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**Serbia**

## **The Social Basis of Party Politics and Elite Recruitment in Serbia**

### **Topic of Research and Country Visited**

The STG supported preliminary research on the social foundations of party politics and elite recruitment in Serbia. I spent five-and-a-half weeks researching the topic in Belgrade and Central Serbia.

### **Relevance and Contribution to the Field**

Theories of democracy and democratic transition often lay emphasis on vigorous civil societies and social and political pluralism as essential preconditions of successful democratic transition and consolidation. This project began with a somewhat different hypothesis: that social and political pluralism can easily lead to the social, ideological, and political fragmentation of democratic elites with potentially dangerous consequences for democratic stability. The postwar West European experience seemed to bear out the validity of this view: to a large extent the stability of postwar European democracies has rested on the successful transformation of ideologically, politically, and socially fragmented elites into coherent democratic establishments that rejected parties of the extreme left and right as a matter of principle. Such established elites are characterized by “intimate cohesion” based on common outlook, patterns of social recruitment, significant overlap in the biographies of its members, and cultural affinity. By contrast, fragmented or *abstract* elites lack these features and are more prone to disunity in times of crisis.

I began the field trip with the assumption that one of the main reasons of democratic instability in Serbia lay in the fragmented character of its *abstract* elite. By this I meant that the democratic elite gathered in the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS) that unseated Milošević in October 2000 was recruited from a variety of status groups with a variety of ideological orientations, life experiences, and cultural outlooks. The question is of obvious significance for theories of democracy as well as of practical relevance for policy makers.

### **Summary of Approach and Research Methodology**

During my research trip I focused on gathering secondary and primary data on elites and politics in Serbia. Primary data on political (as opposed to economic) elites appears to be relatively scarce, except for the very top elite echelon. A modest data base exists for parliamentary deputies and this data was collected in the Federal Assembly in Belgrade. Visits to political party offices with the purpose of collecting data on elites yielded a variety of results: predictably, the openly reformist parties proved more open to the possibility of sociological inquiry. The conclusion was that the question of elite recruitment may have to be approached in more indirect fashion, i.e. through the analysis of voting, party appeals, and the social profile of party memberships.

### **Summary of Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions**

The available data gathered by Serbian sociologists and political scientists indeed confirm the presence of important value divisions among the electorates of different parties. More to the point, from the point of view of the foregoing hypothesis, important divisions characterize the electorates and mass memberships of select democratic parties as well. This is particularly true of the voters for the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) led by the current Prime Minister Koštunica. The opportunistic expansion of the party has led to a large influx of traditionalist-minded voters who are not supporters of political and economic reform. Thus, the party remains divided between a predominantly reformist elite and a predominantly traditionalist electorate. Since the elite is not held together by a firm and well-developed ideology, its leaders are prone to make opportunistic concessions to the electorate in order to gain/retain votes. In doing so, they are undermining the coherence of the democratic bloc. This is just one illustration of the dynamic of divisions in the democratic bloc that are caused both by ideological weakness (lack of a strong common ideology or shared commitment to social change) and the opportunistic considerations of select party elites.

Secondly, what clearly emerged from the field research was the extent of party patronage. Serbia's political parties are indeed solidifying as organizations, but this is not unambiguously positive for democracy. The main reason for this is that political parties have become the main source for sharing the spoils of office and the redistribution of economic benefits. While this conclusion is hardly revolutionary—it follows the East European pattern more generally—the *extent of patronage* is threatening to undermine the institutional integrity of the state. In addition, the fight over the spoils of office is a serious cause of divisions in the democratic elite, undermining its coherence and shared commitment to reform.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Before any solid conclusions can be made about the relationship between elite fragmentation and democratic instability, the following hypotheses need to be explored in more detailed fashion: 1) the extent to which elite fragmentation is caused by differences in social background and cultural outlook of elite members; 2) the extent to which elite fragmentation is caused by opportunistic electoral decisions which make potentially reformist party elites into “hostages” of more traditionalist electorates; 3) the extent to which elite fragmentation is caused by the widespread practice of party-based political and economic patronage.

### **Recommendations for the US Policy Community**

First, recognize the need for the long-term encouragement of democratic elite and civil service education as a vehicle for creating a democratic establishment. At present, there is no single institution in Serbia committed to the long-term preparation of future democratic political and civil service elites. The G-17 “party of specialists” has become a classic patronage party and the Democratic Party is arguably the only political party that is taking seriously the issue of long-term political education (for its own party members only). There are no higher state educational institutions that have taken up this task, although the political science and international relations programs at Belgrade University are beginning to stand out in terms of their infrastructure and potential in this respect.

Second, support for political parties should be conditioned not only on their formal commitment to political and economic reform but on the basis of the actual political behavior of their officialdom, especially in terms of political and economic patronage.

While patronage can hardly be eliminated from democratic politics, nor is it desirable to do so (after all, party members must have some stake in the system), it is important to control for the scale or extent of patronage.

Third, while efforts to build the foundations of autonomous civil societies are important, more NGO effort should be redirected towards elite training, even if the results may be less tangible in the short run.