGO sector and smaller pro-Western parties, frustrated by the slow pace of Tadić's 'reforms', launched a high-profile 'white-ballot movement' encouraging non-participation in the 2012 election, to send a message to Tadić. Some prominent figures from the NGO sector went a step further, calling on like-minded voters to cast a ballot for Nikolić as president. On election day itself, the Progressive Party received another boost. Several hours before the polls closed, the EU posted a public congratulations to Nikolić—still widely viewed as the underdog—on its website. They quickly issued a correction, suggesting it had been an innocent mistake, but many were sceptical; Tadić would later claim it had been no mistake at all.³⁹

Either way, the word from Brussels proved prophetic. The Progressives won the election. By a margin of just 70,000 votes, Nikolić was lofted to the presidency. Dačić soon became prime minister and Vučić, deputy prime minister. The reaction in Serbia to the 2012 results was one of shock and elation, in roughly equal parts. Some of the worst figures from the 1990s were back, and this time they seemed to have the support of the West. The Democratic Party and its supporters fell into a disoriented stupor. Many felt betrayed. The West, which they had always seen as their main partner, had abandoned them. In Western capitals and press, news of Milošević-era nationalists returning to power in Belgrade was met with conspicuous silence. There were no dire warnings about Serbia's imminent return to the 1990s such as one would expect from foreign correspondents in the Balkans. Indeed, media coverage in the West soon shifted from suspiciously non-existent to outright celebratory. An article in the *Independent* described Vučić as 'the man bringing Serbia in from the cold' and called him 'the West's go-to man in Serbia and, increasingly, the wider region.'⁴⁰ In the German-speaking world, where Vučić appeared to enjoy particularly close ties with Merkel, the

later Konuzin spoke at an SNS rally, heaping praise on the party and noting that its surging strength reflected 'the mood of Serbian citizens'. See, respectively, Boris Miličević, 'Skandal: Konuzim objasnjava da nismo dovoljno Srbi', *YouTube*, 15 September 2011; and 'Russian Diplomat Criticized for Speech at Serbian Opposition Rally', *Radio Free Europe*, 2 November 2011.

³⁹ Aleksandar Miladinović, 'Intervju petkom: "Ja nikad neću nestati iz politike", kaže Boris Tadić', *BBC na Srpskom*, 22 May 2020.

⁴⁰ Kim Sengupta, 'Aleksandar Vučić: The Man Who's Bringing Belgrade in From the Cold', *Independent*, 4 August 2013.

coverage would later grow especially laudatory. Austria's *Der Standard* compared Vučić to Willy Brandt.⁴¹

The new regime

The past decade of Serbian political life has been entirely dominated by this one man. It was not long after the 2012 election that a curious realization set in: Nikolić was President, but Vučić was clearly the man of the hour. Though he occupied the comparatively modest post of Deputy Prime Minister, his face was everywhere. He was on the cover of the tabloids on a daily basis, calling for the arrest of corrupt opposition politicians and tycoons; he was on billboards throughout the country, wearing a ruthless, stony expression. With the liberal opposition too dazed to mount a counter-offensive, Vučić set about consolidating his power. In July 2012, the new Progressive–SPS government rammed through ‘urgent legislative changes’ governing state security.⁴² Among these was a revision of the Law on the Bases Regulating Security Services, which made it possible for Vučić to serve in several powerful positions at once; in addition to leader of the ruling SNS, he quickly became Minister of Defence, first Deputy Prime Minister with responsibility for corruption and organized crime, Secretary General of the National Security Council and head of the Bureau for Security Services Work Coordination. He also purged his party’s executive of anyone close to Nikolić, replacing them with his own people.

