

# Kostunica's shoes

by Aleksa Djilas

*Damn them. They had the revolution without me!*

---

*Aleksa Djilas is a Serbian writer*

---

Last spring, when Nato bombs were falling, I was in Belgrade. This autumn, when Milosevic was falling, I was in Washington at the Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars. The Centre is heaven for research and the riches of the Library of Congress are at my disposal. But in my spacious office I felt left out and lonely when the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS) triumphed in the elections. It really is impossible to live by email and telephone alone. My homesickness increased when the protests and strikes erupted and finally the federal parliament and the state television were stormed.

From afar, I am proud of my people and my country. Serbia has finally said "no" to more than a decade of authoritarian rule. It was a bloodless, velvety revolution, with the army and police quickly understanding that the will of the people cannot be resisted. Even Milosevic seemed almost dignified when he appeared on television to congratulate Kostunica-the unassuming 56-year-old lawyer-on his victory.

I am not a member of any of the 18 opposition parties which form the victorious DOS, but I have supported the creation of such a coalition for many years. Indeed, I have publicly asked the question many times: why do we need so many parties? The party leaders, with their selfish interests (often financial), egotism and sheer irrationality, allowed Milosevic to rule unchallenged, even though he had the support of less than a quarter of the electorate. Most Serbs have long been fed up with the bickering among opposition leaders, and finally this frustration somehow found political expression.

I suspect, however, that the leaders' conversion is temporary. Soon they will be at their old games and Kostunica will face huge divisions and personal rivalries. Because he defeated Milosevic, his authority is great. Yet as president he has few powers-closer to the powers of the German president than the US one. So Serbian politics will remain chaotic. The most important thing, however, is that no one will have the unchecked power that Milosevic and his clique had over the state.

I have been visiting the US for many years to give lectures on Yugoslav history and politics. My audiences are usually students, who mostly do not know much, but are interested and open-minded. It is more difficult to explain events and personalities to the members of the US foreign policy establishment. Often I am not given enough time. (At working lunches, the dessert is already there when the serious talking begins.) More important, many of them have rigid anti-Serbian views and are suspicious of my preference for nuance (Milosevic is an authoritarian ruler, but not a full-dress dictator) and incredulous when I make moderately optimistic forecasts (the elections will be unfair, but the opposition has a chance of winning). Some now seem almost disappointed that Milosevic did not stage a military coup and that the demonstrations were not bloody. Whom are they going to attack and punish if the Serbs are behaving like the Czechs?

Woodrow Wilson, who led the US into the first world war, remains the only US president with a PhD. In Serbia, and eastern Europe in general, intellectuals are much more attracted to politics. We have many leaders who are professors or writers, even

scientists. Vojislav Kostunica received his doctorate in 1976 for his thesis on opposition parties in western democratic countries and then became a distinguished member of the Belgrade opposition. The communists soon expelled him from the university.

A translator of The Federalist Papers, Kostunica is a classical western liberal, which, in contemporary European politics puts him slightly to the right of centre. He has been accused of Serbian nationalism and it is true that he supported the struggle of the Serbs in Croatia and Bosnia to remain with Serbia once those two republics seceded. Though he condemned the siege of Sarajevo and the Serbian paramilitaries when they "cleansed" Muslims, many, including myself, criticised him for not being more outspoken. In private, this man (who has a somewhat romantic picture of Serbian history and national character), must have suffered much.

His preference was always for legality and compromise. In the recent turmoil, he was advocating non-violence and restraint. Perhaps his most important quality is that he is the very opposite of a man who inspires fear. This is why minorities in Serbia, especially the Hungarians in the north and Muslims in the south-west, backed him.

One reason the opposition parties chose him as their candidate was that no one could accuse him of corruption. It is striking how modest his clothes are-his shoes almost suggest poverty. Pale, tense and worried-looking, he is courteous in an old-fashioned way. He has a pleasant smile, but it rarely appears. By nature he seems a melancholy loner. I noticed when talking to him how carefully he listens and how he does not mind being interrupted. There is no trace of politician's ego.

Perhaps he has too many principles and is too insistent on legal niceties for today's Serbia, which is confused and uncertain, and in need of quick changes and decisive leadership. He also heads a federation which may disintegrate. I would not like to be in his shoes, even if they were expensive Italian ones, in the event of Montenegro seceding and violence breaking out between those who want to go and those who want to stay. It is difficult to say if Kostunica will find his way in the turbulent waters of Serbian politics. But even if the circumstances prevent him from doing much good, with his rise, the era of repression has ended. n

Kostunica's shoes

[http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/article\\_details.php?id=3420](http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/article_details.php?id=3420)

Prospect Magazine

<http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk>