Populist Authoritarianism

*The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia’s Transition in the 1990s*

Time has shown that the policies of Milošević’s socialists were consistently authoritarian, and only hypocritically national, and by their essence and results anational or anti-national.

*Vojislav Koštunica in February 1996.*

Authoritarianism, Milošević-style

Post-communist FRY was ruled in the 1990s by an authoritarian regime that combined Serbian nationalism, warmed-over Marxist-Titoist ideology, and a confrontational anti-Western foreign policy as forms of legitimization. At the helm of this regime were Slobodan Milošević, a former communist apparatchik turned defender of Serbian interests, and his communist successor Serbian Socialist Party (Srpska Partija Socijalistička, SPS). Milošević and the SPS took control of the most important institutions of the state, created a repressive military-bureaucratic police machine, and either marginalized or coopted opposition groups. There were frequent oscillations in ideology and policies during the 1990s, but the authoritarian leadership of Milošević and the SPS was consistent. The military, the security forces, and various paramilitary and organized crime groups were closely tied to the regime and were used to wage war in Bosnia, Croatia, and Kosovo. Milošević, like Tuđman in Croatia, used war to justify his curtailing of democracy and to create a siege mentality among the population. Moreover, the powerful military and secu-
rity structures that emerged from these wars were a source of employment and regime support.

Like Tuđman’s Croatia, the Milošević regime at times displayed a commitment to democratic procedures. By the end of the 1990s, in terms of the sheer reach of Milošević and the SPS in political institutions and the economy, it was more authoritarian than the Croatian case, and yet in certain areas such as media freedom the Tuđman regime was more repressive. Though some popular accounts have portrayed Milošević as a dictator akin to Iraq’s Saddam Hussein, Milošević did not rule by terror or total control of information. Urbanites could watch CNN, Sky News, and the BBC on their satellite dishes. Opposition figures, like the Kosovo dissident Ibrahim Rugova, were able to travel throughout the world. Foreign-sponsored NGOs were allowed to operate, though they were often attacked as tools of foreign intelligence agencies. The regime even allowed for criticism, although it stopped short of permitting direct attacks on Milošević or his wife. There was no concerted effort to construct a cult of personality. This was in sharp contrast to the megalomaniacal tendencies of President Franjo Tuđman in Croatia.

The initial conditions of FRY’s transition were characterized by an unfavorably structured economy, and a catastrophic economic situation in the formerly autonomous Kosovo province and parts of southern Serbia. Many areas of the FRY underwent only limited industrialization under communism, or at best heavy industrialization that produced inefficient industries and “political factories.” Other weaknesses in the FRY economy included “low rates of capital formation, a relatively low level of technological development, a burdensome system of social administration, high tax rates and a lack of either a rational system of resource allocation or a labor market” (Thomas 1999: 163). FRY’s economic structure thus could not withstand the pressures of the deepening recession, independence, and adaptation to Western markets, much less international sanctions and the economic policies of “destruction,” as a famous Serbian economist called them (Dinkić 2000).

Everywhere in FRY, there was a looming social crisis related to demographic trends and the inability of the existing political system to respond effectively. Ironically, this social crisis was related in part to the spread of educational opportunities and the corresponding influx into the labor market of large numbers of young people with advanced degrees. The FRY economy of the 1980s could not absorb all of these new workers, especially in the many provincial cities and towns, and millions were left unemployed. Moreover,
there was significant migration by “peasant workers” from the countryside to
the cities and towns in the 1970s and 1980s, putting further pressure on a
very tight labor market. The movement of such large groups of people over a
relatively short span of time meant that “many remained only partially as-
similated in urban life” (Thomas 1999: 26). Some estimates found that 50 to
60 percent of those involved in non-agrarian occupations in urban areas had
rural origins (Thomas 1999: 26). FRY, moreover, retained the character of a
largely peasant country, with overpopulation in the rural sector. These demo-
graphic realities and trends have been described by some as the “simultane-
ous urbanization of the village and the peasantization of the town,” which
had the net effect of “re-traditionalizing” FRY society (quoted in Thomas
1999: 27). Residents of small towns and the countryside would constitute a
solid base of support for radical populist parties, and urban cosmopolitan
culture was the target of attacks by these parties. In Kosovo, the effects of the
economic crisis and the demographic trends described above were magnifi-
due to the province’s underdevelopment and helped worsen already troubled
ethnic relations there. So the conditions were ripe for the rise of radical pop-
ulism, especially given existing proclivities in Serbian political culture that
the emerging political elite seized on. One such proclivity was toward au-
thoritarian politics and the related development of a police and rentier state.
Serbia did experiment with parliamentary democracy in the nineteenth and
twentieth centuries, but these efforts largely failed and the country retreated
to authoritarianism. The second proclivity was toward a sense of national
victimhood that historically had been easily mobilized by politicians and ex-
pressed in the form of populist collectivist nationalism. This characteristic
of Serbian political culture came to the fore in the oft-cited 1986 Memoran-
dum of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences (Srpska Akademija Nauka
i Umetnosti, SANU), which argued that Serbs were the victims of discrimina-
tion in the SFRJ. It signaled that at least part of Serbia’s intelligentsia was not
in the liberal camp. The third proclivity was related to the existence of a deep
cleavage between urban and rural areas and corresponding cosmopolitan
versus conservative, nationalist orientations. All three of these tendencies—
authoritarian political traditions, feelings of victimization, and a deep urban-
rural social cleavage—came to the fore as material conditions declined and
competition for resources became scarce. They were used and manipulated
by elites bidding for power and exploited by Milošević and the SPS to great
political advantage.
Just as it is a mistake to reduce the post-communist transition of FRY to the role of Milošević himself, it is also a distortion to see it as being driven exclusively by regime-sponsored nationalism. While Milošević and the SPS did indeed fan the flames of nationalist passion, there were groups that were far more nationalistic than the SPS. In fact, some of them were coopted by Milošević at various points in the 1990s as “ideological surrogates.” Milošević himself rarely preached ultranationalism; rather, he claimed to be protecting Serbian national interests and convinced large numbers of Serbians that he would advance their cause (Cohen 2001: xiv). Yet, that he was willing, at a whim, to withdraw support for ethnic Serbs in Croatia and Bosnia and that in the end he lost Kosovo—these facts show that there was a highly instrumental dimension to his regime’s nationalism.  

Ideological flexibility allowed Milošević and the SPS to attract a broad cross-section of the Serbian electorate and to lead the opposition into disarray. However, that the regime’s strategies and levels of support remained relatively consistent even as it shifted among different ideological orientations indicated that the electorate was made up of people who simply supported the current regime in power (Gordy 1999: 9).  

The legitimizing principles of the regime were decidedly illiberal and infused with populist appeals. Western-style democracy was portrayed as alien to Serbian culture and history, and the regime claimed that Western states and organizations were trying to undermine Serbian state sovereignty. Since protection of Serb national interests became the regime’s main rallying cry, support for separatist Serb movements in neighboring republics and war were a logical consequence. Deep divisions over fundamental questions about the state and its borders further lowered the liberal content of the Milošević regime, as did deep ethnic divisions, particularly those in Kosovo between the majority Albanian and minority Serb population. The ongoing crisis in Kosovo meant that the regime faced a never-ending crisis of legitimation. When Milošević moved to rescind the province’s autonomy, the Kosovar Albanians responded by boycotting rump Yugoslav federal institutions and declaring Kosovo a constituent republic. They proceeded to create their own parallel institutions, which Belgrade declared illegal.

The question for the Milošević regime in the late 1990s was one that arose for the Tuđman regime in Croatia: how long could the manipulation of fear as a basis of popular support be sustained? The answer proved to be the same: until the costs of a failing economy outweighed the “benefits” of the prevail-
ing form of radical populism. However, the FRY case differed from the Croatian case in ways that suggested worse prospects for democratization. First, that which emerged as a response to Milošević’s dictatorship as it faltered in the second half of 1990s was not a nascent liberal democratic opposition, as in Croatia, but rather an extreme rightist alternative that was to play a prominent role in Serbian politics even after Milošević was removed from power. Second, compared to Croatia, Western conditionality found a smaller receptive audience among elites in FRY. Consequently, the external impetus for liberalism was weaker.

Formal Democracy: The Record

Elections in FRY were held regularly. There were frequent reports of irregularities from the domestic opposition and external observers, and yet it was clear that Milošević and the SPS enjoyed substantial popularity. Although the elections did not formally exclude any political group, they were nonetheless perceived as illegitimate by many of FRY’s minority groups, comprising over one-third of the population, who boycotted them repeatedly. Kosovar Albanians refused to recognize Belgrade’s sovereignty over the province and created parallel government structures. Moreover, some Montenegrin parties repeatedly boycotted federal elections. The most notorious case of voter fraud occurred after the Belgrade municipal election of November 1996, which opposition parties won. Milošević refused to recognize the results but was forced to back down after protests at home and pressure from the international community.

Western observers gave FRY consistently poor ratings in the areas of political, civil, and human rights, placing it in the same category as Belarus, Uzbekistan, and other post-communist authoritarian regimes. The U.S. State Department declared in 1997 that the human rights situation in FRY was “very poor” (U.S. Department of State 1997). Minority rights were rarely respected, although the constitution, which declared FRY to be a “state of all its citizens,” was actually more democratic than that of Croatia or Macedonia. In Vojvodina, minority groups such as the Hungarians and Croats lost much of their Yugoslav-era cultural autonomy and language rights. Ethnic Croats, many of whom came from ethnically mixed families, were subject to open harassment, and many left for Croatia. In general, a climate of intolerance marginalized non-Serbs (Miller 1997: 147).
The constitution was either amended or interpreted to promulgate the power of Slobodan Milošević. When he was president of FRY, Milošević made sure that he had wide-ranging powers, leaving the federal president as a figurehead. However, when he was no longer eligible to be Serbian president, he was elected federal president and amended the constitution to assure his continued influence while installing a figurehead in the Serbian presidency.

