

Testimony for Synodal Study Group 9 on “Active non-Violence”

OTPOR: YOUTH-LED MOVEMENT IN SERBIA

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The world today is in crisis. We witness it in its many forms. We see it as war and devastation, as political turmoil even in countries once considered stable, as systemic economic and social crisis in developing and developed countries alike; we feel it as a sense of anxiety, alienation and dread, facing threats of unchecked technological change, accelerating ecological degradation and disrupted lives. It seems as if the ground is disappearing from under our feet, that everything we have known for years is no longer guaranteed, the institutions we value and count on are crumbling, and we start to feel hopeless, powerless and aimless. We even start doubting the very principles that are fundamental to who we are, including our own agency.

In such a state of apathy and despair, we need to remember that we have the power to defy the inevitable, to beat the odds and reverse the tide, maybe starting small and isolated, but eventually coming together in collective action to preserve what is most sacred to us - our humanity.

I learned this from my experience of being part of Otpor, a youth-led movement which emerged in Serbia in the late 1990s, played a critical role in the fall of Slobodan Milosevic in 2000 and then inspired numerous movements around the world. Otpor managed to shift political power and pressure Milosevic, the so-called “Butcher of the Balkans”, a man directly responsible for numerous deaths and suffering in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo, to step down without a single shot fired.

As a movement led by students and young people, Otpor united the disparate groups opposing Milosevic and his regime, mobilized the population to vote him out in elections that were neither free nor fair; then through noncooperation and nonviolent resistance forced him to concede defeat. There were many factors besides our contribution that led to this outcome and many books have been written about these, here I’d like to tell the story of how we, and especially our commitment to the nonviolent method, made these factors lead to a peaceful transfer of power rather than yet another catastrophe.

My somewhat unique experience is tied to coming of age in Belgrade, Serbia, then part of Yugoslavia, as sinister forces within the Serbian Communist Party, led by then ascendent Milosevic, seized power, adopted a nationalist and expansionist program, reopened old wounds, sowed division, hatred and fear, and eventually plunged the country into war. The connection of power and violence, already present throughout Serbian history was once again made clear to everyone. Power was used to inflict violence and the violence was used to solidify power even more.

My memories as a teenager, with my extended family in Croatia, now on the other side of the frontlines, were of hopelessness, isolation and powerlessness. Everything around me had changed so profoundly and there was nothing from the world that I had known that I could rely on any more. The

power of Milosevic's regime to me seemed so overwhelming, the violence so brutal and the devastation so tragic, my hopelessness was at times turning into despair. Trying to avoid being drafted into the army and sent to fight in Bosnia, I enrolled at the Belgrade University and there I found others like me, a sizable group of draft dodgers and for the first time in years, I found a glimpse of hope, hope that would grow over the years as we slowly turned the tide.

These students were the kernel of the movement that was yet to emerge. We cut our teeth on a series of protests, the first one happening in 1992 as I was being admitted to the Belgrade University – my first experience was that of banners on windows and student activists checking my freshly issued student ID as I entered the campus which was on strike for weeks. Another student protest erupted in 1996 and lasted for four long winter months, generating huge energy and enthusiasm, but failing to win against the regime, which was then able to start yet another war, this time in Kosovo in 1998.

In these formative years, in opposition to the prevailing violent rhetoric, we as students adopted a strict nonviolent method that would come to define our struggle. For that we had little or no inspiration from our own history, which seemed to be a series of wars, rebellions, coups and political assassinations. But we felt that we had to reject that path as it would keep us in the same pattern and continue the cycle of violence we wanted to escape from. So we drew inspiration from elsewhere, from Gandhi and Martin Luther King, from People Power in the Philippines and Solidarity in Poland. We were inspired by those who remained nonviolent in their struggle and managed to win, not despite, but because of their nonviolent methods.

I remember reading how early Christians, without violence, managed to challenge and conquer the mighty Roman Empire. I admit, these were mostly works of fiction, like *Quo Vadis* by Sienkiewicz, but they painted a very stark contrast between the two sides.

On one side was Rome whose power was based on violence and domination. Violence was how the Roman economy was managed (with slavery as its essential part), how their politics was conducted (with frequent political assassinations and civil wars) and how their empire was expanded (through conquest and subjugation). The power of Rome was stemming from gratuitous use of violence and force. It was everywhere. Even Roman entertainment at the Colosseum was violent and gruesome.

