

Serbia - 2000 - Danko Cosic

Transcript:

My name is Danko Cosic and in 2000 I was a deputy director of the Center for Free Elections and Democracy (CeSID), an organization that organized domestic election monitoring in Serbia. I'm also one of the founders of that organization.

To better understand the context of the Federal elections in 2000, it is important to go slightly back in the past and go to 1996, when in November the local elections were organized in Serbia. What happened in 1996 is that there was a huge election fraud, which was recorded first by the opposition party, but also then by the student community student soon later.

The outcome of the local elections in 1996 provoked the huge student rallies which lasted for three months, demanding for the right election results to be recognized. This is very important, because that was for the first time during the Milosevic regime, that, what before was some sort of doubt, proved to be a clear electoral fraud, and it took people outside on the streets. As I said, the protests took place for three months. They concluded in February, 1997, when the Serbian Parliament approved a *Lex Specialis*, a special law, that affirmed (opposition) victories in several cities, in municipalities which previously were claimed by the opposition parties.

As a result of that, in September, in 1997, the Center for Free Elections and Democracy (CeSID) was founded by four law school students that were previously involved in those protests, and a professor of sociology at the Law School, the, unfortunately, late Slobodanka Nedovic.

The events from 1996 and 97, however, the State propaganda was, was strong, actually raised the popular distrust in the election process. Being established in September, 1997, CeSID were trying to actively work on recruiting election domestic monitoring volunteers to organize domestic monitoring missions. These several years were used as a time to build and strengthen our network, and also, what was very important, to create an image of a nonpartisan election monitoring mission, which, at the time in the given circumstances, was very much important.

Later, in 1999, the Kosovo war broke out. This is another important, or, key moment, that led to 2,000 elections and overthrow of the Milosevic regime, because domestically, in the country, the war brought up a sense of collapse, of what was the politics of the Socialist party of Serbia led by Slobodan Milosevic. That feeling was really felt among the majority of citizens, regardless of their political perceptions, and whether they were supporting or disproving the regime in an earlier stage. That kind of losing of popular support led to increased state oppression towards opposition activists, including the most famous political assassination (in the country) of the former President of Serbia, Ivan Stambolić, which the regime perceived as a potential leader of the opposition for the elections in 2000. This united all opposition parties, movements, and the civil sector into united fronts against the Milosevic regime.

This led us to the early 2000, where on one side, the opposition parties were preparing their political campaign for the September 24, 2000 elections. And in the meantime, CeSID was also

very much involved, building our own campaign and planning our activities. During the previous period we already were able to establish a 16 regional offices, which we use working together with trade unions in other civil society organization in building those regional offices, which were pillars of what later became a structure and network of domestic collection monitors

It was very important that before the election we organize a pre-election campaign. The pre-election campaign was, on one hand, a publicity campaign trying to promote free and fair elections. We came out with the slogan: "one plus one equals two". In other words, the election results should be the same as the simple mathematics: One vote, plus another vote means two votes, not three, four, or 5.

[On the other hand] we also used this campaign to recruit volunteers that were deployed later at the polling stations. We also have a program of training the trainers. We trained 300 trainers, which later went throughout Serbia to train the recruited volunteers. We managed to recruit some 7,000 volunteers. Just for comparison, at the time, Serbia had 10,673 polling stations. With this number we were able to cover approximately 50% of the polling stations. However, in the end, not all the recruited volunteers were able to deploy, due to oppression and propaganda that we were also facing. So at the end we had some 6,042 volunteers that were actually deployed at around 5,000 polling stations.

Less than 3 weeks before the elections—and I remember the date very well, because that was the date of my wedding—the police entered our offices, took all our equipment and started some fake financial investigations. This happened not only in our central office in Belgrade, but it also happened outside our offices and a number of our activists were detained, including myself. I spent some 5 or 6 days every day, going to the police and being interrogated, and in some way threatened with my, you know, physical security, but there was no actual physical violence against myself and against others of our activists. That actually did not stop us from implementing our task three weeks later, because we were aware that we were under surveillance, and we were aware that something similar might happen. So we also prepared a backup plan. We had backup offices, and our main office was some sort of decoy for the police and state authorities.