The federal parliament largely rubber-stamped policies created by the SPS and Milošević. The Serbian parliament had greater influence, and when the SPS did not win an adequate number of seats, it was forced to cooperate with other parties. When this happened, Milošević made use of his self-created power to issue executive decrees to make policy, thereby bypassing legislative debate. The constitution gave the president wide powers to take measures that did not require the ratification of parliament and could not be challenged by the constitutional court, including the power to institute a state of emergency. By the end of the decade, the parliament was among the least-trusted institutions in Serbia, and indeed, had among the lowest levels of trust among parliaments in all of Eastern Europe (Slavujević and Mihailović 1999: 45).

The judicial system remained largely unreformed, and judges were holdovers from communist times. Though they ruled fairly on routine matters, on any cases that affected the standing of the ruling party, decisions were politicized. Criminal investigations were pursued against opposition figures, who were often imprisoned without due process. The Constitutional Court was stacked with loyalists.

Freedom of the press was guaranteed under the FRY Constitution, though all media outlets had to register with the government. Unlike Croatia, there were few libel suits against independent media outlets, but they were subject to other forms of harassment. There was at least one case of a prominent opposition journalist, Slavko Ćuruvija, killed by assassins, probably henchmen of the regime. Yet, there was also an incredible array of media sources in FRY during the 1990s. In 1997, there were more than a hundred privately owned television stations and twelve daily newspapers in Belgrade alone. Moreover, international publications were widely available in Belgrade. Independent outlets such as Studio B and Radio B92 were quite popular, though the regime later attempted to shut them down. Likewise, important publications such as NIN and Vreme were openly critical of the regime. However, this seeming variety of information sources was limited strictly to a few large cit-
ies. The regime made sure that the signal of independent stations like B92 and Studio B was limited to Belgrade. The only real source of information for the millions of people living in FRY’s provincial areas was the state-run Radio Television Serbia (Radio-Televizija Srbije, RTS), whose editors and producers received their orders directly from the SPS. The popular newspaper Politika was also firmly in the hands of the SPS. Control over state-run television gave the regime great leverage, since research showed that over 60 percent of population watched the principal news program on state television as their main source of information, while only 2 percent read newspapers (Gordy 1999: 33).

Corruption and criminality reigned in the 1990s, rendering the rule of law a sham. J. F. Brown notes that while there were several post-communist states where the mafia exercised control over the government, only in FRY did the government control the mafia (Brown 2001: 72). Many top SPS officials and politicians were also directors of the most important state companies. For instance, the Serbian prime minister was director of the state company with exclusive rights to the fuel trade with Russia. The vice president of the SPS was owner and director of the Komuna publishing conglomerate. The speaker of the Serbian parliament was also the director of the largest state oil company, Jugopetrol. This kind of clientelism was at the foundation of the regime’s entrenchment in power.

The First Elections

Milošević’s initial rise to power had little to do with popular participation and everything to do with an intra-party coup in the Serbian League of Communists (Srpski Savez Komunista, SKS) in December 1987 in which Milošević moved to oust his longtime political mentor, Ivan Stambolić. Other accounts place great emphasis on the way in which Milošević was able to seize on nationalist sentiment among Kosovo Serbs with his famous 1987 speech. Gordy (1999: 26–27), however, notes that the situation was much more complex. Milošević cleverly offered support to both the nationalist Serbian resistance movement in Kosovo and the old guard of the Communist Party, which feared the consequences of economic and political reform and was wary of any overt expressions of nationalism. Most of all, however, Milošević represented a fresh alternative to a largely discredited SKS that had failed to extract Serbia from economic crisis and was entrenched in corruption and privilege. Recog-
nizing that Yugoslav causes had lost their potential for mass mobilization, Milošević’s answer to the ideological vacuum was a brand of radical populism called the “anti-bureaucratic” revolution and filled with disparate ideological messages, among them protection of Serbian national interests and a distinctly Serbian approach to economic reform and democratization.

Milošević contended that Tito had deliberately weakened Serbia by undermining its sovereignty over the two autonomous provinces, Vojvodina and Kosovo (Bugajski 2002: 384). Moreover, he alleged that Serbs in neighboring Bosnia and Croatia were threatened by insufficient constitutional protections. Thus, he focused his efforts after becoming Serbian president in 1989 on restoring a centralized Serbian administration in Belgrade. He organized mass demonstrations in support of Serbian unification in Belgrade, Montenegro, Vojvodina, and Kosovo (Bugajski 2002: 384). Exploiting economic and ethnic grievances, he later orchestrated the ouster of the entire state and party leaderships in Novi Sad, Priština, and Podgorica, replacing them with pro-Belgrade loyalists (Bugajski 2002: 384). To complete the move toward centralization, he changed the constitution so that Vojvodina and Kosovo formally lost any semblance of autonomy. The ethnic Serb populations of these regions, regardless of socioeconomic status, supported such policies because they saw the existing party leadership as corrupt and unresponsive and hoped that such changes would improve their economic situation. Milošević also undermined the position of Federal Prime Minister Ante Marković and the collapsing federal institutions more generally (Gordy 1999: 29).

In July 1990, the SKS and the Socialist Alliance, a communist front organization, united to form the SPS under Milošević’s leadership (Bugajski 2002: 385). The party adopted an openly nationalist platform, and yet did not part with many tenets of socialism. Under pressure from events in the rest of the communist world, the SPS reluctantly legalized opposition parties in August 1990 and called for the first multiparty elections in December 1990. But the SPS had a host of advantages, including extensive influence over the media and an electoral law that inflated its representation in the National Assembly. Moreover, it inherited an extensive organizational network from its communist predecessor, while the fledgling opposition parties were organizationally weak. Milošević and the SPS also presented a clear populist agenda with ostensibly easy solutions to FRY’s socioeconomic crisis.

Milošević’s well-documented use of nationalist mobilization prior to the first election worked not only because of the dissatisfaction generated by the
poor economic situation in FRY but was also given strength by the rise of nationalist rhetoric in other republics, especially Croatia. The media was used to revive fears of atrocities committed against ethnic Serbs during World War II. A propaganda campaign sought to exploit public dissatisfaction with the economic situation by appealing to a sense of victimhood. The enemies in this campaign included nationalist governments in the other republics, cosmopolitanism, the Marković reformist federal government, and increasingly, Western governments. At the same time, the SPS sought to portray itself as experienced, moderate, and in tune with the public mood, using the slogan “With us, there is no uncertainty” (S nama nema neizvesnosti) (quoted in Gordy 1999: 32). Opposition parties, by contrast, were presented as “disorganized, corrupt, fighting among themselves, and opposed to the national interest” (Gordy 1999: 33).

The opposition, it should be said, was hardly made up only of liberal-minded parties. In fact, it is quite telling about the prevailing mood in FRY that the largest party to emerge as opposition in the first elections was Vuk Drašković’s Serbian Renewal Movement (Srpski Pokret Obnove, SPO), a group that advocated openly nationalist positions such as the unity of all Serbian lands. Drašković, with his long flowing beard and three-fingered salute reminiscent of World War II–era Chetnik fighters, would only later become an ostensible liberal and opponent of the wars.11 “Milošević’s party,” writes Gordy, “benefited tremendously from the SPO’s extremism in 1990 and gained the ability to dismiss pro-European liberal parties as subject to ‘foreign elements,’ appeal to nationalist sentiment, and appear to be moderate at the same time” (1999: 34).

The election to the Serbian parliament took place in an atmosphere of uncertainty, instability, and deepening economic troubles. An electoral law had been drafted without the participation of the opposition, and a month before the elections, it was still unclear if the opposition parties would boycott or participate (Gordy 1999: 35). In the end the SPS won the most votes but did not manage to win an absolute majority despite the boost it received from the highly majoritarian electoral system. Under this electoral system, however, it was able to gain an overwhelming majority of seats (194, or nearly 78 percent of all seats), albeit amid charges of voting irregularities (Bugajski 2002: 385). No non-nationalist party did well at the polls, which shows that any politician who wished to succeed had to “offer a vision for the defense of Serbs from a variety of threats, real and unreal” (Miller 1997: 146). Serbia’s
minorities, together representing one-third of the total population, were offered minimal representation and were largely excluded from the political process.

Having transformed its electoral plurality into an overwhelming parliamentary majority, the SPS was able to cut short debate and “pass any and all laws and resolutions without any consideration of the position of opposition parties” (Gordy 1999: 35). The SPS was able to maintain its monopoly over all ministries and all executive positions and was actively extending its control over the two institutions that would be crucial to its rule, the police and the media (Gordy 1999: 37). However, none of this solved the problem of the SPS’s legitimacy among the parts of the public that had opposed it and among Serbia’s minorities, especially the Kosovar Albanians, who had entirely boycotted participation in the rump Yugoslav state.

On 9 March 1991, over a hundred thousand protestors, led by Drašković, gathered on Republic Square to protest the opposition’s exclusion from state-run television. The regime responded with busloads of police officers and violence, including beatings and shootings that resulted in the death of one eighteen-year-old student. Subsequently, the military was also brought in. Two days later, the students submitted a list of demands to the regime, such as the resignation of the interior minister.

The SPS organized a counter-demonstration in New Belgrade (Novi Beograd) on the opposite side of River Sava, where many migrants from the countryside had settled to work in communist industries.

Indeed, the impact of the protests was tempered by their largely urban, educated, and young composition, a demographic viewed with great suspicion by provincial areas and recent migrants to the city. The SPS was able to exploit this rift effectively, but not without making concessions to some of the students’ demands.

