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*The Politics of Despair:
Radical Nationalism and Regime Crisis in Serbia*

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*This paper was prepared for a Roundtable on Current Political Development in Serbia,
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Formulating an effective international response to the crisis in Kosovo requires careful consideration of the factors shaping the current situation, and the potential consequences of recent events for the political development of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (composed of Serbia and Montenegro). This paper focuses on the role of radical nationalism in Yugoslav politics during the second part of the 1990s, and particularly how the changing character of ethno-political mobilization within the province of Kosovo (at present technically an “autonomous province” in Serbia) is related to Serbian political extremism and political development.

Kosovo’s Radicalization and the “Crisis of the Center”

There is a growing will to rebel. These armed [Kosovo Albanian] groups or individuals will only give the Serbs a good excuse to carry out more blood baths with impunity.

~Ibrahim Rugova

The short-term prospects for democratic development in Serbia, already rather bleak at the onset of 1998, suffered a major setback with the outbreak of violence at the end of February in the predominantly ethnic Albanian province of Kosovo. The latest stage in Yugoslavia’s political evolution reached crisis proportions in early March when Serbian police killed scores of Albanian

civilians in the Drenica region of Kosovo during what authorities described as an “anti-terrorist” operation against the Kosovo Liberation Army. Following that incident, the Kosovo crisis was quickly internationalized, and a flurry of diplomatic activity ensued. Episodic violence resumed, but both the leadership of the province’s Albanian population (the Kosovars), and the regime in Belgrade, began positioning themselves for negotiations on the region’s future.

The “Kosovo problem” has long been a serious impediment to democratization in Serbia. It was in Kosovo, after all, that Milosevic became a Serb hero, and where he initially honed the populist and nationalist devices that eventually allowed him to construct his illiberal political order. The Milosevic regime’s harsh control of the province for more than a decade also resulted in widespread human rights violations and, beginning in 1990, provoked the Kosovars to boycott multiparty elections and other political institutions in Yugoslavia. The non-participation of Kosovo’s Albanians in Serbian political life not only resulted in a lack of political representation within Serbia for the nearly two million Kosovars, but also significantly weakened the potential strength of anti-regime opposition forces in the republic. Thus, over the last decade, Slobodan Milosevic’s ruling Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), has been able to capture nearly all Kosovo’s seats in the Serbian National Assembly on the basis of votes cast by the relatively small number of Serbs living in that province (approximately 150,000 in recent years). The SPS organization in Kosovo,

practiced at electoral chicanery, has also regularly inflated its vote count by claiming to have won support from a portion of the abstaining Albanian voters.

The Kosovar strategy of boycotting the Serbian political process has been an important part of a gradualist approach to Kosovo's detachment from Yugoslavia that was fashioned in 1990 by a group of the province's Albanian opposition. The most prominent figure in this group was Ibrahim Rugova, a writer and translator who had studied in France, and helped found the Democratic League of Kosovo (DSK) in 1989. Rugova, who was selected to head the DSK, believed that in order to lay the basis for the establishment of a sovereign state, Kosovars should totally disengage from Serbian society and political life through a non-violent course of action.¹ The DSK initiative was a response to the abolition of Kosovo's autonomy by the Milosevic regime during 1989, a move that, at the time, had provoked large Albanian protest demonstrations in the province. Recognizing the emotional Serb attachment to Kosovo (the epicenter of the Serbs' medieval empire, lost to the Ottomans from 1389 to 1912), Rugova and his fellow leaders believed their strategy would allow Kosovars to obtain international support for the province's peaceful evolution toward independence, and perhaps even eventual union with Albania (the DSK policy was supported during the mid-1990s by the Berisha regime in Albania).

¹ Rugova's father and grandfather were both killed by the communists in 1945. For the genesis of the DSK and its strategy see the interviews with Albanian leaders in Momcilo Petrovic, *Pitao sam Albance sta zele a oni su rekli: republiku...ako moze* (Belgrade: Radio B92, 1996).

Widespread Kosovar support for the DSK's Gandhian-like strategy resulted in the creation of a parallel underground Albanian state in Kosovo, and also for *de facto* ethnic apartheid in the province. This situation, together with the presence of highly visible Serbian security forces in Kosovo and the regular political harassment of Albanians, resulted in the province remaining relatively subdued for a number of years. But by late 1996, Rugova's strategy was increasingly coming under attack from more impatient and aggressive political activists in the province.² Though a majority of Kosovars continued to support the non-violent and gradualist strategy of the DSK, the political mood in Kosovo was rapidly changing. The repressive status quo in the province, the failure of the international community to devote sustained attention to Kosovo following the end of the war in Bosnia, and the growing frustration of younger Kosovars (a group which had grown substantially in a short period, with roughly 70% of the Kosovars estimated to be under the age of thirty), all contributed to a pattern of increasing political radicalization in the province. The flow of arms into Kosovo following the disintegration of Albania's army in the first part of 1997 also assisted Kosovars who sought to more aggressively confront the Serbian police regime in the province.

² Rugova's major critic has been Adem Demaci, the head of the Parliamentary Party of Kosovo, who has advocated a more aggressive struggle against the Belgrade regime than the DSK leader, but is more willing than Rugova to talk about political options short of independence. Many other Kosovars, particularly after the February-March 1998 violence against Albanian civilians, have been highly critical of Rugova's rather aloof and intellectual manner. For example, Mahmut Bakalli, the respected former head of Kosovo's League of Communists, who was removed during the former regime for failing to prevent Albanian nationalist protests, has said that in Rugova, the Albanians have "a leader without leadership."

