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NEWS

As Serbia Stiffens Academic Controls, Professors Who Protest Risk Dismissal

By Theresa Agovino November 20, 1998

At the U. of Belgrade, dozens have refused to sign contracts that they liken to loyalty oaths

Despair is etched in Marija Bogdanovic's face. After teaching at the University of Belgrade for 35 years, she never thought she would question her decision to become an academic. Yet now she does, every day.

"Our government is politicizing education," she says. "Our government doesn't care about the quality of education."

The government to which she refers is Serbia's. Serbia and Montenegro are all that remain of the former six-republic Yugoslav federation.

Ms. Bogdanovic has not only witnessed the recent introduction of a law by the government of Serbia that has essentially abolished academic freedom and university autonomy; she has also seen how years of living under a repressive regime have muted the outrage that most scholars and students now feel toward such changes.

The law, which was adopted by Serbia's parliament in May, gives the government the power to appoint rectors, deans, and members of university boards. The deans, who in the past were elected by professors, now have the power to hire and fire faculty members at will.

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The new rector of the University of Belgrade and several of its newly appointed deans are prominent members of political parties that make up the ruling coalition in Serbia. At the same time, many professors with ties to opposition political parties have been ousted from their posts at the university.

Ms. Bogdanovic resigned as dean of the Faculty of Philosophy rather than allow herself to be replaced. Although she continues to teach social-science methodology, she says she is left to wonder why she ever became an academic. "There is no solidarity among the professors," she says.

That may be so, but the government's actions have sparked resistance in several pockets of the university, and provoked strong reactions outside the country. Human Rights Watch, an international organization based in New York, called the new law "an unprecedented assault on academic freedom and the autonomy of Serbian universities." The Alliance of Universities for Democracy, which represents 143 institutions in Central and Eastern Europe and the United States, last week passed a resolution condemning Serbia's actions, calling them a threat to democratic development as well as to academic freedom.

Within Yugoslavia, an independent association of intellectuals known as the Belgrade Circle has been trying to organize international opposition to the new law on universities.

On the campus of the 50,000-student University of Belgrade, reactions to the law have varied among the many faculties, or schools. About 150 of the institution's 4,200 faculty members have refused to sign an employment contract that is required under the law. To sign the document, many have said, would be like taking an oath of loyalty to the government.

The refusal to sign has thus far resulted in the firing of at least five professors, the suspension of about 50, and the resignation of 13. The electrical-engineering faculty, where one professor who had refused to sign the contract was physically removed from his classroom by security guards, is now on strike.

The scale of the resistance, however, has been small, and observers here seem to agree that the Yugoslav president, Slobodan Milosevic, is succeeding in his campaign to muzzle one of the last bastions of free thinking in the country. The purge at the University of Belgrade dovetails with a new law that severely limits freedom of the press. Three independent newspapers have been shut down in the past two months, and the government has done its best to jam broadcasts by the BBC, Radio Free Europe, and the Voice of America.

"This is the action of a paranoid, totalitarian regime," says Ivan Vejvoda, executive director of the Fund for an Open Society-Yugoslavia, a part of the international network of philanthropic groups sponsored by George Soros, the Hungarian-American financier. "They fear that the masses will overthrow them, so they are trying to fill in the places that might bring the tidal wave of change."

Mr. Vejvoda says the government's tactics have taken a toll. "People are losing contact with democratic institutions, and they are becoming cynical," he says. "People are actively apathetic."

Yugoslavs say that while the anti-government, university-based protests in late 1996 and early 1997 attracted international attention, they brought little lasting change. People here also note that years of living under international economic sanctions have drained their energy and their pocketbooks. Many academics say that they have not spoken out against the university law because they simply cannot afford to get fired. Others acknowledge being just too frightened to protest.

Observers here note that Mr. Milosevic's timing is impeccable. His latest moves to quash independent, democratic-leaning institutions have been overshadowed by the crisis in Kosovo, the province of southern Serbia that is home to an ethnic-Albanian majority that wants independence, or at least autonomy. A violent Serb crackdown on separatists in the province in recent months has drawn threats of bombing by NATO. Serbia has agreed to pull its security forces out of Kosovo, although that operation is not yet complete.

Since the university law was adopted, 16 of Belgrade's 36 deans have been replaced. Four of the deans resigned, but the others were removed.

While none of the deans who were replaced were known to be active in political parties, 15 of the 16 new appointees are members of one of the three parties that make up Serbia's ruling coalition. The new rector of the university, Jagos Puric, is a member of the Yugoslav Left, a party headed by Mira Markovic, the wife of President Milosevic.

At least 13 politicians who serve in the ruling coalition -- made up of the Serbian Radical Party, the Socialist Party of Serbia, and the Yugoslav Left -- have been named to various boards at the university. Most notably, Vojislav Seselj, who heads the ultra-nationalist Serbian Radical Party, now sits on the university's governing board as well as the boards of the Faculty of Law and the Faculty of Economics.

