archive.today
webpage capture
Saved from https://www.chronicle.com/article/in-yugoslavia-a-campus-born-resistance-m search
no other snapshots from this url
27 Oct 2023 02:16:59 UTC
All snapshots from host www.chronicle.com
Webpage Screenshot
share download .zip report bug or abuse

FEATURED: Student-Success Resource Center

REGISTER FOR A FREE ACCOUNT

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

SUBSCRIBE Sign In

NEWS | ADVICE | THE REVIEW | TOPICS › | CURRENT ISSUE | VIRTUAL EVENTS | STORE › | JOBS › |

NEWS

In Yugoslavia, a Campus-Born Resistance Movement Fights for Freedom

By Theresa Agovino | AUGUST 4, 2000

The performance is scheduled to begin in about two hours, but no one wants to play a key role.

Pressure is mounting on Milena Joksimovic to portray Mira Markovic, the wife of Yugoslavia's president, Slobodan Milosevic. Ms. Joksimovic steadfastly refuses. "I'd be too embarrassed," says the slender 21-year-old as she puts

ALSO SEE:

University of Belgrade Beset by Violence, Paralysis, and Frustration

out a cigarette in an overflowing ashtray. "It is a disgusting role."

In Yugoslavia it is a tossup whether Mr. Milosevic or his wife is more despised. One student agreed to accept the role of Mr. Milosevic, an accused war criminal largely blamed for starting a series of wars, most recently in Kosovo, which ripped apart Yugoslavia, leaving hundreds of thousands dead and tens of thousands of refugees. The destruction further weakened the strain on an economy already crippled by almost a decade of international sanctions.

Yet the Yugoslav defense minister, Gen. Dragoljub Ojdanic, believes Mr. Milosevic should be acclaimed as a national hero, an honor only the president can bestow.

Now Yugoslavia is waiting for the president to decorate himself, and a skit highlighting that irony is set to be staged by the Nis chapter of Otpor in the main square of Yugoslavia's second-largest city.

Otpor, which is Serbian for "resistance," was founded by about 15 students at the University of Belgrade and has mushroomed into a nearly 30,000-member, 126-chapter national organization dedicated to the nonviolent removal of Mr. Milosevic from the presidency. The group is still made up largely of students.

Through a mixture of youthful exuberance and arrogant optimism, of street protests and satirical skits, Otpor has shot some much-needed energy into a population left weary by a decade of war, and cynical about the chances of President Milosevic's splintered political opposition.

Such vitality is especially important as Yugoslavia heads toward an important crossroads. The Yugoslav Constitution says that elections must be held before the end of the year, and Otpor is plotting two strategies. One is to call citizens to engage in active civil disobedience if the government fails to hold the elections. The other is to persuade the largely apathetic electorate to vote if elections are held.

"Otpor is a new factor here, and they are important because they keep up the energy," says Sonja Biserko, head of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia. "They keep reminding people of their dissatisfaction, the repression here -- things people would rather not think about." The problem, she adds, is that many intellectuals and the opposition in more-traditional political parties don't offer an alternative to President Milosevic.

Human Rights Watch reported in July that the police and President Milosevic's sympathizers are increasingly using beatings, not just detention and interrogation, to fight Otpor. In one incident cited by Human Rights Watch, a policeman shouted, "I've had enough of you democrats!" while beating a man arrested for wearing an Otpor badge. Human-rights groups and Otpor activists are also concerned about a proposed law in Serbia that, under the pretense of fighting terrorism, would give the police and the courts broad powers to put Otpor members in jail.

A group of dissatisfied students founded Otpor in the fall of 1998. Opposition politicians were making no headway in efforts to topple Mr. Milosevic, and had begun to mimic the megalomania that has characterized many Balkan leaders. No one wanted to share power, and charges of corruption clouded the reputations of opposition-party leaders.

"The opposition parties just did not have a plan for change," says Ivan Andric, an Otpor founder. "There was real lethargy. So a friend called and said, 'What can we do?'"

Otpor's activists concede that the opposition parties are weak, but say they represent a better alternative than more years of President Milosevic. Members of the resistance group insist that, after the hoped-for power shift, Otpor will transform itself into a watchdog organization, keeping pressure on the opposition once it takes power. In the meantime, a new generation of politicians could emerge.

"We have to start somewhere," says Mr. Andric, an economics major at the University of Belgrade. Otpor was designed to be a leaderless organization with only one political motive -- removing Mr. Milosevic, Mr. Andric says. The group was constructed that way to attract all dissatisfied individuals, no matter what their political leanings. Decisions are largely made by consensus, and local chapters are practically autonomous. The organization is anything but streamlined, but founders insist a little confusion is worth it to counter the two major threats to any opposition group: bribery and prison. Otpor members believe it will be impossible to bribe all 30,000 of them or throw them all in jail. But a few Otpor activists have served time in prison, and at least 1,000 have been taken into custody for "informative talks," as the police call them. The routine list of questions includes, "Who is your leader?"

