

The March 9 Legacy

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Serbs feel despair and bitterness on the anniversary of a demonstration, which threatened to overthrow the Milosevic regime nearly ten years ago.

For the Serbs - the happiest, bravest and most liberated nation on the planet, if you believe state TV - memories of March 9, 1991 when unprecedented anti-regime demonstrations rocked Belgrade seem as distant as the Milky Way.

Because of what did not happen, and might have happened, March 9 became a political myth, the moment when Serbia had a chance to opt for a different future.

Nine years ago, the then Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, was on its last legs. Republics were declaring independence, criminals were sharpening their knives, and the sniff of war was in the air.

The state media in Serbia was expanding its list of enemies day in day out. And as the war drums grew ever louder, the Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO), then the strongest opposition party, scheduled a big rally at Belgrade's Republic Square.

The March 9 protests could have changed the course of history in the Balkans. It was just an inch away from getting rid of Slobodan Milosevic and leading Serbia down the path of reason, tolerance and peace.

All, unfortunately, ended in tragedy, two dead, hundreds injured and arrested, and a mythic pattern of memories to which we the Serbs are very much prone as a nation.

Nervous and unprepared for the events of this kind, the police responded with a show of force: thousands of officers took to the streets backed by hundreds of armoured vehicles and dozens of special vehicles.

The entire town was turned into a battlefield - the police used batons, demonstrators responded with stones, hundreds of shops were demolished, blood was everywhere.

A woman with a white T-shirt bravely stood in front of a water cannon - her picture dominated the front pages of all the independent media the next day and became a symbol of resistance.

As the protest escalated, Milosevic's regime dispatched tanks on to the streets of Belgrade. Never before or since had the Serbian leader been weaker or more afraid.

This was obvious when he addressed student demonstrators in front of TV cameras: his voice was shaking, he promised to punish those who beat them, he even offered to resign.

The then Serbian opposition, encouraged by the developments and popular support, felt strong, with good reason. Milosevic's overthrow - it was said - was just a matter of time.

But in subsequent months, Milosevic cleverly turned the tables on the opposition by switching public attention away from Serbia to the plight of Serbs in Bosnia and Croatia. The opposition pulled back, preferring nationalism to democracy.

As this March 9 approaches, many of the main players in the '91 upheaval are still on the political scene.

Vuk Draskovic, the instigator of the demonstrations, and the undisputed leader of the Serbian Renewal Movement, has changed allegiances many times, siding by turns with the authorities and its opponents.

The students' leader, Zarko Jokanovic, became one of the heads of the New Democracy party, the regime's coalition partner for years.

General Momcilo Perisic, today an opposition politician, was shelling Zadar in 1991, and somewhat later 'liberated' Mostar by levelling it to the

ground.

The current leader of the opposition Democratic Alternative, Nebojsa Covic, was a faithful member of the Milosevic' Socialist Party of Serbia at the time.

With us is also retired general Vuk Obradovic, head of the opposition Social Democracy, who in '91, was in uniform defending Milosevic's vision of Yugoslavia with fiery words.

With such people still around, memories of March 9 leave a bitter taste.

Then I naively believed in the following things: that membership of Europe was in reach, that I would not need visas to go abroad and that I would be able to visit the Croatian coast every summer.

What happened was that I have not been to Croatia for ten years, I need a visa to go almost anywhere in the world and, as a Serb, I am always guilty until proved innocent.

Today, we are sitting here in Serbia, trying to survive, forgetting the world we once admired. Getting a visa for England is like winning the lottery; going on a smuggling tour to Romania is something to get excited about.

Thanks to Milosevic's regime, everything in Serbia has turned into a giant concentration camp, jointly guarded by the international community and our patriotic authorities. Serbia has been left to die, slowly.

There will of course be no celebration on March 9 this year. What would we celebrate anyway? Several wars, as many defeats, isolation and sanctions.

Or the sugar and bread queues, depression, silence and fear. This Serbia is far removed from the Serbia we - naively - dreamt about almost ten years ago.

March 9, 1991, turned out to be the beginning of our downfall. Defeated in Belgrade - we were then defeated throughout former Yugoslavia.

There is no reason to mark this anniversary. It is part of the past that ought to be buried.

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