

The Current Security Situation in Serbia: Challenges Following the Assassination of Prime Minister Djindjic

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As many are well aware, the situation in Serbia in recent months has been marred by the tragic murder of the Prime Minister, Zoran Djindjic. I will be direct—the shot fired at Dr. Djindjic was at the same time aimed at the young democracy of Serbia.

This assassination was organized and perpetrated by a criminal organization—the so-called “Zemun band”—that represents the residue of the criminal heritage from the Milosevic period and that worked in the past for the leadership of the former State Security Service and the former commander of the Special Operations Unit of that service.

The goal of their conspiracy, which they called “Stop the Hague,” was to use the assassination of the Prime Minister as a catalyst to provoke chaos in the country. They thought that such an act would prevent the election of the Council of Ministers in the joint state of Serbia and Montenegro. The assassination was perpetrated at a time when the country was without a minister of defense. The conspirators also hoped that, as a result of the chaos following the assassination, it would not be possible to elect a new Serbian government. All this was supposed to trigger the fall of the administration and prompt the return of pro-Milosevic forces to the same positions that they enjoyed under the earlier regime. The stated political platform of the conspirators was to gather together all of the so-called “healthy patriotic forces,” while in reality it was a joint attempt by those with an interest in perpetuating the criminal heritage of the Milosevic regime.

The conspirators certainly received clear answers; however, their plan had a boomerang effect. First of all, the citizens of Serbia, with their magnificent farewell to Dr. Djindjic during his funeral, which was attended by more than half a million citizens, clearly demonstrated that the plans of these criminals had failed and that there was no chance of a return to the past. The ruling coalition had not fallen apart. On the contrary, this tragedy unified it. The coalition understood the importance of this historical moment, and it was aware of the responsibility that it had towards the citizens and the state. Elections for the Council of Ministers and the government took place without a hitch.

Instead of the division on which the terrorists were counting, and instead of the disharmony between the Republican and Federal authorities that was the main problem in the Serbian fight against organized crime in the period after democrati-

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zation, the nation had full unity between the government of Serbia and the Council of Ministers of the State Community.

At the urging of the Serbian government, the acting president of Serbia, Mrs. Natasa Micic, declared a state of emergency. The Supreme Defense Council ordered the Yugoslav Army to provide full assistance to the Serbian police in the investigation and arrest of the assassins and in the relief of all the conditions that had caused the introduction of the state of emergency. So for the first time Serbia enjoyed the position of having the army, the police, and the various state security agencies working together toward the same goal. The results are obvious. The state of emergency was introduced in order to facilitate the rapid arrest of the perpetrators, organizers, financial supporters, and ideological instigators of the assassination of Prime Minister Djindjic, in order to fight organized crime throughout the country, and to pursue individuals who used to be, for various reasons, untouchable by the law and who already had extensive criminal records.

I want to clearly stress that the state of emergency was not imposed against the will of the citizens, in opposition to their freedoms or rights, and that it was not used in an abusive way. This was in general terms confirmed by the delegation of the OSCE Mission to Serbia and Montenegro that visited detained persons, although certain irregularities were noted with regard to the state of some prisons. We enjoyed the full understanding of the citizenry and we received very good cooperation from them; in some cases, after providing the public with certain information, the authorities were able to locate some members of this criminal organization or obtain other data relevant to the investigation.

When we talk about organized crime, I would like to use this opportunity to repeat the sound conclusions offered by Mr. Mihajlovic, the Serbian Minister of the Interior, at the London Conference. Their relevance and significance, unfortunately, were confirmed by the tragic loss of the Serbian prime minister. Organized crime gains its power from the ability to respond flexibly to every change in its environment, as well as the ability to adapt itself to all the repressive measures that society undertakes against it. The existence of the "Zemun band" is just another proof of this ability. This gang was, in reality, the biggest narcotics cartel in Serbia, had exclusive rights for the distribution of cocaine and, connected with its partners throughout the world, was a major supplier of heroin in the Serbian market. The organization extended from Colombia and other countries that were producing the cocaine and heroin all the way to the European countries that housed their bank accounts.

All these activities span national boundaries, so the fight against them cannot be imagined as taking place exclusively within national jurisdictions. The organized crime that is today afflicting both developed and underdeveloped countries became international in nature long ago, and its actors, from different countries and regions, have been uniting and now act on a global scale. Arms dealers and drug traffickers, mercenaries and organized pirates, all are laundering their profits

through the well-established channels of financial crime, which is also taking its own share of the proceeds.

After coming to power, the Serbian government quickly realized the extent and seriousness of the criminal heritage of the Milosevic regime. That criminal pyramid, at whose pinnacle were individuals from the state administration, had two faces. One face is that of war atrocities, and the other is organized crime. We saw that terrorism, like the assassination of Dr. Djindjic, is just a political aspect of organized crime, and that it is financed with the revenues of criminal activities. The security details of some war criminals are also financed with these revenues. Also, we saw that criminals were behaving like real globalists as they established a genuine Balkan criminal brotherhood during the times of conflict and war in the area of the former Yugoslavia, while politicians and statesmen were divided and were trying to erect barriers between the new Balkan states. But in the wake of these wars, the Balkans are again becoming a transit area, and not only in the form of the Balkan heroin route, through which passes most of the heroin that reaches the European Union's narcotics market.

