
The Populist Lock

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Summary

The author attempts to explain the fall of the Serbian ruler Slobodan Milošević in October 2000. Milošević's system of power can be analyzed as a regime with sultanistic tendencies, a dictatorial system based on direct control of power by the ruler, his family and the staff recruited upon personal loyalty. Although activities of the opposition were seriously restricted and the elections were neither free nor fair, the regime could not completely do away with the opposition and elections. Milošević's regime relied on electoral mobilization of popular support. At the same time it used a wide range of instruments of electoral manipulation. When Milošević decided to organize presidential elections one year before the end of his term, he didn't calculate with two factors: rapid decline of his legitimacy as result of NATO air strikes against Serbia, and the ability of the Serbian opposition to overcome its fragmentation and unite behind Koštunica as the presidential candidate. Electoral support for Koštunica ultimately exceeded so significantly the support for Milošević that it couldn't be counterbalanced by any manipulation. Thus Milošević became victim of the populist method of rule by which he came to power.

1.

The first approach that can be taken to explain the fall of Slobodan Milošević, the ruler who dominated Serbia in the last 13 years, is of a sociological kind. Milošević fell because his policy lost support among electorates long before the September elections. At previous Federal elections in 1996 the ruling coalition composed of the Socialist party of Serbia (SPS), the Yugoslav United Left (YUL) and the Serbian Radical Party (SRP) won 64 percent of the votes and controlled the lower chamber of the Federal parliament with the majority of 82 seats out of 108. At the 1997 Serbian parliamentary elections the same ruling coalition won 62.3 percent of the votes, which was translated into 192 out of 250 seats in the parliament. At the last elections held on September 2000, the Left coalition (SPS and YUL) won 31.8 percent of the ballots cast, gaining 44 seats in the lower chamber of the Federal parliament, while SRP obtained 8.4 percent of the ballots, or 5 seats.

The trend behind the decrease of Milošević's popularity was first captured by a research team supported by the Center for Policy Studies from Belgrade shortly after the end of NATO strikes in June 1999. Between September 1999 and September 2000, the

center conducted four comprehensive public opinion surveys, all of which pointed to the same conclusion: the citizens of Serbia were fed up with ethnic nationalism and national rhetoric. The evidence of this was the fact that the Kosovo question—the most compelling form of the Serbian national question that has ever dominated contemporary Serbian politics—became neglected within months after the end of the war with NATO. In a research conducted in early July of 2000, 10 percent of the Serbian people considered the Kosovo question to be the most important one. In September of 2000, only 4 percent of the people expressed the same opinion, a clear indication that the thirteen years of exploiting national rhetoric had lost its appeal among Serbs. The suggestion made by the public opinion surveys was that anyone who wanted to base their policy on the nationalistic rhetoric was bound to lose.

Sociologists will certainly have more to say about this aspect of Milošević's fall in the future. In this article, however, I would like to focus on the regime's preconditions of Milošević's fall. The article is organized in the following way. Section 2 explains the change that occurred within the Serbian opposition shortly before the September elections and how this change facilitated its success. Section 3 classifies the Milošević regime as a regime with sultanist tendencies. Here I argue that the key cause of Milošević's fall was his inability to scrap the electoral institutions. Finally, section 4 advances the populist lock thesis to explain the reasons that drove Milošević to go for direct presidential elections.

2.

Until only a few months before the September elections, the Serbian opposition was the worst in Europe. In the past ten years all European countries had seen at least once change of government. Only in Serbia this did not happen. One of the reasons for the Serbian opposition's meager results was the issue of its leadership. Vuk Drašković, the leader of the largest Serbian opposition party, the Serbian Renewal Movement (SRM), had been blackmailing the rest of the opposition throughout the past decade, insisting that the opposition may unite only under his leadership and only if the SRM had a dominant role. This led to the disintegration of the opposition coalition called "Zajedno" ("Together") in the spring of 1997, in spite of its success in the November 1996 municipal elections. One of the consequences of the coalition's collapse was that one of the opposition parties, Zoran Đinđić's Democratic Party (DP), decided to boycott the 1997 elections, while another opposition party, Drašković's SRM, decided to take part. The opposition split over the question of its presidential candidate, which enabled Milošević's coalition to win the presidential and the parliamentary elections and thus marginalize the opposition in the next three years. Constantly in disarray and divided over the question of leadership, the Serbian opposition often acted as a pillar of Milošević's regime rather than a real alternative to it.