The decision to use the military to quell a political protest showed the politicization of state institutions (especially the military) as well as the distance to which the regime was willing to go to preserve its power. In many ways, these protests were the “last cry” before the wars rendered the regime “invincible” and allowed the opposition to be equated with treason (Gordy 1999: 42–43).

Kosovo and the Ethnic Albanians

The situation in Kosovo was also deteriorating rapidly. Milošević had rescinded the province’s autonomy and replaced ethnic Albanian party officials
with Serbs. When the Kosovar Albanians boycotted state institutions in Belgrade, the regime sent in the army and paramilitary groups, ensuring apartheid and military rule in the province for the next ten years. Meanwhile, an outlawed shadow government of ethnic Albanians claimed to rule in Priština, and a resistance movement was being organized.

The history of Kosovo and its two main ethnic groups, the Orthodox Serbs and the mostly Muslim Albanians, has been characterized by periods of conflict and accommodation. While Serbs may have outnumbered the Albanians at one time, in recent times the Albanians have far outnumbered the Serbs; by the late 1980s they constituted over 90 percent of the population. This was due both to out-migration by the Serbs and high fertility rates among the ethnic Albanians. Owing to low rates of ethnic Albanian participation in the Partisan movement, until the 1960s Kosovar Albanians were treated with suspicion by Tito’s regime, and the province was virtually a police state in which Albanians had little say. They lived as an inferior class, and the minority Serbs filled all public offices in the province. After a series of riots in Priština and the controversial removal of Aleksandar Ranković from the party’s apparatus in the 1960s, Tito gradually devolved power to the Kosovar Albanians, and Kosovar Albanians controlled provincial institutions by the 1980s. An influential but corrupt ethnic Albanian party apparatus developed in Priština, and ethnic Albanians were given access to higher educational opportunities at the Albanian-language University of Priština. Serbs and Montenegrins, however, continued to dominate the police and security services. Although many ethnic Serbs did harbor legitimate feelings of victimization, in the 1980s exaggerated reports of discrimination against Kosovo’s Serbs were circulated widely in the media, including accounts of rapes and killings.

As a result, ethnic tensions were high in 1980s Kosovo. Unlike Bosnia, intermarriage was almost nonexistent, and the two societies lived separately, divided by both language and religion. Any kind of compromise was made very difficult by the catastrophic economic situation. Rapid population growth had long since outstripped the Kosovar economy’s capacity to provide jobs, “thereby leading to an increase in unemployment, especially among younger Albanians eager to enter the workforce” (Cohen 2001: 20). Ethnic Serbs were also afflicted by skyrocketing unemployment in the province. There was thus intense competition in the province for very limited resources in the 1980s, and one way for Belgrade politicians to bid for power was to exploit the na-
scent social frustration in Kosovo. This is precisely what Milošević did in 1987, with his now-infamous promise to Kosovo Serbs that “nobody will dare beat you again.” Likewise, the unemployed and frustrated masses of ethnic Albanian young people were an ideal target for separatist Albanian nationalist groups. Problems in Kosovo, then, were a result of the ongoing structural problem of economic backwardness and ethnic divisions, as well as more recent political contingencies.

Subsequent Elections and Party Politics

The 1992 Election

Milošević called for Serbian parliamentary elections in 1992 as a way to legitimize his hold on power. In 1992, a referendum was also held in Montenegro. Well over 90 percent of the population voted to stay with Serbia in a new entity to be called the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which declared itself to be the only legitimate legal successor to the SFRJ. With war raging in Bosnia and Croatia, every major political group, including the democratic opposition, was attempting to curry nationalist favor. Liberal political options were virtually eliminated from the Serbian and Montenegrin political scene. Although the SPS was only able to win 30 percent of the vote, the second-largest vote getter was the neo-fascist Serbian Radical Party (Srpska Radikalna Stranka, SRS), which went on to form an informal “red-brown” coalition with the SPS. The Democratic Movement of Serbia (Demokratski Pokret Srbije, DEPOS), a coalition of fourteen parties and Serbian intellectuals of various ideological persuasions, came in third. The coalition was weakened, however, by the refusal of the Democratic Party (Demokratska Stranka, DS), which came in fourth, to join. Significantly, the 1992 elections were boycotted by some opposition parties, most ethnic Albanians, and the Slavic Muslims of Sandžak, which lowered the legitimacy of the elections and of the regime.

Earlier in 1992, after the declaration of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Milošević had invited two prominent individuals, the writer Dobrica Ćosić and the Serbian-American millionaire businessman Milan Panić to be president of the FRY and Serbian prime minister, respectively. This was a clever move designed to broaden the regime’s base, and with the appointment of Panić, to reach out to the West. However, both individuals subsequently became disillusioned with Milošević and began to criticize him openly. Panić
even went so far as to ask Milošević to resign, which he declined. In retaliation for their disloyalty, Milošević began plotting to have both individuals removed. His fiercest attacks were directed at Panić, whom he accused of working at the behest of foreign powers (Cohen 2001: 166). Subsequently, Panić ran an unsuccessful campaign against Milošević in the 1992 Serbian presidential election. After being ousted, Panić returned to the United States and worked to strengthen the Serbian opposition. Čosić was removed in favor of a Milošević henchman, Zoran Lilić.

To help remove the two and further discredit the opposition, he enlisted the help of his erstwhile informal coalition partner, the SRS. This began a pattern in which Milošević would use the charismatic and unpredictable SRS leader Vojislav Šešelj as an ideological surrogate when it was politically expedient and then openly attack and even jail him when circumstances changed. During the 1992 election, Milošević praised Šešelj, saying that he trusted him the most among opposition politicians because his party was not “dependent on foreign financial interests” and because Šešelj was not afraid to express his true political thoughts (Pribićević 1997: 58). Thus, many voters who would otherwise have voted for the SPS chose the SRS, with the understanding that they were voting for a pseudo-coalition.

However, this “red-brown coalition” ended when Milošević, increasingly worried about the negative effects of Western-imposed sanctions, decided that he would take on the role of peacemaker by supporting the ultimately unsuccessful Vance-Owen peace plan for Croatia and Bosnia. Milošević was also fearful that Šešelj was starting to threaten the SPS’s communist base with all the SRS’s talk of equalizing incomes (Pribićević 1997: 59). Šešelj’s promise to fight corruption and organized crime also threatened the SPS, as did his overtures to certain parts of the army and police, one foundation of Milošević’s rule. Thus, the coalition broke up at the end of 1992, and the SPS unleashed its media attack machine on Šešelj, calling him a war profiteer and criminal (Pribićević 1997: 60–61). Milošević dissolved the parliament and called new elections.

The 1993 Election

Dragoslav Grujić writes that in the 1993 elections “the south defeated the north, the undeveloped defeated the developed, the province defeated the metropolis, and the village defeated the city” (quoted in Gordy 1999: 52). The SPS had consolidated its rule and its propaganda campaign against the SRS
worked quite well: Šešelj’s party did much worse in the 1993 elections. His nationalist fire “stolen” by the SPS, Šešelj began to focus on economic problems and the fight against criminality and corruption.

The 1993 elections “played the nationalist tune and played on the collective paranoia of the whole world seeming to be against Serbia” (Jeffries 2002: 80). Vuk Drašković’s SPO, the largest party in the ostensibly liberal DEPOS coalition, espoused openly nationalist positions. After the election, six deputies from the DEPOS coalition defected to the SPS. The SPS also managed to coopt another ultranationalist political grouping led by the criminal boss and paramilitary leader Željko “Arkan” Ražnjatović, the Party of Serbian Unity (Stranka Srpskog Jedinstva, SSJ).


In the 1993–1995 period, little was accomplished in FRY in the way of political and economic reform. Milošević and the SPS became more deeply entrenched in positions of power, while the country was isolated internationally and paralyzed by economic sanctions. Though inflation had been stabilized somewhat, many of FRY’s inhabitants lived in poverty. The vast majority of FRY’s minorities and, most significantly, the Kosovar Albanians did not recognize the legitimacy of the Milošević regime. Stability in Kosovo was being maintained by special police forces with low morale.

In 1995, Milošević was afforded a political opportunity with the Dayton Agreement. He decided again to play the role of peacemaker, cooperating with the U.S.-sponsored talks to achieve an end to the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. There was a domestic political cost, since he was seen by many nationalists to have sold out the Bosnian Serbs. However, the political capital he derived from his role in Ohio, both domestically and internationally, was significant as well.

The public was assured that the end of the war in Bosnia would lead to the end of international sanctions against FRY. Rhetoric about national issues was abandoned in favor of a focus on the economy, devastated after the years of war and sanctions. The preconditions for an economic revival were met, it was said. The slogan used by the SPS in the 1996 elections to the federal parliament was “Serbia 2000: A Step into the New Century.” The DPS, the SPS’s close ally in Montenegro, used similar appeals in the campaign to win seats in the National Assembly. In terms of concrete solutions, the SPS’s campaign proposed developmental programs for many industrial and social sec-
tors but hardly attempted to address real problems (Slavujević and Mihailović 1999: 105). As a result, the SPS, in coalition with the Yugoslav United Left (Jugoslovenska Udružena Levica, JUL) and its Montenegrin ally, won a narrow majority of seats in the federal parliament, though an opposition coalition managed to garner nearly 24 percent of the vote and 22 seats.

