

Culture Wars in Serbia

Serbian Dragoljub Kojcic has worn many hats, including philosopher, journalist, and politician.

● He now heads a new party known as Serbia 21. ● His goal to encourage Serbs to membership

in the European Union as an extension of their national identity and a part of their destiny.

But in the bitter Belgrade atmosphere, persuasion comes hard. ● by Valerija Brkljac

Political scientist, philosopher and essayist Dragoljub Kojcic was president of the Serbian center-right Democratic Party (DSS) from 1997 through 2003, later serving as a parliamentarian for the party. Dormant in the 1990s, the DSS rose to prominence after the defeat of incumbent President Slobodan Milosevic by Democratic Party chief Vojislav Kostunica in 2000, with Kostunica later serving as both president and prime minister.

But Kojcic grew increasingly disenchanted with the DSS and in 2009 recently left the party to form his own pro-European grouping, known as Serbia 21. Kojcic started “Drzava” magazine and was editor of “Knjizevni Srpski Glasnik” (“The Serbian Literary Messenger”), considered the most authoritative Serbian literary magazine. He spoke to east about his recent political efforts.

You're a philosopher and a political scientist by training.

Why did you decide to get involved in politics?

Under communism, my family was the “other side.” When the Communists came to power after World War II, my mother was among the first to be arrested because of her democratic convictions. She spent five years in jail because she refused to disavow them. I soon came to know from personal experience the immensity and humiliating nature of the gap between the privileged members of society, in those days the Communist elite, and so-called



ABOUT Dragoljub Kojcic was born in 1954 in Belgrade. He earned a degree in philosophy from Belgrade University, focusing his studies on political philosophy, political theory and methodology. He is a founding member of the democratic opposition in Serbia, joining the Democratic Party (DSS). In 1990, he and Radoslav Pavolovic banded together to start the magazine *Drzava* (“The State”). Later, he was also editor of the literary magazine *Knjizevni Srpski Glasnik* (“The Serbian Literary Messenger”). In 1997 he helped found the Serbian Institute for Geopolitical Studies. Between 1997 and 2003, he headed the DSS, also serving in parliament between 2004 and 2007. In 2009, he founded the political party Serbia 21. ●

“class enemies.” Our family has never renounced its Christian faith and priests came to our house for all religious holidays. In this kind of a situation, I sought refuge in philosophy, humanities and art. I was my only way out. In the late 1980s, when the Communist bloc began to shake at the core, I came to realize that politics was the way to achieve inner freedom in the outside world. Politics represents the continuation of the practice of philosophy.

Two decades ago, when Yugoslavia still existed, the Serbs had considerable confidence in Europe. What about now?

I'm not nostalgic regarding Yugoslavia. At the same time, the fact is that it represented a yardstick for the idea of a multiethnic and multicultural Europe. If there had been a sincere desire on the part of the European Union to democratize the member states it would be easy to do, because the social and economic standards that existed were far and away higher than those of some of the countries that are now members of the EU. Moreover, the legacy of the Tito regime left the doors wide open for inclusion in NATO. Some [former Yugoslav] republics wanted



independence at all costs and some EU countries gave these aims a powerful strategic boost, following the logic of “traditional friendship,” while Serbian leadership had failed to notice that the world had undergone substantial changes. The leaders of the other Yugoslav republics were no less Communist than [former Serbian chief Slobodan] Milosevic. They were simply more able to dress up in more acceptable clothing, making them favorites of the European Union.

In any event, the legitimate right of the Serbian people not to be torn away from a larger, common state was unlawfully by the Communist regime as an excuse to prolong its existence. The linking of Milosevic's policies with that of the Serbian national interest was a major mistake that did considerable harm to the Serbian people. The aftershocks of the error are still being felt now.

In the ensuing war, Milosevic's Serbia was branded by some as “the guardian of the Communist regime.” Serbia then lost Kosovo and was treated like a kind of adolescent.