By the fall of 1997, many Albanian political activists in Kosovo had opted for new and more assertive modes of political protest. Increasing disenchantment with the non-violent and gradualist strategy of the DKS was signaled by Albanian student demonstrations in Kosovo during the fall of 1997, and the onset of armed resistance, including attacks launched on Serbian police and Albanian officials working with the regime by a shadow underground organization, the Kosovo Liberation Army (UCK).³ The departure from the DKS non-violence policy marked a more complex and dangerous stage in Serb-Albanian polarization, and ultimately provided a pretext for the Belgrade regime's crackdown on alleged "terrorists" in early 1998.⁴ Though the current crisis and internationalization of the Kosovo problem has ended the decade-long repressive status quo in the province, recent developments threaten a potentially volatile situation for the protagonists, and for broader Southeastern European regional stability. Moreover, in the short-term at least, the combination of Kosovar

³ The first evidence of armed guerilla activity in Kosovo by the UCK (in Albanian, Ushtria Clirmtare e Kosoves – UCK), occurred in April 1996, but escalated considerably during the summer and fall of 1997. Prior to the events of 1998, the UCK was estimated to have between 100 to 1,000 members. For a detailed account of the UCK see Zoran Kusovac, "Another Balkan Bloodbath? – Part I, *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (February 1, 1998), and Part II, Vol. 10, No. 3 (March 1, 1998).

⁴ Milosevic's decision to take harsher measures in Kosovo may in part be the result of the ambiguous signals he received from U.S. diplomats, but was also motivated by strong pressure from the hard-line faction within the SPS and Serbian police. Milosevic may have also calculated that, as in the past, he could whip up citizen support behind the regime for a patriotic-nationalist policy, and that once the international community pushes the Serbs and Albanians into negotiations (which he was assured would be premised on Kosovo remaining in Yugoslavia) he could pose as the architect of peace and reconciliation.

radicalism and intensified repression by Belgrade has chilled the atmosphere for democratic political change in Serbia.⁵

The fragmentation of the democratic opposition in Serbia following the three-month 1996/97 street demonstrations has been an additional important factor that indirectly contributed to recent Albanian radicalization in Kosovo, and Milosevic's subsequent harsh "anti-terrorist" measures against the Kosovars. Coordinated by both non-party student leaders and opposition politicians from the Zajedno (Together) coalition – composed of the Democratic Party (DS), led by Zoran Djindjic, the Civic Alliance of Serbia (GSS), headed by Vesna Pesic, and the Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO), headed by Vuk Draskovic – the winter demonstrations succeeded in forcing Milosevic to revoke his cancellation of the opposition's impressive victories in the fall 1996 local elections. Prospects for Serbia's further democratization were dashed, however, when Zajedno disintegrated in the early spring of 1997, not long after the conclusion of the street marches.

Zajedno's collapse resulted from chronic problems that had fractured the democratic opposition in Serbia since the onset of pluralist politics in 1990, and

⁵ Despite criticism of his non-violent approach, Rugova ran unchallenged in the March 22, 1998 election for "President" of the underground Kosovo state. Ten political parties participated in the election. But several Albanian politicians, as well as student leaders and representatives of the UCK guerillas asked that the voting not be held because of the Serbian "police siege" in Kosovo. During the campaign handbills appeared throughout the province attacking "pacifism" and by implication Rugova: "For eight years the pacifists have been trying to convince you that Albanians will have a state. Where is your state? Where is your government? Where is your freedom?" The handbills were signed by a group called the National Movement for the Liberation of Kosovo (LNCK – an Albanian emigrant organization based in Switzerland since

prevented the formation of a viable centrist coalition: personal differences and jealousies among the party leaders, the considerable-ideological-political distance between the various opposition parties (see Figure 1), and Milosevic's political maneuvering and ability to undermine his opponents (through the co-optation of ambitious opposition leaders, police penetration of opposition party organizations, etc.). Perhaps most importantly, however, Zajedno's failure underlined two major weaknesses in the Serbian opposition: first, the inability of the relatively small number of non-nationalist democrats to find common ground with democratic nationalists in a united opposition movement, and second, the failure of both democratic groups to cooperate effectively with their counterparts in other ethnic communities. In any case, by the summer of 1997, Milosevic, albeit politically weakened, was able to substantially rebound from his political problems. Milosevic's re-consolidation of power was discouraging to Kosovo's Albanians (though they never expected much support for their goals from the ranks of the Serbian opposition)⁶, and emboldened Kosovar political forces opposed to Rugova's gradualist strategy of change.

1981) and encouraged Albanians not to vote. *Los Angeles Times*, March 22, 1998, p. 8. The day before the election, seven parties published a declaration urging that Kosovars boycott the voting.

⁶ A survey of Serbian students participating in the 1996/97 demonstrations revealed that only 1% favored giving the Kosovars independence or allowing them to unite with Albania. Indeed, 36% of the student respondents felt that all forms of autonomy in Kosovo should be abolished, 14% accepted the status quo in the province, 11% favored Kosovo's partition into Serbian and Albanian units through population movement, another 11% supported some form of confederal status for Kosovo in the framework of Yugoslavia, and 8% believed that Kosovo should revert to the status it had under the 1974 constitution. The author of the study concluded that "for Serbs, Kosovo has become a painful problem, in relation to which democratic and rational people cease to behave rationally." Bora Kuzmanovic, "Setnjom u slobodu," in Marija Babovic, *et al.* (eds.), *'Ajmo, 'ajde, svi u setnjul: Gradjanski i studentski protest 96/97* (Belgrade: Medija Centar, 1997), p. 61.