However, the outcome of the federal elections masked the extent of popular dissatisfaction within the country. A dangerous rift had developed between the regime and public in urban areas. A number of opposition parties had managed to unite in local elections under the “Together” (Zajedno) label and win majorities in several municipalities in November 1996 runoff elections. Milošević clearly felt threatened by these results, especially since the opposition had won control of the Belgrade city council. So he arranged to have local courts annul the elections. This turned out to be a major miscalculation, as the blatant effort to steal the election led to massive protests in the winter of 1996–1997 that lasted several months. Day after day, hundreds of thousands of protestors braved the cold in Belgrade and other cities to demand that the election results be honored. The protests were expanded to other causes, among them a demand by students for certain political appointees at the university to resign. The regime attacked the protestors relentlessly with rhetoric and sometimes with physical force (Cohen 2001: 332). Given the size, strength, and duration of the protests, Milošević was obliged to recognize many of the local elections, and he also acceded to several of the students’ demands.

The significance of these protests also lay in their social composition. While a majority of protestors were still educated, young, and urban, among the protestors were significant groups of older people who were not so highly educated (Lazić 1999). This was a sign that the opposition to the regime was widening, though the working classes and farmers were still not well represented in the protests. In the end, the regime survived yet another election, but Milošević and the SPS were fundamentally wounded by the crisis, both domestically and internationally. The opposition, meanwhile, was emboldened.

Yet, the regime was able to survive in part due to the intense battles that occurred inside the Zajedno coalition after the protests were called off in February 1997. The most bitter struggle was between the DS leader Zoran Đindić and SPO leader Drašković. The split between the two leaders had much to do with personality, but it was also related to national orientation, with Đindić increasingly taking a pro-Western approach and Drašković continuing to es-
pouse a nationalist and monarchist program. There were also strategic differences between the leaders, with Drašković advocating a boycott of all elections, which he saw as unfair. The split in Zajedno was a boon to the SPS and the SRS in the 1997 elections. The opposition leaders seemingly spent more time attacking each other than the regime. Đinđić later said that all the united opposition had fought for in the 1996–1997 protests was thrown away (Cohen 2001: 215). The greatest harm caused by the incessant bickering of the opposition parties was their own delegitimization in the eyes of the public, which helped to lead to an increasing withdrawal of the public from politics, a trend that only benefited the ruling party.

His term limit as Serbian president approaching, in 1997 Milošević engineered a formal shift of his base of power from the republican to the federal level. In July 1997 he was elected president of the FRY by the federal parliament, and subsequently transferred substantial powers and loyal personnel to the federal level.

The 1997 Elections

In the second half of 1997 popular dissatisfaction with both the regime and established opposition parties was quite high. Milošević and the SPS were blamed for having betrayed Serbian national interests and having allowed the FRY to fall into poverty. Yet, the opposition parties were also discredited because of their endless squabbling and failure to maintain a united organizational structure in the 1996–1997 protests (Cohen 2001: 220). Above all, the economic situation continued to generate intense resentment.

“The main political beneficiary of such citizen anger and despair,” writes Cohen “was Vojislav Šešelj, the controversial and charismatic leader of the Serbian Radical Party” (2001: 220). Though many voters had simply withdrawn from politics, many others decided to vote for the SRS as an alternative to both the regime and opposition. The SRS, after all, was addressing the poor economic situation, albeit with simplistic populist solutions. The SRS “mobilized despair” in an increasingly delegitimized regime (Cohen 2001: 225). Šešelj, moreover, could point to his successes as mayor of the city of Zemun, where the streets were cleaner, garbage was collected regularly, and the city administration ran efficiently. The SRS had a strong showing in the 1997 Serbian parliamentary elections, winning 32 percent of the vote and 82 seats. The SPS, without enough seats to form a government, again adopted the SRS as a coalition partner. In exchange for its participation in the govern-
ment, the SRS was given 16 of 36 ministries, which it proceeded to actively use in propagating its extremist goals.

Emboldened by the popularity of his party, Šešelj also ran for the office of Serbian president and, to the surprise of many, defeated Milošević ally Zoran Lilić in the second round. However, the elections were invalidated due to low turnout, and new elections were held in December 1997. This time, Milošević was ready and used every electoral manipulation he could to ensure the victory of a new henchman, Milan Milutinović. Still, the radicalism of Šešelj and the SRS enjoyed wide popularity in Serbia as a response to the deepening socioeconomic crisis. Šešelj had received close to 2 million votes, and the membership of the SRS doubled. Research showed that the SRS had taken over a significant portion of the SPS's electorate (Cohen 2001: 228). However, the low voter turnout, barely above 50 percent in the repeat presidential elections, also showed that the population was exhausted, demobilized, and distrustful of all politicians.

Meanwhile, Kosovo was on the brink. The ethnic Albanian population was increasingly losing hope of any political solution to the crisis and becoming radicalized. A separatist guerilla movement, the Kosovo Liberation Army (Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës, UÇK) was organized and armed with weapons obtained by looters and sold on the black market after the 1997 breakdown of authority in Albania. In 1998 armed UÇK militias began to launch attacks on Serbian special police forces. Milošević responded with a heavy hand. Subsequent events, including the massacres of Albanian civilians by Serbian paramilitary forces, have been well documented elsewhere, as has the resulting NATO bombing of FRY from March to June 1999. The short-term effect of the NATO bombing was to compel the Serbian population to rally around the leadership temporarily. However, as the compounded effects of ten years of economic mismanagement and the destruction caused by the bombing set in and as it became clear that Milošević had lost Kosovo to international supervision, opposition rose and spread to all parts of society. Aided by the international community, the divided opposition was beginning to unite.

The Milošević regime was now in grave danger. The economy was in shambles, and the country was totally isolated. Milošević had promised in 1996 that economic sanctions would end and that Serb refugees would be allowed to return to their homes in Bosnia and Croatia, but neither promise had been fulfilled. Much of the population was living in poverty. Kosovo, for practical purposes, no longer belonged to Serbia, and the Montenegrin lead-
ership was in open rebellion against Belgrade. The Serbian Orthodox Church and SANU were calling for Milošević to step down. Though he could still rely on the support of his wife’s JUL and to some extent on that of Šešelj, his power was clearly waning. In response, authoritarianism deepened: if the regime had been a “soft” dictatorship before, it moved decisively in the “hard” direction in 1999. Milošević cracked down fiercely on the opposition, using his extensive military and police apparatus. Laws were enacted to prevent criticism of the regime and to curtail the independent media. Protestors were beaten, and some opponents of the regime disappeared. Constitutional changes were enacted so that Montenegro was basically left out of political processes at the federal level.

In the spring of 2000, the SPS held an extraordinary convention at which Milošević was reelected party president by 99 percent of the delegates. Many delegates were probably under no illusions about the harm Milošević had caused the country, but given the corrupt system of privileges and the threats of trials and lustration, as well as Milošević’s own indictment in 1999 by the ICTY, they had a lot to lose if the regime fell. Then the regime made a fateful move: it called for direct elections to the Yugoslav presidency and parliament in fall 2000. Milošević had clearly calculated that, using all of the electoral tricks and media control available to him, he would be able to secure a victory and thus legitimize his rule for another term.

The challenge was now left to the opposition, who would have to present a common front in order to defeat the regime. Milošević, after all, still had a reliable electorate ready to vote him back into power. With tactical help from the international community, they went through the painful process of unification in subsequent months. To win, the opposition would have to enlist the support of parts of society who had been suspicious of the urban democratic parties. Given the sheer depth of economic devastation, this was, for the first time, entirely possible.

**The Main Parties and Their Orientations**

In the 1990s, voting for parties in Serbia was generally governed by the “rule of fourths.” Excluding the Kosovar Albanians and Hungarians in Vojvodina, who either boycotted elections or voted for their own minority parties, we can observe that at least half the electorate voted for the two largest illiberal parties, the SPS/JUL and SRS (one fourth each). Another fourth voted for one of the opposition parties, whose liberal credentials were ambivalent.
Finally, the last fourth abstained from voting altogether. These parties, their programs, and their social bases of support speak to the illiberal character of the FRY polity in the 1990s.

The SPS and Its Bases of Support

The SPS emerged from the SKS, and beyond changing its name and adding nationalist ideology to its rhetoric, little else changed. The party inherited the funds, infrastructure, and organizational resources of its predecessor. Most members, used to party discipline and loyalty to a leader, followed Milošević as conformists. Whereas the communists regarded peasant culture and its manifestations as backward, the SPS embraced and exploited them:

Whereas Tito's Yugoslavia relied on the acquiescence, if not necessarily the support, of urban and intellectual elites, Milošević early understood that he could not depend on their support and turned instead to rural Serbia and the areas around the “southern railway” (južna pruga). In turning to the peasantry and the “small towns,” the regime adopted in part many of the attitudes of these groups, particularly opposition to urban life, urban culture, and the supposed contamination and artificiality of cities. These attitudes form a vital part of the nationalist side of the regime’s rhetoric. (Gordy 1999: 12)

And as Gordy (1999: 11) has also observed, it was only one small step from communism’s false collective of the working class to nationalism’s false collective of the people. Moreover, where the Communist Party sought class enemies, the SPS found national enemies in other ethnic groups. It also found enemies in the outside world—and a global conspiracy against Serbia.

In its day-to-day functioning, the SPS oscillated among communism, socialism, nationalism, and reform, hardly unfamiliar to people who recall Tito’s swings among Stalinism, “non-party” pluralism, centralism, federalism, and nonalignment (Gordy 1999: 16). Gordy notes, however, that “a single structural current runs through all of these rhetorical variants: authoritarianism” (1999: 16). He continues: “These ideological and practical inconsistencies allow the [Milošević regime], however briefly, to rely on a shifting coalition of conformists, nominally left-wing supporters of the Communist regimes of the past, right-wing nationalists who were formerly opponents of those regimes, and even some liberals who may trust in promises of eventual reform or believe that the regime can be compromised from within. In this regard, they simultaneously represent a continuation of the old regime and a limited
departure from it” (1999: 17). A Vreme journalist put it more candidly: Milošević “succeeded in tricking both the communists and nationalists; the communists believed he was only pretending to be a nationalist, and the nationalists that he was only pretending to be a communist” (quoted in Cohen 2001: 88).