Another leader of the Serbian Radical Party, Radmilo Marojevic, is the new dean of the Faculty of Philology, which is in turmoil. Mr. Marojevic has suspended 30 faculty members for refusing to sign the new

employment contract. He also has ordered that the comparative-literature department be abolished.

The department had been headed by Vladeta Jankovic, a founder of the Democratic Party of Serbia, an opposition group. "I'm afraid I'm the reason my department was so hard hit," says Mr. Jankovic, who was suspended and, last week, fired.

Mr. Marojevic declined a request for an interview. However, at a public meeting on the campus where he was vilified by students and faculty members, he insisted that he was not trying to stop the teaching of comparative literature, but simply believed that it did not need to be a stand-alone department. "I'm not firing anyone," he said at the meeting. "They are firing themselves by not signing the contract. I'm only a dean who respects the law."

Mr. Jankovic dismisses such arguments. "Our department is a fine spiritual instrument that for decades has made a contribution," he says. "It has been built up for generations and produced journalists, artists, and writers. I don't know what you stand for when you try to mess up a fine department with technicalities."

Mr. Jankovic and eight of his colleagues traveled to Budapest this month to bring their plight to the attention of educators abroad. They spoke at a press conference, organized by the Central European University, that bore the title "Universities for Freedom, Freedom for Universities."

The new dean of Belgrade's law faculty is employing the same logic as his counterpart in the Faculty of Philology to oust professors. Oliver Antic has fired four professors and suspended nine because they did not show up for work. The scholars say they were protesting the new employment contract. But Mr. Antic says that the absence of 13 professors out of 99 doesn't qualify as a strike. "People are just refusing to work," he says.

Mr. Antic defends the new university law. "This is a state university, but the state had no input except to give money," he says. "Before, the law professors didn't go to class. They had a buddy system where they took care of each other."

Observers say such allegations do not seem plausible, because so few members of the school's faculty declined to sign the contract.

The largest number of contract holdouts has been in the philosophy faculty, which was the epicenter of the 1996-97 protest movement. Of the school's 200 faculty members, 61 have refused to sign contracts. Many say that they believe they enjoy some strength in numbers, which thus far has

spared them from any punitive action. But they are under no illusions that they are safe from the government's campaign to rid the university of those deemed politically undesirable. "Anything can happen," says Ms. Bogdanovic.

Many of those who did sign contracts say that their colleagues who have refused to do so are ultimately doing their students a disservice, because replacement instructors are likely to be much less qualified. They also resent the notion that signing the contract is like pledging loyalty to the government.

"It is a bad law, and everyone knows it," says Ljubisa Rajic, an associate professor of Scandinavian studies. "But our Constitution is bad. Many of our laws are bad, yet I don't throw away my passport. My students will get a bad education if I'm not here. I'd rather stay and fight it out."

Vladimir Ilic opted to sign his contract because he did not want anything to interfere with his publication of a book that analyzes political thought in Serbia. "I didn't want to take part in any resistance," says Mr. Ilic, an assistant professor of social-science methodology. "I was worried about my book, and my reputation. I'm sure my book is a greater contribution to the university than my not signing a contract."

Mr. Ilic says he also did not know if his colleagues would stand firm in their opposition. "When there is great pressure, my colleagues abandon resistance," he says, referring to the 1996-97 protests. "I just didn't know if they would hold the promise. I didn't have enough confidence in my colleagues."

Students say that the ill-fated protests of the winter of 1996-97 are keeping them from taking to the streets again.

"We tried protests and they didn't do a thing," says Mirjana Radenkovic, who is majoring in Greek. "It is just too bad that people who don't know the subjects well will now be giving us classes."

But Dragana Javanovic reckons that any diploma is better than no diploma, even if it is earned in classes taught by less-qualified professors. "I'd be afraid to protest; I'd be afraid to get kicked out," says Ms. Javanovic, an Italian major. "What am I supposed to do? I need a decent job. I can't give away my whole life."

Many students just want to graduate so they can leave the country. If nothing else, the new university law is compounding the effects of an already severe brain drain that has plagued Yugoslavia since the federation began to unravel, in 1991. Independent newspapers say that

more than 100,000 professionals have abandoned the country since that time.

Zoran Milutinovic never thought that he would be one of those who fled, but now he hopes to leave. “All of my friends left between 1991 and 1994, but I stayed to be a role model,” says Mr. Milutinovic, an assistant professor of comparative literature at Belgrade until he was fired last week for not signing his contract. “Now I can’t teach. All I can do is stay and suffer. I can’t help my students now.”

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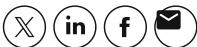
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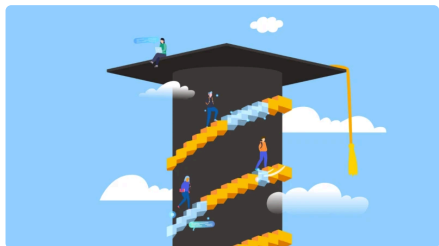
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