Despite Zajedno's collapse, the 1996/97 protest demonstrations did have several positive consequences for Serbia's potential democratization. Thus, though the opposition had once again reverted to its typically fragmented profile, the dramatic standoff between a frightened regime and emotionally charged anti-regime forces consisting of thousands of Serbian citizens had revealed the fundamental and rapidly growing illegitimacy of the Milosevic power structure. To a limited extent, the demonstrations also strengthened civil society by motivating many members of Serbia's younger generation to become active in student organizations, local politics, and non-governmental organizations. Even after the conclusion of the protests several new organizations continued to function (e.g., for independent journalists, municipalities governed by opposition parties, and student groups).

The emergence of a young reformist leader in Montenegro – Milo Djukanovic, the leader of the liberal faction in that small republic's ruling Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) – was also a byproduct of the 1996/97 protests. Expecting the imminent fall of the regime as a result of the street demonstrations, Djukanovic sharply attacked Milosevic's record of political management. After the Montenegrin leader won his republic's presidential election in October 1997 – garnering most of the minority Muslim and non-boycotting Albanian votes in the republic – he was able to present himself as a liberal alternative to the regime in Belgrade. Perhaps most importantly, however, as a lesson to all those hoping for political change in Yugoslavia, was the way the

first stage of liberalization took place in Montenegro. Thus, Djukanovic's success did not result from a clash between demonstrating citizens and a powerful regime, but rather from an internal factional split between hard-liners and reformers within the ruling power structure, or a pattern reminiscent of many other cases of communist melt-down in Eastern Europe.⁷

Djukanovic's political defection from the ruling circle underlined the growing erosion of support for the Belgrade regime. But Milosevic continued to retain control of the major levers of power in Serbia: the police, the media, the judiciary, and his still powerful party machine. Moreover, the decision of most democratic opposition parties to boycott the fall 1997 parliamentary and presidential elections, together with the continued absence of the Kosovars from the political process, allowed Milosevic and the SPS to win those political contests (albeit not as easily as in earlier years). Desperate to retain control, the regime seemed to care little that voter turnout in those elections (see Figure 2) was at an all-time low in Serbia's experience with multi-party politics (even compared to the period of party pluralism in the 1920s). Ironically, at a time when Milosevic was faltering domestically, he was also assisted in resuscitating his image as a secure leader through his cooperation with the American-led international effort to implement the Dayton Accords in Bosnia. For example, during the second half of 1997 and early 1998, Milosevic received praise from Western diplomats for assisting in efforts to replace the hard-line Bosnian Serb

⁷ By March 1998, the DPS in Montenegro had fractured, and the pro-Milosevic faction, headed by

leadership in the Republika Srpska with pro-Dayton pragmatic nationalists (the Biljana Plavsic-Milorad Dodik leadership team).

The Seselj Phenomenon: Mobilizing Despair in a De-legitimated Regime

The fact that [ethnic Albanian leaders] Rugova and Agani do not recognize Serbia and Yugoslavia gives us the right to let them separate from us personally, pack their bags, pile on to a tractor, and head over Mount Prokletije [into Albania].

~Vojislav Seselj

Serbia's chronic crisis of the democratic center, and the recent events in Kosovo, are closely linked to the significant residual strength of radical nationalism in Serbian politics. In the wake of the war in Bosnia, and the resolution of the "Serbian question" in Croatia (first through the brutal expulsion of Croatia's Serbs in August 1995, and more recently as a consequence of the UN-engineered reintegration of Eastern Slavonia into Croatia in early 1998), Yugoslavia's citizens appeared exhausted with the nationalist discourse that had dominated political life in the Balkans over the preceding decade. Indeed, survey research in Yugoslavia during the 1990s indicated that although xenophobic and authoritarian sentiments were still quite strong in Serbia, there was also a noticeable decrease in the magnitude of such attitudes.⁸

But while overt expressions of ultra-nationalism and illiberalism on the part of Serbs may have diminished somewhat, the level of popular frustration,

Momir Bulatovic, founded (see Figure 1) the Socialist National Party of Montenegro (SNPCG).

⁸ Bora Kuzmanovic, "Stepen i cinioci autoritarnosti," and Mirjana Vasovic, "Karakteristike grupnih identifikacija i odnos prema drugim etnickim grupama," in S. Mihailovic (ed). *Izmedju*

cynicism and bitterness regarding Serbia's internal problems, and pariah status in the world, had actually increased substantially. By the fall of 1997, dissatisfaction with both the regime and the established opposition parties was at an all-time high. Thus, Milosevic and the SPS were condemned for having "betrayed" Serbian national interests and allowed Yugoslavia to become an isolated state with a Third World economy. For their part, most democratic opposition politicians were also discredited, owing to their highly visible failure to maintain a politically united organizational structure after the 1996/97 protests, and their inability to develop a feasible program for Serbia's transformation.

The main political beneficiary of such citizen anger and despair was Vojislav Seselj, the controversial and charismatic leader of the Serbian Radical Party (SRS). During 1991, Seselj had established the SRS out of disparate ultra-nationalist groups.⁹ A former communist, who had first gained attention in the 1980s as a vocal anti-Titoist dissident (and had been jailed for nearly two years), Seselj was a rather enigmatic figure in Serbian political life.¹⁰ Throughout his

Osporavanja i podrške: Javno mnjenje o legitimitetu treće Jugoslavije (Belgrade: Institut Društvenih Nauka, 1997), pp. 229-245 and 246-266.