In terms of its bases of social support, the SPS was disproportionately backed by voters in poorer areas. It also had stronger support among older people. Furthermore, large numbers of SPS supporters came from rural areas and small towns, and it found stronger levels of support among less-educated voters (Gordy 1999: 52–53).

The Ideological Surrogates of the SPS

Despite its clear hold on power, the SPS heavily relied on the use of ideological surrogate parties. They served a number of purposes. “By rotating its cast of ideological surrogates through the musical chairs of power,” writes Gordy, “the regime protects itself from its own positions and actions” (1999: 14). Moreover, all the crucial ideological, political, and military work of the regime was performed by surrogates, and they could also be used to give the impression of pluralism. Finally, in the context of a parliamentary system, surrogates allowed the SPS to overcome its failure to win majorities in the Serbian parliament.

One important surrogate was the JUL, founded and led by the wife of Slobodan Milošević, the unpredictable Mirjana Marković. Marković espoused a hodgepodge of neo-communist views, and the JUL became an “auxiliary framework through which Milošević could attract assorted elite-level forces (mostly industrial managers, military officers, former communist apparatchiks, and some intellectuals)” (Cohen 2001: 121). Marković and the JUL became more prominent in the second half of the 1990s, helping the SPS to fight dissent with divisive rhetoric. The parties ran as a coalition in 1996 and 1997.

However, a far more important ideological surrogate in terms of its support, membership, and influence was Šešelj’s SRS. The popularity of the Radicals skyrocketed in the latter half of the 1990s due to economic collapse, war, and UN sanctions. They did the “dirty work” on behalf of the SPS: organizing paramilitary units and volunteers to go fight in Croatia and Bosnia. The second most important function of the SRS was to destroy the democratically oriented opposition parties by offering an appealing alternative to the SPS.
Šešelj performed both tasks very well. According to the Serbian political scientist Ognjen Pribićević (1997: 54), the SRS was “indispensable” to Milošević and the SPS.

The SRS offered simple, populist solutions rooted in xenophobia and nationalism to complicated political, social, and economic questions. For instance, Šešelj declared that the solution to the Serbian national question was quite simple: since Serbs have the most military power in the former Yugoslavia, they should simply use it to take what is theirs (“da upotrebe vojne snage i uzmu ono što je njihovo”). His solution to the Kosovo problem was just as simple: Kosovar Albanians should be made to go to Albania. He also proposed a population exchange with Croatia: “We will try to quickly reach an inter-state agreement with Croatia so that, in a civilized way, we can exchange populations. If they refuse, in the civilized world there exist other, also civilized, ways that this can be accomplished” (Pribićević 1997: 55). To FRY’s economic problems, he offered a variety of populist state-led solutions to redistribute income, finance public works, and yet also restrict budgetary expenditures and privatize the state sector. “Economically we are liberals,” Šešelj told an interviewer in 1996, “we support liberal capitalism and the complete privatization of everything that can be privatized and not endanger the functioning of the state. Almost Thatcherism. We differ from others because we insist on a method of privatization which excludes stealing” (quoted in Cohen 2001: 223). Šešelj took advantage of the fact that a politically and socially disoriented electorate did not have the will or patience to get involved in the nuances of policy (Pribićević 1997: 55).

Šešelj proposed a Greater Serbia (Velika Srbija) that would include Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, and large parts of Croatia and Bosnia. He gave fiery speeches and boasted about atrocities committed against Croat civilians in the Krajina. He was vehemently anti-Western, frequently referring to conspiracies orchestrated against Serbia by the Vatican, Germany, CIA, Italy, and Turkey. He was also a charismatic leader who was a fearless and consistent advocate of society’s deepest concerns. As such, his message resonated with the parts of population most seriously affected by Serbia’s slide into poverty. These included the former middle and lower middle classes, private craftsmen, lower-ranking technicians, professionals and management personnel, small-scale entrepreneurs, skilled and semi-skilled workers and retirees, disgruntled students, and segments of the rural sector (Cohen 2001: 222). Šešelj skillfully tapped into their economic despair and sense of national humiliation. An example of
his fiery, outrageous rhetoric was his threat to burn down Rome in retaliation for Italy allowing NATO planes to use its bases to bomb Bosnian Serb positions around Sarajevo in 1995. However, he toned down his most extreme rhetoric when he ran for Serbian president in 1997.

The Democratic, Somewhat Liberal, Opposition

Four major parties made up the democratic opposition: Drašković’s SPO, Đindić’s DS, Vesna Pesić’s Civic Alliance of Serbia (Gradaški Savez Srbije, GSS) and Koštunica’s Democratic Party of Serbia (Demokratska Stranka Srbije, DSS). The inability of these four parties to unite helped to keep the Milošević regime in power. Nominally, they were all liberal parties, declaring their support for democracy, human rights, the free market, and European integration.

In practice, they all dabbled in nationalism, albeit to different degrees. The GSS was the most consistently liberal, followed by the DS, the DSS, and the SPO. Drašković was unpredictable: an avowed nationalist at first, he even organized his own militia to fight in Croatia. Then he became an opponent of war, only to join the Milošević government late in the 1990s. Yet, as a traditionalist, anti-communist, and monarchist, he was able to attract a unique base of support. The DSS and DS emerged from the same party when the nationalist-inclined Koštunica split from Đindić and founded the DSS. Yet, even Đindić played the nationalist card, at one point supporting Bosnian Serb leader and indicted war criminal Radovan Karadžić after his split with Milošević. Nevertheless, the DS appealed mostly to educated urbanites of Belgrade.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the two Hungarian minority parties from Vojvodina: the Democratic Community of Vojvodina Hungarians (Demokratska Zajednica Mađara Vojvodine, DZMV; Hungarian: Vajdasági Magyarok Demokratikus Közössége, VMDK) and the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (Savez Vojvođanskih Mađara, SVM; Hungarian: Vajdasági Magyar Szövetség, VMSZ). Both called for the autonomy of Vojvodina, with the latter favoring a more pragmatic, conciliatory approach. With representatives in the National Assembly, the two parties were among the only minorities to have a voice at all in 1990s FRY.

Loci of Political Conflict

Patterns of party support allow us to reach some conclusions about the nature and extent of public divisions in 1990s FRY. On one level, FRY society
was split between a collective, neotraditional, anti-Western, illiberal culture associated with rural areas and a cosmopolitan, civic, modernizing, liberal orientation associated with urban areas. The conditions of the 1980s and 1990s helped the former to win over the latter, but the division continued to shape public discourse and divisions within the opposition parties, for instance. The split over the appropriateness of Western liberalism proved to be the most divisive of all, especially for the opposition. FRY’s democratic development was also hindered by a lack of national integration, that is, the complete withdrawal of Kosovar Albanians from the political process and the efforts of Montenegro after 1997 to withdraw from the federation.

Thomas writes about other profound divisions rooted in competing views of history:

In Serbia ideological divisions are not necessarily connected with the pursuit of different policies; rather it is a matter of their adherence to or connection with different political traditions or cultures. These cultures may not only have a differing political content but also a radically different understanding of history and vision of the nation underpinned by familial and collective memory. In Serbia this cultural schism particularly relates to the Partisan/Chetnik and Socialist/anti-communist divide. This cultural and political chasm in the body politic is manifest in the use by contending parties of different national symbols and anthems and insignia. In practical terms this existence of alternative national political visions, which draw on the unresolved memories of civil war, means that there is no readily accepted “legitimacy” for the dominance of either side. In these circumstances the terms of the “democratic bargain” are prone to be called into doubt, the restraints on the bounds of political action are fragile, and political rhetoric tends to stray into the language of revolution. (1999: 5–6)

Table 7.1 shows how certain value divisions were manifest in the party system. A number of deep divisions emerge from this data over values such as authoritarianism, liberalism, nationalism, and modernism, with some parties attracting mostly authoritarians and others mostly liberals. For example, 63 percent of DS voters declared that belonging to Europe was important for them, while only 38 percent of SPS voters responded in this manner. Similarly deep divisions emerge over values such as nationalism, modernism, and tolerance. The kinds of cross-cutting cleavages that foster political compromise are absent, indicating low levels of liberal content.
The Milošević Regime and the West

The Politics of Anti-Westernism

As a careful, calculating political actor, Milošević perceived that the benefits of appealing to Serbian nationalism and fomenting paranoia about the intentions of the outside world outweighed the costs of isolation and exclusion from the process of European integration. With regard to his pursuit of war in Bosnia and Croatia, some analysts have suggested that Milošević had believed internal intelligence reports, which argued that with the winding

Table 7.1  Distribution of Selected Values within the Main Political Parties
(percent of voters who agree with value)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value</th>
<th>SPS(^a)</th>
<th>SRS(^b)</th>
<th>SPO(^c)</th>
<th>DS(^d)</th>
<th>DSS(^e)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belonging to SCG/ important</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging to Europe important</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>75</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nostalgia for the old system</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Liberalism</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modernism</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>73</td>
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**Survey period October 1992**

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<tr>
<td>Radicalism</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nationalism</td>
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<td>52</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>Authoritarianism</td>
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<td>22</td>
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<td>84</td>
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<td>Religiosity</td>
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**Survey period 1993**

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<th>46</th>
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<th>65</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trust in people</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egalitarianism</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservatism</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-materialist values</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Survey period October 1996**


\(^a\)Serbian Socialist Party (Srpska Partija Socijalisticka).

\(^b\)Serbian Radical Party (Srpska Radikalna Stranka).

\(^c\)Serbian Renewal Movement (Srpski Pokret Obnove).

\(^d\)Democratic Party (Demokratska Stranka).

\(^e\)Democratic Party of Serbia (Demokratska Stranka Srbije).

