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**Protocol**  
**Berlin workshop, March 9, 2007**  
**How to support democratic forces in Serbia?**

The parliamentary elections, held in Serbia on January 21, 2007, did not change fundamentally the political landscape and in particular the balance of power between the pro-European / democratic and the radical / nationalistic forces. Some analysts argue that Serbian elections and their results reflect a lack of political and civic maturity. While the Radical Party remained the strongest single political force, the pro-Western political parties and movements are currently striving to form a sustainable coalition government. All of the latter are following the European integration path but differ widely in their political programs.

The objective of the workshop was a critical discussion of the actual needs and possibilities to effectively support democratic forces in Serbia. The international workshop aimed at evaluating the relevant actors in politics and society in Serbia, and at identifying and supporting those forces in Serbia which clearly follow the Euro-Atlantic / democratic path. These include not only political parties in Serbia but also democratic and reform-oriented forces in civil society and the media. The workshop has been conducted with the intention to open a frank exchange of ideas among representatives from Serbia, member states of the European Union and international institutions engaged in Serbia. Participants were invited to offer policy recommendations on how to achieve a more constructive and responsive political process.

**Panel I: Actors in Serbia**

The debate concentrated on three key issues

**1) A critical assessment of the present political system in Serbia**

Fundamental criticism prevailed at the workshop concerning the structure of political parties in Serbia in general. They are highly centralized with leaders enjoying strong positions and often using authoritarian means of decision making. The new

constitution was criticised as giving complete control of the composition of the parliament to the political parties, while the process of internal democratisation of the parties remained rudimentary. Here support from the side of international party foundations was called for as well as lobbying with the government to change the electoral code. This also applies to the strengthening of the role of the parliament in relation to the government.

In particular, the younger generation finds it difficult to get a voice within the parties (as in the political system as a whole), resulting in apathy and disengagement. Political parties are therefore in a severe need of reform.

Apart from this critical evaluation of the political parties and their democratic potentials, several other key deficits of the state institutions in Serbia were identified:

- The executive has a nearly monopolistic role, whereas the parliament is often been reduced to a mere “voting machine”.
- Administration lacks continuity as ministries are mostly “one party” institutions, with even promising projects being pushed aside after a political change. Administrative work also often lacks coordination. It was noted with concern that in the administration more and more frustrated people leave their jobs and move either to the NGO sector or even abroad.

## **2) Civil society and its relation to the democratic parties**

The role of civil society in enhancing democratic development in Serbia is widely appreciated. Yet, the civil society seems to be divided over a couple of issues:

- Should they act from a position of absolute opposition as they did in 1999 – “standing outside watching”? Or, instead participate in politics, trying to understand and support political (party) actors?
- If so, with which parties should the civil-society representatives cooperate? After all, the coming up of the radicals in Serbia has been fuelled by the antagonism and misunderstandings among the democrats. Should one consider a dialogue with those individuals within the radical and the socialist camps that behave seriously and responsibly? This was one of the main points of discussion throughout the whole workshop.
- The “big questions” of cooperation with ICTY and of the future Kosovo status are “both divisive and decisive” as one participant said. Only after these issues have been solved, the actors in Serbia will be free to discuss economic and European integration issues in depth. Yet, the Kosovo issue is now widely and openly debated within the civil society – much different from 1999, when this question was still monopolized by the ruling forces, and only few people dared to openly express opposition against the official positions.

There is a good practice of active involvement of the civil society in institution building, for example in the field of training judges. The next foreign minister of Serbia will probably be a prominent representative of the civil society, who will hopefully bridge the gap existing between politics and the civil society.

Work with the parliament – preferably on cross party issues – was suggested as an alternative to the involvement of the civil society in party politics. One such issue

where an experience of good cooperation already exists is the discussion about application of the *acquis communautaire* of the EU.

### **3) Recommendations: Does and don'ts for the International Community vis-a-vis Serbia?**

Some civil-society representatives demand a more critical approach of the IC towards Serbian party representatives. For example, few have resisted the commonly held view that Djindjic has been a victim of the mafia of which he himself was a part. Representatives from the West too easily accept the democratic credentials of parties like the DSS but also G 17+ that reportedly – without provoking major protests – have been involved in serious cases of corruption.

By some the IC is seen as having “abandoned civil society too quickly” and instead cooperated with governments.

Foreign delegations have too often dealt only with the executive and by-passed and neglected the parliament – however, for obvious reasons, because “they know where the power is”, as one discussant put it. Official visitors should instead try to involve the parliament into dialogue.

The local level should receive much more attention also from the international side. There, the “big political issues” do not dominate the discussion in the same way as in the centre. Local self government needs to be supported as decentralization is strongly needed and many good capacities and initiatives are to be found on the local level.