⁹ In early 1990, Seselj's small "Serbian Freethinkers Movement" had joined with Vuk Draskovic to form the Serbian Movement of Renewal (SPO), but Seselj soon broke with Draskovic, and in June 1990 launched the Serbian Chetnik movement. Seselj ran as an independent candidate in the 1990 presidential election, and then formed the SRS. Like other opposition parties, the SRS has suffered from internal factionalism. For example, in early 1994, part of the leadership and membership left the SRS and formed the Radical Party of Serbia, a pattern repeated in mid-1994, with the formation of the Serbian Radical Party "Nikola Pasic." See Vladimir Goati, *Stabilizacija Demokratije ili Povratak Monizmu: Treća Jugoslavija Sredinom Devedesetih* (Podgorica, 1996), p. 114.

¹⁰ Seselj was born in Sarajevo in 1954 to a family that had emigrated to that city from Herzegovina. His mother was illiterate and his father was a railway worker. As a boy, Seselj was

career, Seselj has employed various clownish, brutish, and belligerent maneuvers to gain publicity. In 1990, for example, he was involved in the forcible expulsion of Croatian families in a number of Vojvodina villages. And during the recent wars in Croatia and Bosnia, Seselj led paramilitary volunteer units against “anti-Serb” forces. An ardent Serb nationalist and anti-communist who opposes monarchism, Seselj’s right-wing populist program is an eclectic admixture of themes from traditional European Fascism, and newer ideas borrowed from Western Europe’s current radical right.

Tall and distinctive in appearance, Seselj has been a highly visible fixture in Serbian politics over the past decade. A prolific writer, the SRS leader also enjoys appearing at public events surrounded by his entourage of lieutenants, where he generally stations himself at the center of the room and proceeds to hold court. In order to obtain maximum effect, Seselj has a reputation for very carefully choreographing the content and style of his public appearances. Though considered a dull orator (who has problems with pronunciation) when giving set speeches, Seselj is very effective at debating, often fascinating his

an activist in Titoist youth organizations and became a member of the League of Communists in 1971. In 1976, he graduated from university, and only three years later defended his doctoral thesis at Sarajevo’s law school (entitled “The Political Essence of Militarism and Fascism: A Contribution to the Marxian Critique of Political Forms of Civic Democracy.” From 1981 to 1984, Seselj was one of the youngest docents at Sarajevo University. After becoming involved in dissident activity he lost his university job and moved to Belgrade where he made many friends in dissident circles. He was jailed for 22 months (1984-1986) for his writings. After imprisonment he returned to Belgrade as a prominent victim and resumed his anti-regime publishing activity. On a visit to North America in 1989, Seselj was awarded the title of Chetnik Vojvoda (Duke) by one of the oldest living Chetnik leaders. The title was later rescinded, but Seselj kept using the honorary rank, and often has been referred to as the “Red Duke.” Seselj has remarked that “every

audience by crudely and provocatively “unmasking” his political adversaries. Not surprisingly, some of his very immoderate remarks and aggressive activities have infuriated and frightened his domestic opponents, and also shaped his unsavory international image as a “Balkan Nazi-extremist.”

But for many of his countrymen, Seselj is a fearless and consistent advocate of their deepest concerns. Moreover, off the political stage Seselj has a reputation among many Serbs as a rather intelligent and congenial figure. He is also a respected family man, with friends throughout Serbia’s social and political circles. Indeed, Seselj’s political longevity and recent success in Serbian politics is a complex phenomenon, which results from more than superficial enthusiasm for his public antics, demagogic style, or the proto-Fascist details of his program.

For example, the populist message of Seselj’s SRS during the 1990s has resonated with those Serbian citizens who have been most seriously affected by the country’s severe economic collapse, namely, members of the former middle and lower-middle class. This group includes a large pool of white-collar workers, lower-ranking technicians, professionals and management personnel, private craftsmen and small-scale entrepreneurs, skilled and semi-skilled workers, pensioners, disgruntled students, and segments of the rural sector. Members of these groups are extremely bitter about their painful slide into poverty during the period of tough economic sanctions against Yugoslavia that began in 1992 and were only partially relaxed at the end of 1995. While many members of that

one of his political attitudes, political perspectives, depends on his personal experience, his

impoverished constituency had initially supported Milosevic, over the last few years (1995-1998) they have become more vulnerable to political appeals that blame Serbia's plight on the regime in power, the international community, and non-Serbs. Seselj's growing support in the last few years has been particularly apparent in areas around the periphery of major cities, and in medium-sized towns, and also among the elderly, low-paid workers, and younger unemployed people.¹¹

But economic despair is not solely the source of Seselj's success. He has also been able to tap the deep sense of national humiliation that has been associated with Serbia's failure to either maintain the cohesion of the former Yugoslavia, or to realize the maximalist "Greater Serbia" national program that attracted widespread support during the late 1980s. The loss of the hegemonic position once enjoyed by Serbs in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, together with the disintegration of Socialist Yugoslavia, the partitioning of the Serb ethnic corpus among the former Yugoslavia's successor states, and the military defeats suffered by Serb forces, have collectively constituted a traumatic blow to the pride of the Serbian people. While the importance of "wounded pride and sense of humiliation" has been recognized as a significant factor in the development of

personal destiny, from one of his personal ordeals." *Intervju* (No. 410), June 1997.

¹¹ Zoran Markovic, "Revansisticki nacionalizam," *Republika*, September 1997.

most nationalist sentiments and movements,¹² the deep sense of victimization in Serbian political culture make such attitudes particularly significant.

Understanding and exploiting the political climate in Serbia, Seselj and the SRS have promised voters a way out of the economic desperation and ethnic humiliation they have experienced under the Milosevic regime. But unlike most of the moderate democratic opposition parties who suggest that Serbia must accommodate itself to internationally accepted modes of economic development, and “civilized” norms of inter-ethnic relations, Seselj focuses blame on the international community for Serbia’s difficulties, and has consistently remained an unashamed spokesman for Serb nationalism and revanchism.