During the summer of 2000 the issue of leadership was unexpectedly taken off the agenda. Zoran Đinđić, the DP leader, contributed to this the most. The events took an unforeseen turn when Đinđić publicly declared in July that the opposition's presidential candidate, behind whom everyone could throw their weight, could be Vojislav Koštunica, the leader of a small opposition party, which won only 5.1 percent of the

votes in the 1993 elections. Đinđić's willingness to play second fiddle in the opposition (he took the role of the opposition's campaign manager) meant that the opposition would no longer waste time and energy on discussing its leadership and organizational matters. This came as a surprise since Đinđić's DP was larger and stronger than Koštunica's Democratic Party of Serbia (DPS); also, the DP was the axis of the popular opposition coalition "Alliance for Change" formed in 1999; and finally, Đinđić himself could claim credit for reviving the activity of the opposition after the NATO strikes during which the opposition appeared to be defunct. What Vuk Drašković had never done before, Đinđić adopted as his guiding principle: he stepped aside and let Koštunica run for president. At that moment it became clear that the opposition organized itself around one goal—to beat Milošević and change the regime. The other segment of the opposition, Vuk Drašković's SRM, which continued to function on the old principles, throughout the election campaign was hurling accusations against the other segment of the opposition by saying it had made "a catastrophic mistake for not having decided to accept the leadership of the biggest and the strongest opposition party." As a result, the SRM presidential candidate Vojislav Mihajlović won only 2.95 percent of the votes in the last September elections, while the SRM won 4.9 percent of the votes and remained without a deputy in the lower chamber.

3.

During the last several years of its existence, Milošević's regime started to show sultanist tendencies. Sultanism is a type of an authoritarian system based on political monopoly. At the top of the system there is a person or a family surrounded by obedient aides appointed solely for their loyalty to the sultan. The sultan and his cronies aim at the material exploitation of the nation for personal material gains. "As a result, corruption reigns supreme at all levels of society" (Linz & Chechabi, 1998:7). However, Milošević's regime was not a full-blown form of sultanism, but rather a regime with sultanist tendencies. Two elements of Milošević's regime did not fit into the ideal sultanist type. No form of sultanism permits either free elections or the existence of a real opposition. The opposition in sultanism is phony and loyal to the regime, while elections are a mere show where the winner is known in advance (*ibid.*, 18, 20). Milošević's regime started moving in this direction in 1992 when Vojislav Šešelj's SRP became the fake opposition. In 1993, this role was given to a small party called the New Democracy, led by Dušan Mihajlović who, for the sake of a few cabinet chairs sold out to Milošević and gave him another four years in power. In 1997, this role was taken up by Drašković's SRM, which in return received the help of Milošević's SPS to hold on to power in the Belgrade city hall. Had Milošević managed to survive few more years in power, the regime would have probably managed to corrupt the entire opposition, and thereby transform itself into a developed form of sultanism. But the democratic opposition managed to come up with Vojislav Koštunica who had never made any deals with Milošević in the past. In this sense, he could present himself as "the clean hands of the Serbian opposition" in which the Serbian electorate saw a real alternative to Milošević.

Also, Milošević never succeeded in bringing to a standstill the electoral process. In this respect Serbia was similar to Slovakia under Vladimir Mečiar. Stephen Fish argued that Mečiar never succeeded in totally closing the polity and doing away with free elec-

tions. This contributed to his fall in October 1998 (Fish, 1999: 50-1). Due to this, Fish classified Mečiar's regime as a specific kind of authoritarian regimes, different from sultanism. I want to argue that there is yet another sub-type of authoritarian regimes that can be placed between Mečiarism and sultanism. Serbia under Milošević was an embodiment of this sub-type. Milošević's undeveloped form of sultanism differed from Mečiarism in that it was economically isolated. (Serbia had been under the economic sanctions imposed by the international community since 1992.) The two regimes were similar in their inability to carry out a total clampdown on the electoral process.

Just like Mečiar, Milošević was doing everything he could to obstruct free elections. The most blatant electoral engineering occurred in Kosovo where about 1 million Albanians regularly boycotted Serbian elections. Milošević's lackey Milan Milutinović, ran in 1998 for the Serbian presidency and narrowly won over Vojislav Šešelj with the help of 200,000 votes from the Kosovo Albanians. This was one of the many instances of rigging the elections since the introduction of political pluralism in Serbia in 1990 (Goati, 1999). In spite of these manipulations, the elections in Serbia were still free in the following sense. Democratic elections presuppose a certain level of uncertainty, making it possible for the ruling parties to lose elections (Przeworski, 1991: 10-11). In sultanism, as in communism, there is no uncertainty and the sultan cannot lose. But from the start of the 2000 election campaign until the final results came through, no one could predict with certainty the outcome of these elections. Milošević employed all the means at his disposal to reduce the opposition's chances: the police harassed the members of the youth organization Otpor as well as the members of other NGOs; Milošević's generals threatened people with using force; his ministers flaunted the threats of imprisonment, arrests, court proceedings, and the shut-down of independent media houses. The infamous 1998 Public Information Law was invoked 66 times in the period between 1998 and 2000, and the total fines collected by this law - paid mainly by the independent media - today amounts to half a million dollars. During the campaign, both the public and the private radio and television, all under the strict control of Milošević's cronies, covered only the ruling coalition events, labelling the opposition and its presidential candidate as traitors and foreign agents who, if elected, would sell Serbia to the depraved West for a fistful of dollars. In spite of all these obstacles, the united opposition beat the Left coalition with 50 against 32 percent of the votes, whereas Koštunica beat Milošević with 50.54 against 38.62 percent.

