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**THE 5 OCTOBER REVOLUTION,
“MILOŠEVIĆ’S LEGACY”, AND DEMOCRATIC SERBIA**

("The Nature of 5. October, 'Milošević's Legacy', and Democratic Serbia", in I. Spasić and M. Subotić (ed.), *Revolution and Order: Serbia after October 2000*, pp. 35-42. Belgrade, 2001: Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory)

In this paper I wish to explore the nature of the 5 October changeover, its influence on the consolidation of the democratic order in Serbia, and finally what can be called »Milošević's legacy«.

A putsch or a revolution?

From historical experience during the past three hundred years we know that forceful overthrowing of authoritarian regimes tends to produce weak and unstable democratic governments (Elster, Offe, Preuss, 1998: 49). In ordinary political conditions, as Plato argues, it is not always the most virtuous people who come to power. In cases when power is seized primarily by force, it is very unlikely that the new ruler will be someone who is capable of running the country. It is equally unlikely that he or she will cede power peacefully, after a certain period of time, to another ruler (Goodspeed, 1962: 235). Violent changes of power are invariably nothing but »a desperate cure for a desperate illness«. And in such therapies the outcome is most often highly unpredictable. Frequently one despot is replaced by another, still worse and more malignant, so that Batista was replaced by Castro, and Pahlavi by Khomeini (Garfinkle et al., 1992: 4, 65).

Certainly, there was some violence in the 5 October changeover. But it is not unimportant whether the events of 5 October are to be called a »putsch carried out by CIA« (see the headline on the front page of *Velika Srbija*, vol. XI, No. 1584, October 2000), or a »revolution«, or some other kind of change of power. Since the notions such as »putsch«, »overthrow« or »revolution« tend to be used rather loosely, in the following sections I shall try to specify the meaning of these concepts.

In the relevant literature, *putsch* is understood as a subtype of *coup d'état*. Coup in turn is defined as a sudden and violent overthrow of the incumbent government and seizure of power by a small number of people who were members of the state structure (Goodspeed, 1962: ix; Luttwak, 1969: 20; David, 1986: 7; Ferguson, 1987: 13; O'Kane, 1987: 22; 37; Farcau, 1994: 2). Coup d'état has several subcategories: 1) *palace revolution*, involving direct participants in power, when power changes hands, but its distribution remains the same; 2) *pronunciamiento*, in which the overthrow is carried out by the military as a whole; 3) *putsch*, when the overthrow is performed by just a part of the military (some units, some officers...); a special kind of putsch is *cuartelazo*, where one unit rebels first, and the others follow (Luttwak, 1969: 25, Farcau, 1994: 3). Anyhow, a coup d'état does not require the participation of the masses or large

military forces. It differs therefore from a revolution or civil war (Luttwak, 1969: 24; David, 1986: 7). Coup d'etat is simply "a short, sharp action aimed at the seizure of the key functions of a state's ruling system, usually coming to fruition or failure within the space of twenty-four hours" (Farcau, 1994: 7).

Thus if a change of power is to be called putsch, power must be taken by army or police officers who have carried it out. The second possibility is that instead of officers the government is taken over by civilian politicians, while actual power is in the hands of some 'revolutionary committee' or 'army council'. Neither of these is found in the 5 October changeover. Whatever the role of police was in ousting Milošević (on its importance see Antonić, 2001a), actual power was indeed taken over by politicians who until the overthrow had been in deep opposition to the regime. And secondly, whatever connections the new government had had with the police or the military, it put armed forces under its control rather than becoming their instrument.

If we speak of a *revolution*, it can be defined as a violent change of power by people who are not (or are no longer) parts of the state apparatus. The changeover results not just in a new government but in a new order as well. (A new *political* order in the case of political revolution, and new *social* order in the case of social revolution.) Every revolution implies active participation of citizens in the revolt, although not necessarily of a majority ("probably much less than two or three percent", Tullock, 1987: 213). Revolution means also a certain armed rebellion. This can be the rebellion of a seceded segment of the government (parliament versus the king, like in the English Revolution; or colony versus the metropolis, like in the American Revolution). It can also involve an attack of party units (October Revolution), or of the armed mob (French Revolution). But some measure of armed violence is always present.