## **Panel II: Political dialogue**

The debate dealt with four key issues:

### **1) Instruments for the strengthening of the civil society and of “political culture” in Serbia**

Various speakers underlined the importance of cultural exchange programs, media development and professionalisation, and educational programs. The coming to terms with the past of the 1990s and Serbia's role in the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia was part of this debate. Coming to terms with the past is far more than just a matter of the Serbian judiciary and the ICTY, but a crucial factor in political culture and the self-perception of the Serbian population. Similarly, the dogmatic position of the Serbian political class on the Kosovo issue not only blocks any dialogue with Albanians in Serbia and Kosovo and fails to encourage the Serb leaders in Kosovo to opt for integration in the Prishtina institutions, but also has negative effects for the societal dialogue at large in Serbia.

### **2) Democrats and anti-democrats**

Habitually, optimists argue that two thirds of the Serbian electorate voted for a democratic party at the last elections in January 2007. Pessimists underline that one third of the electorate opted for the Radicals or the Milosevic party, thereby suggesting that nationalism and authoritarianism are endemic in Serbia. Several speakers nuanced both contrasting positions. Some argued that the abnormality of Serbia should not be overstated considering the dramatic political upheavals, the atrocities and the consecutive “loss” of constituent parts of the Yugoslav state and the fact that Le Pen also managed to mobilise up to one third of the voters in France. Others argued that actual polls indicate that the voters in Serbia are far more realistic

than their leaders. Surveys show that only one third of the SRS and SPS voters were convinced by the nationalist-extremist agenda of the respective political readers. Most of the voters opted for these parties for socio-economic reasons and clearly belong to the (potential) losers of the transformation process. Similarly, most voters are ready to accept the fact that Kosovo is lost for Serbia – the political leaders of almost all parties are not.

### **3) The leadership of the democratic parties**

Many speakers touched upon the weakness of the democratic parties, arguing that the Serbian voters deserve better parties or political leadership. Not only have the democratic parties failed to determine the political agenda (e.g. on the issue of Kosovo and the constitution), but most Serbian participants are also rather pessimistic concerning the capabilities of a new government to change this situation – without new agendas and new personalities. More importantly, the internal structures of all parties are rather undemocratic, replicating the old mechanisms of the Communist Party, as one participant argued provocatively. Correspondingly, new ideas and voices from below hardly reach the party leaderships that largely act in isolation from the party basis and the constituencies. Correspondingly, parliament is weak and lacks an impact and profile of its own in the legislative process. The undemocratic autarky of the parties and their political culture has resulted in the younger generation turning away from politics, the drive of 2000 being lost.

### **4) Dealing with the anti-democratic parties**

A key dilemma, both for local NGOs and for international assistance, is how to deal with the SRS and the SPS as well as Kostunica's DSS, as some participants argued that DSS is actually not part of the democratic block. As each party encompasses factions with diverging views on key issues, the isolation and exclusion of the anti-democratic parties from NGO networks and international dialogue is not an optimal solution and risks ignoring potential reform caucuses within these parties. The symmetry of the German party foundations' relations with cognate parties in Serbia (and Kosovo) was defended by some participants and criticised by others as it leaves new parties like Ora or others without assistance because they do not fit into the Western party landscape.

The question of how to deal with the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) sparked a controversial debate. Some participants argued that one could not disregard the voice of 1/3 of the electorate and that it was important to speak with the SRS leadership in order to pass some very clear messages on what was not acceptable. The SRS were not a uniform party, but included different factions, some less radical than others. One should at least start engaging the Radicals party leadership in the regional and local levels. Considering the fact that the last DSS government was to a significant degree dependent on support from the SRS – the constitution was considered by some participants as essentially an SRS constitution – this party were a factor in the governing of Serbia already and had to be engaged.

Other participants strongly argued against any contacts with the SRS considering their involvement with Milosevic, as long as the party does not change its programme and distances itself from its party leadership in The Hague. Consideration should instead be given to influence the electorate of the SRS and bring them into the democratic fold. Contacts with the party leadership would legitimise the SRS and might have an impact on wavering voters in next elections.

### **Panel III: Coordination / Competition?**

#### **1) Current and further engagement of foreign actors**

The ongoing engagement of German political foundations in Serbia was very much appreciated. In order to stick the political parties in Serbia to the reform agenda, further development of sister partnerships, in particular regarding the DSS, is a desire. Additionally, a partnership between the civic and the political sector in Belgrade should be established with clear assistance from outside. First steps to launch a public dialogue between the civil society and political party representatives have recently been made by a series of open discussions in a popular channel of Serbian television.

