

The Center for International Private Enterprise

2007 International Essay Competition: Engaging Youth in Reform

Topic: Citizenship in a Democratic Society

Democracy after the October Revolution:

Bringing Youth Back in

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Country of Citizenship: Serbia

On October 5, 2000, a remarkable event made international headlines: Slobodan Milosevic, the Butcher of the Balkans, had fallen from power on a wave of popular dissent. Defying expectations, hundreds of thousands of Serbs—many of them under the age of 30—stormed the federal parliament, demanding Milosevic's resignation. In the end, it was not bombs or sanctions that spelled Milosevic's political demise, but the will of the Serbian people. Tired of electoral manipulation, allegations of corruption, and seemingly constant warfare, Serbs longed for political change. Like the rest of the post-communist world, they too wanted democracy.

It has been almost seven years since the fall of the Milosevic regime and much has changed. Democratic forces have assumed power, civil liberties are now widely upheld, and the economy is growing. Not all change has been positive, however. The political consensus that enabled regime change has proven elusive in a post-Milosevic context. Multiparty democracy has given way to personality-based politics, political vendettas, and popular disillusionment. While democracy may be the only game in town, few people in Serbia are still playing.

Young people have been particularly affected in this regard. False promises made by Serbia's pro-reform bloc have driven many from political life. Due in part to unrealistic expectations, a new generation of Serbs are frustrated with the pace of reform and have abstained from political processes as a result. For Serbia's fledgling democracy to succeed, the youth must have a greater stake in the democratic process.

Introduction

As a young person living in Serbia, I am all too familiar with the lure of political apathy. The lines that once clearly defined the good from the bad have now blurred. Youth movements such as OTPOR and political alliances such as the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS)—both of which were instrumental in bringing down Milosevic—fell victim to the new political realities of a state undergoing both economic and political transition. Unable to cope with the post-Milosevic context, many of the organizations upon which the hopes of young people rested have withered to the point of irrelevance. If even organizations such as OTPOR and DOS are incapable of weathering the political storm, why should young people enter the political fray?

This question has no easy answer. To be sure, the government must do more to encourage Serbia's youth to take part in the political life of their country. The private sector and civil society also have a decisive role to play in this regards. Nongovernmental organizations should abandon their elitist ways and reach out to young Serbs of all of walks of life, in an effort to counter this dangerous trend of political apathy.

It should also be remembered, however, that young people are not merely passive victims of the current system. To a certain extent, today's political problems are part of their own creation: young people across Serbia must demand to be a part of political processes, just as they once demanded for Milosevic's ouster. The quick solutions brought by street protests have served their purpose, but they are not the making of sustainable change. If young people like me expect to see change happen, they must assume an active role in seeing it realized.

The State of Serbian Democracy Today

After coming to power in late 2000, the coalition of parties which composed the Democratic Opposition of Serbia soon proved susceptible to the classic dilemmas of coalition building that characterize fledgling

democracies across the developing world. Not twelve months into the coalition's rule, one of its largest affiliates, the Democratic Party of Serbia, took its exit. Though the government succeeded in launching some important reforms in those first few months, the fractured coalition was unable to assemble the parliamentary majorities necessary to finish the job. As a result, many of the most crucial political decisions, including efforts aimed at lustration, judicial reform, and most importantly, cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), went unmade.

Perhaps the greatest setback to Serbia's young reformists came in March 2003, when the republic's then-Prime Minister, Zoran Djindjic, was assassinated by individuals close to the former regime. A national state of emergency soon followed, as did allegations of governmental corruption and the eventual collapse of the coalition government.

New elections in late 2003 saw a resurgence of nationalist forces. With ICTY indictee Vojislav Seselj at its helm, the Serbian Radical Party became the country's most popular party, taking in almost 30 percent of the republican vote. The rise to prominence of this ultranationalist, populist party signaled not only resentment with the ruling elites, but also massive disillusionment with the state of democracy. Voter turnout in the 2003 elections dropped dramatically from those held in 2000, with less than 60 percent of the population taking part.

To be fair, the lack of public participation pre-dated both Djindjic's death and the Radical's rise. From September 2002 to July 2004, Serbia remained without a President thanks to low voter turnout. It took a total of four Presidential elections and an amendment to the election law (which previously required a 51 percent turnout for election results to be accepted as valid) for the position to be filled.