The liberal opposition was incensed, but also to blame. Every bold move Vučić made contained within it a precedent they themselves had set. Under the Democrats, the law on the Bases Regulating Security Services included provisions that allowed Tadić to control the security services through his chief of staff, Miodrag Rakić. The unwritten law put in place by the Democrats and continued under the Progressives was that the leader of the most powerful party would retain control over the security services. Years later, when Vučić became president, power would be concentrated in the office of the president. Here, too, Tadić had been something of a trailblazer. In a popular cartoon in *Blic*, a Springer-owned Belgrade daily, Prime Minister Mirko Cvetković was frequently depicted

⁴¹ Adelheid Wolff, ‘Vučić in der Rolle des serbischen Willy Brandt’, *Der Standard*, 17 August 2017.

⁴² Katarina Djokić, Sasa Djordjević, Marija Ignjatijević, Jelena Pejic Nikić, Predrag Petrović, *Security Sector Capture in Serbia: An Early Study*, Belgrade 2020, p. 8.

serving coffee for Tadić and other politicians, the suggestion being that he was merely the president's puppet.

After the 2012 election, major media outlets, including formerly independent voices from the 1990s like *B92*, abruptly adopted a pro-Vučić editorial line. Long-running political talk shows were taken off air, online articles that depicted Vučić in an unfavourable light were deleted and tabloids transformed into government mouthpieces, subjecting government critics to unrelenting attacks; specious accusations of domestic violence, spying, drug addiction and sexual depravity were not uncommon.⁴³ A populist 'war on corruption' saw Vučić arrest political opponents and formerly untouchable tycoons. Most significant was the arrest of Miroslav Mišković, Serbia's richest man, who had built a real-estate empire during the 1990s. The public adored the spectacle of retribution, chronicled in lurid detail in the tabloids. Vučić's approval rating reached 70 per cent.

A consummate post-ideological populist, Vučić's real innovation on the formula was his remarkable capacity for self-victimization. He portrayed himself as a martyr for the entire Serbian nation, sacrificing himself for the collective good. Pro-government tabloids regularly ran headlines about assassination plots against him. Sometimes the killers were 'Croatian fascists', other times it was the mafia or the CIA. When he wasn't dodging assassination attempts, Vučić was shown evading CIA or MI6 plans to topple him in a regime-change operation. He was also depicted as a Superman-like figure, going to the aid of the sick or rescuing children from dangerous snowstorms. He preached the virtues of hard work, scolding the collective Serbian nation for its supposed laziness. 'We dreamt and we perished, and now it is time to wake up. Labour must be our ideology, our last experiment and our last try.'⁴⁴ A reality TV show, 'A Day with the Prime Minister', seemingly had the express purpose of demonstrating how hard Vučić worked, how rarely he paused to take a rest.

⁴³ The lurid pro-government tabloid *Informer* has been the peddler of some of the most outrageous stories in recent years. Among them was the vicious smear campaign launched against ombudsman and 2017 presidential candidate Saša Janković, accusing him of responsibility for a friend's suicide twenty-two years prior. Investigative journalists who publish unflattering stories about the government have received similar treatment. In 2016, *Informer* accused *KRIK* editor Stefan Dojčinović of being a 'terrorist' and 'sodomasochistic French spy'.

⁴⁴ Ivan Rajković, 'Commodification from Below: Reforming the National "Work Ethic"', *REAL-EURASIA* blog, 23 April 2018.

As far as Serbia's Western partners were concerned, it wasn't just for show. Vučić was getting things done. In 2013, following countless hours of negotiations in Brussels, Kosovo and Serbia signed an agreement normalizing their relations. Serbia was represented by Dačić, which suited Vučić who had developed a habit of dispatching other politicians to do unpopular tasks. The Brussels Agreement was touted as a rare example of successful European mediation, but its wording was ambiguous; Priština and Belgrade would wrangle over matters of interpretation for years to come. Significantly, Belgrade agreed to dismantle the 'parallel structures' it had long maintained in Kosovo's Serb-majority north. The EU again rewarded Serbia for its compliance, this time by granting it the green light to begin accession talks. Support for EU membership had fallen somewhat as the years dragged on, but remained at a respectable 53 per cent.

