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Policy Brief

summary

The United States and Western Europe played an active role in the downfall of Slobodan Milosevic. A critical part of that Western policy was extensive aid to bolster Serbian civic and political opposition forces. The aid was well conceived and executed. It did not, however, create the process of political change; rather, it facilitated the work of those leading it. The success in Yugoslavia may not be easily transferable to other countries where the West hopes to drive strongmen leaders out of power through similar "electoral revolutions." Not only was the aid there unusually well designed, but Yugoslavia had some important prior experience with elections, opposition politics, civil society, and the rule of law. Western policy capitalized on these conditions in Yugoslavia; it cannot necessarily create them elsewhere. ■

Ousting Foreign Strongmen: Lessons from Serbia

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During his final year in power, Yugoslav leader Slobodan Milosevic found himself contending not only with rising social discontent and political opposition, but with a remarkably extensive set of Western aid initiatives aimed at speeding his ouster. When he did fall—after losing to Vojislav Kostunica in the first-round elections on September 24, 2000, then denying those results, and finally giving way in the face of enormous popular protests on October 5—Washington policy makers and aid officials celebrated. Milosevic's departure was only one step in what will inevitably be a drawn-out, difficult process of democratization in Yugoslavia. Nevertheless, it was a major breakthrough, opening the door to genuine change at all levels.

The apparent success of what Michael Dobbs recently described in the *Washington Post* as "an extraordinary U.S. effort to unseat a foreign power" raises important questions. First, was the U.S. and European aid campaign actually a key factor in Milosevic's downfall? Second, although democracy assistance is usually marginal to overall political outcomes, here it appears to have been more than that. Why? And finally, as we look forward, can the experience of democracy aid in Yugoslavia be transferred to other settings—that is, do the United States and its European allies now have a proven method for ousting strongmen leaders they dislike?

Promoting an "Electoral Revolution"

In the several years prior to the 1999 NATO military campaign against Yugoslavia, the U.S. government viewed Slobodan Milosevic as a pernicious political figure who was nevertheless necessary to maintaining the structure of peace in Bosnia created by the Dayton Accords. The United States funded some democracy programs for Yugoslavia in those years, but they were only small-scale. Coming out of the NATO campaign, however, Washington and other Western capitals reached a clear conclusion: it was time for Milosevic to go. Western governments asserted a policy of pressure for political change in Yugoslavia made up of three components: economic sanctions; diplomatic isolation (including the indictment of

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The Democracy and Rule of Law Project analyzes efforts by the United States and other international actors to promote democracy worldwide. The project also examines the state of democracy around the world, looking at patterns of success and failure in democratic transitions.

Milosevic by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia); and, most actively, significant amounts of aid to promote what U.S. democracy promoters liked to call "an electoral revolution."

The aid strategy was rooted in the belief that a political transition in Yugoslavia was more likely to occur through elections than through a popular revolt. This strategy built on previous election-oriented campaigns against strongmen in the region, notably Vladimir Meciar in Slovakia and Franjo Tudjman in Croatia, though it had deeper roots, back to at least the U.S. and European democracy aid barrage against Augusto Pinochet in Chile in the late 1980s. In the months following the end of NATO military action against Yugoslavia, Western governments launched or expanded an interconnected set of aid initiatives designed to (1) bolster the credibility of the next national elections (through parallel vote counts and domestic election observing), (2) strengthen opposition political parties, (3) foster public belief in the desirability and possibility of political change, and (4) support a massive get-out-the-vote campaign. Parts of this strategy were formulated as nonpartisan civil society–building while others were explicitly partisan, especially the work with parties. Overall, the central objectives of the strategy were clear—to defeat Milosevic in credible national elections and simultaneously build core institutions and processes for a long-term process of democratization.

To implement this strategy, Western aid flowed to four arenas: opposition parties, the civic advocacy sector, independent media, and opposition-controlled municipalities. From mid-1999 through late 2000, the main opposition coalitions (first the Alliance for Change and then the Democratic Opposition of Serbia, or DOS) received direct material aid and huge doses of training and advice from the U.S. Democratic and Republican party institutes. The U.S. institutes trained more than 5,000 opposition party activists in campaign methods and more than 10,000 in election monitoring. The party aid reached every major area of Serbia and ran the gamut of issues from mobilizing volunteer networks to developing effective campaign messages. Representatives of the U.S. party institutes regularly counseled opposition party leaders, drawing on extensive U.S.-financed polling to calibrate campaign strategy.