Was Serbia really so “immature” when it comes to the nature of the state and of democracy?

Serbia was not the guardian of the regime, but its victim. No country that emerged from the Communist bloc saw so many violent clashes with state police Serbia. People were constantly rising up. Remember the Serbian opposition suffered real casualties, so much so that the European Union had to intervene through political mediators on several occasions. Spanish Prime Minister Felipe Gonzalez in 1997, even managed to make Milosevic's abide by the so-called “lex specialis,” an extraordinary piece of legislation that forced parliament to recognize opposition showings in municipal elections.

The Serbs wanted two things in essence. The first was democracy, the second the right to remain united in the context of Yugoslavia, for which, and this is worth remembering, millions of people lost their lives fighting side-by-side with democratic nations in two world wars. The Communist regime hampered government by the people, while the international community took away the Serbian right to live in its own country. All the peoples of former Yugoslavia, even the Albanian minority [in Kosovo] got the right to national territorial sovereign-

A soldier pauses to lean on a cross during 1991 ethnic fighting in ex-Yugoslavia.

ty, all except the Serbs. It hurt to see that democratic countries from which we expected support, using a double standard toward the Yugoslav peoples, always and without exception at the expense of Serbs. But this is the past. It is what it is. Instead, we must look toward the future. We need to open up new horizons for day-to-day life and be receptive to European synergies. Don't get me wrong: I'm not among those who believe that the EU represents some kind of postmodern paradise. Maybe my generation had too harsh a time as a result of having idealized its domestic reality. At the same time I remain convinced that, for the first time, there's a project, the EU project that lays the foundation for a true civil union of European peoples.

The European identity is our identity. To understand this we just need to look past Serbia, which has eight million inhabitants. There are two million Serbs in the Republika Srpska, which is the constituent entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Croatia, there are some 300,000 Serbs, while they represent a third of the population in Montenegro. Germany has 850,000; France 350,000, and so on. It's evident that what was lost with the disappearance of Yugoslavia can be regained in the context of the European Union, from a legislative, political and cultural point of view.

Politics is the meeting point between community and the individual, between being and identity.

Democracy, however, is the guardian of being itself. What are Serbia's prospects from the democratic point of view?

Democracy is the relationship between the entities defined by identity. It would be a terrible desecration if democracy were reduced only to being defined in terms of prevailing interests. The European Union, in which I believe, is really just a piece of a bi-millennial arc, which connects the present age to its history and its older values. In the modern European system, each individual, wherever he or she lives, as a member of a political whole, has the right and the opportunity to use any civil means to represent, defend and assert identity. However, the preservation of identity represents the outward borderline of social compromise, beyond which you can't go.

Slobodan Milosevic, the late Serbian president, faced charges of crimes against humanity for ethnic cleansing carried out by the Yugoslav military.

In this regard, Peter Kilmanseg wrote a political essay that was published just about at the time when Eastern European countries were making the transition from decades of a one-party system to democratic precepts. Kilmanseg wondered how much diversity a democracy could "tolerate." The conclusion he reached was that in terms distribution values, money for example, people would always be able to find some kind of agreement. Three men can always divide a 100 hundred gold coins without clashing. What can't be divided or broken is identity. It tolerates no compromises, not even that introduced by democracy.

You dedicated her book, "Time's Arrow and the Horizons of Freedom," to the relationship between the past and future. You write that "the future we will help teach us what our past really was."

I consider the book a message to my Serbian countrymen. Complaining about the shortcomings of an unhappy and arduous past serve no purpose. Only if we are sufficiently determined and brave enough to toward a new beginning can we recover what we've lost over a century. To do this, we must first adapt to international conditions as they are now, and I'm not referring only to justice, which probably doesn't even exist in the absolute way we want. The title of my book means political ideas and solutions are compelled to adjust based on the times in which we live. If once-upon-a-time sovereignty was based



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on defending borders, with the rifle proudly picked up and pointed at perceived enemies, that same pride today needs to be exerted cultural and scientific terms, in forging international friendships, in exalting the art of living, or in sports. And Serbs are no strangers to these values.