The US and EU clearly believed that Vučić's ultranationalist credentials would allow him to do things that the liberal Democrats could not manage. Most critically, they thought Vučić would be able to resolve the issue of Kosovo's contested status, once and for all. This was why they remained conspicuously silent about the domestic political situation, where Vučić had consolidated an unprecedented amount of power. In their eyes, he would need near-total command over the National Assembly in order to remove the 2006 Preamble to the Constitution defining Kosovo as a part of Serbia, which would require a two-thirds majority. He would need total control of the media to anaesthetize the population into accepting the reality of Kosovo's loss. He would need the state-security sector, along with the football hooligans, to ensure that any unpopular move to 'sign Kosovo away' did not trigger unmanageable levels of unrest or start a civil war. The lofty language of democracy, human rights and freedom that had accompanied Milošević's fall had given way to cold *Realpolitik*. 'Serbs love a strongman,' Western diplomats would say.

Rainbow hardliners

In March 2014, the Progressives scored a historic landslide victory in the National Assembly elections, capturing 48 per cent of the vote and nearly doubling their number of seats. The Democrats, who only two years before had been the most powerful party in Serbian politics, won just 6 per cent of the vote. Riven by infighting and devoid of any credible alternative vision, the opposition was obliterated. It has never recovered.

With that crushing victory, Vučić became prime minister of Serbia; Dačić became minister of foreign affairs. The majority of Progressive Party voters came from the ‘first Serbia’, or ‘real Serbia’: the Serbia aggrieved by globalization, distrustful of the West, rural, older, generally—but not exclusively—poorer and less educated. These were the people who had been cruelly labelled the ‘losers’ of the transition. It was not unusual for urban liberals to call them ‘cattle’ or reduce them to caricatures with missing teeth. The composition of the new ruling stratum reflected Vučić’s support among working-class voters, even though the Progressives still drew significant support from conservative-nationalist sections of the middle class. In 2003, under the Democratic Party, nearly 28 per cent of the political elite had fathers from the old ruling class; in 2015, under Vučić, that figure had fallen to just under 19 per cent. The number of those with working-class fathers had risen from 14 to 20 per cent.

For many of his supporters, Vučić’s Serbia offered at least a simulation of greatness, if not the real thing. Vučić’s grandiloquent military parades reminded them of Tito’s time, when the Yugoslav People’s Army was the fourth largest in Europe. His foreign policy, which looked both East and West, reminded them of the glory days of socialist Yugoslavia, when Belgrade had hosted the first summit of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961 and students from Africa, the Middle East and Asia came to study in the Serbian capital. Vučić spoke both to those for whom the transition to capitalism had meant a decline in living standards and marginalization, and to those for whom the defeats of the 1990s had meant a loss of dignity.

At the same time, Vučić was equally skilled at giving Western leaders at least a simulacrum of what they wanted. Nowhere was this more evident than on the question of LGBT rights. In October 2010, under the Democratic Party government, the capital’s Gay Pride Parade had erupted into a full-blown civilizational struggle in the streets of Belgrade. On that occasion, some 6,000 ultranationalist hooligans had gathered in the city centre to attack the parade. They were prevented from doing so by a strong police presence; approximately 1,000 parade participants marched along a heavily guarded route secured by thousands of armoured riot police, far out of view of the public. Instead, the ultranationalists rioted across the city, hijacked a bus, attacked Democratic Party headquarters and effectively transformed the centre of Belgrade

into a ‘no-go zone’. At the end of it, 132 policemen and 25 civilians were injured.⁴⁵

