

U.S. Advice Guided Milosevic Opposition

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A photo caption with an article Dec. 11 on U.S. assistance to opposition groups in Serbia incorrectly described and credited the photograph. The photo, provided by the National Democratic Institute, shows an Alliance for Change youth training session in Budapest in February 2000, conducted by NDI. (Published 12/12/2000)

By Michael Dobbs December 11, 2000

In a softly lit conference room, American pollster Doug Schoen flashed the results of an in-depth opinion poll of 840 Serbian voters onto an overhead projection screen, sketching a strategy for toppling Europe's last remaining communist-era ruler.

His message, delivered to leaders of Serbia's traditionally fractious opposition, was simple and powerful. Slobodan Milosevic--survivor of four lost wars, two major street uprisings, 78 days of NATO bombing and a decade of international sanctions--was "completely vulnerable" to a well-organized electoral challenge. The key, the poll results showed, was opposition unity.

Held in a luxury hotel in Budapest, the Hungarian capital, in October 1999, the closed-door briefing by Schoen, a Democrat, turned out to be a seminal event, pointing the way to the electoral revolution that brought down Milosevic a year later. It also marked the start of an extraordinary U.S. effort to unseat a foreign head of state, not through covert action of the kind the CIA once employed in such places as Iran and Guatemala, but by modern election campaign techniques.

While the broad outlines of the \$41 million U.S. democracy-building campaign in Serbia are public knowledge, interviews with dozens of key players, both here and in the United States, suggest it was much more extensive and sophisticated than previously reported.

In the 12 months following the strategy session, U.S.-funded consultants played a crucial role behind the scenes in virtually every facet of the anti-Milosevic drive, running tracking polls, training thousands of opposition activists and helping to organize a vitally important parallel vote count. U.S. taxpayers paid for 5,000 cans of spray paint used by student activists to scrawl anti-Milosevic graffiti on walls across Serbia, and 2.5 million stickers with the slogan "He's Finished," which became the revolution's catchphrase.

Regarded by many as Eastern Europe's last great democratic upheaval, Milosevic's overthrow may also go down in history as the first poll-driven, focus group-tested revolution. Behind the seeming spontaneity of the street uprising that forced Milosevic to respect the results of a hotly contested presidential election on Sept. 24 was a carefully researched strategy put together by Serbian democracy activists with the active assistance of Western advisers and pollsters.

In the long run, many people here say, Milosevic's overthrow was inevitable, if only because of

the economic and military disasters that befell Serbia during his 13 years in power, first as head of Serbia, Yugoslavia's dominant republic, and then as head of Yugoslavia itself. But there was nothing inevitable about the timing or the manner of his departure.

"Without American support, it would have been much more difficult," said Slobodan Homen, a student leader who traveled to Budapest and other European capitals dozens of times to meet with U.S. officials and private democracy consultants. "There would have been a revolution anyway, but the assistance helped us avoid bloodshed."

"The foreign support was critical," agreed Milan Stevanovic, who oversaw the marketing and message development campaign for the opposition coalition, the Democratic Opposition of Serbia. "In the past, we did what we intuitively thought we should do. This was the first campaign where our strategy was based on real scientific research."

Had Yugoslavia been a totalitarian state like Iraq or North Korea, the strategy would have stood little chance. But while Milosevic ran a repressive police state, he was never a dictator in the style of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. His authority depended on a veil of popular legitimacy. It was this constitutional facade that gave Serbian opposition leaders, and their Western backers, an all-important opening.

A Unified Opposition

The fall of 1999 was a difficult time for the Serbian opposition. Although Milosevic had long been unpopular, he appeared to have had some success in tapping into the upsurge of patriotic feeling caused by the Kosovo war a few months before. The 59-year-old Yugoslav president was seeking to depict himself as the rebuilder of the country following NATO bombing raids. Attempts by some opposition parties to topple Milosevic through street protests were getting nowhere.

Milosevic's strongest political card was the disarray and ineffectiveness of his opponents. The opposition consisted of nearly two dozen political parties, some of whose leaders were barely on speaking terms with one another. While the opposition politicians recognized the need for unity in theory, in practice they were deeply divided, both on the tactics to use against Milosevic and the question of who should succeed him.

It was against this background that 20 opposition leaders accepted an invitation from the Washington-based National Democratic Institute (NDI) in October 1999 to a seminar at the Marriott Hotel in Budapest, overlooking the Danube River. The key item on the agenda: an opinion poll commissioned by the U.S. polling firm Penn, Schoen & Berland Associates.

The poll reported that Milosevic had a 70 percent unfavorable rating among Serbian voters. But it also showed that the big names in the opposition--men such as Zoran Djindjic and Vuk Draskovic--were burdened with negative poll ratings almost as high as Milosevic's.

Among the candidates best placed to challenge Milosevic, the poll suggested, was a moderate Serbian nationalist named Vojislav Kostunica, who had a favorable rating of 49 percent and an unfavorable rating of only 29 percent.

Schoen, who had provided polling advice to former Yugoslav prime minister Milan Panic during his unsuccessful 1992 campaign to depose Milosevic, drew several conclusions from these and other findings of the poll.

First, Serbian voters were receptive to simple anti-Milosevic messages focusing on the terrible economic situation. Second, they wanted change to come through the ballot box, not demonstrations. Finally, and most important, only a united opposition had a chance of deposing Milosevic. "If you take one word from this conference," Schoen told the delegates, "I urge it to be unity."

The unity message did not catch on immediately with Serbian opposition leaders. "They had seen Milosevic rise before," recalled Debra Alexander, who was in charge of the National Democratic Institute polling operation. "There was a sense they were going up against insuperable odds."

In the following months, however, the opposition politicians came to believe the polling evidence and shape a strategy for defeating Milosevic with the help of the Western consultants. Djindjic, leader of the largest, best-organized opposition party, agreed to set aside his presidential ambitions in favor of a less polarizing candidate and serve as coalition campaign manager.

Things moved into high gear in July, when Milosevic called elections. For the first time in Serbian political history, Western advertising techniques were used to test political messages. The messages were tested in a similar way to soft drinks or chewing gum, according to Srdan Bogosavljevic, head of the Strategic Marketing firm, which ran a series of focus groups on behalf of the opposition coalition and the Otpor student resistance movement with financial support from Western democracy groups.

"We approached the process with a brand to sell and a brand to beat," said Bogosavljevic, one of Serbia's best known pollsters. "The brand to sell was Kostunica. The brand to beat was Milosevic."

According to Stevanovic, the coalition marketing expert, every word of the opposition's one-minute and five-minute core political messages used by opposition spokesmen across the country was discussed with U.S. consultants and tested by opinion poll. Coalition candidates running for the Yugoslav parliament and tens of thousands of local government positions received extensive training on how to stay "on message," answer journalists' questions and rebut the arguments of Milosevic supporters.

Visa restrictions imposed by the Milosevic government made it impossible for the U.S. consultants to travel to Serbia, so they organized a series of "train the trainers" sessions in Hungary and Montenegro. The trainers then went back to Serbia to spread the word.

Kostunica's selection as the opposition presidential candidate in August was shaped, in large measure, by the opinion polls. "The polls showed that Kostunica could defeat Milosevic in the easiest possible way," recalled Dusan Mihajlovic, leader of the New Democracy party, one of 18 political parties that made up the coalition. Part of Kostunica's appeal, the polls showed, was that he was widely perceived as anti-American. Because he was an outspoken critic of the NATO bombing of Serbia, it was difficult for the Milosevic government to label him a Western stooge or a traitor to Serbian interests.

Kostunica was also the one opposition leader strongly opposed to accepting U.S. campaign assistance. "I was against it, never got any myself, and thought it was unnecessary," he said in an interview.

To many opposition activists, Kostunica's denials ring a little hollow. While it is true that his own party, the Democratic Party of Serbia, rejected anything that smacked of U.S. aid, his presidential campaign benefited enormously from the advice and financial support the opposition coalition received from abroad, and particularly from the United States.

Lessons in Resistance

The U.S. democracy-building effort in Serbia was a curious mixture of secrecy and openness. In principle, it was an overt operation, funded by congressional appropriations of around \$10 million for fiscal 1999 and \$31 million for 2000.

Some Americans involved in the anti-Milosevic effort said they were aware of CIA activity at the fringes of the campaign, but had trouble finding out what the agency was up to. Whatever it was, they concluded it was not particularly effective. The lead role was taken by the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development, the government's foreign assistance agency, which channeled the funds through commercial contractors and nonprofit groups such as NDI and its Republican counterpart, the International Republican Institute (IRI).

While NDI worked closely with Serbian opposition parties, IRI focused its attention on Otpor, which served as the revolution's ideological and organizational backbone. In March, IRI paid for two dozen Otpor leaders to attend a seminar on nonviolent resistance at the Hilton Hotel in Budapest, a few hundreds yards along the Danube from the NDI-favored Marriott.

During the seminar, the Serbian students received training in such matters as how to organize a strike, how to communicate with symbols, how to overcome fear and how to undermine the authority of a dictatorial regime. The principal lecturer was retired U.S. Army Col. Robert Helvey, who has made a study of nonviolent resistance methods around the world, including those used in modern-day Burma and the civil rights struggle in the American South.

"What was most amazing to us was to discover that what we were trying to do spontaneously in Serbia was supported by a whole nonviolent system that we knew nothing about," said Srdja Popovic, a former biology student. "This was the first time we thought about this in a systematic, scientific way. We said to ourselves, 'We will go back and apply this.' "

Helvey, who served two tours in Vietnam, introduced the Otpor activists to the ideas of American theoretician Gene Sharpe, whom he describes as "the Clausewitz of the nonviolence movement," referring to the renowned Prussian military strategist. Six months later, Popovic can recite Helvey's lectures almost word for word, beginning with the dictum, "Removing the authority of the ruler is the most important element in nonviolent struggle."

"Those Serbs really impressed me," Helvey said in an interview from his West Virginia home. "They were very bright, very committed."

Back in Serbia, Otpor activists set about undermining Milosevic's authority by all means available. Rather than simply daubing slogans on walls, they used a wide range of sophisticated public relations techniques, including polling, leafleting and paid advertising. "The poll results were very important," recalled Ivo Andric, a marketing student at Belgrade University. "At every moment, we knew what to say to the people."

The poll results pointed to a paradox that went to the heart of Milosevic's grip on power. On one hand, the Yugoslav president was detested by 70 percent of the electorate. On the other, a majority of Serbs believed he would continue to remain in power, even after an election. To topple Milosevic, opposition leaders first had to convince their fellow Serbs that he could be overthrown.

At a brainstorming session last July, Otpor activist Srdjan Milivojevic murmured the words "Gotov je," or "He's finished."

"We realized immediately that it summed up our entire campaign," said Dejan Randjic, who ran the Otpor marketing operation. "It was very simple, very powerful. It focused on Milosevic, but did not even mention him by name."

Over the next three months, millions of "Gotov je" stickers were printed on 80 tons of imported adhesive paper--paid for by USAID and delivered by the Washington-based Ronco Consulting Corp.--and plastered all over Serbia on walls, inside elevators and across Milosevic's campaign posters. Printed in black and white and accompanied by Otpor's clenched-fist emblem, they became the symbol of the revolution.

A Fair Vote Count

Had Yugoslav border officials been paying attention last summer, they would have observed an extraordinary increase in the number of Serbian students visiting a revered Serbian shrine in southern Hungary. "Making a pilgrimage to Saint Andrija" became the favorite excuse for opposition activists en route to another U.S.-funded program, this one in the Hungarian town of Szeged, just 10 minutes' drive from the Serbian border.

Its purpose was to train election observers. "We set up mock polling stations with ballot boxes and went through the balloting process in detail with them," recalled John Anelli of the Republican institute, describing what became a key component in Milosevic's downfall. "We

trained about 400 election monitors who went back to Serbia and trained another 15,000 monitors."

Without a massive monitoring operation, and an equally massive parallel vote count organized by the Serbian Center for Free Elections and Democracy, this fall's effort to unseat Milosevic would almost certainly have failed. Opposition parties suspected him of stealing previous elections, most notably in 1997, but were unable to offer conclusive proof. This time, they made sure they had the means to detect election fraud.

Drawing on their experience of elections in such places as Indonesia and Mozambique, IRI consultants simulated vote-counting scams and ballot-stuffing techniques. "They trained us to spot fraud and react quickly," said Goran Rapoti, an opposition election monitor from the town of Backa Palanka, who attended the seminar. "It was really useful."

The United States paid for the training in Szeged and the second level of training back in Serbia. By Election Day, the opposition parties were able to place at least two trained monitors at every polling station in the country. Each monitor received about \$5 in Western-provided money, a significant sum in a country where the average monthly wage is less than \$30.

"Without the monitors, Milosevic's people would have stolen the elections again," said Alexander Trkulja, the coalition campaign manager in Backa Palanka. "They are masters in stealing elections."

An iron rule for both the coalition and Otpor was never to talk about Western financial or logistical support. To have done so would have played straight into the hands of the Milosevic propaganda machine, which routinely depicted opposition leaders as "traitors" or "NATO lackeys."

"It was dangerous to be connected publicly with the American authorities," said Randjic, the Otpor activist, recalling a 12-hour police interrogation in which he was grilled about his "Washington controllers."

Even today, nearly two months after Milosevic's fall, the topic is sensitive. Although the U.S. effort was clearly aimed at Milosevic, the Clinton administration prefers to depict it as a neutral democracy-building operation. "Our job was to level the playing field," said Paul Rowland, head of the Democratic institute's Serbia program. "We worked with parties that wanted to make Serbia a genuine democracy."

Serbian opposition leaders, meanwhile, view the U.S. support as atonement for past mistakes. They note that for many years U.S. officials treated the Yugoslav president as the linchpin of America's Balkan diplomacy, an indispensable interlocutor for Bosnia peace negotiator Richard C. Holbrooke and other high-level emissaries. Far from undermining Milosevic's grip on power, U.S. policy had actually served to strengthen it, they contend.

"In the past, we had the impression that the West was supporting Milosevic," said Homen, a 28-year-old lawyer who served as Otpor's intermediary with Western diplomats and aid organizations. "This was the first time that we felt that Western governments were actually

trying to get rid of Milosevic."

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