Political life in Serbia from 2004 onwards has been mired in political stagnation. Serbia's EU prospects remain distant and its obligations to the ICTY unfilled. Seven years after Milosevic left office, many of the biggest tasks facing Serbia remain ahead.

Young People in Serbia Today

The role of young people in the description provided above is strikingly absent. This is not without reason: Serbia's youths have played only a marginal role in the political events which took place after October 5, 2000. Their voices, which were so vocal in signaling discontent with Milosevic's policies, have been largely silent in regards to the achievements of his predecessors. Many of those who took to the streets waving OTPOR banners just a few years ago no longer even bother to show up on Election Day. No longer seeing the benefits to be had by partaking in politics, many have responded with abstinence.

I would argue that the blame for this lies in the disconnect between those who govern and the governed. Young people have been denied many of the skills and opportunities which would enable them to partake in democratic processes. Many feel ostracized from political life as a result. For young people to contribute to Serbia's socioeconomic development, they must regain a stake in the political process and thereby reassume their citizenship.

But given the lack of political participation in even the most established of democracies, how can this be achieved in Serbia? This paper proposes tentative answers to this difficult question.

Citizenship and Good Governance

To understand the roots of Serbia's current problems, one must first contemplate the relationship between citizenship and good governance.

The role of citizens in a democratic polity encompasses both rights and responsibilities. Unlike their authoritarian counterparts, citizens of democracies enjoy the virtues of civic and political liberties, including freedom of speech, assembly, and religion. Along with such rights come responsibilities; citizens must participate in democratic processes and respect the rule of law, including the rights of others.

Particularly in new democracies, where the confines of democratic rule are still being explored, I believe that citizens must redouble their efforts to ensure that the will of the people is both voiced and heard. If anything, the responsibilities of democratic citizenship are inversely related to the age of a democracy: responsibility is highest where democracy is youngest. After all, many emerging democracies lack the very societal watchdogs (i.e. independent media, civil society, and private sector) that help keep democracy in place. Particularly in new democracies like Serbia, the onus is on the public to keep their politicians in check.

The link between good governance and citizenship has been well established. For governance to be good it must be accompanied by responsible citizens who actively partake in the decision-making process. Governments and politicians alone are not the source of good governance. For authority to be exercised effectively, citizens must maintain an influential role in political processes. Not only must they vote, but they should help set the political agenda, determining the issues that most affect their lives, and helping to identify their solutions.

Bringing the Youth Back in

Serbian youths are no exception to this rule. As citizens, young people in Serbia have an important role to play in the governance process. Many, if not all, of the decisions their government makes are likely to impact upon their lives, however indirectly. Unless they actively provide input into the reform process, they will continue to be mere bystanders to their country's political and economic development.

To participate effectively, young people require both skills and opportunities. Too often, both of these are lacking. To ensure that Serbia's youth has the skills necessary to contribute to their country's political life, I propose the 'reinvention' of education. To make sure that students have the opportunities to put those skills to use, I advocate for a public-private sector alliance, which would help young people realize their potential early into their careers. Finally, to ensure that such opportunities are taken, I argue that civil society should play a more positive role in encouraging youth to stay the course and to enter political life, whether directly or indirectly.

Reinventing Education

If young people are to play a role in determining their country's future, Serbia's government should enable them to do so. The government must do more not only to create opportunities for young people, but also to empower them with the skills and knowhow through which to take advantage of such opportunities. To this end, Serbia's government must invest more in education.

Primary schools, high schools, and even Universities are pitifully unequipped throughout much, if not most, of Serbia. Students often learn from outdated textbooks and are too often taught by uninspired teachers who are meagerly paid. Students are rarely encouraged to explore contrarian views differing from those upheld by the State. The government can begin to remedy these problems by investing in new educational materials and creating incentives for teachers and principals to think of new ways to educate Serbia's next generation.

Part of the problem lies in our conception of education itself. In Serbia, education is not a dialogue but a directive. Education remains centralized, with decisions made by the state and implemented by schools. Teachers and students play but a passive role in the process: rarely are their thoughts or opinions taken into account. Education should be more of a collaborative process: schools should be awarded greater freedom to adapt curriculum to the needs and interests of their student body. Opportunities should be created for students of all ages to partake in their schools' decision-making processes, via self-elected student councils and governments.