For example, on the economic front, Seselj espouses a neo-liberal program relying primarily on Serbia’s internal resources and traditional international friends, rather than on connections to the global economy. His program calls for an end to the statist policies employed by the ruling socialists, and other measures such as the rapid expansion of the private sector, the development of tariff-free economic zones, the renewal of “economic integration” among Serbian communities throughout the Balkans, the intensification of economic links with Russia and China (Japan and South Korea were also mentioned in 1992), and the reduction of economic dependence on the European Community. “Economically we are liberals,” Seselj told an interviewer in 1996. “We support liberal capitalism and the complete privatization of everything that can be privatized

¹² See, for example, Isaiah Berlin, “Nationalism: Past Neglect and Present Power,” in his *Against*

and not endanger the functioning of the state. Almost Thatcherism. We differ from others because we insist on a method of privatization which excludes stealing.”¹³

With regard to the national question, Seselj emphasizes his commitment to Serbia’s ethno-national aspirations, including “the unity of all Serbs,” and the “Greater Serbia” that Milosevic is accused of having betrayed. Advocacy of restored Serb control over Croatian and Bosnian territory not only appeals to the roughly 600,000 refugees from these areas now living in Serbia (who are not citizens of FRY and therefore cannot vote), but also to the large segment of Serbia’s population who are deeply angered by the refugee tragedy (and who are directly connected with the refugees by family ties), and the loss of traditional Serb influence in other regions.

Some Serbian intellectuals and opposition leaders have urged that the members of their ethnic community should recognize the Serbian regime’s responsibility for the recent warfare and atrocities in the Balkans, and that when appropriate, individuals should be required to personally assume responsibility for their actions. Seselj has, in contrast, rationalized and exploited Serb resentment against failures, foreigners, and ethnic foes (see Table 1a). Indeed, even members of the younger generation who view themselves as democrats, and have actively demonstrated against the regime, have a strong sense of national identity (see Table 1b). Most of Seselj’s nationalist themes are in part

the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 333-355.

repackaged ideas first advanced by Milosevic at the end of the 1980s, but which the Socialist Party leader is perceived as having betrayed. Even if he wished to do so, Milosevic would now have great difficulty convincingly portraying himself as a heroic Serbian patriot to his embittered and deeply cynical countrymen.

Throughout the 1990s, Milosevic's shrewd strategy of power maintenance has included abrupt tactical changes toward Seselj. Recognizing that the Radical Party leader appeals to an important pool of voters, Milosevic has alternatively praised, ignored, jailed, or electorally cheated Seselj, depending on the prevailing domestic and international political situation. For example, at times (1992-1993), when the democratic opposition threatened Milosevic, an alliance between the ruling SPS and Seselj's SRS appeared expedient, and the regime encouraged the "controlled growth" of Seselj's party. But when trying to project a more moderate and democratic image internationally (after mid-1993), Milosevic has chosen to marginalize or neutralize Seselj. Even sidelined, however, Seselj has proved useful to Milosevic. Thus, members of the international community could be convinced that if they did not deal with the Belgrade regime, the far worse specter of radical ultra-nationalism might fill the vacuum. But because the potential voting base of the Radicals and the SPS overlaps considerably, Milosevic has been careful not to allow Seselj to grow too strong. The steep fall in Milosevic's support, and Zajedno's collapse (which created a fluid bloc of

¹³ *Vreme*, February 3, 1996, pp. 16-18.

frustrated voters), therefore created a difficult situation for the regime during mid-1997. Ultimately Milosevic was compelled to employ seasoned and very transparent techniques of electoral manipulation in order to deal with a surge of popular support for Seselj and the Radical Party.

By the time of the Serbian parliamentary and presidential election in September 1997, Seselj already had become a formidable force. For example, in the legislative contest, the SRS won the second largest contingent of seats in the Serbian National Assembly.¹⁴ But Seselj's effort to win the republic's presidential post was an even more serious challenge to the regime. In July 1997, Milosevic had already arranged for the Federal Assembly to elect him to the post of president of Yugoslavia (in a late night sparsely attended session), so he did not have to directly face Seselj and other contenders in the Serbian presidential contest. In view of Seselj's growing political strength and self-confidence; however, Milosevic could not afford to let the Radical leader take control of Serbia.

Sensing the political opportunity at hand, Seselj tried to present a more moderate "presidential" image. He stressed his effectiveness at managing the town of Zemun, near Belgrade – the sole municipality won by the Radical Party in the 1996 local elections¹⁵ – and offered voters a smorgasbord of social,

¹⁴ In the Serbian parliamentary race, the SRS captured 82 seats (32.8%) having won 29.3% of the vote. Seselj's SPS and left coalition took 35.7% of the votes and got 110 seats (44%).