\(^f\)Serbia and Montenegro (Srbija i Crna Gora).

\(^g\)Questions on tolerance and radicalism included in survey conducted May 1993. Questions on nationalism and authoritarianism included in survey conducted October 1993. Questions on xenophobia and religiosity included in survey conducted November 1993.
down of the Cold War, Yugoslavia was no longer of vital strategic importance to the West and thus that it would not intervene in its internal affairs. However, these factors only explain Milošević’s decision to go to war and not his consistent rejection of Western liberalism and his use of populist anti-Western rhetoric throughout the 1990s.

Certainly part of the explanation is path-dependent: once he began to base his legitimacy on standing up to the West and rejecting its demands, it was harder to turn back. Even the otherwise liberal opposition parties felt that they had to toe the anti-Western line to some degree in order to be politically viable in the charged atmosphere of 1990s FR Yugoslavia. Being seen as a Western “lackey” was a significant political liability. Thus, that the West openly supported the ascent of Milan Panić and Dobrica Ćosić to leadership positions in the regime actually backfired, as the two leaders were later denounced as serving foreign interests by both the regime and large parts of the public. That Milošević created an atmosphere in which the Western incentives of membership in the European Union, NATO, and other international organizations had little in the way of a receptive audience among the domestic public, and thus little leverage in terms of encouraging democratization, goes far in explaining the authoritarian character of the Milošević regime. Absent a domestic impetus for liberalism and any credible promise of membership in Western institutions, the external factor could not act as a force “neutralizing” radical populism, as it did in Slovenia and Croatia.

Anti-Western sentiment deepened in the 1990s as a result of Milošević’s policies and the negative effects of Western sanctions, which were exploited by the regime to demonstrate a vast conspiracy against FR Yugoslavia in the international community. Indeed, Belgrade bookstores were full of volumes purporting to expose Vatican, German, American, and other conspiracies to destroy Yugoslavia and annihilate the Serbs. Polls taken in the mid-1990s showed that 69 percent of respondents believed that it was necessary to keep up the fight without regard to the outside world. According to research done by the Institute of Political Studies in Belgrade, 79 percent of respondents from Serbia believed that there was a vast conspiracy against Serbia led by Germany and the Vatican (Malešević 2002: 252). Even intellectual groups had assimilated a deep mistrust of the West, as the following statement from one writers’ association attests: “Western civilization is a mixture of poverty, drugs, and criminals and the fall of all moral values, and we cannot find a model for us in this” (quoted in Malešević 2002: 245).
This led to a cycle in which the West was forced to rely on negative inducements to achieve compliance, while this sort of pressure only galvanized anti-Western sentiment in FRY. Sanctions were the main instrument used by the West: they were imposed in 1991 over the war in Croatia, reinforced in 1992 over the war in Bosnia, lifted in 1995 after Dayton, reimposed in 1998 over Kosovo, and tightened in 1999 after the NATO bombing. An “outer wall” of sanctions excluded FRY from membership in any international organizations and remained intact throughout the 1990s as punishment for the undemocratic regime. Milošević, of course, understood that there was a limit to how much he could ignore Western demands, particularly since complete economic isolation would lead to conditions that could threaten his power. Thus, he made grudging concessions, mostly to have the sanctions eased.

In 1994, following hyperinflation, economic conditions were particularly bad, and Milošević knew that he would have to extricate FRY from the sanctions if he wanted to stay in power. For a tired public, it also played well to appear to have had defeated, as opposed to “given in to,” sanctions. It is then that he decided to play the role of peacemaker at Dayton. The sanctions were lifted, and Milošević received a significant boost at home and abroad. However, any international political capital he may have achieved internationally was wasted with his invalidation of the November 1996 local elections, for which he was sharply criticized and isolated by both the United States and the EU (Pribićević 1997: 118).

Milošević, nonetheless, was intent on cultivating a respectable image in the international community. Thus, he created a democratic façade at home and tried hard not to appear as a dictator. This was one other reason that it was strategically valuable to support extremist ideological surrogates like Šešelj’s SRS: they made Milošević appear moderate and allowed him to point out to Western officials that the alternative to his rule was an extremist party. Milošević, then, was not ideologically driven in his anti-Western appeals. Rather, he saw them as politically expedient. He seemed to be always calculating about how far he could go without totally alienating the West, and how many concessions he could extract from Western officials.

**Moving to Promote Regime Change**

Already in 1991, Milošević came under sharp criticism from Western nations. Later, the policies of the West were driven by the imperative of ending the wars in the former Yugoslavia, and as such Milošević was embraced in
1995 when he expressed a desire to participate in the peace process. By the end of the 1990s, Western nations used the stick of isolation to punish Milošević for his democratic transgressions and in an attempt to compel democratic reform.

However, at a certain point it became clear that the policy of isolation alone was only playing into the regime’s efforts to demonize the West and present Serbia as a victim. Thus, in 1998 the United States in particular decided that it would be useful to begin a campaign of support for the democratic opposition. There were strong feelings that the United States had missed an opportunity in failing to seize on the massive 1996–1997 protests by supporting the Milošević opposition. This failure also made some members of the democratic opposition in FRY cynical of U.S. motives.

Washington began a policy of offering support to opposition groups in the form of aid and logistical assistance, much like what was done in Croatia around the same time. By some estimates, the opposition received $25 million in financial assistance in the last two years of the 1990s (Krickovic 2001: 18). There were conditions attached to this aid. One condition was that the opposition parties overcome their divisions, as this was the only way they could assure their victory over the regime. Much of the logistical support offered to the opposition was geared toward helping the opposition parties unite behind a common leader and program. The second condition was that the nationally oriented opposition parties such as the SPO and DSS cease their anti-Western rhetoric and support FRY’s entry into Euro-Atlantic structures based on a fulfillment of the necessary political and economic reforms. During the NATO bombing of 1999, the U.S. Mission to Belgrade evacuated, set up shop in Budapest, and received members of the Serbian opposition on a regular basis. The strategy worked: the SPO, GSS, DS, and, somewhat more reluctantly, the DSS united and ran on a pro-European, liberal platform under the DEPOS coalition. Later, the nonviolent resistance movement Otpor became a major beneficiary of aid. Support for Otpor turned out to be an ideal strategy: as a nonpolitical party, it had much more legitimacy in the eyes of the public. The EU also wooed the opposition. Romano Prodi said that “Belgrade and its policies which are continuing to deny [FRY] its place in Europe, a place to which it will be wholeheartedly welcomed once a democratic government is in place” (quoted in Field 2000: 132). This also reflected a shift from exclusive reliance on the stick to the carrot on the part of the EU. Moreover, the Western-promoted democratic turnover in Croatia in January 2000
and the positive international reaction in the months that followed served as a positive demonstration effect for the opposition.

Part of the Western strategy involved funding the work of a number of U.S.-based prodemocracy NGOs, such as the International Republican Institute (IRI) and National Democratic Institute (NDI), which were instrumental in training party activists and helping to organize campaigns to encourage citizens to vote. Support was also provided to alternative media outlets to help them reach rural areas. Moreover, Western-funded NGOs conducted polls that helped the opposition parties focus their programs. Critically, these polls showed that the electorate was most concerned with issues of economic survival far more than issues such as nationality.

The catch was that the United States and other Western countries had to take a very cautious approach so as not to discredit the opposition as a tool of foreign countries. The choice of DSS leader Vojislav Koštunica was a compromise in this regard: he was uncorrupted and democratic but also had strong nationalist credentials. He had been an open critic of the American effort to “export democracy,” saying, “For people who have not experienced democracy it is important that democracy grow in this country. If it was somehow imported, it would not give people the right idea” (quoted in Cohen 2001: 409). Ironically, he was even more blunt about the American “Budapest strategy” that helped bring him to power: “You need to have a huge dose of arrogance to claim that a long-term U.S. goal is the improvement of democracy in Serbia. Democracy in Serbia is exclusively a Serbian goal and nobody else can claim it” (quoted in Cohen 2001: 409).

The NATO Bombing of 1999

The U.S.-led decision by NATO to pursue an air war against the Milošević regime and the events of this war have been well documented elsewhere. Despite all the debate over its utility and strategic goals, one fact is clear: the decision to punish Milošević reflected a new willingness on the part of the Western world to enforce liberal norms through military force, if necessary. Milošević’s campaign in Kosovo did not represent a serious threat to European or American security, but his failure to adopt the provisions of the Rambouillet framework meant that he was not willing to play by Western liberal rules, especially with regard to minority rights. Why was he willing to risk a bombing campaign over Kosovo when he had so readily abandoned nationalist projects in Croatia and Bosnia? There is no definitive answer, but analysts
have speculated that he thought he could divide the NATO alliance or that he would again be able to emerge as peacemaker after entering negotiations, thereby strengthening his position. If so, he greatly miscalculated on both counts. More than likely, he knew that losing Kosovo would be the final nail in his regime’s coffin, proof that he was not capable of defending Serbian interests as he had promised in Kosovo more than a decade earlier. From the perspective of NATO, it was necessary to defend the alliance’s credibility, find a new mission in the post–Cold War world, and eliminate the chief impediment to democratization and stability in the Balkans.

NATO bombed FRY for seventy-eight days before Milošević, realizing that it was his last chance to walk away and still hold power, finally capitulated and signed an agreement promising to withdraw his troops from the territory of Kosovo and accept that it would become an international protectorate. During the bombing itself, massacres were committed by Serbian paramilitary groups, and much of the Albanian population fled to neighboring countries. Estimates are that at least 500 civilians were killed by NATO bombs, while Serbian forces killed 10,000–12,000 Albanian civilians (Ramet 2006: 517).

