

Belgrade Students Lead Resistance To Bad Government

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A student movement dubbed 'Resistance' plans to mark the new university year in October by occupying faculties, blocking lectures and pressing for Slobodan Milosevic's ouster - but his regime is certain to fight back, and hard.

The clenched fist - the symbol of resistance for dissatisfied students across Serbia. From the moment he came to power the majority of the country's students and many of their professors have opposed Slobodan Milosevic's rule.

Today the students call their movement 'Resistance' - a symbolic name for their permanent call for Milosevic's ouster - which began in October last year and approaching its first anniversary with the start of the new university year.

Resistance takes pleasure in parodying the regime's style. When the government put piggy banks out on the streets of Belgrade to collect funds for new seeds for farmers, the piggy banks were inscribed with the campaign motto: 'A Dinar for Sowing'. The students followed suit in September with their own piggy banks inscribed 'A Dinar for Resignation'.

Milosevic's police declined to see the joke and arrested students who took part in the 'Dinar for Resignation' campaign, two in Belgrade and Nis, and a reported 12 in Kragujevac. One of the detained in Belgrade, political science student Vukasin Petrovic said he and fellow student Branko Ilic were deliberately intimidated by police talk of 'liquidation'.

The regime's response to Resistance's first actions was fierce. Three young women and a man were arrested last November 4 as they wrote graffiti targeting Milosevic, his wife Mira Markovic and the leader of the Serbian Radical Party, Vojislav Seselj in central Belgrade. The four were swiftly jailed for 14 days.

The end of 1998 and the beginning of 1999 saw Resistance protests at several Belgrade University faculties where "disobedient" deans had been dismissed and replaced by more obedient teachers. The situation was most dramatic at the Philological Faculty, where the Serbian regime finally had to give into the protestors and dismiss its choice of faculty dean, Radmilo Marojevic.

But this victory for the students was followed in Serbia by war with NATO. On the advice of Slavko Curuvija, the late owner of the daily Dnevni Telegraph and the magazine Evropljanin, Resistance suspended their actions three days before the bombing began.

"Curuvija invited us to talk with him and suggested us that we leave the country, and, in any case, stop with our activities during the bombing," Petrovic said. "Curuvija believed that this was a very bad period for all opponents of the regime and that the regime will use the opportunity during that time to get rid of all those who stood in its way."

He was right. Curuvija, who was waiting to start a five month jail sentence for publishing an article about a scandal involving the Yugoslav United Left of Milosevic's wife Mira Markovic, was gunned down by unknown assassins, eighteen days after the start of the NATO offensive.

The Resistance ceased its protests during the bombing. Some members had left Belgrade to avoid the military draft; others left the country completely.

There is no one leader of Resistance. From the start student Boris Karaicic featured most often in the media, and before the air war, had been part of a December delegation addressing the Foreign Affairs Committee of the US Congress. But immediately upon his return he was attacked by masked men and beaten up in front of his flat, while ultra-nationalist vice-premier Vojislav Seselj singled him out as "a traitor and foreign mercenary".

To avoid others from being targeted the same way, the Resistance now operates around a core of 20 student activists who make decisions collectively by consensus.

Dejan Randjic, one of the activists, said people involved in Resistance have various political loyalties. Activists are members of different political parties, the Democratic Party (DS), the Civic Alliance, New Democracy, the Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO) and the Movement for the Democratic Serbia (PDS) recently founded by the former chief of the Yugoslav Army, General Momcilo Perisic. Boris Karaicic has since joined the PDS and has been elected its vice president.

The Resistance activists do not mind the fact that their membership included parties that are publicly at odds with each other, specifically the DS and the SPO. Both parties and other members of the opposition have laid claim to influence over Resistance, but the activists reject their bids.

The Resistance also has a Political Council of 35 members, mostly professors from Belgrade University, but also including Dragoslav Avramovic, former governor of the National Bank of Yugoslavia. Avramovic is also the opposition Alliance for Changes' choice for premier in a possible future transitional government to replace Milosevic's regime.

In the meantime Milosevic has put all the faculties under its heel with a new law on universities. The autonomy of the institutions has been taken away, while at the same time the authorities are trying to win over the students with new concessions such as lower entry criteria for new students - today almost anyone who wants can enrol at Belgrade University - and extending deadlines for exams.

These efforts to buy the students' loyalty have mostly been in vain. Belgrade University, the country's largest, has hardly functioned as a conventional place of study since the 1996-7 protest. Hundreds of professors and junior lecturers had left for jobs abroad in the face of a crippling lack of resources. Others deemed 'disobedient' are simply retired, like Branko Popovic, a world-renowned professor at Belgrade University's Electrical Engineering Faculty.

The Resistance plans its biggest actions for October, the beginning of the new academic year at Serbia's Universities in Serbia, a kind of general strike for students only. The students openly plan to occupy university buildings and keep them under Resistance control.

The professors will simply be prevented from holding lectures. Until then, the Resistance will try to unite all non-party and non-government organisations demanding the ouster of Milosevic and his regime.

The students have still not come up with an assessment of the mainstream opposition's programme of daily protest begun in 19 towns across Serbia on September 21. Most believe however that despite the lower than expected turnouts, the protests can be judged a continuing success.

But the Resistance activists have a final message to emphasise. They hope to animate all those who oppose the regime, but distrust the opposition parties and are cautious about joining public demonstrations. They maintain that once Milosevic is gone, Resistance will turn its energies to voter education.

For, as they say, elections are the best way to resist bad governments everywhere and not just in Serbia.

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