¹⁵ Seselj quickly offended Zemun's small Jewish community by turning the town's 147-year-old synagogue – that was no longer operative and had been sold to the communists in 1961 – into a nightclub. About the same time, headstones in the Jewish cemetery were desecrated. But Seselj

economic, and nationalist promises. Seselj also sought to position himself as a honest nationalist, the “law and order” candidate, who would be able to bring an end to the rampant corruption, violence, and “moral collapse” that had become endemic in Serbian society.¹⁶

Seselj’s remodeled approach proved highly successful. With most of the democratic opposition boycotting Serbia’s presidential election campaign, Seselj came in second in a field of 17 candidates (taking 27.2% of the vote in the initial round of voting), and was able to force the front-runner – Milosevic’s hand-picked candidate, former Yugoslav president Zoran Lilic (who took 35.7%) – into a run-off. On October 5, 1997, Seselj defeated Lilic (49.1% to 47.9%), but since the overall voter turnout (48.97%) fell below 50%, the election was declared legally invalid. Widespread electoral fraud was in evidence,¹⁷ but Seselj had nevertheless come within 1% of becoming Serbia’s president. Though the

enjoyed considerable support among the local population. As one citizen of Zemun remarked: “Seselj also has his good side. The streets are cleaner, the garbage is collected more often, and the city administration runs more smoothly.” *Jerusalem Post*, September 19, 1997, p. 10. In 1993, Sinisa Vucinic, another self-proclaimed Chetnik leader (and future leader of the Serbian Radical Party-“Nikola Pasic”) accused Jews of responsibility for the bankruptcy of pyramid schemes in Serbia. A 1997 study concluded that anti-Semitism is a “marginal phenomenon” in Serbia, but that “there is a latent danger of anti-Semitism. The South Slav brothers hate each other sufficiently, they do not need Jews for their hatred.” Laslo Sekelj, “Anti-Semitism and Jewish Identity in Serbia After the Collapse of the Yugoslav State,” (Belgrade: unpublished manuscript, 1997), pp. 25-30 (Sekelj’s conclusion is supported by the findings indicated in Table 1a of this study). In 1997, Yugoslavia’s Jewish community had approximately 3,350 members.

¹⁶ In 1996, Seselj also tried to improve his image by removing the explicitly discriminatory anti-Albanian aspects of his earlier party programs. The 1994 program of the SRS, for example, had called for the following measures: the expulsion of all Albanian immigrants and their descendants, termination of every state-financed subsidy received by the Albanian minority, disbanding of all institutions that operate in the Albanian language and are financed by the state budget, dismissal from employment of all “Siptars” (the derogatory Serbian way of referring to Albanians) who are not citizens, abolition of all social assistance to “Siptars,” particularly those who have “too high a birth rate,” etc. Vladimir Goati, *Partijski mozaik Srbije 1990-1996*, (Belgrade: Beogradski Krug, 1997), p. 33, and *Politicki Program Srpske Radikalne Stranke* (Belgrade, 1992).

Milosevic regime had managed to stop Seselj's drive to power, it could not compensate for the striking anti-regime mood of the voters, and the lukewarm enthusiasm generated by Lilic (who had formally presided over FRY for Milosevic during Serbia's economic downslide). Some of Seselj's support came from hard-core ultra-nationalist followers, but many others voted for him because of economic and ethnic grievances, and also a desire to get rid of Milosevic "by any means and at any price."¹⁸

Neutralized by SPS electoral manipulation, and shunned by most of the opposition parties, Seselj, who had now recast himself as a law-abiding main-line political actor, could do little more than forward his complaints about the electoral process to the appropriate authorities. Seselj was also well aware that Milosevic had the tacit support of the international community for taking whatever measures were necessary to prevent a "Fascist" takeover of Serbia. Meanwhile, the anxious Milosevic quickly dumped Lilic, and ran a new candidate for the Serbian presidency, foreign minister Milan Milutinovic. For Milosevic, who needed a trusted henchman to run Serbia, the stakes had become more serious. In a new round of voting in December, the SPS machine operated more effectively. Milutinovic defeated Seselj 43.7% to 32.1% in the next balloting, and emerged victorious at the run-off (59.2% to 37.5%).¹⁹ After four elections

¹⁷ Roksandra Nincic, "Radikalna kradja," *Vreme*, January 3, 1998, pp. 8-12.

¹⁸ Stevan Niksic, "Milosevic on the Down Slope," *The New Leader*, December 1, 1997.

¹⁹ One of the big losers in the 1997 election was Vuk Draskovic, the leader of the Serbian Renewal Party, who was in the forefront of the 1996/97 demonstrations. Draskovic's popularity began to fall soon after his split with the other parties in Zajedno in mid-1997. The SPO also suffered from

over a four-month period, Milosevic's party machine had finally consolidated its grip on Serbia. But the number of voters who were willing to support Milosevic and his lieutenants in Serbia had dropped sharply (Figure 3) compared to the early 1990s.

During the 1997 elections, Seselj perversely used the slogan "We are coming." The surge of support for the Radicals during the fall, and the energy expended by the regime to block Seselj, prompted renewed discussion about the residual strength of Serbian nationalism, and also the potential for a "Fascist" victory in Serbia. Viewed from the perspective of conventional theories regarding Fascism, Seselj's inability to make a breakthrough and take power can be explained rather easily. Thus, most analysts consider Fascist ascendancy as an outcome associated with the breakdown of relatively new liberal democracies that are governed by moderate and centrist parties, namely, a stage of political development that Serbia has not yet reached. Moreover, Milosevic's ability to contain Seselj corresponds to a pattern observed in other illiberal states (semi-democracies and soft dictatorships) with hegemonic party systems, i.e., an authoritarian ruler who uses a dominant party and other levers of power to prevent radical nationalists or populist extremists from taking control. Such a pattern, for example, was apparent in Romania and Hungary between the world wars, and also in Yugoslavia during the 1930s, where extreme ultra-nationalist movements were kept at bay, or partially absorbed, by conservative

severe internal factionalism and Draskovic lost further support when he began openly

authoritarian regimes. In such cases, it is only after the authoritarian power structure collapsed, under conditions of internal civil strife and a breakdown of law and order, that the extreme right temporarily assumed control.