On the other side were the Christians who, I came to believe as I was reading, undermined the power of Rome by rejecting violence. By turning the other cheek, not just as an ethical, but also as a political decision (a strategic decision I would say), these early Christians denied Rome its source of power. Rome could persecute them, torture them, kill them, but it was still being denied the acknowledgment of its violent way. By shifting the struggle to another level, they ultimately shifted power and in the end Rome became Christian.

Ours was a different time, but the underlying strategic reasoning the same – we too decided to reject violence and by choosing the nonviolent method challenged and eventually undermined power based on violence. We were young students who had experience with protests and demonstrations, but also with prison and detention, with overwhelming apathy and fear which could be felt around the country. We learned from our failures, from our inability to continue beyond the initial mobilization and

withstand violent backlash, that it was not enough just to be nonviolent, we needed to be strategic too.

Coming out of the 1996-97 protest, without success and somewhat bruised, we spent months reflecting on our failure and thinking about how to move beyond protest and become a true movement. As we were starting, a mere dozen of us students, the larger society was in a state of despair and apathy. Because of this, we felt it was important to put hope at the center of our message. But the people around us were not receiving this message well: how could we be hopeful when the situation was so dire and getting worse by the day?

Our message of hope was met with skepticism, but we didn't get discouraged by this because we knew that people had a need for hope. They desperately wanted to hope, but they were afraid to get disappointed and hurt, that's why they were skeptical. When we understood that cynicism was just on the surface, we could look deeper until we found their desire to live in a normal country. This is how we derived our goal for "Serbia to be a normal country", however politically unsophisticated it might have sounded.

Our proposition on how to get to that goal was also the result of reflection and building on mistakes from the past. Instead of protesting in front of government buildings where nobody would listen to us anyway, we would organize public events at the outskirts of the capital city and in small towns around the country, in and around markets and other places where people usually gather. We spoke to people rather than yelling at institutions.

We didn't just contrast the movement to the regime, in a simplistic "we are good, Milosevic is bad," while asking citizens to support us. No, our message to them, to all of us actually was: how did we, as citizens, perpetuate this, through our action or lack of action? And what can we do to change it? We learned to do this from Gandhi whose many speeches and writings could be summarized in the following galvanizing proposition: "The British are ruling India for their own benefit, why should we help them?" Our Balkan version was a proposition for our fellow citizens: "Martians are not going to land, abduct Milosevic and fix our problems. We are the ones who will make Serbia a normal country."

With this simple message we went around the country to build our movement, and it took us years. First, we attracted students, which made sense as we were students. Then we reached out to other young people, maybe those in their final year of high school and about to enter university or those who got a degree but could not find a job. We became a youth movement, not just a formation of students.

Interestingly, the next group that we were successful with were the retired people; they too felt marginalized, remembering better days, not adjusting to the present and feeling anxiety about the future. And they had much better understanding of their communities and neighborhoods than we did; they had time and persistence and spent endless hours slowly spreading our message.

Only much later were we able to reach people in their prime; the generation of our parents was the last to join the movement. We were growing from the margins of the society until we finally became

a broad-based movement. In the spring of 2000, less than two years after its founding, Otpor was a movement of 20,000 organizers around the country, people of all ages and all walks of life.

This is when the regime took notice and launched a crackdown. They underestimated Otpor for a long time and in that we were fortunate. They couldn't believe that people in their early 20s could pose a real threat. They were focused on more prominent critics and opponents of the regime. And they were brutal. Ivan Stambolic, who had served as president before Milosevic, went for a morning run one day and was abducted and killed. Slavko Curuvija, editor of a newspaper critical of the regime was murdered at his doorstep on Easter Sunday. Vuk Draskovic, leader of an opposition political party survived two attempts on his life and was in exile in Montenegro. Other prominent dissidents and opponents were persecuted, assassinated or left the country. But Otpor flew under the radar for a while until the movement grew too big to remain unnoticed.

But this was about to change. In a hastily organized press conference in May 2000, Milosevic's regime declared Otpor a terrorist organization and initiated a crackdown. Hundreds of organizers and activists were detained around the country. They were held in police stations and local jails, often leading to citizens in those towns protesting and demanding their release. The crackdown on Otpor failed for two reasons: one was our strict adherence to nonviolent methods and the other was our sheer size; we were everywhere, in every small town and village and every neighborhood of large cities. We were the local kids and our neighbors came to our rescue.