Hundreds of Serbian civic education organizations, NGO advocacy groups, student groups, labor unions, community associations, policy institutes, and other civic associations received Western funding. These groups strove to build citizens' awareness of the need for and possibility of democratic change and to motivate them to act, through voting and other forms of civil engagement. Western aid also underwrote much of the independent media in the country, helping ensure the expansion of an enterprising network of independent local radio and television stations and the survival of many independent magazines and newspapers. The independent media played a major role in challenging Milosevic's efforts to control public information. Finally, municipalities that were under opposition political control received special aid packages for infrastructure, education, and other services. This aid aimed to show Yugoslavs the material benefits an opposition victory at the national level could bring to the whole country.

When in July 2000 Milosevic called for elections, the aid campaign moved into high gear. Donors rushed in money to support a massive get-out-the-vote campaign, carefully targeted to reach those voters most likely to oppose Milosevic. Aid and advice to the DOS stepped up, and funding for civic groups and media organizations supported the intensification of their public awareness campaigns and other work.

The U.S. government, through the U.S. Agency for International Development

(USAID) and the State Department, was the largest funder of this aid campaign. But the government was only one of many actors. Also involved were the National Endowment for Democracy and its four core grantees (the two party institutes as well as the American Center for International Labor Solidarity and the Center for International Private Enterprise), Freedom House, the German Marshall Fund of the United States, the International Research and Exchanges Board, the Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe, the Open Society Institute, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, and others. In a striking example of the increased blurring of lines in international affairs between different types of actors, public and private funds flowed together, complementing each other and sometimes intermingling. Altogether, U.S. public and private groups spent approximately $40 million from mid-1999 to late 2000 on democracy programs for Serbia.

Though it is a common conceit in Washington to view these undertakings as a largely American effort, Western Europe and Canada were also very much part of the picture. The aid agencies and foreign ministries of Britain, the Netherlands, Sweden, Canada, Norway, Finland, Germany, Italy, and the European Union contributed significantly, especially on NGO support and aid to the opposition-controlled municipalities. Some European private foundations also took part, in some cases drawing on years of presence and experience in the region. The European aid probably totaled close to or a little less than the U.S. aid.

Whose Victory?

After Kostunica's victory and Milosevic's exit from power, it was hard for U.S. policy makers and democracy promoters not to feel that, as some said in private, "we did it!" Secretary of State Madeleine Albright had insisted in early 2000 on the necessity of political change in Yugoslavia; months later, Milosevic was out. Rarely does foreign policy seem to bring such clear-cut results. Yet if we look at the broader picture, especially giving attention to the Yugoslav political context and the views of key Serbian political and civic actors, the need for a more balanced assignment of credit is evident.

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The defeat of Milosevic in the September 2000 elections must be understood as the culmination of a more than decade-long struggle by Serbian opposition politicians and civic activists to challenge the hold of Milosevic and the Socialist Party of Serbia. Ever since Yugoslavia started to open up politically in the second half of the 1980s but then failed to keep pace with most of the rest of Eastern Europe, opposition to Milosevic had grown.

What U.S. democracy promoters have been holding out as key accomplishments of their work generally entailed strengthening features of Yugoslav political life that already existed. U.S. democracy promoters, for example, have made much of their efforts to persuade

Serbian political leaders to unify, describing the U.S.-financed polls as critical information that opened Serbs' eyes to the importance of unity. In fact, however, the need for opposition unity had been a driving theme of Serbian politics throughout the 1990s, with constant efforts to form coalitions—sometimes successful, sometimes not. The unity achieved for the 2000 elections was certainly positive, but it was neither total (the long-standing division between the two largest opposition parties was never overcome) nor much broader than the accords achieved in some previous elections. Similarly, U.S. aid representatives glowingly cite their own success in helping the opposition parties take seriously the task of monitoring the elections and fighting against the falsification of results. Yet in the local elections four years earlier, prior to any extensive U.S. aid to the parties, the opposition and some civic groups uncovered Milosevic's attempted manipulation of the results and successfully overturned it in the streets.

The same pattern holds true in the NGO and media sectors. Western NGO aid certainly helped multiply the number of Serbian NGOs. Yet the most innovative, influential groups, such as the Otpor (Resistance) movement and the G-17 Plus organization, were clearly not developed from any U.S. or European mold but were the creations of remarkably talented Serbian activists. They benefited from aid but were not products of it. Likewise, Western media support definitely helped independent media groups get through hard times. But it was the credibility and experience of scores of Serbian journalists working in media outlets they had created themselves, often long before Western aid was available, that made the sector so important.

In short, it was the ideas, persistence, courage, and actions of Serbian politicians, civic activists, and ordinary citizens that brought down Milosevic. U.S. and European support made real contributions in broadening and deepening that opposition, but the aid campaign was a facilitator of change, not the engine of it. Other elements of the anti-Milosevic policy carried some weight, but were neither determinative nor always consistent in effect. Economic sanctions, for instance, added to Serbs' sense of isolation from Europe, increasing some people's desire to turn against Milosevic. However, the sanctions also fed a sense of victimization by the West, encouraging some Serbs to keep supporting Milosevic as their defender against a hostile outside world. The indictment of Milosevic at the Hague tribunal and the diplomatic branding of him as a rogue dictator had similarly divided effects. The NATO bombing campaign against Yugoslavia in 1999 was primarily about protecting Kosovar Albanians, but Milosevic's defeat there certainly contributed to his political decline. That defeat came late in a decade, however, in which Milosevic had been only inconsistently stymied by the West in his aggressions against neighboring areas, actions that often boosted his domestic standing, at least in the short run.

