
Interview: Istvan Webel

'Last chance to get rid of the bandit'

Istvan Webel and his wife, Vera Webel Tatic, are the leaders of the Center for Anti-War Action in Ada, a city about 100 miles north of Belgrade. They have been active against the genocidal assault launched by Serbia's Duce, Slobodan Milosevic, against several of the peoples of former Yugoslavia, in order to create a racially pure "Greater Serbia."

While an organized opposition to Milosevic inside Serbia has emerged only recently, the Center has been one of those rare groups that opposed the horrors of ethnic cleansing from its very start. "In Ada we were the first to start the protests; it was at the beginning of the insanity," as Mr. Webel put it. They were able to conduct, in the middle of unimaginable difficulties and mass chauvinistic hysteria, a courageous testimony of real patriotism. Already in 1995, in an interview with EIR (Aug. 18, 1995), the Webels had pointed out that, in reality, Milosevic was weak, and a large resistance inside Serbia could have bloomed, but for the support that Milosevic got from the West, especially Britain. At that time, Mr. Webel compared the situation in his country with the attempt to create an effective resistance inside Hitler's Germany. "We know that the leaders of the German resistance to Hitler asked the British for help, and the British betrayed them to Hitler. They gave Hitler the list of their names. . . . And we see what the British are doing today."

Mr. Webel talked to Umberto Pascali on Nov. 28, and again on Dec 3. What is striking for an "outsider," is the trust that the Webels feel toward the United States, and the terrible bitterness provoked by the role of "main interlocutor" granted by the West and the United States to Milosevic. Mr. Webel issued a statement for publication in EIR when the U.S. position seemed stuck in the old relations with Milosevic. In subsequent conversations, the Webels stressed that they had regained confidence that the United States could play a new, positive role. All the time, the message was: "Tell the Americans they have to act as Americans."

EIR: You have a message for U.S. citizens?

Webel: Yes. America is concentrating far too much on the Dayton agreement as such. It seemed obvious, until now, that the interest of America was to keep Milosevic in place, because he was the one who signed the agreement concerning Bosnia. But even from this standpoint, Bosnia cannot be

helped, if America does not help the democratization process in Serbia and Croatia. When this happens, then Bosnia's situation will also improve. But one should not concentrate only on solving Bosnia's situation as such. People here can help with this process. America must have contact also with the opposition in Serbia. The actions of Milosevic and his accomplices should be denounced.

EIR: Could you give us an insight into the coalition that forms the Zajedno opposition?

Webel: Because it is a coalition of different parties, of course there are differences in their program. We should remember that none of these parties were active at the beginning of Milosevic's war. Looking at the future, it is probably easier to work together if you are in power, than if you are in the opposition. If they can go through all this process, it will make them stronger and more homogeneous. The main difference between Milosevic's Socialist Party and the opposition is that the opposition is interested in working for democratic ideas, and not for power.

With all the limitations, you should see the leaders of the opposition as a cohesive body with a division of tasks. . . . In their program, they accept international rules. Milosevic will never accept international norms. If Milosevic stays in power, the economic situation will worsen. If the coalition takes power, the economic situation and the democratic situation will get better. For example, Milosevic's enormous police force—120,000 men—will not be necessary. Of course, it also costs a lot of money.

But the future of individual leaders is not the focus of discussion. They will work together as a team: Everyone will do what he or she does best. . . . But there is no grandiose plan. None of them is power-hungry. Their task will be to work together for the good of Serbia.

EIR: If, hopefully, Milosevic is weakened, if the West takes its distance from him and there is a big change in Serbia, people must be made aware of the role of international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. These groups sponsored Milosevic, and they will try everything to gain influence among the opposition.

Webel: We are fully aware that these leaders are not perfect. We want to make sure that these leaders are not like Milosevic. If they show that they are inadequate to the task, they can be replaced. But they are the best we have, and they . . . are going in the right direction.

EIR: Do you see the immediate possibility that Milosevic will be forced to step down?