That is the reason why the countries of the European Union—if they want less drugs on the streets of their cities, if they want fewer false asylum seekers and less uncontrolled migration—have to aid police, customs, tax, and judicial systems in the countries of South Eastern Europe. Such a collaborative approach is also cheaper for the taxpayers of the countries of the European Union than is the cost of the elimination of all these drugs and illegal immigrants from the streets of European capitals.

The high level of violence under the previous regime in Serbia represented the main weapon of organized crime. Those who dealt with organized crime were not protected from this violence, even if they held high positions in the legal or political realms. However, the consequences of this violence were not felt exclusively by partners of organized crime; they were felt by all citizens, who were victims of a feeling of personal insecurity and endangerment of life and property.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Serbia has undertaken clear and concrete measures in fighting organized crime. The first step was aiding the public recognition that organized crime does exist in Serbia, followed by the establishment, two years ago, of a directorate for the fight against organized crime as a specialized organizational unit in the Ministry. Unfortunately, the law was late to join the war against organized crime, but now the legal system has introduced some necessary institutions—such as witness protection, for example—so that law enforcement will be able to reach to the very core of criminal organizations and secure evidence of their activities. Up to then, police information was largely worthless. Thanks to moles in police ranks and in the very system of prosecution (we now know that one primary mole was the deputy state prosecutor, who was to be arrested), a leak reached this criminal group, and they committed

their desperate move by shooting the prime minister just days before their arrest. The results are well known.

The killers of Prime Minister Djindjic are now in prison. The result of the police measures that have been undertaken will be a Serbia without unsolved crimes of the kind that used to haunt the public, without killers on the loose, without organized criminal groups, and without war criminals. Each one of the 105 criminal groups that were identified at the beginning of 2001 has been pursued. Each person with a criminal record with the police was summoned for interrogation; over 11,600 persons were interviewed. The length of detention lasted just for the period of time that was necessary to gather information and secure material evidence. As of 12 May 2003, 3560 criminal charges had been filed against 3946 persons, for a total of 5671 crimes.

Although the biggest burden of this action rests upon the Belgrade Police and the new specialized directorate within the Ministry of Internal Affairs, it is important to note that this action is being undertaken throughout Serbia. This movement represents a chance for citizens throughout Serbia to be rid of the fear of local criminal bands. Local police branches solved numerous killings, located large printing facilities for counterfeiting money, seized significant quantities of narcotics and weapons, and found many stolen vehicles. Now we are witnessing the real effects of the Serbian decision to establish a *Gendarmerie*. This unit is supporting the implementation of emergency measures as well as providing security in southern Serbia. With their assistance, the actual assassin was arrested, and the decision on the dismantling of the Special Operations Unit was implemented peacefully. With that action, the last compromised part of the Serbian police was removed.

The general state of security has improved, and the crime rate has significantly dropped compared with the same period last year. For the first time in recent history, there have been days in Belgrade when more cars were recovered than were stolen. Simultaneous with the seizure of illegal weapons and explosive devices from criminals, the voluntary surrender of weapons and the process of legal firearm registration were underway. For example, the following quantities of weapons were seized from criminals: 593 pistols, 235 automatic rifles, 463 rifles, 14 machine guns, 347 hand grenades, 7 bazookas, 10 rocket launchers, and great quantities of explosives. During this action, 73.5 kg of drugs were seized, which included 28.2 kg of heroin, 463.5 grams of cocaine, and 44.8 kg of marijuana, as well as 4960 tablets of the synthetic drug Ecstasy. In addition, 688 stolen vehicles were recovered. Citizens surrendered to the police and army 40,438 parts of weapons and mine devices as well as 2 million pieces of ammunition. At the same time, 27,392 applications for the legalization of weapons were submitted.

Serbians are not living under the illusion that organized crime can be completely eradicated, but we do think that we can combat it and reduce it to a tolerable level, from which it will not represent a viable threat to the institutions of soci-

ety and to the values that our citizens cherish. The Serbian government wanted to achieve this goal through the complete reform of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the conclusions of the London Conference, as well as the readiness of the European Union and its member states to help not only Serbia but also the whole region in fighting this global evil, significantly encouraged us in our endeavor.

The tragic death of Dr. Zoran Djindjic on March 12 has had security, political, and historical implications. From the security point of view, these events have had the same significance for Serbia as the events of September 11 had for the United States. In the political sense, March 12 is like October 6, 2000 for us, as it gave us a chance to successfully complete the political changes that were begun on October 5 but which were delayed by the deep divisions between the various political forces that collectively paved the way to the historic overthrow of the Milosevic regime. But these divisions are in the past. From the historical perspective, this horrible tragedy represents a unique chance for an epochal change in the way Serbians think about politics, and I believe that this is the last in a long string of attempts to change power violently in Serbia. The EU and the U.S. offered support to Serbia and Montenegro, which was manifested by pledging assistance to help eliminate the budget deficit, by admitting Serbia into the Council of Europe, and by offering Serbia a chance to define, on the occasion of the forthcoming Thessaloniki Summit, its process of stabilization and association. By finishing the tasks already undertaken in implementing the necessary reforms, we will provide citizens with a better standard of living, and we will facilitate the process of the Serbian people and state becoming full members of the family of European peoples and states. The end of the state of emergency was the end of the extraordinary authority of the police, but that was not the end of the decisive fight against organized crime in Serbia.