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Distinguishing Features

Even if the extensive U.S. and European democracy aid campaign did not determine the political outcome in Yugoslavia, it was a well-conceived, well-executed effort of genuine consequence. It is important to extract from the record of experience some of the features that gave the campaign greater weight than democracy aid typically has. Seven elements stand out:

■ *The aid effort was large.* Often the United States pronounces the lofty goal of aiding democracy in another country, but then commits laughably few resources to the task. Here, not only did public and private U.S. funders spend roughly $40 million in a little over a year, but the various European actors probably spent a similar amount. On a per capita basis, the $40 million of U.S. aid would translate into more than $1 billion in the United States. Adjusting for the fact that dollars have much greater purchasing power in Yugoslavia than in the United States, the comparable amount is even greater. Clearly, if an outside group had spent one billion dollars to influence last year's U.S. elections in favor of one side, it could well have had major impact.

■ *The democracy aid campaign was a sustained effort.* The lion's share of the aid came in the last year of Milosevic's rule. But the high-octane strategy of "electoral revolution" was built on foundations that had been laid before. Critically important relationships forged throughout the decade between Western aid providers and Serbian political parties, NGOs, and media made possible the rapid, decisive action in 2000. Although the aid effort of 1999–2000 was indeed fast-moving, the notion that it was an in-and-out blitzkrieg is simply wrong.

■ *The aid was decentralized.* Too often democracy aid is concentrated in the capital of the recipient society, going primarily to a limited range of elite organizations and only secondarily trickling out to other parts of the country. A distinctive feature of all four components of the aid campaign in Yugoslavia was that support was distributed all over the country, with a focus on networks of locally oriented organizations and with no special emphasis on Belgrade.

■ *Much of the aid went directly into the recipient society.* Milosevic made it impossible for most U.S. and European democracy promoters to get into the country in 1999-2000, presumably believing he was making their work more difficult. The actual effect of this ban, however, was otherwise. Aid groups adapted to adversity, developing flexible mechanisms, from offshore bank accounts to informal couriers, to get aid into the country. Unable to send in the usual expatriate consultants and experts, aid groups devoted a larger-than-usual share of their funds to precisely targeted small grants that went directly to local groups.

■ *Aid and diplomacy reinforced each other.* U.S. democracy aid sometimes floats out by itself in a country, unsupported by or even in tension with the U.S. diplomatic line. This was the case in Indonesia in the first half of the 1990s, where small-scale efforts by USAID to nurture independent civic groups were mere dots in a deeper U.S. policy of supporting President Suharto; and it is currently the case in Egypt, one of the largest recipients of U.S. democracy aid in the world. In Yugoslavia, although there were certainly disagreements at times between diplomats and democracy promoters about specific methods, the core objectives of U.S. aid and diplomacy were the same.

■ *U.S. and European aid worked from the same script.* West European governments varied in how hard they were willing to push on Milosevic and the types of aid they were willing

Thanks but No Thanks

In the months after Milosevic's fall, Serb opposition leaders traveling to Washington made a point of thanking American officials for the extensive U.S. support to the DOS. At home, however, they downplayed that aid and reacted angrily to Western press stories about the role U.S. political aid played. Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic, for example, was quoted in the Serbian newspaper *Blic* on December 15, 2000, denying that the DOS campaign had received any external assistance, other than some election monitoring training that he said it had not asked for. The sharp divide between the "thanks" in Washington and the "no thanks" at home highlights the extraordinary sensitivity of partisan political aid across borders. During the campaign, Milosevic made much of the charge that Serb opposition parties were paid agents of the West. His accusations were partly blunted by the fact that the DOS presidential candidate, Vojislav Kostunica, was an outspoken Serb nationalist who had openly distanced himself from Western aid efforts (though the DOS campaign that supported his presidential campaign was Western-supported). Nevertheless, the extent and legitimacy of such support was a raw issue throughout the process and continues to provoke debates in Serbia today.

to give. But on the essential point of seeking Milosevic's ouster, they were largely united with the United States. As a result, U.S. and European aid cumulated rather than competed, and Yugoslavs received a strong, unified message about the degree to which Milosevic's continued rule was isolating their country.