After the Prague 'velvet revolution' (1989), however, the concept of "peaceful revolution" has appeared as well. Although the term is a contradiction in terms, it implies that a regime breaks up under the pressure of non-violent popular upheaval, with the government failing to launch the last armed struggle. This was precisely what happened in the Prague case. When 50 000 demonstrators gathered at the Wenceslas Square, on 24 November 1989 the Central Committee was faced with the question whether to crush daily protests by force. Without any doubt, the Czechoslovak police and army had the necessary means at their disposal, and all that was needed was a political decision. Yet the Central Committee decided not to use force. Very soon half of million people went into the streets of Prague, and the communist power was dissolved (Schöpflin, 1993: 231).

Nevertheless, "peaceful revolutions" are still exceptional. It is difficult for peaceful demonstrators to effect a revolution. The government can easily crush even the largest demonstrations only if it is ready to use force. The chief danger for the government on such occasions, rather than the number or rage of the protesters, is its own timidity and lack of resolve to go to the end in crushing demonstrations. "The dangerous situation for a ruler is one in which he kills a few people and then decides he doesn't want to kill any more. This is, in essence, what happened to the Shah of Iran. A truly ruthless leader with loyal troops and a

good internal intelligence service does not need to worry very much about popular uprisings” (Tullock, 1987:69).

Consequently, when judging the character of the events of 5 October there is no doubt that they exhibited almost all features of a revolution. The overthrow was carried out by political forces that had not been parts of the ruling structure. In the changeover the participation of the people was crucial – at least half a million people were in the streets of Belgrade on that day (*Blic*, 6 October 2000, p. 3). Traits of armed rebellion were also present – Nebojša Čović had procured a truckfull of guns and armed 150 people, “mainly former policemen” (Bujošević and Radovanović, 2000: 30); but, as Milošević’s troops fortunately surrendered without struggle, these weapons were not used (on the armed aspect of 5 October see: Antonić, 2000a). Unlike Prague, where the command to crush the demonstrations by force was never issued, in Belgrade such an order was actually issued. In that respect the Belgrade changeover is closer to a revolution than the Prague one. True, the fact that just two people were killed, by accident, on 5 October makes the whole event more conforming to the Prague model than to the Bucharest one. But one should bear in mind that other, much more famous revolutionary dates did not cause larger numbers of casualties. In the attack on the Bastille no lives seem to have been lost, while in the raid on the Winter Palace, on 25 October 1917, less than 20 people were killed (Goodspeed, 1962: 233). Finally, 5 October meant not just the change of power, but also a change of order. Milošević’s authoritarian order, with powerful sultanistic tendencies (Antonić, 2000b), was replaced by an order which, admittedly, belongs into the weaker sort of democracies (the so-called electoral democracy; Diamond, 1996), but still is democratic.

In sum, 5 October was a revolution. So far predominantly a *political* one, although the possibility for it to grow into a *social* revolution is not ruled out, provided that pro-reform democratic forces succeed in their intentions. Obviously, from the perspective of consolidation of the democratic order every revolution has its bad sides. But in the case of the 5 October overthrow the bad sides are greatly mitigated.

First, this revolution took place at the moment when the regime was already exhausted, so that the overthrow did not require much violence. Had the regime been stronger, it would have defended itself more resolutely; had it defended itself more resolutely, there would have been more blood; had there been more blood, more bad feelings would have remained among the people; stronger resentments would have brought deeper divisions, which in turn would have made democratic order less solid. As it happened, the old regime fell without much blood. There was no need for large-scale revenge, so that social relations were not poisoned by hatred and intolerance.

And secondly, the 5 October turn was not, like other revolutions, an illegal change of power. 5 October itself should be viewed within the context determined by the elections of 24 September, on one hand, and the elections of 23 December, on the other. The revolution actually surged precisely out of the striving to respect citizens’ electoral will, to ensure democratic transfer of power. The most serious ailments of young, post-revolutionary democracies are due to a break in the functioning of the legal order. The old, authoritarian regime is usually

removed by an abolishment of the constitution and the laws, while some self-appointed, non-elected revolutionary body takes on the role of legislator or even constitution-maker. In Serbia, on the contrary, the change of political order took place exactly according to the legal and constitutional provisions of the old order, in such a way that the authoritarian regime was forced to observe what had otherwise served it just as a fake identity card. Political order was changed by setting in motion parts of the legal system that had existed but never worked (and had been instituted in order not to work). In this way, the 5 October changeover not only failed to abolish the legal order but activated it in its entirety. Thus the danger of anarchy, lawlessness and illegality was reduced to a minimum.