Can Milosevic's current difficulties, now exacerbated by the looming crisis in Kosovo, create the preconditions in Serbia that will allow Seselj's Radicals to capture power, either during any general chaos that may accompany a meltdown of Milosevic's authority, or after a period of failed post-Milosevic liberal pluralism? Such scenarios may seem unlikely in view of Milosevic's impressive record of survival against the odds, and also Seselj's demonstrated difficulty in expanding his appeal to attract the traditional voting base of the democratic opposition (the more educated, liberal, urban middle class), or in reaching out to non-Serbs. As Seselj admitted in early 1998, "we want to take power, but with whom? That is why we have to go it alone."²⁰ Seselj claims he would prefer an "orderly transfer of power," but expects that an eruption of popular dissatisfaction is not too far off. For Seselj, the street demonstrations of 1996/97 had little to do with the leadership of Zajedno. "The fact that the Together coalition has failed does not mean that the people's dissatisfaction has disappeared.... The next outburst of the people's dissatisfaction will be must

negotiating with Milosevic for a place in his government.

²⁰ *Demokratija*, January 19, 1998.

fiercer than the previous one.... The social situation is deteriorating...the economic crisis is deepening.”²¹

It is entirely possible that the fluid and inflammatory nature of Serbia’s current political scene may create a climate in which Seselj can achieve power. Up until the spring of 1998, the international community has cooperated with Milosevic, partially because the potentially strongest alternative to the Belgrade leader was the unpredictable extremist, Vojislav Seselj. Milosevic has counted on such international perceptions, and often taken advantage of his room for maneuver. Milosevic’s recent repression of alleged “terrorists” in Kosovo may be a good example of this situation. But should the Kosovo crisis worsen, Washington may reduce or withdraw its cooperation with the Belgrade regime and thereby unintentionally open an entirely new and potentially explosive chapter in Serbian political life.²² For the moment, however, Milosevic is still

²¹ *NIN*, December 18, 1997. One of Seselj’s fiercest critics, *Vreme*’s Stojan Cerovic, remarks that the Radical leader “sees his chance in complete dissolution and chaos. He is a hyena, which waits for an exhausted organism to cease putting up any resistance. *Vreme*, July 26, 1997, pp. 18-22.

University of Belgrade psychologist, Jelena Vlajkovic, worries about feelings associated with “the brutalization of everyday life, powerlessness and anger which have become embedded in people, because that can lead to an intense experience, an explosion of anger which results in a civil war in Serbia. The [1996/97] civic protest was a civilized, whimsical, cathartic and coordinated protest, and I don’t know if it can be repeated. But the possibility exists that the next outburst of anger will be far more brutal.” *Nasa Borba*, March 22, 1997.

²² Most members of the democratic opposition in Serbia maintain that Kosovo must remain part of Yugoslavia, and that only the democratization of the state, that is, the end of the Milosevic regime, can provide the necessary context for Serb-Albanian rapprochement, including some form of autonomy for Kosovo. Zoran Djindjic of the Democratic Party, however, betrayed the difficulties of the democratic opposition, and also its dilemma in squarely addressing the national question, when he tried to excuse the opposition for not making a stronger protest concerning regime-sponsored violence in Kosovo: “It is difficult for the opposition, which is unable to be granted the rights its wants, to stand up and demand those very rights for other groups in the same country.” *Frankfurter Rundschau*, March 16, 1998, in *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, March 18, 1998, EE/D3178/A. Djindjic advocates that Kosovo be granted autonomy along the lines the province was granted under the 1974 constitution.

successfully holding his own. After all, the international community may not approve of his behavior, but there is simply no one else in Belgrade who can negotiate with the Kosovars. Milosevic has not failed to grasp the situation, including the dangers of inaction, which helps explain his recent rush to finally open negotiations on Kosovo with Rugova and other Kosovar moderates.

In any case, the Kosovo crisis of 1998 provides Seselj with an opportunity to exploit his mobilization of a desperate population seeking a way out of their economic poverty and national disappointment. Indeed, while the official program of the SRS has tried to portray the party as a moderate right-wing organization, Seselj's public pronouncements have consistently revealed the same extreme anti-Kosovar sentiment and intolerant brand of Serb nationalism that he has espoused for years.²³ Seselj has astutely been presenting a message that closely corresponds to Serb attitudes toward Albanians that have been revealed in successive opinion surveys of the general Serbian population throughout the 1990s (see Table 2).²⁴ Thus, reacting to the events of

²³ Most of Seselj's Radicals see themselves as "modern nationalists" and regard leaders such as the French extremist Jean-Marie Le Pen and Russia's Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (both of whom have visited Seselj in Serbia) as major European nationalist figures. For example, Jorgovanka Tabakovic, a 37-year-old Radical member of the Serbian Assembly from Kosovo, who also holds a management job in a bank, remarks: "we nationalists are bound to understand each other. Even the Albanian nationalists. Once they recognize that Kosovo is part of Serbia, the Radical Party will be prepared to grant them full cultural autonomy...except schools in Albanian of course. They will have to learn the official language." Jean-Arnalut Darens, "Lendemans amers pour les orphalins de la "Grand Serbie," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, November 1997, pp. 14-15.

²⁴ Zagorka Golubovic, et al. (eds.), *Drustveni karakter i drustvene promene u svetlu nacionalnih sukoba* (Belgrade: "Filip Visnjic" 1995), pp. 225-244. Belgrade sociologist, Ognjen Pribicevic has remarked that "the Serbs do not treat the Albanians as equal. They treat them as uncivilized, very primitive, dirty...as humans of a lower profile. Of course, Milosevic was the person that opened the bottle and let the devil out, but these feelings are much older than Milosevic." *Chicago Tribune*, March 22, 1998, p. 6.