Help is needed to raise certain issues in Serbia. It is, as one participant pointed out, to win the peace and not the war. Nobody in Serbia is approaching certain issues, like Kosovo, in a functional, not heated and not emotional manner. Functional issues may allow, for example, to publicly debating whether the costs of readmission agreements would be less for Serbia, if Serbia recognizes UNMIK passports. It has never been discussed what sort of integration Serbia and Montenegro in fact have / had. Supporting policy papers for developing arguments for civil society and for journalists will contribute to a more informed public opinion and an improved public debate in Serbia. The public does not know what the costs of the alternatives are. Assisting by policy papers will also forge partnerships between parties, civil-society sector and stakeholders.

While some international organisations, such as OSCE or UNDP, are playing an important role in Serbia, the real progress is often made by bottom-up initiatives. Autonomous initiatives are gaining momentum and quality, with the civil society repeatedly substituting in fact governmental tasks. Competition exists even among Serbian NGOs in terms of gaining funds from international organisations and foreign institutions. There is a tendency among NGOs in Serbia to get more grants from the US and from international organisations but not from the European Union. The simple reason is that to fill in applications for the EU is “higher mathematics” and secondly, everything has to go to the Serbian government for permission.

A representative from the Bavarian State Government informed about the Serbian-Bavarian bi-lateral commission, which started its activity in 1970. The commission, which was interrupted during the wars, has been revived when Prime Minister Djindjic was in office. The commission convenes working level representatives from the ministries of both sides in order to discuss possible projects of cooperation (economy and transport; public administration; police; justice and home affairs; education etc.). The commission has proven an instrument of concrete action. A new area of cooperation has recently started in scientific cooperation focussing on the younger generation with *Bayhost* in Regensburg offering scholarships. Any suggestions for improving these instruments are welcome.

One participant critically noted that foreign actors often tend to follow their own agenda. This might cause dilemmas. An evaluation of the engagement depends on the perspective one has. Though German political foundations are engaged in Serbia in various fields they did not succeed in filling the gap between the civic society and political parties, yet. Secondly, the NGOs often lack a sense for power, especially in terms of ownership and empowerment. Thirdly, there is a kind of volatility of Serbian

political parties and NGOs in their cooperation with outside actors. And finally, no one actually knows how to work with the so called spoilers. No German political foundation is currently dealing with the Serbian Radical Party at all. The question therefore was raised whether this is the right approach.

It was clearly stated that the region as such will not be mature enough for Europe if it does not show the ability to cooperate among itself. To underline the necessity of regional cooperation and regional dialogue is important for both, the region and potential donors. Since the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe is phasing out and the Regional Cooperation Council shall take over certain responsibilities and bring ownership to the process, the question was raised whether the Serbian / Western Balkan society knows what regional ownership really means. It does not mean only agenda setting but also financial commitments and donor coordination. Therefore it was suggested to build a kind of NGO network within the region, a neutral body, to oversee and to control the donor coordination.

## **2) Youth Support**

Serbian youth is locked in the country with more than 70% never having left the country. Most of the remaining 30% travelled only around former Yugoslavia and did not leave original borders. It is necessary to get young people to Europe and in contact with European culture and values. Thus, visa facilitation for young people, as well as exchange programs/partnerships between Serbian and European universities and similar institutions, especially targeted to the young generation, are required. In addition, import of "our" views via film programs, book translations and cultural exchange in general might bring in plurality of opinions and support the debate in Serbia. This support could be delivered through NGOs active in Serbia.

The importance of the ability to travel and 'experience Europe' for young people was highlighted with a positive reference to programmes developed by the Austrian EU Presidency in 2006 and now continued by Germany. While all German political foundations are currently involved in the "Welcome to Germany" initiative which offers approx. 60 young students from Serbia visa to come to Germany, political foundations could also play a more intensive role in this respect in the future. Invitations to Europe are important, but teaching foreign languages at Serbian schools should be a first priority for the younger generation already at an early age.

Young people even distrust foreign experts. They increasingly do not opt for studying social sciences and law, because of the overall tough political environment at the related faculties in Belgrade. Any discussion of the past is offended there. The distance between those people who removed Milosevic and the young generation of today is enormous.

## **3) Other sectors**

- The role of the *Serbian Orthodox Church* must be taken into consideration. It was recommended that Western Christian Churches should establish contacts with the Serbian Orthodox Church, because its influence is understood as a reaction against communism.
- *Refugees and IDPs* are a huge social problem. There is no decent Asylum Act in place in Serbia. Refugees and IDPs form the bulk of the electorate of the Radicals, unless their situation is not improved.