During the bombing, the population initially rallied around the regime. Then support began to wane, falling sharply among nationalists as they realized that Kosovo was lost. The negative economic effects of the bombing impoverished the FRY population further. The regime was delegitimized and, as noted above, resorted to strong-arm tactics to remain in power.

Milošević delivered a speech on New Year’s Eve in 1999 that again evoked the theme of Western liberal imperialism. “The West wants to conquer the whole world,” he remarked, “Let us hope that the developed part of the world will come around and see the danger that they themselves are posing to the world. But we should expect that the other part of the world will find the strength to unite and stand firm” (Cohen 2001: 332). A desperate and isolated man on the eve of the new millennium, he sought alliances with the likes of Iraq, Libya, and Belarus. Meanwhile, the West had made his removal from power an explicit condition for aid and admission to any Western organizations (Field 2000: 138).

**Seeking Western Largesse: Montenegro and Milo Đukanović, 1997–1999**

Montenegro after 1997 is a paradigmatic example of a theoretical point made in the introduction to this study about how post-communist political
elites may adopt a pro-Western stance in order to bid for political capital, even where they have no history of supporting the Western liberal project.\textsuperscript{29} The public may or may not be behind the Western agenda, or it may be deeply divided over it; nevertheless, certain segments of society will support these elites if they see potential benefits emerging from falling in line with Western conditions. The West becomes, therefore, a source of capital in domestic political games.

Until 1996, Milošević was able to control Montenegro firmly. However, increasing dissatisfaction with FRY’s isolation and the catastrophic economic situation led to a search for political alternatives in Podgorica and resistance to Milošević by the reform-minded coalition of Đukanović, who had already succeeded in placing his supporters in the federal parliament in Belgrade. The federal constitutional court, filled with Milošević loyalists, challenged this and Đukanović’s subsequent election as president. In response, Montenegro’s government announced that it no longer recognized the authority of the National Assembly. Milošević arranged for Momir Bulatović, a loyalist, to be elected federal prime minister (Cohen 2001: 329). In response to such battles with Belgrade, the Đukanović government in Podgorica decided to court the United States and the EU, and the West was happy to oblige, seeing in Đukanović an opportunity to promote reform in FRY.

However, a Western versus anti-Western orientation was never at the root of the Podgorica-Belgrade conflict. Đukanović had not been a pro-Western politician in the past. He had originally been one of the “golden boys” of Milošević’s anti-bureaucratic revolution. He began to have reservations about the regime when Milošević removed Dobrica Ćosić and Milan Panić from office during 1993.\textsuperscript{30} During the 1996–1997 anti-regime protests, Đukanović openly sided with the protestors. When the time was right, he used the West to raise his political standing and to gain concrete rewards. He could not have stood up to Milošević on his own: with only 600,000 people, Montenegro was dwarfed by Serbia. Embracing the West was a practical way, therefore, to pursue his political ambitions.

In the Montenegrin presidential election of October 1997, Đukanović began to criticize Milošević openly for his authoritarian practices and his failure to address the problems the country was facing. Critically, he also began to speak of Montenegro’s desire to join Western structures, particularly the EU, which was a sharp departure from Belgrade’s policies. Đukanović’s split with the pro-Belgrade policies of Bulatović also signaled a split in the
ruling DPS, with Bulatović forming the splinter Socialist People’s Party (Socijalistička Narodna Partija, SNP) and continuing to pursue a pro-Belgrade line. The election turned into a bitter battle between Đukanović and Bulatović and, simultaneously, between supporters of Belgrade’s policies and Montenegro’s continued union with Serbia and those opposing both. Two small pro-Western liberal parties, the Peoples’ Party (Narodna Stranka, NS) and Liberal Alliance (Liberalni Savez, LS) agreed to support Đukanović in return for his pledge to undertake democratic reforms. The outcome of the first round of voting was extremely close, with neither candidate gaining the required absolute majority. In the second round, Đukanović prevailed, with strong support from young voters and members of minority communities. Đukanović also relied on mobilizing voters along traditional Montenegrin clan lines, a strategy that was sharply attacked by the Bulatović camp as being “pre-civic” (Cohen 2001: 282).³¹

Bulatović, supported by Belgrade, mounted a fierce attack on Đukanović, claiming that he was corrupt and a stooge of the NATO countries aiming to break up the FRY (Bugajski 2002: 499). He accused his rival of election fraud and organized large demonstrations in January 1998 in an attempt to disrupt Đukanović’s inauguration. Belgrade likewise tried to stir up civil strife to invalidate the election and intimidate Đukanović with Yugoslav troop movements. However, despite rumors that Bulatović was planning a coup and that Milošević would impose a state of emergency in Montenegro, strong international support for Đukanović probably prevented the regime from taking such drastic measures (Karatnycky et al. 1999: 658). Thus, Đukanović took office with strong international backing: fifty-six diplomats accredited to FRY attended the inauguration (Vojicic 1998).

The close results in the presidential contest reflected the deep polarization of the republic’s population regarding the question of reform and relations with Serbia and, to some extent, over identity itself. Half of Montenegro’s citizens identified as Serbs, and the other half as Montenegrins.³² The Metropolitan of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church said at the time:

At this time Montenegro is literally divided. The northern regions, workers and retirees are on the side of the Serbian option that is Momir Bulatović; the urban areas, businessmen and the youth are on the side of Milo Đukanović and independence. [Federal] army and [Montenegrin] police—each representing its option—have already unsheathed the bayonets. The outcome may be bloody… very bloody… The mentality of our people is still very patriarchal,
knife, revenge, and tribal system such as exists nowhere else. The whole country is inter-connected, almost everyone knows everyone else. . . . Quarrels within a family are the worst, the pain the deepest. (quoted in Cohen 2001: 334)

Đukanović, therefore, had limited legitimacy and had to tread carefully. This only increased his need for international backing, and he began to seek it more actively with numerous overtures to Western governments. Montenegro opened a separate trade mission in Washington, and its spokesmen distanced themselves from the FRY embassy. Representatives of the Đukanović government were dispatched to Brussels to express their desire to cooperate with the EU.

Increasingly operating as a quasi-independent state in terms of foreign policy, Montenegro opened the door to foreign visitors without a visa regime. Yet, Đukanović’s regime in Montenegro also resembled the kind of “simulated” democracy described in chapter 4 for Croatia: despite the existence of extensive democratic rules, the DPS exercised a tight hold over political and economic life in Montenegro as well as the media. Nevertheless, Podgorica was viewed by many Western diplomats as the back door through which to influence developments in Milošević’s Yugoslavia. The simulation, however, proved to be useful in gaining concrete rewards from the West, especially since Western countries and organizations saw any counterforce to Milošević as strategically useful and hoped that democratization would spread from Podgorica to Belgrade. Hence, despite Đukanović’s lack of democratic credentials and ongoing rumors about his shady financial dealings in the contraband cigarette trade, he was embraced as the “poster boy” of the Balkans and invited to visit Western capitals.

NGOs were dispatched to Podgorica to promote reforms and educate locals in the art of Western democratic institutions. Financial assistance and limited investment began to flow into Montenegro, including an independent bank sponsored by George Soros. The international community used Montenegro, for instance, to set up meetings and workshops with Serbia’s political opposition, to whom Montenegro gave safe haven. The ultimate reward came in 1999, when, save for a few military installations, NATO left Montenegrin targets off of its bombing list.

The Đukanović government used a number of traditional avenues to stimulate support for its separatist agenda. For instance, it began to encourage the Montenegrin church to assert its independence from the hierarchy of the Serbian Orthodox Church. There was, however, a part of the population,
who, whether for personal or economic reasons, did not recognize Montenegrin identity and would never support its independence. In an atmosphere of nationalism, some had eagerly embraced the idea spread by the Belgrade regime that all Montenegrins were actually Serbs, in part because such statements were taboo under communism. The division over identity proved to be a constant threat to the legitimacy of Đukanović’s agenda. The West, while warning Milošević not to provoke another war with Montenegro, also opposed Montenegro’s outright independence and pressured Đukanović to contain his pro-sovereignty inclinations.

Milošević did everything in his power to destabilize and discredit Đukanović’s government, as did former pro-Milošević Montenegrin president and Đukanović rival Bulatović. An economic blockade was imposed on Montenegro, and troops were amassed on the border, at times provocatively straying into Montenegrin territory. Đukanović was attacked for undermining social ownership and playing into the hands of “Western liberal imperialism” and excluded from the Supreme Defense Council. Podgorica retaliated by strengthening its internal security forces and with a new citizenship law that created a distinct Montenegrin citizenship.

In the end, the threat from Đukanović to Milošević was probably greater, since in acting as an independent state, Montenegro further hurt the legitimacy of the Belgrade regime. Ironically, though, one of the biggest losers after the fall of the Milošević regime in 2000 was Đukanović, who quickly lost his “poster boy” status in Western capitals. His overtures to the West would now have to depend on more than half-hearted democratic policies. A pro-Western stance as a means of bidding for power and rewards, in other words, no longer carried the same benefits under changed circumstances.

The Reproduction of Economic Decline

The economic crisis of the 1980s was especially acute in FRY, where high expectations and memories of better times fueled deep disappointment. The economic shocks associated with the breakup of the SFRJ market were severe because FRY had depended heavily on the availability of cheap inputs from the other republics and on their markets to sell its goods. Due to populist economic policies, a lack of almost any reform whatsoever, and the negative effects of war and international isolation, the economy continued its downward spiral through the 1990s. This had the dual political effect of strengthening
support for radical populism (even as support for Milošević himself fell) and, in the long run, exhausting and demobilizing the population politically.

The first years of transition saw steep declines in growth. In only four years, FRY’s GDP dropped by 60 percent (see figure 7.1). By 1996, 26 out of 35 branches of industry had an output that was less than 50 percent of the 1989 level. Many FRY citizens emigrated to the West, which resulted in a severe weakening of the position of the middle class (Cohen 2001: 208). The SPS-connected “new rich,” meanwhile, grew richer.