After this calamity, the government cancelled successive pride parades in 2011, 2012 and 2013. Only in 2014 was the Belgrade Pride Parade finally held again, entirely without incident. It was so eerily quiet and free of confrontation, in fact, that some observers called it a ‘ghost pride’. Vučić’s near-total control of the security forces, including the country’s football hooligans (their informal auxiliaries) allowed him to direct much of Belgrade’s street theatre at will; he also had the power to make destructive actors vanish. Western embassies, having turned the event into ‘a litmus test for Serbia’s commitment to European values’, could only applaud.⁴⁶ The US Ambassador and European diplomats march in the parade, where EU flags are an ostentatious presence. Ultrationalists have seized on this relationship in their efforts to depict LGBT rights as a foreign imposition by the degenerate West, but the Serbian government has pragmatically accepted them as yet another meaningless sacrifice required for EU accession. In 2017, reshuffling the government, Vučić made another symbolic gesture calculated to garner praise in the West, promoting an openly gay woman, the 41-year-old Ana Brnabić, to the role of prime minister. Prior to becoming premier, Brnabić attended university in the US and UK, and worked on various USAID-financed projects. She has remained prime minister ever since. Critics decried the brazenly cynical nature of the appointment, but it also demonstrated Vučić’s post-ideological shapeshifting, his seemingly boundless capacity to accommodate the demands of multiple foreign capitals at once, standing for everything and nothing at all.

On the economic front, the Vučić government introduced strict austerity measures, improving its standing in the eyes of the IMF. The public sector shrank by 30,000 employees between 2015 and 2021, as employment was frozen, wages were cut and above-average pensions reduced. Elderly retirees with smaller pensions were left alone, however; they were a critical part of the Progressives’ base. The labour law was changed, allowing firms to pay workers less than €200 per month. Employment recovered,

⁴⁵ ‘Belgrade Pride 2010—A Call for Tolerance’, *Amnesty International*, 17 October 2010.

⁴⁶ Koen Sloopmaeckers, ‘The Litmus Test of Pride: Analyzing the Emergence of the Belgrade “Ghost” Pride in the Context of EU Accession’, *East European Politics*, vol. 33, no. 4, May 2017, pp. 517–35.

due in part to the growth of low-paid, more precarious jobs. The unemployment rate dropped from 24 to 9 per cent between 2012 and 2020. Poverty fell from over 28 to 12 per cent. Vučić also courted foreign direct investment, granting investors favourable deals or even subsidies, often with the expectation of political support. Domestic investors, particularly those without connections to the ruling party, complained of exclusion. ‘Special Economic Zones’, set up to lure foreign investors, proliferated.

‘A golden age’

But Vučić proved most skilful at maximizing Serbia’s unique position in a chaotic global environment. He adopted a quasi-‘Titoist’ foreign policy—albeit one devoid of any internationalist vision or ideology—by strengthening relations with both Washington and Brussels and Moscow and Beijing. This included retaining historic ties to the non-aligned world, particularly when it came to courting support for Belgrade’s position on Kosovo. While the other ex-Yugoslav countries have just four embassies in Africa between them, Serbia has fourteen.⁴⁷ Relations with Turkey have entered what Ankara has called ‘a golden age’, with tourism between the two countries increasing dramatically. Turkish business investments in Serbia have increased from just \$1 million to \$300 million since Vučić came to power, in addition to a \$285 million contract to build a highway linking Belgrade and Sarajevo. Serbia’s relations with Hungary have also never been better, drawing on the large Hungarian minority in the province of Vojvodina and benefiting from Vučić’s personal rapport with Orbán.

More controversial have been the joint ventures with the United Arab Emirates—brokered by none other than Tony Blair, once the cheerleader for the NATO bombing of Belgrade.⁴⁸ Air Serbia was launched in 2013, a collaboration with Etihad Airways. A few years later, the Belgrade Waterfront mega-project—apparently lifted from the skyline of Dubai—was rolled out before a shocked public. Its developer was Mohamed Alabbar of the Abu-Dhabi company Eagle Hills, also responsible for Dubai’s Burj Khalifa. Categorized as ‘a project of national significance’, like a military base or airport, the \$3 billion development was not submitted to the usual public scrutiny or architectural competition. A

⁴⁷ Nemanja Starovic, interview by author, 30 September 2021.