4.

Milošević's crucial mistake was to run for president and test his grassroots support one year earlier. Still, it is not clear why Milošević made this move. In fact, there was no legal ground that mandated direct presidential elections, let alone the early ones. Milošević was elected for the Federal president by the Federal parliament in July 1997 for a four-year term. The 1992 Federal constitution stipulates that the president is elected and can be impeached only by the parliament if found guilty of breaching the constitution (Articles 78, 97). Although Milošević's presidential mandate was to expire only in July 2001 without the possibility for another mandate, on 6 July 2000 Milošević influenced the ruling coalition's federal MPs into amending the constitution in order to enable him to seek a re-election. The new amendment V stipulates that the federal

president is to be elected by a direct ballot. But why did Milošević want to be elected directly? It was more prudent not to touch the part of the electoral scheme concerning the election of presidents and wait for the parliamentary re-election coming in July 2001. In this case, the result of the 2000 elections would be an even stronger Milošević, backed by the strong parliamentary majority. (YUL won 44 and its Montenegrin counterpart 30 seats, which makes a majority of 74 out of 138.) However, Milošević insisted on running for president directly. There are two reasons that may explain this move.

The first reason has to do with the opposition. I argued in section 2 that the Serbian opposition, constantly split over the question of leadership, often acted as a pillar of Milošević's regime. Milošević's decision to run for president was predicated on the assumption that the opposition would remain disunited and disorganized. He rightly expected that it would not manage to rally behind one counter-candidate. Moreover, when the presidential elections were announced on July 27, the opposition was taken aback, as it was preparing itself only for the municipal and parliamentary elections and not for an abruptly announced presidential elections. Milošević expected the opposition to split over the question of participation in these elections. Drašković's SRM confirmed this premise. This party—which in the summer of 2000 was still perceived as the largest opposition party; it had won 19.1 percent of the votes on the 1997 elections—declared its electoral boycott. When the rest of the opposition nevertheless put up Vojislav Koštunica, SRM put up its own candidate for presidency. This kind of split within the opposition was precisely what Milošević had hoped for. With the opposition divided and with the opposition's two candidates, Milošević's decision to run for president at the beginning of summer seemed a perfectly sound idea. However, what Milošević never expected was that a major portion of the opposition managed without much infighting and bickering to agree on a joint candidate. The agreement was reached by consensus rather than by the traditional domination of the biggest party. If Milošević had outfoxed the opposition with the constitutional changes of 6 July, the democratic opposition surely outfoxed Milošević by settling on Koštunica as the joint presidential candidate.

The second reason why Milošević wanted direct elections is related to the way he came to power in 1987–1989. Milošević's first coming to power can be divided into two stages. First, Milošević took over the control of the Serbian Communist Party in 1987 and purged it from all the people who showed even the slightest signs of disobedience. Since the communist party controlled the main pillars of economic life, Milošević also purged the key economic positions and installed obedient people. However, he could not become the true ruler of Serbia if not confirmed by the masses. Thus, the second phase consists of a series of mass demonstrations that took place in 1988 and 1989 all over Serbia. More than 4 million people took part in these mass rallies, the last of which pompously took place on 28 June 1989 on Kosovo, celebrating the 600th anniversary of the Kosovo battle; 2 million people attended. These events, spurred by populist referenda, catapulted Milošević onto the Serbian throne.

Once sanctioned by the masses, Milošević could not escape popular election in the future. The communist Serbian parliament adopted in 1990 a new constitution stipulating direct presidential elections as well as direct presidential impeachment (Articles 86, 88). In contrast, the federal parliament, although composed similarly like the Serbian parliament, adopted in 1992 a new federal constitution stipulating that the federal presi-

dent is to be elected by the federal parliament and not by direct ballot. This difference can be accounted for by the fact that Milošević intended to become Serbian president by deriving legitimacy from the 1988/9 mass events. No other politician was allowed to seek and obtain legitimacy conferred by direct elections. When Milošević moved from the post of Serbian president to become Federal president in 1997, he immediately called for the amendment of article 97. This attempt was torpedoed by the Montenegrin federal deputies led by Milo Đukanović, who then still attended the federal assembly sessions. Three years later, with the Montenegrin ruling coalition's federal deputies not sitting in the federal assembly anymore, Milošević easily pushed through the constitutional amendments mandating direct elections.

Milošević wanted to repeat over and over again the “election” of 1988/9 because this was the only way to sustain the aura the mass rallies created around him. The crux of the populist lock thesis is that he found himself “locked” into the populist way of political promotion by which he began his political career. (Hence the term “populist lock.”) The two presidential elections of 1990 and 1992 sustained his charisma in his own eyes and in those of many Serbs. Without direct elections, Serbs would have sooner realized what Milošević really was: a former communist party apparatchik and a third-rate banker with a strong affinity for corruption. And the Serbian transition to democracy would have started earlier.

References

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