The SPS’s ideology called for a mixed socialist-market economy, but detailed policy proposals were few and far between. Many economic decisions were based on populist motives, which wreaked havoc on the economy. One practice employed by Milošević repeatedly from 1990 to 1993 was simply to increase the money supply to pay retirees and state-sector workers, thereby buying supporters and social peace. This proved to be disastrous. An increase in the money supply combined with strong inflationary pressures caused by a number of other factors, such as the unloading of other republics’ dinar holdings in the FRY market as the SFRJ disintegrated, helped lead in 1993 to one of the largest instances of hyperinflation in world history. The monthly rate of inflation was never below 100 percent in 1993 and fell below 200 percent only in April. The end of 1993 saw genuine hyperinflation: 18,860 percent in August and 20,190 percent by November. The dinar had lost its meaning as the Serbian economy reverted to barter. In January 1994, the monthly rate of inflation averaged over 300 million percent and prices reached dizzying sums (Gordy 1999: 171).

In 1994, the economist Dragoslav Avramović was brought in as the new head of the Yugoslav National Bank and managed to curb inflation and for a time reverse declining output with a strict program of monetary restriction. However, falling inflation could not disguise continued instability in the economy. Unfortunately, Milošević had instilled Avramović with limited powers, and he could not follow through on his privatization program. Instead, he was dismissed in 1996 for advocating an end to state monopolies.

A staple of the Milošević regime’s economic policy was extensive clientelism. The regime ensured that the resources available in economically devastated FRY went to regime insiders. Although clientelism marked the Tuđman regime in Croatia as well, its effects were much worse in FRY because its economic structure was weaker and because it occurred in the context of an economy that had undergone almost no liberalization. Poor initial condi-
tions, the absence of privatization, and the isolation of the FRY economy from 1992 to 1995 due to international sanctions created an ideal milieu for the evolution of the SPS and DPS as clientelist parties “that do not manage to represent economic or cultural interest, but co-opt individuals from different social strata and cultural segments by financial inducements” (Goati 1998: 25).

The SPS was the main source of patronage, doling out the state’s meager resources to loyalists and profiting from sanctions-busting and war-related activities with the support of organized crime. Ministers and political leaders wielded enormous influence in the economy. The economic system was dominated by 120 companies, whose heads were all political appointees and who represented FRY’s main producers, exporters, importers, and the banks. Because they operated in monopolistic conditions and received export and import privileges, the profits were large. The state and para-state economic elites grew enormously wealthy, due not to their entrepreneurial talents but to politically backed monopoly control over different segments of the economy. The wartime trade in arms, war materials, and stolen humanitarian aid was very profitable. Cohen writes: “The Serbian state and para-state eco-
nomic and managerial stratum did not constitute a modernizing elite devoted to economic innovation and development, but rather a politically obedient oligarchy benefiting from the status quo” (2001: 132). The SPS adamantly opposed privatization. As one newspaper wrote in 1996, “They want things to stay as they are because they have the best of both worlds. You have companies run by general managers appointed by one political leader. These are feudal fiefs held by one man. If you privatize, you lose control—you convert your country from a tightly controlled society to an amorphous society where you do not know what to expect.”

Limited privatization was attempted in the first years of the 1990s but was later reversed. Since there were restrictions on international capital, there was really no way for outside firms to buy FRY enterprises. By the end of the 1990s, the private sector accounted for only 40 percent of production, much of which was in the small and informal sector. The state sector, on the other hand, was inefficient and bloated and subject to soft budget constraints. The EBRD wrote: “The country’s enterprises are largely unreformed and are characterized by substantial losses, soft budget constraints, widespread inter-enterprise arrears, and barter arrangements. There are no effective bankruptcy procedures. While there is a competition law in place, it has not been applied” (quoted in Jeffries 2002: 12).

The economy was characterized by a number of other negative trends in the 1990s due to poor policies and mismanagement by the Milošević regime, international sanctions, and the effects of war. FDI was limited—only $1 billion flowed in from 1990 to 1998, and most of this came from the privatization of Serbia Telecom. Macroeconomic performance was variable, but long-term trends pointed to general deterioration (Uvalić 2001: 178). There was a chronically large current accounts deficit and high gross external debt. Inflationary pressures remained. Price liberalization was only partial and was reversed on several occasions. The foreign exchange system, even after the lifting of sanctions in late 1995, remained subject to restrictions such as widespread import and export licenses, import quotas, high import duties and associated charges, the non-convertibility of the dinar, and limits on foreign exchange. Banking scandals deprived people of hard currency savings. A large part of the budget went to defense. And the unemployment rate crept upwards, surpassing 25 percent in 1995 (Jeffries 2002: 303).

Milošević was wary of reform and suspicious of free market capitalism—not so much due to his ideological convictions as his desire to stay in power at all costs. Radical reforms would strike at the heart of his power base, which
rested on a vast web of political and economic patronage. Consequently, the economy continued to slide downhill. I have heard in Serbia countless stories of people who lived relatively well in the 1980s but whose lives were completely devastated in the 1990s. Many became increasingly dependent on pensions or remittances as the only source of income, lowering social autonomy and leading to general resignation. People were forced to think about basic needs rather than how to go about ousting the regime and this was a boon to Milošević (Gordy 1999).

After the Kosovo conflict, all economic indicators took a nosedive. The country’s GNP in 1999 dropped to less than 40 percent of its 1989 level. Dangerous low reserves signaled that a serious international liquidity crisis was looming. The costs of the bombing and the destruction it wrought have been estimated at between $30 billion to $100 billion, of which $4 billion was the cost of physical damage, $2.3 billion was lost human capital, and $23 billion was lost potential GDP from damaged plants and disrupted trade (Uvalić 2001: 177).

Pensions and salaries were not being paid at all or paid with coupons for needed goods. The factor that kept the population at a level of basic sustenance was the fact that FRY was always able to feed itself. For the first time in history, Montenegro had higher wages than Serbia. More than 40,000 people worked in 350 loss-making industries and 42,000 worked in the bloated public sector. Unemployment stood at over 40 percent. Serbia had its lowest standard of living since the end of World War II. Twenty percent of the population lived in poverty, and 50 percent lived at the subsistence level.

The question of how Milošević was able to stay in power should be distinguished from the larger question of why radical populism took hold in FRY and dominated the first ten years of post-communist transition. It was clear that had the institutional and other guarantors of SPS rule been removed in the 1990s, liberal political forces would probably not have filled the vacuum. Indeed, the second-largest party in FRY throughout the 1990s was the neo-fascist SRS, and significant parts of the ostensible liberal opposition played the nationalist card.

Radical populism dominated post-communist FRY because of initial conditions of economic malaise that deepened in the 1990s. Continuing reproduction of economic scarcity was filtered through certain illiberal proclivities in FRY society to produce populist authoritarianism. Research on social atti-
tudes in FRY indicated that “no social strata were interested or ideologically prepared to support or implement [liberal] reforms.” Moreover, in the early years of post-communist transition, survey research indicated high levels of xenophobia, ethnic distance, and non-market orientation in Serbia (Sekelj 2000: 58). Bora Kuzmanović, a social psychologist, found in 1990s FRY society an uncritical attitude toward authority, a “patriots or traitors” mentality, and strong feelings of collectivism (quoted in Sekelj 2000: 58).

Certain aspects of FRY political culture that could be mobilized in conditions of economic scarcity proved especially fertile soil for Milošević’s populist style. The triumph of traditional collectivist values in the Milošević years reflected in part a victory of the rural areas of FRY over the cosmopolitan, modern culture of the city. The urban-rural split in FRY society was cleverly exploited by the regime. Moreover, the regime’s decision to reject Western liberalism and the corresponding lack of any credible offer of membership in the EU and other Western organizations not only fortified populist nationalism but also meant that there was no positive external inducement to curtail illiberal policies and neutralize radical groups, as there had been in Croatia, Slovenia, and Macedonia.

Milošević, despite “astutely understanding his cultural milieu, [knowing] precisely how to package and convey such nationalist appeals, and also when to adopt a new style of political discourse,” had no real long-term strategy (Cohen 2001: 86). He did have an overriding interest, and that was power. He showed time and time again in his clientelist economic policies, in his manipulation of the democratic process, in his opportunistic nationalism, and in his knee-jerk foreign policy, that his chief interest was staying in power at all costs. This was not easy, as Milošević faced a permanent crisis of legitimation (Cohen 2001: xviii). Unlike his Croatian counterpart Tuđman, he could not point to a “Homeland War” or any other successful nationalist project. Instead he adopted ideological surrogates, exploited divisions in the public, blamed FRY’s woes on internal and external enemies, and, when all else failed, turned to repression.

Another factor lowering liberal content in FRY was the extent and nature of public divisions as reflected in the party system. Sekelj has written that there was “no fundamental consensus in Serbia and Montenegro on either the borders and character of the state or the values on which society and the political community should be founded… the ethnic Albanian community does not recognize the state, while leading Serbian political parties… advo-
cate a ‘Greater Serbia’” (2000: 59). Liberal content in FRY was low given the complete absence from the political scene of any real liberal options for most of the 1990s.

The opposition prevailed in the tumultuous events of October 2000, Vojislav Koštunica was installed as president, and the West was elated. The DEPOS coalition took control of the federal parliament, and won Serbian parliamentary elections several months later. However, as in Croatia, Milošević was not voted out of office because of a broad condemnation of nationalism or a universal embrace of democracy. Rather, the public was expressing deep dissatisfaction with the economic situation and a deeply illegitimate regime. Nationalist sentiment remained entrenched, and there was a continuing popular distrust of the West, its institutions, and its motives.