

Yugoslavia

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Subject:	Information on Student Political Activists since the fall of Milosevic
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Query:

What is the situation of members of student activist groups, such as Otpor, since Milosevic's fall from power?

Response:

Otpor (Resistance) is a liberal democratic, anti-Milosevic student movement founded in 1998 in response to a restrictive university law. Throughout 1999, and especially 2000, Otpor grew into a broad movement of dissent and came into increasingly severe conflicts with authorities. According to a report by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, virtually every event staged by Otpor resulted in some arrests (IWPR,2000). Repressive actions by the government became particularly severe in the summer of 2000. The Human Rights Watch World Report 2001 reports that roughly 500 members were detained and interrogated in May and June 2000. In the months leading up to the elections in September-October hundreds of members were detained and at least 10 were beaten by police while in custody (HRW, 2001).

Otpor is widely credited with playing a major role in the collapse of the Milosevic government, both because it served as a unifying influence on the otherwise fractious movement of democratic dissent, and because it effectively mobilized large numbers of young people and their supporters in a massive get-out-the-vote campaign. The new regime under Yugoslav president Vojislav Kostunica and Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic share the same basic liberal and democratic principles as Otpor, although members of Otpor have occasionally been critical of some actions of the new government. A search of the internet sites of major human rights organizations (Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Freedom House) has produced no reports of violations of the rights of Otpor members since the elections.

There is a general consensus that the new Yugoslav government represents a lasting turn toward democracy, and that there is little likelihood of Milosevic or a similar figure returning to power. A program officer with the US Institute of Peace affirms that the major concern for the new regime is institutional reform, rather than a threat from the previous government. Of particular concern is Kostunica's unwillingness to cooperate with the UN war crimes tribunal and his ability to reform the police and implement the rule of law. (USIP, 18 January 2001).

While it is unlikely that Otpor will face official persecution under the current government, reprisals against individual student activists on the local level are very possible. According to a researcher with the National Endowment for Democracy, Otpor's campaigns against corruption have earned it many enemies in local government and law enforcement, some of which have close ties to criminal elements. It should also be noted that the security

apparatus used by the previous government is still in place. Until a thoroughgoing reform of local institutions has been achieved, it is possible that individual activists who have played visible leadership roles in demonstrations against the previous regime, agitate on behalf of minority populations, or are active in current anti-corruption campaigns might face serious reprisals (NED 23 January 2001).

References

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Attachments

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