- *Aid coordination was better than usual.* When numerous democracy promotion groups rush into a country at a critical transition juncture, aid programs are often poorly coordinated, resulting in duplication, conflicting messages, and unclear priorities. In Yugoslavia, a strong sense of common purpose among the many different aid groups, as well as the adverse conditions for administering aid, prompted aid representatives to take more active steps than usual to share information with each other and create mechanisms for coordination.

Beyond Yugoslavia?

Flush with the apparent success of the effort to oust Milosevic, U.S. policy makers and commentators are asking whether and where that success can be repeated. Especially when it is viewed, as it often is, as the third in a series of "electoral revolutions" in the region, after Slovakia and Croatia (though Croatian strongman Franjo Tudjman himself played a useful role in his fall from power by dying on the job), the Yugoslav experience appears to represent the consolidation of a proven method. Possible next targets are beginning to multiply. Belarus appears to some democracy promoters as a natural next step given that President Aleksandr Lukashenko, popularly elected in 1994, has decayed into a harsh tyrant. Opposition parties and independent NGOs are struggling against his authoritarian methods. With national elections in Belarus scheduled for later this year, Western aid groups are increasing democracy-building assistance there, consciously modeling their efforts on the Yugoslav case.

The stark descent of Robert Mugabe's rule in Zimbabwe into virulent authoritarianism has also provoked some U.S. and European democracy promoters to step up efforts there to aid civil society, promote more credible safeguards for future elections, and move toward a more openly oppositional approach. President Mugabe has already responded with measures to protect himself against a foreign-financed ouster campaign, calling for legislation to ban foreign aid to political parties.

Bush administration officials and members of Congress are debating whether more aid to Iraqi opposition groups and a tougher diplomatic line could send Saddam Hussein packing as well. The approach there would primarily be a military-oriented overthrow campaign with covert military aid at the core of the U.S. effort. Nevertheless, U.S. support for the Iraqi opposition has already included a democracy aid component, managed by the State Department, aimed at strengthening civil society and opposition groups.

In considering the possibility of new campaigns to oust foreign strongmen, U.S. and European officials must keep the central lesson from Serbia in mind: even when a democracy aid campaign is extensive and sophisticated, it is at most a facilitator of locally rooted forces for political change, not the creator of them. Also, the seven characteristics listed above that helped make the aid for Serbia effective are difficult to reproduce, for various reasons, including the unavailability in most cases of large amounts of funds, the challenge of sustaining aid over time, the tendency toward centralization and bureaucratization of aid, and the frequent divergences between the United States and Europe or even just among the differing parts of the U.S. policy bureaucracy.

Moreover, it must be remembered that certain features of the recipient society also contributed to the success of the aid effort in Yugoslavia. Though Slobodan Milosevic pursued thuggish policies outside Serbia's borders,

within the narrower confines of Serbian domestic politics he was not an out-and-out dictator. He was a semiauthoritarian leader who permitted some real political space for opposition parties, independent NGOs, and media. He pressured, harassed, and disadvantaged those groups to varying degrees, but they operated openly and actively. As a result, credible local partners existed for Western groups to support. The task of assistance was not introducing democratic values and methods for the first time, but strengthening those people and groups who were already practicing them.

Related to this, elections were already well established as a genuine mechanism of political competition in Yugoslavia well before the 1999–2000 campaign. Milosevic had certainly cheated and bullied his way through past elections, but some of them, such as the 1992 contest between Milan Panic and Milosevic as well as the 1996 local elections, were serious affairs in which opposition groups competed hard and, in the latter case, successfully fought to uphold its victories. Thus, while promoting an "electoral revolution" in Yugoslavia was an ambitious strategy, a critical part of the important groundwork on elections was already in place.

More broadly, though Serbs could not draw on much significant pre-1990 history of democracy in their political struggles of the 1990s, Yugoslavia was nonetheless a country with some tradition of the rule of law, civil society, and political pluralism, as well as relatively high levels of education and equality. These characteristics are not absolute preconditions for democratization—but they do help. And although they did not prevent the violent collapse of Yugoslavia in the first half of the 1990s, they nonetheless facilitated the work of democracy promoters in Serbia later in the decade.

In short, the hope of quickly multiplying "electoral revolutions" around the world must be viewed with considerable caution. It will be a significant challenge to mount aid campaigns outside of Eastern Europe that share critical features that helped make the efforts in Yugoslavia, as well as Slovakia and Croatia, effective. And many societies in the former Soviet Union, Middle East, Africa, and Asia lack the attributes that made those three countries fertile ground for such processes of change. This does not mean that leaders such as Lukashenko in Belarus, Mugabe in Zimbabwe, Moi in Kenya, or the generals in Burma will never fall, or that the United States should not even try to foster change in countries where strongmen rule. But it must do so with a clear focus on existing lessons for making such aid effective and the inevitably long-term and uncertain prospects for success.

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