In addition, I believe that teachers should be held accountable for the poor performance of their students, but also rewarded when their students do well. Rewards may come via pay increases, longer holidays, or perhaps most importantly, minor extra funds through which to launch interesting projects of the teacher's own design. Through small grant programs costing no more than a few hundred Euros, teachers could make learning 'fun' by organizing modest class trips, purchasing cutting-edge educational materials, and enabling other school-related activities. Such a system would create incentives for teachers to maximize their output while also experimenting with new methods of teaching. Because education in Serbia stresses learning by rote, it currently rewards outdated teaching methodology and stagnant styles of learning. Students are taught to memorize rather than explore the deeper complexities of the subject at hand. This hampers innovative thinking and encourages young people to follow rather than lead.

The problem with Serbia's Universities is a case in point. Rather than stimulate critical thinking and independent thought, professors demand that students memorize selected works, often word for word. How can students who are a product of such a system be expected to contribute to their country's political life, other than to replicate the mistakes of their predecessors?

While the introduction of the Bologna accord is a much needed step in this regard, I believe that it does not go far enough. The most formative moments of a young person's life begin in the earliest stages of development. Beginning at age 18 simply does not cut it.

Luckily for Serbia, it is not the first country to be confronted with such a struggle. There is much that Serbian authorities can learn from initiatives undertaken by their colleagues in Western and Central and Eastern Europe. The government should be open to learning the examples set by others, even if that means adapting foreign ideas to local contexts.

Partnering with the Private Sector

One of the key ways for governments to stimulate such developments is by encouraging the private sector to get more involved in Serbian education. Tax incentives, for example, would encourage businesses to take on some of the burdens of the educational system. This may include logistical arrangements such as

the provision of classroom space, computers, or scholarships but also less tangible contributions like vocational traineeships and summer internships.

One of the chief problems facing young people today is a lack of job opportunities. Even for the minority of Serbs who obtain University degrees, finding employment in a relevant sector can be difficult. All too often, whether one finds a job depends more on connections than one's merit. This diminishes the lure of higher education and encourages potential students to find alternative paths to self enrichment.

The private sector is uniquely positioned to keep young people on the academic track by offering promising students the opportunity to practice their trade while still in high school or college. Such services profit students, providing them with much needed hands-on experience, while also benefiting the companies that train them. Governments should encourage small and large businesses alike to help educate students in this fashion.

Working Together with Civil Society

Civil society also has a role to play. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Serbia have a long history of representing students' rights. Until the revolution of October 2000, student unions played an instrumental role in calling for statewide change. Since 2000 however, Serbian NGOs have been concerned less with enabling young people to partake in democratic processes than in criticizing the institutions and politicians which represent them. While many of the criticisms lodged against the government deserve criticism, organizations should also be willing to acknowledge positive steps when and where these are taken.

This is not to say that civil society should censor its activities. To the contrary, one of the intrinsic roles of NGOs is to sound the societal alarm when politicians stray from their political mandates. But for the apathetic masses to relinquish their cynicism and opt for political participation instead, they must believe that their governments are capable of change. If civil society is solely focused on what politicians are doing wrong, young people will have little reason to believe that they can help set things right.

Another point should be made here as well: All too often, civil society organizations in Serbia are just as hierarchical and personality-driven as the political parties whom they critique. At times, they appear equally unresponsive to the needs and interests of the citizenry, sometimes more so. Apart from a handful of organizations, young people are often denied access to the very organizations which claim to speak in their name. If NGOs are genuinely interested in bringing youth back into the political equation, they must do so without their own confines as well.

Reclaiming a Stake in the System

If properly implemented, the three methods sketched above—education, private sector, and civil society—should provide young people across Serbia with what they are currently denied: a stake in the system. With a proper education, the next generation of Serbs will have the knowledge and know-how to bring about change. With access to employment, they will gain the ability to put that knowledge to use. With a vision of government that includes both the good and the bad, they will have reason to believe that Serbia's future is not quite as bleak as they once imagined. Finally, with a stake in their country's prosperity, they will reclaim their rights as equal citizens in a democratic Serbia.