- There is no settled media legislation and owners of the print media are often unknown. Yellow papers have a clear anti-European image.
- Women are everything but a minority, as one participant has put it. One initiative, the Women Government, is trying to mainstream in a major way and promotes to bring women into public life and in decision making.
- Capacity building in parliament is highly requested, as the Serbian parliament for the moment is rather a voting machine than really fulfilling its legislative role. The parliament has to be made more sufficient. The establishment of an appropriate system to control the government, like a general auditor, is needed, as well as direct questioning the ministers. A system and rules for lobbyism are also crucial. Budgetary control could be improved as well as decentralisation and local governance in the municipalities.

### **Policy recommendations**

- 1) Enhanced partnerships between political parties and their counterparts in Serbia. Building party connections with Europe should continue. Include Serbian political parties in international meetings.
- 2) Help in developing party culture, e.g. regulations for party financing.
- 3) Assistance in agenda setting by providing policy papers for NGOs for building arguments and enabling non-political actors to inform the public and to push public debate. Not only focussed on Belgrade but throughout the whole country. Public debate should be cross-party, cross-sectoral and inclusive with the clear support from outside expertise (personally and with papers). Internationals are asked to fill the information gap with the organisation of conferences, lectures at remote places in Serbia.
- 4) Promotion and financing of exchange programs for young people / students (corresponding to the Austrian initiative and Germany's "Welcome to Germany"). Encourage of other EU member states to follow this example.
- 5) Dissemination of European values to the country side, in particular for the younger generation.
- 6) Enhanced cultural exchange targeting young Serbian - not only in Belgrade and major towns but also in the region: Film programs, book translations, partnerships between Serbian and European Universities.
- 7) Support of independent media in Serbia has to be continued.
- 8) Western Christian Churches should establish contacts with the Serbian Orthodox Church.
- 9) Capacity building in the parliament.
- 10) Creation of a NGO network, a neutral body, to work with the RCC and SEECF.

## **Panel IV. EU Perspective**

The question of the EU perspective and its role as a carrot influencing political decision-making was raised at the outset of the discussion. While it was underlined that the EU should not be seen as a panacea, the issue of 'communicating Europe' better was a common theme of the discussion. This should be a joint responsibility

between EU representatives in Serbia as well as the Serbian leadership, both in Government and in the civil society. 'Blaming' difficult reform steps on the EU will not create a pro-European environment in Serbia. Several participants highlighted that concrete examples of how EU approximation and ultimate membership would impact everyday life in Serbia needs to be communicated to the general population, not just in Belgrade, but also in rural areas – will it still be possible to distil one's own brandy? This will require the involvement of EU institutions (EU member states and European Commission representations in Belgrade), but also the preparation and contribution by the Government and NGOs. The outreach programme of EU-MS to focus on individual municipalities is a first step in this direction.

Another basic question that has been discussed is how deep European values are rooted within the minds of the people in Serbia. Apart from an optimistic approach, which mostly focuses on the much respected role of civil-society actors and, in general “real democrats”, there is a more pessimistic view that reveals a deep anti-European attitude and a lacking system of values characterizing of the Serbian society. Thus, if polls reveal a 75% approval of European integration, such an assent is probably only formal and not an expression of a deep adherence to democratic principles. Serbian business, according to the same voice, is also mostly anti-European, devoted to neutrality and in favour of a kind of “offshore position” of the country. Preparations underway for several workshops on the EU with different stakeholders in Serbia, such as the Orthodox Church, the media, as well as the role of civil society, were acknowledged. Progress on security sector reform on the one side and media development on the other was underlined by several participants as a precondition for full democratisation and Europeanisation of Serbia. In particular regarding media development, much has been done already, while progress is limited.

It was underlined that Serbia is under a lot of pressure at the moment, having to deal with Kosovo, the requirements for re-opening negotiations with the EU as well as for the preparation for these negotiations. A quick decision on Kosovo would allow the political leadership to focus on the required steps for EU integration and take Kosovo out of the equation – it was highlighted that there is no partner in Serbia for any kind of trade-off between giving up Kosovo and progress on EU integration. The EU was called upon to give the new government, once formed, the benefit of the doubt and allow SAA negotiations to continue, while being strict on conditionality at the end of the SAA process. Polls have clearly shown that whenever another step towards the EU was taken, no matter how small, support for the government increased. The EU should thus keep the government involved in with intense negotiations and have some visible step ready to be achieved every few months. This would demonstrate to the population that the EU is serious, ensure reform progress in Serbia and help deal with the political fallout of a Kosovo status decision. A clear check-list of reforms required for visa facilitation could provide a way for the electorate to judge the performance of the government. Yet, a significant change of mentality in Serbia regarding Kosovo will only be possible if the EU has concrete advantages to offer for Serbia, which does not seem to be a realistic option at the moment.

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