On the whole, if Serbia was not lucky with Milošević, at least the way in which he left was not so bad. Milošević was ousted without much resistance and in a form which enabled the people to reclaim self-respect. If Milošević had been overthrown earlier, when his order was not yet so exhausted, and without an electoral defeat, i.e. in a truly revolutionary manner, the police would have resisted much more seriously and Serbia would have had to undergo a civil war. If on the other hand he had been ousted later, the sultanistic tendencies would have had more time to shape the autocratic system, and Milošević would have prepared much better for the final clash. In that case he could have been removed only through some sort of coup d'état, without the necessary popular catharsis. In both cases, we would have "revolutionary committees" and a much more complicated transition into a genuinely democratic order.

Milošević's legacy

Let us turn now to "Milošević's legacy". Is there anything good that Milošević has bequeathed Serbia? He can definitely be counted among the worse rulers in Serbian history. In the thirteen years of his rule Serbia was struck by most diverse evils.

Firstly, there are the wars. After five-year long wars for Yugoslav succession (1991-1995), Serbia entered a war against the alliance of 19 most developed countries (1999). The wars brought several thousands dead people, dozens of thousands injured and over a million refugees (in and out of Serbia). Direct war damage is over four billion dollars, indirect one as much as one hundred. The basic task of a ruler is to protect his or her citizens from the state of nature. There is no worse state of nature than war. Wars, of course, cannot always be avoided. But Milošević was getting into wars imprudently, and often unnecessarily.

The second evil was poverty. When Milošević came to power, life in Serbia was better than in most other communist countries. In the meantime, wages and pensions have dropped to one fifth of the original level, national product to one fourth, unemployment doubled, and surplus of employees tripled (Dinkić, 2001: 1). Most people have slid into penury. For many families, it sometimes grew into humiliating misery. The evidence of personal stories, say, during the period of hyper-inflation, shows how much suffering was hiding behind each of these cold figures.

The Belgrade intellectual made bread and the whole morning enjoyed the results of his endeavors, trying to convince his family that this was exactly the right thing to do. To the remark that the only reason for such behavior on his part was the fact that there was nothing else in the refrigerator, he said that it was not true, that during World War II the situation had been even worse. ... Unemployed woman doctor went with her two daughters to a soup kitchen. Seeing the strange faces of the starving demi-monde, the child asked the mother to explain what sort of place was that. 'This is a special restaurant where not everybody can eat' – the mother curtly replied. ... One of the teachers was forced to take bread out of a garbage container in front of his house, wash it and bake it anew..." (DR, 1994: 135-138).

Thirdly, Serbia has lost Kosovo, in factual if not in legal terms. The state of the South Slavs, into which Serbs had built two million lives, also vanished. Milošević was not the only one to blame for these tragedies. But the ruler who leaves his country behind considerably smaller than it was in the beginning of his rule is not unlike a master of the household who through neglect wastes most of the riches he inherited.

And fourthly, Serbia spoiled its relations with almost all ex-Yugoslav countries. It has also remained without most of its old friends and allies. In earlier times, Serbs were held in high esteem, primarily because of their honorable and brave conduct in the world wars. Now they have fallen into disrepute, as bullies, conquistadors and rabble. True, such an image was partly created artificially by Serbian political enemies. But there was a great deal in Milošević's policies that nurtured such efforts and rendered meaningless the attempts of our friends to understand and justify us.

Yet, in every evil there is some good. From all these bad deeds it should be possible to derive some benefit. True, this benefit is by far lesser than the damage done. But if we wish not to forgo it, we have to become aware of it.

