

## **Students Protesters Side With Opposition**

**Author:** [Srdjan Staletovic](#)

The Otpor student movement, arguably the most potent anti-government group in the country, may regret its decision to support the Serbian opposition.

At an anti-government rally in Belgrade last month, a group of youths from the Otpor (Resistance) movement handed their clenched fist flag to the leaders of the united opposition.

The gesture was significant. It was the first time Otpor had publicly demonstrated its support for the anti-government alliance, representing a victory of the pro-opposition faction of the movement over advocates of a more independent stance.

Whether this was a wise decision remains to be seen. Over the past decade, several revolts by Serbian youth and students were suppressed when they were taken over by opposition leaders.

Opposition parties have for months been trying to install their own people within Otpor ranks and encouraging greater co-operation, effectively weakening the movement.

Although Otpor activists strenuously deny that they belong to any political party, they are known to sympathise with three of the main opposition groups: the Serbian Renewal Movement, SPO; the Democratic Party, DS, and the Democratic Party of Serbia, DSS.

The latest poll carried out by the Institute for Social Sciences revealed that a large number of Serbian youth back Vojislav Kostunica, the leader of the DSS. Their main reason for doing so was his "moderate Serbian nationalism," dashing any hope that Serbia's youth might have overcome the nationalistic mindset of their parents.

Kostunica won the support of many of the younger Otpor activists by abstaining from any visible collaboration with Milosevic, unlike other opposition leaders. It seems his support for hardline nationalism at the end of the 1980s has been entirely forgotten.

"We lent our flag to the opposition now because we believe that Serbia needs a true political struggle," said Ivan Vasovic, an activist from Novi Sad. "This gesture does not represent support for any particular party, rather a strategy which Otpor thinks is appropriate for the moment."

Created barely a month after the end of the NATO bombing campaign in July last year, the Otpor student movement quickly spread across Serbia. Otpor's activities have unnerved the regime - 2,000 activists were arrested in 20 Serbian towns in March alone. Police interrogations and beatings of activists are common. So too are state media denunciations of the movement.

In one recent crackdown, 41 activists were arrested after Otpor put up around 60,000 anti-regime posters in 67 towns to commemorate the NATO bombings of Yugoslavia. Police beat up the majority of detainees and put pressure on them to reveal the identities of those who'd masterminded the protests.

"The regime is afraid of our actions because we are not fighting for power, we are not blood-thirsty and we do not seek revenge," says Marko Butulic, a law student from Belgrade. "They are afraid because the

activists of Otpor really want change to take place in Serbia

"We are under no illusion about the Kosovo conflict, we don't believe Milosevic's version of events and we do not wish to spend the rest of our lives fearing repression, the police or crime."

Maria V from Belgrade believes the regime fears the youth movement could trigger a revolution, "The authorities are not afraid as long as they don't see organized masses on the streets of Serbian towns. Otpor may not have sufficient political power for real change, but the fact remains that it is spreading like wildfire."

Otpor organizers claim that around 50,000 Serb youngsters "are ready to go into action at any time". Apart from activists themselves, their parents, other family members and friends are also said to be eager to take part. "We think we could bring around half a million people onto the streets in at least fifteen Serbian towns," said one activist. "Nobody in Serbia except us is currently capable of mobilizing such anti-government feeling. The regime does not like this at all."

Protests by Serbian youth almost defeated Milosevic in 1996. Their daily marches brought other disgruntled people onto the streets, pressuring the regime into accepting local election results, in which the opposition triumphed.

There's now the prospect that the ranks of the student activists could soon be joined by other frustrated citizens: the unemployed, families of those who lost their lives in Milosevic's numerous wars, refugees from Kosovo, Croatia and Bosnia; pensioners; former Milosevic allies.... the list goes on.

Srdjan Staletovic is an IWPR contributor from Belgrade.

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