February/March 1998, Seselj proposed the formation of a more “unified, unitary Serbian state,” which he said would be “much cheaper and more efficient than the current federation,” and would help prevent Albanian or Montenegrin separatism. Even though his own SRS program includes the idea of considerable local “self-rule” for different parts of Yugoslavia, in the current climate, Seselj has decided to be as provocative as possible in playing the national card.

Though it is true that few citizens of Serbia today may be willing to give their lives or make further sacrifices for Milosevic’s transparent and self-serving instrumental nationalism, most Serbs still feel very strongly about the significance of Serbia’s territorial control of Kosovo (not to mention their sensitivity regarding their lost foothold in Croatia, and the situation of Serbs in Bosnia), and resent what they see as foreign meddling in Serbia’s internal affairs. The “myth” of Kosovo in the Serbian mindset may be based on a hodge-podge of historically inaccurate and exaggerated ideas, and the majority of Serbs may not have even visited Kosovo, but the myth, nonetheless, remains a powerful mechanism for political mobilization. Although Milosevic may not be able to excite enthusiasm for aggressively preventing Kosovo from becoming independent, another leader, such as Seselj, may have more success in this regard. Moreover, though some international actors believe that a new round of sanctions against Serbia will motivate its citizens to rally around the regime, and thereby ensure Milosevic’s survival, such foreign pressure may actually benefit Seselj more than Milosevic. The potential for that outcome is even more likely if,

during negotiations with the Kosovars, Milosevic is forced to give up more than Serbs will stomach, or if the Kosovars refuse to accept what Milosevic offers, and a costly and bloody war ensues. Though the international community would likely be tempted to take strong measures to prevent Seselj from influencing the destiny of the Kosovar Albanians, another surge of support for the SRS would certainly further retard prospects for democracy in Serbia.

In yet another scenario, which may appear unlikely at the moment, but should not be entirely ruled out, the Kosovo Albanians could decide – after intense foreign urging (including from Albania)²⁵ – to peacefully participate in Serbian elections, for example, as citizens living in a potential new “third republic” of FRY. The inclusion of such a large anti-regime voter bloc in Serbia would certainly enhance the prospects of the opposition to Milosevic. But the threat of such Kosovo voters combining forces with the Serb opposition parties could well impel Milosevic to once again embrace Seselj as an ally. In view of Seselj’s views on Kosovo, he would probably be receptive to such an overture from Milosevic. But the Radical leader would undoubtedly demand a high price for his cooperation with the regime.²⁶ Moreover, should Milosevic, for some

²⁵ Albania’s Prime Minister, Fatos Nano, has remarked that the “maximum demands” for independence put forward by Ibrahim Rugova “may complicate the achievement of a sustainable and peaceful solution in Kosovo.” Nano also looks approvingly on developments in Montenegro, and among Bosnian Serbs, as possible models for a Kosovo settlement, i.e., a liberalized Kosovo which is a semi-autonomous entity, but not fully independent.

²⁶ Uncertainty regarding the manner in which the Kosovars should participate in Yugoslavia’s political life – assuming for the moment they could be persuaded to forego their goal of independence – may eventually become a stumbling block to finding a resolution to the Kosovo crisis. For example, even if the Kosovar Albanians do not directly participate in Serbian elections, but only take part in the political life of a newly formed Kosovo republic within the framework of

reason, rapidly be forced to leave the political stage, Seselj, for the moment at least, appears well positioned to assume power.

In any event, the current Kosovo crisis, and its potentially dangerous linkage to the Seselj phenomenon, has become Milosevic's most difficult political challenge since he first was lifted to power by the emotional nationalism of the Kosovo Serbs in the spring of 1987. How Serbia's political leaders – both in the ruling party and in the opposition – come to terms with the Kosovo problem has become the determinative factor in Yugoslavia's future political development.²⁷ It appears that the long status quo in Kosovo is now over. But unfortunately, even if the Kosovars break free of Belgrade's present heavy-handed control (either by means of some arrangement for genuine autonomy within Yugoslavia, or outright secession), the short-term prospects for the emergence of stable democratic politics in Serbia remain quite remote.*

Yugoslavia, Milosevic would still have to face the possibility that a potential coalition of Kosovo and Montenegro – in a new three-unit federation operating along some consociational formula – would put him and Serbia at a political disadvantage. How to deal with the position of the province of Vojvodina also arises. Moreover, Montenegro's Djukanovic, who supports some form of autonomy for Kosovo within Yugoslavia, may also have difficulty accepting the Kosovars as equal players in a three-sided political game. But the idea that Kosovar leaders living in a unit with a population already more than three times the size of Montenegro would even contemplate equal status with Djukanovic's entity, may be even more problematic.

²⁷ DSK leader, Fehmi Agani, maintains that Kosovo and Serbia must be separated in the interests of their mutual democratization: "As long as Kosovo remains as territory that must be dominated, the region can never undergo democratic processes." *NIN*, January 15, 1998, pp. 11-12.

* *Afterword*: On March 24, 1998, a new Serbian government was formed with Milosevic's Socialist Party of Serbia holding the key posts. Seselj's Serbian Radical Party received 15 of 36 portfolios. Seselj, and the second-in-command of the SRS, Tomislav Nikolic, were appointed as two of the five deputy prime ministers. The Yugoslav Left (JUL), headed by Milosevic's wife, also received several ministerial posts. At one of the most crucial moments in its political history, Serbia would be guided by a SPS/JUL-SRS alliance, or what may fairly be termed a "red-brown coalition."