

Milosevic's Personal Army, On Call 24 Hours A Day

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Since 1991 Slobodan Milosevic has showered money and top of the range military equipment - including armoured vehicles and heavy ground attack aircraft - on his special police units, and deployed them between him and his political opponents.

The Serbian police are both symbol and guarantor of Slobodan Milosevic's regime, the president's own Praetorian Guard, as Vladan Batic, one of the leaders of the opposition Alliance for Changes puts it.

The interior ministry police (MUP) uses force against the opposition's daily nationwide street protests as its own way of rewarding Milosevic for the extra resources he has invested in its ranks over the last decade.

The police have been ready to draw their batons and teargas grenades against the opposition ever since March 9, 1991, when they first took on reform-minded Belgraders as they peacefully protested in the city.

Thereafter the government has dedicated ever more resources to the reorganisation and reinforcement of the MUP forces. Funding for the police soon overtook state investment in health care, education and even the conventional army.

Researchers working for the Federation of American Scientists have estimated that Serbia's MUP operates on a budget of some six times that of the regular army, whose troops are less well paid and less well equipped than their supposed civilian colleagues.

The MUP command was given firm central authority over the regional and city police forces after 1991. "This move allowed him strict political control over all branches of the police," said B.D., a retired Belgrade police inspector. "On the other hand, this made the police inefficient when carrying out its daily duties. The Serbian police today have about 100,000 members... Which other police force in the world has such manpower?"

Statistically Serbia has nearly twice as many policemen per citizen as the city of New York, which employs 38,000 officers to police eight million people.

New police units have been formed since 1991 that owe more to the military for their command structure and training than a conventional police force. Special units have been formed to operate under the State Security Service (SDB) along with special forces units run by the existing MUP police forces.

Most have their own ranks and insignia and were set up in conditions of total secrecy, with their basic training routine based in part on that run by the French Foreign Legion, as one member officer says.

State-of-the-art foreign equipment has been bought for their use - including the U.S. made Humvee personnel carrier and the Russian armoured Mi-24 Hind attack helicopter - unique to their ranks. They are called out for special missions by the president, such as the evacuation of UN peacekeepers held hostage by Bosnian Serb forces in 1993.

Apart from the SDB special units, the MUP forces have set up three 'anti-terrorist' (SAJ) squads in Belgrade, Novi Sad and Pristina, largely modelled on US special weapons and tactics (SWAT) teams. These squads

represent the elite of the Serbian police, but the president can also call on massed forces to back them up, once more designed along the lines of foreign forces like the Russian OMON internal security army or the US National Guard.

These massed forces are called Special Police Units (PJP) and unite conventional police units with a standing PJP core force. Each region in Serbia has its own brigade sized PJP unit, which in turn breaks down into army-style battalions, companies and platoons.

Members can be recognised by their sword and PJP emblem, their US equipment, including US combat dress and standard US 'fritz' type lightweight kevlar helmets, all up to NATO standards. They are armed with an extensive array of modern automatic weapons and played a key role in Serb operations in Kosovo before NATO moved in.

As an older police officer says, the PJP forces were formed for two purposes - to suppress the Albanian movement in Kosovo and to preserve the current regime in Serbia. "The Romanian experience has contributed to the forming of the PJP," the officer says.

"In Romania, it turned out, that neither the secret special police, nor the army were enough to keep the regime in power," the officer says.

A stronger force appears to be needed in Serbia. Both PJP and regular police units were deployed against demonstrations in Belgrade on September 30 in an operation designed to remind the anti-regime forces what kind of power they face.

"The goal is to let these people know that any attempt at change is futile and doomed to fail in advance," the anonymous officer says.

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