Webel: Yes, there is the possibility, but the West and the international community have to show their support, and that the actions of Milosevic are unacceptable. This is the last chance for the outside world to get rid of the last communist

dictator and bandit in the Balkans. It can be done. And if this does not happen, it will only get worse. The situation will never change in a normal way; this has been demonstrated with the Nov. 17 election. Even if the opposition gains the majority of votes, Milosevic will change the rules illegally, or use police and terror. If a change is to happen, it has to be done now, right away; there is no time to waste.

EIR: How do you judge the attitude of the European countries?

Webel: After World War II, it is obvious that in this kind of situation, you cannot count on the countries of Europe. But there is one superpower, America. It showed that it could solve the situation of World War II, and it solved the situation in Bosnia—although it did not do it in the best possible way. So, it is the responsibility of the U.S., as the only superpower, to take the initiative. We count on the actions of America; we do not really count on the help of other European countries.

EIR: What is the attitude of the opposition coalition toward Bosnia?

Webel: The opposition fully accepts the Dayton agreement, and insists especially on the right of all refugees to go back home, regardless of their ethnic group. The opposition insists that all war criminals must be brought before the War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague.

On Dec. 3, Mr. Webel communicated that the situation,

though still extremely dangerous, was developing in the right direction:

Webel: I realize that the appeal I sent to you is rather bitter, but we are desperate here. I must say that I am very pleased that this resistance has not lost anything in continuity. I am happy to say today that four American congressmen participated in the demonstrations in Belgrade. It was announced by Radio Free Europe. Today, also, the last independent radio station, Belgrade's B-92, was shut down by Milosevic. No independent electronic media are reporting any more. At 2 p.m., the station lost its legal right to broadcast. Also, the informal student radio station Index was shut down. We are in a total media blockade; we depend for information only on foreign TV stations, and especially Radio Free Europe.

But, spirits are high. The Association of the Free and Independent Trade Unions called their members to a general strike, so that, as of yesterday, the biggest tractor factory in Belgrade is on strike. These are the real trade unions. The trade unions close to the regime are like a police organization, they are a fictitious body, the loudspeaker for Milosevic. Anyone who has the possibility to do so, forms independent trade unions, and they are against Milosevic. One of the biggest is the Metalworkers, workers employed in the armament industry from Kraguevica, and they are on the side of the democratic forces.

The big danger now, is that Milosevic will react against the demonstrations; he can still count on his police. . . .

An appeal to the U.S.

Istvan Webel, of the Center for Anti-War Action, wrote this on Nov. 29.

The citizens of Serbia are bitter. Not only about Slobodan Milosevic, from whom we did not expect anything different from what he did, but also about the international community, and especially about the U.S.

For 50 years we have been listening, through Radio Free Europe and the Voice of America, to reports about American democracy, and now, when our democracy is at hand, we are witnessing the spectacle of an otherwise ineffective U.S. foreign policy, being put at the service of the dictator of the Balkans.

During the unfair pre-election campaign, officials of the U.S. administration were parading like majorettes on Milosevic's TV, like the cheerleaders we saw during the U.S. Presidential campaign. In fact, it was only *after* the

first round of elections in Serbia, that Mr. John Shattuck [in charge of Human Rights at the U.S. State Department] made a statement, saying that the use of the media by the ruling Socialist Party did not guarantee fair elections for the opposition. It is indeed hard for us who believe in democracy, to see Serbian students, during the demonstrations, setting the American flag on fire.

We have an important question to ask: What have we believed in for the last 50 years? Or was it all a lie? . . .

There will not be peace, neither in the Balkans, nor in Bosnia, until democratic government, based on the people's will, is established.

We are not opposed to dialogue with Milosevic, we have to talk to him, but it must be in The Hague. In the Nuremberg Trials, it was the Nazi leadership that was brought to judgment, not the guards of the concentration camps.

If America wants to keep its democratic image and its image as the only superpower in the world, it must conform its foreign policy to this image. If not for any other consideration, because the U.S. still has many friends in Serbia.