The first benefit is a general sobering down, both amongst the intelligentsia and amongst ordinary people. Our popular mind, all the way until Milošević, was burdened by all sorts of myths. Serbs used to believe that they are a particularly brave people, that they are invincible in war, that they never attack those who are weaker, that they are noble-spirited and freedom-loving, that they can defy the whole world if they wish so, and many similar things. Under Milošević, Serbs got a chance to see themselves in a realistic light. The famous Serbian heroism in these wars turned out very often to be empty bragging. Serbs proved to be cowards, oppressors and criminals, just as much as other nations, and sometimes even more. They were losing battles even when they were stronger. Contrary to the popular saying that "a Serb gladly serves as a soldier", many Serbs did not do it gladly, and many did not want to do it *at all*. Defying the world has turned out so clearly to be stupid and vain; love for freedom has transformed into a readiness to suffer injustice and humiliation if only there is some personal privilege that can be derived from it. The propensity to ruin one's own life and the life of one's children in the name of redressing global injustices or a better future has also borne its fruits in a quite palpable form.

On the whole, if "suffering is the mother of wisdom" as it is sometimes said, through suffering under Milošević Serbs have been given an opportunity to

learn something more about themselves, and about the world they live in. It seems that Serbs today, freed from many illusions, have a better and clearer insight into their own position and the world situation than they had for much of 20th century. This should be taken as the first valid legacy of Milošević's times.

The second legacy is the so-called advantage of lagging behind (Bogdanović, 1997: 381). After being frozen in Milošević's "crypto-communist limbo", Serbia is about ten years behind the other countries in transition. Therefore it is in a position to see different experiences and different patterns of installing the market economy and democracy. It can look at the examples of successful transformation, such as the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland or Slovenia. There are also instances of less successful transformation, like Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania or Croatia. Finally, there are lessons to be taken from bad examples of unsuccessful transformation as well - the cases of Russia, Moldova or Georgia. Throughout some forty post-communist countries almost all known patterns of economic, political, social and cultural reforms have been implemented. Thus the transitionally "underdeveloped" Serbia has the chance of being able to choose the least painful and most successful paths to transformation.

Finally, the third valid legacy of Milošević's rule is the ethnic homogeneity of today's Serbia. After the loss of Kosovo and the arrival of exiled Serbs from Croatia and Bosnia, Serbia has become a more harmonious state whole than before. This is not important for the sake of some racial or ethnic purity. It is important for the building of political nation and democracy. As has been shown repeatedly (Mill, 1958; Miller, 1995; Antonić, 1997, 1999), the absence of deep ethnic cleavages and the presence – be it quite modest – of "primary attachment" to the community are fundamental preconditions for establishing a democratic order. If the dissolution of Yugoslavia stops at, say, independent Montenegro and (*de facto*, if not *de iure*) independent Kosovo, Serbia could arrive at a "nation-state", political nation and stable democracy within a comparatively short period of time. Of course, under the assumption that the economic situation in the forthcoming period gets at least slightly better.

Prospects for the future

If we think about the future bearing in mind the legacy we have received, and the way in which we have acquired it, we are bound to be overcome by desperation. But like anybody who has suffered a mishap, we can console ourselves that things could have been worse, and that we have learned a lot. We can turn shortcomings into advantages if we become aware that we bear a part of the responsibility for their emergence, but also for their elimination. If, on the other hand, we take the past misfortune as an explanation for all the bad things that are now happening to us, then we shall remain within the closed circle of alibis, such as "five-centuries-long slavery", "anti-people regime", "communist totalitarianism", "Milošević's dictatorship"... And we should take care that the time we live in not be christened "Quisling liberalism" tomorrow, just in order to justify another stupidity, laziness or greed.

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Summary: In the first part of the paper the nature of the changeover of 5 October 2000 is discussed and described as a peaceful political revolution, with a potential to grow into a social revolution. It is stressed that the changeover did not crush the existing legal order but instead activated its segments which had served just as a façade. In this way the danger of anarchy, so often accompanying revolutions, was avoided. Analyzing “Milošević's legacy” the author stresses that apart from the numerous negative elements that Milošević's rule has bequeathed Serbia we can, and should, look also for some positive ones, such as giving up myths, the »advantage of lagging behind«, and the elimination of the ethnic cleavage which is a prerequisite for establishing a stable democracy.

Key words: political change, democracy, revolution, putsch, sultanism, Milošević's legacy, political myths