There's another horizon you mention in your book, namely that of ethics. You assert that morality can't be phrased in terms of social efficiency alone because morality represents a characteristic and not a technique. You also say that metaphysics has reduced morality to behavior.

To me, it is becoming increasingly obvious that politics, economics, religion and culture, in their traditional forms of expression, are failing to push mankind forward. The first sign that time's arrow was already headed toward new horizons were emergence of an entirely new set of social interests and social action. Consider the environmental movement, philanthropy and global solidarity, changed in way bonds are formed, the formation of new churches and faiths — all these ingredients are gems of a post-political global society. They're growing and expanding because the classic spheres of politics, economy, the church and traditional culture, once again, as they exist now, are insufficient to social and personal needs, if not obsolete. In our fragmented civilization there's no longer an amalgam that accounts for the world in totality. Just in this conversation, this back and forth, we've reached the highest imaginable goal. Freedom. Yes, freedom. But not freedom limited to the boundaries established by this or that market or even confined to the quasi-liberal principle where freedom means not doing harm to anyone - in other words, not freedom from, but freedom for. This means entering a new era in which a new society is created composed of people who will give the proper attention to the changes that occurring throughout world.

The other is necessary amalgam is moral. One can no longer exist with indifference towards one's neighbor, or even for that matters to events that are unfolding far away. No one side can any longer impose its truth and entrench itself in a 14th century position of rigidity.

How can we fathom and encourage the creation of a global society of people when the Orthodox and Catholic churches can't even find a way to open communication and get alone? With the Ecumenical Assembly of Christian Churches in 2013, there's an opportunity to move toward reconciliation and unity, at least in that regard. The

event will be held in the Serbian city of Nic, where Constantine was born. The new Serbian Patriarch Irinej will inaugurate festivities celebrating the 1,700 years the edict since the Edict of Milan, which was signed in 313 AD and paved the way for religious tolerance.

What's your sense of the Serbia now and, along those lines, what role do you foresee for your own party?

If ever gets the idea of writing an anthology of demagoguery, I think the most effective examples would come from so-called societies in transition. In the Serbian arsenal of demagoguery you find both impossible promises and fear-mongering, with particular use of conspiracy theories. When you're bombarded the notion that the whole world has a grudge against your people you can start to believe that officials of your own state bear no responsibility the real problems. Outsiders generate those.

Of course, yes, it's true that we were brutally discriminated against and an illegal military aggression was carried out against Serbia [over Kosovo]. But all this could have turned out differently had Milosevic accepted partnership efforts made by the United States and offered by then-Secretary of State James Baker. This all happened long ago, in 1988, when the Soviet Union still existed [and George H.W. Bush was U.S. president].

Serbia now faces some critical decisions. It's obvious that Serbs can't be blamed for the policies carried forward by Communist leaders. At the same time it would be equally irresponsible, using the excuse of bitter memories, to accept the lies being floated by the new demagogues, people who have no logic in the political arena unless they foment anger toward the West. Those of us in Serbia 21 believe that it is indisputably important for Serbia to be positioned within European Union, as political and legal lever for the nation. Serbs shouldn't fear losing their identity, which something we repeat. Our party is dedicated to emphasizing the preservation of identity as part of the Serbian strategic interest. But this method of preservation is a means of opening up to others, to encourage meetings, to foster dialogue, as Martin Buber would say. It's not about xenophobic and the building of walls.

During a lecture I gave a decade ago in the Italian parliament, I concluded my speech by paraphrasing a Serbian poet: If the sea divides the Serbs and Italians, we'll drink it. To which Dario Rivolta replied by saying: "Yes. But first we'll turn the sea to wine." ●