⁴⁸ Ian Johnston, ‘Tony Blair to Advise Serbian Government, a Country Britain Once Helped to Bomb while He Was PM’, *Independent*, 19 February 2015.

popular movement, Don't Drown Belgrade, led by urban planners, NGO staffers and students, held a series of large protests, drawing thousands to the streets of the capital (and launching some political careers), but ultimately failed to halt the project.

Serbia's long-standing relations with China have continued to flourish; the two governments boast of their 'iron friendship'. Beijing has built a massive cultural centre on the site of its former Embassy, bombed by NATO in 1999, and garnered support among the Serbian public at the start of the pandemic by delivering extensive aid, at a time when Brussels was largely absent. In March 2020, Vučić declared European solidarity 'a fairy tale', and a billboard went up in Belgrade that read 'Thank You, Brother Xi'. Chinese investment in Serbia has increased dramatically. In 2016, the Hesteel Group purchased the Smederevo steel plant, which had long languished in near bankruptcy. A high-speed railway linking Belgrade and Budapest will be part of the Belt and Road Initiative.

Some Serbian NGOs have criticized Chinese projects for their supposedly lax environmental standards—and indeed, some of the most spirited protests in recent years have been prompted by environmental degradation. A nascent green movement has emerged to protest against mining, hydropower development and some of the highest levels of air pollution in Europe. These protests have mainly originated from small local initiatives, rather than the internationally funded NGOs or traditional opposition parties, and have been characterized by a somewhat more varied class composition. Most significantly, they have led to some tangible results: under extensive pressure from protesters, the government recently revoked Anglo-Australian miner Rio Tinto's lithium expropriation license.

Probably the largest protest movement in recent years—and the longest lived—was *1 od 5 miliona* ('one of five million'), led by the ideologically disparate but mostly centre-right opposition coalition, Alliance for Serbia. Prompted in part by the brutal beating of Borko Stefanović, a former Democratic Party member, in November 2018, the protests were held every Saturday for over a year. Participants expressed fury with the government's authoritarianism, corruption and crime, and anguish at the diminishing hopes that led more and more people to leave the country. This rage at futurelessness was most acute among the young; a

popular slogan from those years was ‘As soon as I graduate, I will emigrate’. But the Alliance for Serbia was tainted by its leaders’ past in the Democratic Party government, as well as its embrace of the far-right clerical-nationalist party Dveri, a virulent opponent of gay rights. The Alliance for Serbia split in January 2020 over whether to boycott the upcoming elections and the movement fell apart. If anything, the *1 od 5 miliona* protests served to confirm the weakness of the mainstream opposition; an ideologically incoherent alliance could not make a dent in Vučić’s post-ideological regime.

Belgrade–Moscow

Serbia’s relations with Russia have drawn the most scrutiny in the West, especially since the invasion of Ukraine. Russian influence has increased, though it has grown modestly relative to that of the EU, Turkey, or China. One reason why many Serbs are happy to accommodate Russia is simple: Russia did not participate in the NATO bombing. Russia and China are the only powers that wield their UN Security Council veto in Serbia’s favour. There are also some concrete signs of a growing Russian presence in Serbia. In 2012, a Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Centre opened its doors in the southern city of Niš. The following year, Serbia signed a free-trade agreement with the Russian Customs Union and became a permanent observer in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Putin visited Belgrade in 2014 and was greeted with a grand military parade, reminiscent of a procession at the height of the Cold War. A number of Russian media outlets have opened in Serbia, including local versions of Sputnik and RT. Since February 2022, Belgrade has become a haven for (mostly middle-class) Russians fleeing conscription and Western sanctions. And in May 2022, while under considerable pressure from the West to impose sanctions on Russia, Vučić instead signed a ‘very favourable’ three-year discounted gas deal with Gazprom.⁴⁹