During the election day we managed to cover some 50% of all polling stations, [aiming to conduct] a parallel vote—the premise was that our results, because they were parallelly counted, needed to be pretty much similar to what would be the official results. However, we were denied access to the polling stations. So we organized election domestic monitoring outside of polling stations.

We organized some sort of election watch rather than election monitoring where our people were standing outside (polling stations). We tried to deploy them at the places where they were actually voting, so they could enter the polling station, as voters and also provide some sort of inspection of what was going on and what was happening around. We also used one legal stipulation at the time that, after the work of the polling station board is over, they need to post the official results of that election place at the front of the polling station. Because of the organized monitoring of the opposition parties, we were sure that what came out at the polling station we might see as truthful results, because all the election fraud in previous elections, as shown in the history of Serbian

elections, was carried out in the District Election Commission and at the time we had the 24 District Election Commissions.

Using the posted official results at the polling station, we managed to collect, out of 5,000 polling stations, if I'm not mistaken, we were able to receive results from some 4,800 to 4,900 polling stations, which also suggests that our volunteers were not only brave but very dedicated to the common task that we all shared at the time. We received the election results, you also have to understand, at a pre-digital time. So the information was not traveling as fast as it travels today, but it was traveling rather slow. So we were collecting this data over emails, we created some web bases where people were entering results, and also over telephone calls. What was very important for us, as some sort of verification, was that our regional representatives actually collect the written [results] form.

Nevertheless, in the morning of the 25th of September, after the elections on the 24th, we start receiving the electoral results.

The trouble at the time was that in parallel they organized Federal elections in Serbia and in Montenegro, but also local elections. We decided that we did not have the capacity to cover all the elections. So we were focused on the Presidential elections which were the most important elections of that day, and also only in Serbia, because we did not have access at the election station or the polling stations in Montenegro. But nevertheless, the Serbian comparison to Montenegro is 10 times larger, and we also, in our calculation, were calculating how the results we received during the night could be affected by the elections in Montenegro. So even with that, our results show that Mr. Milosevic is losing the elections, and that result was, some 56% for the opposition candidate and then some 35% for the ruling candidate, that is, Mr. Milosevic.

We also organized activities after the elections which, in my opinion, were probably the most crucial for what later became our success when the changes happened after the 5th of October and the new democratic government came.

The popular sense was that CeSID was the only reliable source of information about elections, and that that credibility we managed to maintain for quite some time during. We organized two important post-election activities. One you might call some sort of a guerrilla action, because in the law there was some, as you say, written in small letters a stipulation that interested parties within 24 hours or 48 hours after the elections are closed, can conduct an investigation of the electoral results.

So what we did in preparation, we chose seven out of 24 electoral districts to do this kind of post-election investigation. We hired seven teams. Each team would have a lawyer, a laptop, and a typist, a person who would type the results, and a technical person who would manage this process. But why was this guerrilla? Because we were actually targeting only two out of those seven electoral districts, and those two were in Kosovo, which at the time were attached to Serbian proper, based electoral districts. One, if I am not mistaken, in Leskovac and another in Vranje. We were targeting only those two electoral district facilities because we knew that if

electoral fraud, in terms of ballot stuffing, would happen, it would happen there. The other 5 were some sort of distraction, so as to prevent coordinated action of the State authorities.

What we found in those two electoral districts, and these were kind of really ridiculous examples, for example, that in one voters list of 130 voters 100 people voted, but these were [the first] 100, so from one to 100 [on the list]. Or that all the ballots were stacked together, not one by one, but, you know, put one over the top of another. [We found] number of different, very exact irregularities, which later led to a court case and and some members of the Federal Electoral Commission, where they sentenced on the basis of the evidences we found, and up to date that was the only court case that was taken against the public officials for electoral fraud, and that is why that was so much important.

And another another important activities that that we that we implement was also a publicity campaign through throughout billboards, flyers and posters, because at the time we were banned to go on televisions or any other kind of media. That really made a difference in the public opinion. We were using really, this kind of old old school approach, and our campaign was actually to promote the electoral results that we thought were truthful and later was confirmed by the independent electoral results.

All in all, that would be the story about CeSID and our role in the Federal Elections of September 24th of 2000, which are the crucial elections in Serbia that resulted on the 5th of October the same year and brought the first democratic, free and fair elections [of Serbia] In December 2000.