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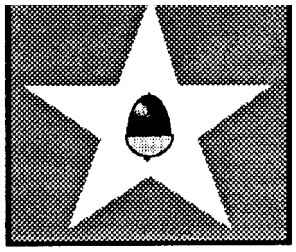

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The Death Of Zoran Djindjic - A Time For Realism

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The assassination of Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic on 12 March 2003 is likely to prove a landmark in Serbian and Balkan history. Although there have been numerous other political assassinations in Serbia and Montenegro since the fall of Milosevic in 2000, in general the victims were not seen in the international community as particularly important figures and the murders could easily be designated as part of the process of post-conflict 'score settling', or as a product of organised crime.

The preferred vision of post-Milosevic Serbia as a society that had benefited from a 'democratic revolution' in autumn 2000 and was embarking on a firm reform and pro-European progress was not affected by these pre-Djindjic murders. This is not likely to be the case now. As in all high profile assassinations, the death of the leader concerned is likely to have a symbolic importance that easily exceeds the actual loss of political skills embodied in that dead individual. Even in terms of practical abilities, such will be the case with this killing, as although the Serbian government contains some competent reformist politicians, few have the capacity and mixture of skills, background and nationalist credentials to replace Djindjic effectively. The movement of support towards ex-Yugoslav President Kostunica's party since the murder is likely to slow the reform process. The political career of his replacement as Prime Minister, Zoran Zivkovic, was built in Nis, a city that was a byword for southern Serbian social and economic conservatism during the Milosevic years, and one with a substantial presence of the military and security apparatus.

Despite British-led vigorous efforts to boost the Serbian government in the media,[1] the assassination of Djindjic is likely to call into question some of the projected achievements of the post-Milosevic government, and to invite enquiry as to how far fundamental or structural change has occurred in Serbia.[2] Negative psychological processes among the people are likely to be encouraged by the recurrence of the tradition of high profile political assassination as a means of securing political change in Serbia/Yugoslavia, something that goes back to the Royal assassinations of the Obrenovic family in 1903, with well known later examples such as the murder of King Alexander in 1934 in Marseilles. Coming at a time when Serbia was supposed to be becoming less of a 'Balkan' country, the assassination falls into a specific and local historical tradition.

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The Context

By far the most important political factor in the recent Serbian background was the revival of hardline nationalism. It is of course questionable how far this political factor in Serbia had really diminished or disappeared after autumn 2000, as election results indicate. It is arguable that in a fair election in Serbia, the hard nationalist Right always commands about a quarter or a third of the vote, and that this proportion can easily increase to a half or more in times of national stress or crisis. The 'revolution' of autumn 2000 made no difference to this whatsoever. In the election held in December 2000 to legitimise the overthrow of Milosevic in the federal parliament, extremist candidates' votes held up quite well, and this has remained the case since.[3] During the last few months there has been a revival in the fortunes of the ex-paramilitary leader Vojislav Seselj, and previously demoralised or fragmented political support for hard nationalism had coalesced around his party. The promotion of the 'organised crime' theory of the murder is an attempt to obscure this fact in international political discourse about Serbia, and to protect the illusion that it is any more 'democratic' than other Balkan nations, and to assert its privileged position as the 'key to stability' in many minds.

The Role Of The Hague Tribunal

The response of the international community to the growth of the Right was to send Seselj to the International War Crimes Tribunal (IWCT) in the Hague. This appears to have been done as something of a knee jerk reaction to his growing electoral support and the more dangerous possibility that he could lead old Milosevic forces back into power. His departure to the Hague was accompanied by over 100,000 cheering supporters and as with other IWCT activities, the Djindjic killing is bound to raise the question in many minds as to how far the Hague international court is an effective contributor to conflict resolution in the Balkans, or whether extraditions to the Hague exacerbate nationalist and chauvinist sentiment. Critics of the Hague argue that followers who see their democratically elected leaders as subject to what they regard as arbitrary and politicised legal procedures in a distant foreign country have their nationalist views strengthened[4] and that the advocates of the Hague as a means of conflict resolution are, in this sense, profoundly elitist. The view that the IWCT has a benevolent general effect depends in the last analysis on the political perception that local non-elite opinion in Serbia and elsewhere does not matter very much. Given the basically populist nature of Serbian and most Balkan politics for many years, this is a highly unstable strategic assumption. In both local and international media terms, the Hague also suffers from the law of diminishing returns, where now Milosevic is on trial other new arrests attract less and less interest, and so do not have the desired effect of blunting nationalist and extremist views.

Organised Crime – A Catalyst?