"The regime is afraid of Otpor because it is amorphous, uncertain, hard to control. That makes it dangerous," says Goran Milicevic, an economics professor who hasn't been permitted to teach since the Yugoslav government passed a law restricting academic freedom two years ago.

The police have already put an end to some Otpor activities. The Nis production was canceled after officers took several participants in for questioning as they approached the town square for the play. A police van was at the square an hour before the play was set to start. Undercover cops were everywhere, wearing identical rectangular sunglasses.

News of the detentions spread quickly in Nis, and soon 500 people were outside the station, calling for the police to release the activists. They waved Otpor flags and sang, "Slobo save Serbia and kill yourself." (Both of Mr. Milosevic's parents committed suicide before their son came to power.) In four hours, the activists were released.

Still, more people were in the cafes that day than outside the police station. "I don't have any time for the rallies," said a 32-year-old man who identified himself only as Zoran. He owns a small business that supports him, his wife, and their two young children. "This nation has many problems," said Zoran, "and we are used to them now, and we are used to being quiet and accepting that our situation is black."

Members of Otpor say they can't allow public lethargy to sidetrack them. "The police can really do anything they want anyway. Resistance is the only answer we

have," says Branko Ilic, one of Otpor's founders and most-visible activists. "This is a question of life. It is not a question of politics."

The classics major has gelled black hair, longish sideburns, and wraparound sunglasses tinted blue, which on another person might look tough. But Mr. Ilic's slight build, sweet demeanor, and dimpled smile override the glasses and create a more impish impression. He is 20, and could easily pass for 15, but the police have called him for questioning three times.

Mr. Ilic has rallied many university students to Otpor's cause, even though, at a demonstration last year, he was beaten unconscious by security guards in front of the University of Belgrade's philology building. He says he was a good student, and dreams of becoming an expert on Spanish literature. Now, however, he can't remember the last time he went to class -- a common characteristic of Otpor members. His activism takes up most of his time, and he finds the environment at the university depressing. "So many good teachers have left," he says. "I want to go to school, but it is not as important right now."

Since Mr. Ilic has become involved in Otpor, his father was also called in for questioning. His mother was suspended from her job as a clerk in the police department last March. Still, she doesn't want her son to abandon Otpor. "I feel alone and isolated sometimes, because our friends don't want to talk to us because our son is in Otpor," says Mrs. Ilic. "But I've always believed in Branko and his ideals."

One of the harshest acts of violence against Otpor occurred in the eastern city of Pozarevac, where President Milosevic and his wife were born and where their son, Marko, still lives.

One night last May, an Otpor member was called to a cafe to meet some of Marko Milosevic's friends, who were allegedly planning to try to force the activist to end his association with the resistance. Radojko Lukovic went to the cafe to defend his fellow Otpor member. When the night was over, Mr. Lukovic was in the hospital with a broken nose, blackened eyes, and missing teeth.

He and two other Otpor members who were beaten that night were charged with the attempted murder of two of Marko Milosevic's associates. The three activists say they are the real victims. "I knew the charges were just a political act, but I realized I was in real danger," says Mr. Lukovic.

The Pozarevac incident caused a huge stir in Yugoslavia. Everyone in the country saw that participation in Otpor could lead to injuries and prison.

"It is risky to be in Otpor. They are on the frontline. They are the first to get arrested," says Branka Rakic, a 19-year-old molecular-biology major at the

University of Belgrade. “I’m afraid to join. I don’t want to get beaten.”

One of Otpor’s strategies these days is to get others to share at least some of the responsibility for ousting President Milosevic. A new program called “Resistance in the Neighborhood” is designed to get older people involved, even if it is initially just wearing anti-Milosevic buttons or T-shirts, or putting posters in their buildings. Eventually, if necessary, Otpor wants to be able to call on such people to engage in various types of civil disobedience, such as boycotting government stores.

One a recent evening, Mr. Ilic talks to a group of 10 retired people and explains Otpor. He encourages them to tell their friends about Otpor and bring them to meetings to discuss concepts of civil disobedience.

“We have to promote the idea of resistance to everyone,” Mr. Ilic tells them. “People have to be ready to stand up for their rights.”

The group is charmed by his presentation, but remains skeptical. “Mr. Ilic lives in a world of beautiful wishes, and I think it will be difficult for them to come true,” says Tomislav Milosevic, a 65-year-old retired engineer. “Old people here grew up in a communist system, and they won’t change. All the old people here should just be expelled.”

Mr. Ilic graciously accepts everyone’s good wishes as they leave the room, but when they are gone he stops smiling. Sometimes, he says, he wants to ask them, “Why didn’t you do something? How could you let it get this bad?”

http://chronicle.com Section: International Page: A44

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please email the editors or submit a letter for publication.

INTERNATIONAL

SUBSCRIBE TODAY

EXPLORE CONTENT	KNOW THE CHRONICLE	ACCOUNT AND ACCESS	GET SUPPORT
Latest News	About Us	Manage Your Account	Contact Us
Newsletters	Write for Us	Manage Newsletters	Reprints & Permissions
Letters	Work at The Chronicle	Individual Subscriptions	User Agreement