Because the movement was so widespread, the regime couldn't just send their most loyal and most brutal troops to deal with us, they had to rely on the local police. And the police followed the orders, but they were not ready for our message, something we practiced and trained people in. Whenever an Otpor activist was arrested, he or she would say the same line: "We are not going to resist arrest. We respect you and your work as a police officer, we understand that this is not your choice, and this is not why you joined the police force. You probably wanted to arrest criminals when you joined, not to harass students. We know that you were put in this situation by the regime that has lost its compass. We understand and we don't hold a grudge."

That simple speech, repeated by hundreds of arrested people, had a devastating effect on the police. Their morale was in shatters. We didn't know it at the time (we thought it was over for us, that we would all end up in jail), but when years later we gained access into their internal communications we learned that people had been calling in sick and taking days off. Police officers weren't openly defying orders, but they didn't believe in them anymore, so they were carrying them out half-heartedly.

At the same time, ordinary people were outraged by what they were seeing. Students who had such a clear record of refraining from violence were smeared as terrorists. The repression backfired and internal cracks were starting to show. This was such a blow for the regime that Milosevic, in an attempt to regain lost legitimacy, called for early elections. He was hoping to catch his opponents by surprise, but was himself surprised by the election turnout – it was historic – which caused him to lose his bid for another term as president. Otpor and others, despite continued repression, launched a campaign to mobilize people to vote and also to protect the vote if it was being undermined. People

flocked to the polling stations and were ready to engage in acts of nonviolent noncooperation, strikes, boycotts and civil disobedience, if Milosevic attempted to undermine their vote.

The elections were held on September 24th, Milosevic lost and refused to accept defeat, calling for another round of voting. In the next 10 days, slowly by the day, Serbia was coming to a halt, strikes and blockades popping up around the country. Ten days after the election, following a large gathering in Belgrade on October 5, 2000, Milosevic stepped down without a single shot fired.

Many articles were written about the last several months of Milosevic's rule, about the elections and the mobilization that followed, but not enough was said about the formative stages of the movement and especially about our decision to choose nonviolent methods and to be strategic about it.

In the Balkans it seems that violence is a default method. This is how you show strength and exert power. This was particularly the case during the wars of the 1990s, following the collapse of Yugoslavia. Many young men at the time had direct experience of the war and only knew violence. Violence was how you showed that you meant business, that you were higher in the dominance hierarchy. And on top of that hierarchy was Milosevic, undisputed.

This is why we had to remain nonviolent. Without strict nonviolence, we would have never gotten ordinary people on our side, this is why they were so outraged by sweep arrests of Otpor activists and accusations of terrorism. Without nonviolence, we would have never gotten the police officers to doubt the intentions of their superiors, following orders halfheartedly and ultimately refusing to shoot at the crowd during the final stand down in front of the Parliament building on October 5, 2000.

"This is not a game", we would tell people when they were joining the movement, "we stand no chance against those who fought in the war, some of them may have taken part in atrocities in Bosnia or Kosovo, and are ready to use violence against us. It's the ordinary people that will save us and we have to make sure that they are on our side. That's why we had to remain nonviolent." This was a very first discussion we would have with people who wanted to join. And at the end of it we would ask them to accept this principle and adhere to nonviolent means if they wanted to be part of the movement. Being nonviolent was essential to being part of Otpor.

Nonviolent discipline was maintained through training and peer pressure. We would practice being arrested and repeat lines that we would then share with police officers and we would keep each other accountable to the principles we agreed to when we joined the movement. This is why our nonviolence was not just an ethical choice but also a strategic choice. It changed the focus, moved the contest to a different plane, undermined the prevalent dominance hierarchy based on violence and opened a door for hope.

In the years following Milosevic's fall, the Otpor story became inspirational to so many youth movements around the world with books written and movies made, and I had the privilege of talking to many of them, seeing them succeed as community leaders, organizers and peace builders in shifting power and achieving the impossible, by choosing the nonviolent method and being strategic about it.

And this is why 25 years later I still draw inspiration from my days as an Otpor activist and why I'm convinced in the power of nonviolence, not just in its ethical, but its political and strategic value.