The argument has been widely put forward in the western media that the Djindjic murder was a result of organised crime, thus positing the presence of a 'democratic' sector of Serbia unaffected by it, the preferred view of the international community post-October 2000. This is not very credible for those with any background knowledge of Serbia in the last fifteen years. At various periods in his own career Djindjic was alleged to have Mafia links, and in particular his party was said by some experts to depend on cigarette smuggling for local funding. The so-called Zemun Mafia has been blamed for his death, which in terms of the operations of the assassination may well be the case, but Zemun town is of course a notorious stronghold of support for Seselj and hardline nationalism in general. The 'mafia' explanation rests on a profoundly Belgradecentric and misleading perception of Serbian political reality, and a misunderstanding of Serbian expansionist threats to the region since the late 1980s.

The facts of Djindjic's own political biography do not support the implicit depoliticisation of the organised crime theorists. He was an ardent supporter of hardline nationalism in the Bosnian Serb community before 1995, for instance. Many voters in places like Zemun who hold strong nationalist views saw a central betrayal of their nation in the departure of their leaders to the Hague. Assassinations of a major nature do not take place in a political vacuum. The 'spun' media emphasis on organised crime in the coverage of the assassination - apart from CNN, the London Times, and one or two other broadsheet newspapers in the West which had more realistic coverage - is linked to an absence of political analysis about what has really been happening in Serbia since autumn 2000.[5]

In practice the political culture of Serbia and other Balkan countries depends in one aspect on an interface between crime and paramilitary activity, and the fact that the top stratum of the Serbian political elite has changed since the days of Milosevic has not altered this fact. The Yugoslav wars have produced the legacy of a widespread paramilitary culture, with many people able to use sophisticated personal weapons, and in turn these groups and individuals can be hired or used by domestic and/or foreign political interests.

The Crime

The emphasis on organised crime in the coverage and diplomatic discourse also detracts from rational analysis of the crime itself, which seems to have involved a very high degree of professionalism, intelligence about Mr Djindjic's movements, and the use of sophisticated weapons. There are indications that the Interior Ministry in Belgrade was initially very unwilling to release important data to journalists about what happened.

In other contexts, it would be normal at least to raise the issue of whether a foreign government or local political force associated with a foreign government might have some form of involvement, given the many interests which might benefit from a destabilisation of Serbia at a time of geopolitical scale crisis in Iraq. This analysis has yet to take place, even though there is very recent evidence of links between Iraq and elements in the military-industrial world in Serbia and the Bosnian Serb republic. In no particular order of importance or priority, it is rational to suggest that extremist Islamic interests, Iraq, conservative forces in Russia and states like Belarus, Montenegrin extremists, Kosovar Albanian and Bosnian Serb and Bosnian Moslem extremists and many conservatives within Serbia itself traditionally oriented towards foreign countries might be involved, or have a strong interest in the demise of Djindjic. This is not to suggest that any of them are involved at all, or that this necessarily happened, or to posit a 'conspiracy theory'; only to argue that the relative improvement in Serbia since 2000 has not made the country of lesser strategic or regional importance. Apart from its other limitations as a theory of Balkan political reality, the organised crime thesis obscures the role of foreign powers in the Balkan region, the role of foreign activity in the removal of Milosevic, and the real basis of extremist support at popular level, particularly in small towns in south and central Serbia. The coercive 'spin' in the media has been useful in obscuring the foreign element in the removal of Milosevic, but now places limits on the analysis of the Djindjic murder.

Regional Aspects

The most immediate effects of the killing are likely to be felt in Montenegro and Kosovo, where International Community political initiatives have been taken to stabilise the situation with Belgrade. Since the murder, European Union efforts have been focussed on trying to reinvigorate the arrangements for the Serbia-Montenegro federation, a task that is not likely to be made easier in the current climate. In Kosovo projected talks between Serbian and Kosovan political leaders on a limited range of technical issues have been put on hold. As there is strong opposition to the timing and often also the principle of the talks in all the Kosovo Albanian political parties, it remains to be seen if they will be held at all in the near future or what will emerge from them if they are. The first Hague indictments served against Kosovar Albanian leaders have had little effect on the local political atmosphere, where the priority for all ethnic Albanian parties is to build and consolidate independent Kosovar institutions.[6]

The relations of Belgrade with non-Serb forces are likely to be complicated by local perceptions of the growing financial imbalances caused by the current US administration's emphasis on increasing financial aid for Belgrade, with figures of the order of US$700 million under discussion, while aid is reduced to weak states such as FYROM/Republic of Macedonia. This appears to be part of the currently fashionable neo-conservative view in Washington that 'strong states' are what are needed in the Balkans, and that Belgrade is a key centre. Critics of this view believe the administration has an obsolete

view of Balkan political development, based on Yugonostalgia, with the new and innovative economic and political forces actually developing in the coastal states such as Croatia, Montenegro and Albania rather than Bosnia or Serbia.