Even so, Serbia–Russia relations are more complex—and distrustful—than they first appear. Serbia has extensive ties to NATO. In 2005, the Koštunica government signed a transit agreement with the alliance that

⁴⁹ Vučić has said that Serbia will have ‘by far’ the most favourable energy prices in Europe. Local media reported that Serbia would be paying \$340–350 per 1,000 cubic meters for gas, while market prices in Europe were then around \$900 per 1,000 cubic meters.

allows its forces to pass through Serbian territory; the next year, a NATO liaison office opened in Belgrade. Serbia subsequently joined NATO's Partnership for Peace in 2007. This trend has continued under Vučić. In the years leading up to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Serbia engaged in nearly four times as many military exercises with NATO as it did with Russia. Since the invasion, Serbia has repeatedly voted to condemn Russia's actions in Ukraine at the UN. Meanwhile, the EU remains Serbia's biggest trading partner by a wide margin; Russia and China, in second and third place respectively, trail far behind.

Russia, of course, has used the precedent of Kosovo—carving territory out of a sovereign state on the say-so of external powers—to support its 2014 annexation of Crimea. The 'success story' of Western intervention in Serbia did become a template, and not just for the West. Today, fifteen years after its declaration of independence, Kosovo remains only partially recognized as an independent state. It is experiencing dramatic levels of emigration; according to one source, over 15 per cent of Kosovo's population left between 2007 and 2018. Youth unemployment runs at around 50 per cent.⁵⁰ Low-level violence periodically erupts in the Serb-majority North Kosovo, usually triggered by administrative matters, but there have also been a series of ethnically motivated shootings. Putting the Kosovo question to rest at last would dramatically decrease Russia's leverage in the region. In exchange for Belgrade recognizing Kosovo's right to join international organizations, the recent Franco-German proposal calls for the immediate creation of an Association of Serb Municipalities, a body that would allow Serbs collective control over certain areas of life in their majority districts. However, its precise nature is highly contentious, and it has proven the main stumbling block in recent negotiations. For the time being, Kosovo will remain in a state of protracted bureaucratic limbo.

In the end, the most pressing crisis in Serbia comes not from an imminent return to regional war but rather from the fast-receding future. Attitudes towards the EU have soured, in face of perceived bullying of Belgrade to sanction Russia. In 2022, just 22 per cent of Serbs polled said they supported EU accession.⁵¹ In truth, the radiant European future

⁵⁰ 'Labour Migration to Kosovo: How to Make the Most of It?', OECD Global Relations South East Europe, 29 September 2023; available at the OECD website.

⁵¹ Katy Dartford, 'For the First Time, a Majority of Serbs Are Against Joining the EU—Poll', *Euronews*, 22 April 2022.

disappeared over the horizon some time ago. Among the most powerful EU member states, there is little appetite to expand the bloc; while there has been some talk about the war in Ukraine potentially revitalizing the EU enlargement process, it is still unlikely that Serbia will make it past the eternal limbo of the waiting room any time soon. But if Europe won't come to Serbia, Serbia will come to Europe. Youth are leaving the country in droves. Between 2012 and 2018, an estimated 300,000 people emigrated, and a third of young people report a desire to leave; in the words of one young anti-Milosevic revolutionary in the years after Vučić came to power, 'it was all for nothing.' Across the Balkans, anniversaries of past massacres, ethnic cleansings, bombings and battles lost and won are celebrated faithfully, always with much fanfare and public grief, as the carefully tended-to past increasingly seems a stand-in for a future. Even the West can no longer imagine much for the region besides a return to the 1990s, which it warns is imminent with increasing frequency. Depending on the setting and the needs of the speaker, the former Yugoslavia can function as a success story—an example of US intervention that worked—or a warning.

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