Optimism & Realism

The assassination took place in a climate of growing official optimism about the Balkans, particularly in the State Department, where a glowing picture of recent progress has been common, linked to a reduction of US diplomatic commitment to the region. This optimism should be modified by Djindjic's death, but it is not clear if it will be. There are still very strong vested interests linked to current over-optimistic analyses, particularly in some liberal international legal and diplomatic circles where the Hague tribunal is seen as a central tool in the globalisation of politics and the consequences of its actions are effectively placed outside rational political analysis, and in Europe, where the issue of support for Belgrade and the new federation rests partly on the basis of geopolitical factors linked to general anti-Americanism. These political forces were those in the EU and NATO that sought to hold Serb-dominated Yugoslavia together at all costs, to oppose US policies in Bosnia, and the NATO intervention in Kosovo.

With policies based on a realistic appraisal of Serbian society, some progress in the post-Milosevic world is possible, but it seems more likely at the moment that the entrenched lobbies in Western governments will opt for over-optimism that has its basis in a 'spun' analysis of what actually happened in Serbia in autumn 2000, and the US government appears to be willing to bankroll the current policy. In practice this involves substantial direct financial transfers to current Serb elite groups, which given the nature of Balkan societies are impossible to keep confidential and, it could be claimed, hinder the fight against corruption and organised crime. Proponents of these transfers argue that they use investment incentives to promote democratic political parties and discourage elite elements from returning to nationalism, and the financial relationship compromises leaders and makes them more open to psychological and legal pressures to moderate their behaviour. But as the Djindjic murder shows, this is not a cost-free policy.

The exaggerated expectations this involves may exact a heavy price on political elites as rank and file nationalists find their expectations betrayed by their elected leaders and, as in the Djindjic killing, resort to violence to prevent political change in directions they dislike. More realistic and careful thought about the role of the Hague IWCT in conflict resolution is urgently needed, and much more transparency in its operations, with the end of sealed indictments, and changes in the rules of evidence so that defendants are given access to relevant material on an equal basis to the prosecution, as in British and American courts. This would help reduce the increasingly common perception in the Balkan countries that Hague trials are essentially conducted on a political basis, and that the defendant has no chance of

proving his innocence for procedural reasons, or because of the use of evidence for the prosecution that would not be admissible in mainstream courts in most nations.

Britain has a heavy responsibility in these matters, given the centrality of British intelligence and diplomatic activity to the events of autumn 2000 and the managed removal of Milosevic from power, and the very substantial British inputs at the Hague in terms of influence and personnel.

ENDNOTES

[1] As in the recent BBC films on the end of Yugoslavia, where in otherwise interesting and professional work the managed nature of the 'revolution' in autumn 2000 was often obscured, particularly the degree of foreign input.

[2] Media comment in the West has focussed on the general stability of Serbian institutions, understandably.

[3] See CSRC papers by James Pettifer, CSRC, G91, '2001: The Prospects for a New Yugoslavia?', February 2001; John Phillips, OB95, 'The Electoral Impasse in Serbia - Autumn 2002', 3 January 2003.

[4] It is perhaps an illustration of the unbalanced nature of current media discourse about the realities of Serbia (and the Balkans generally) that in informative stories covering the Djindjic killing in very responsible journals such as The Economist, Time and Newsweek, the recent activities of the IWCT in the Hague involving Seselj's arrest were not mentioned at all in most cases, although Carla del Ponte's controversial non-attendance at the Djindjic funeral did receive some subsequent coverage.

[5] The fact that the post-autumn 2000 governments are seen as dedicated to 'reform' is regarded as sufficient, although it could well be argued that many of the 'reforms' such as privatisation were also sought by the Milosevic regime and in their time received much international approval and participation, for example telecom privatisation.

[6] The effect on Kosovo politics of the recent IWCT arrests is unclear but it may well increase support for paramilitary groups and the political underground, given that the most prominent figure involved, Fatmir Limaj, is a Kosovo MP and had been seen as a moderate and positive figure by the international community in the demobilisation of the Kosova Liberation Army and the development of the new Kosovo parliament. The camp he is alleged to have controlled has not been mentioned in any official UNMIK, KFOR or OSCE Kosovo political document or public discourse I am aware of since July1999, and when the indictment was served on Limaj different accounts of its location were given in media announcements.

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