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SERBIAN SWING VOTERS ARE PATIENT, BUT ANGRY ABOUT CORRUPTION AND FEARFUL OF POLITICAL CONFLICT

March 2002

In order to examine attitudes towards political, economic and social conditions by certain supporters of democratic reform in Serbia, NDI commissioned a series of focus groups. The following is a summary of a report prepared by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, Inc. on March 11, 2002.

Early in the second year of Serbia's democratic transformation, swing voters among supporters of the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS) are largely patient about the pace of reform – notwithstanding large concerns about the economy, their distaste for squabbling within the governing coalition, and the persistence of corruption and other ailments they had hoped would be banished along with Slobodan Milosevic.

These are the principal findings of ten focus groups comprised of “swing voters for reform” conducted January 24 to 29, 2002 in the following cities in the Republic of Serbia: Bor, Nis, Uzice, Belgrade and Novi Sad.¹ Fieldwork, including the recruitment of the groups, moderation and translation and transcription, was done by the Belgrade office of Partners Marketing Research Agency under the direction of Managing Director Milica Vulicevic. GQR and NDI officials attended the groups, as well.

Remarkable patience with economic difficulty

The most striking thing about Serbia's swing voters is their stoicism about very difficult economic circumstances. Virtually every participant in the focus groups indicated that economic renewal or jobs should be the biggest priority for the government in the coming year.

- Anger about inflation (especially the price of electricity) was voiced in several cities, and women in particular spoke of the problem of those who have lost their jobs in the transition.
- However, the spiraling economic decline of the latter Milosevic years remains a powerful countervailing point of reference, and brings a large measure of sobriety to discussions about the pace of reform.

This resolve to soldier through a difficult transition is evident even among those one would expect to be least satisfied with what the change of regime has

brought – such as blue collar workers in Bor, a distressed mining town near the Romanian border. Yet even here, men who are out of work (or expect soon to be), say that, while things are bad, they are getting better and “things don’t change overnight.”

Their patience stems in part from an appreciation that real political and economic changes have been implemented.

- For some, the most salient factor is the political freedom they still find refreshing after 15 months and this enables them to overlook the hardships of the moment. Young people, in particular, comment on the absence of war as a great relief from recent years.
- For others, there are tangible signs of improvement that give them reason to be optimistic. Salaries have gone up (for those with jobs) and are actually being paid. Perhaps as important, those dependent on public assistance -- whether pensions or unemployment benefits -- are receiving what they think is adequate.

Deep anger over corruption in the professions

The patience is not boundless, however, and the DOS governments need to address not only material issues, such as jobs, but also a deep-seated concern about fairness. After the years during which connections and corruption determined who succeeded, the people who brought the DOS governments to power want to know that those who work hard and play by the rules will now have a chance to get ahead in their lives.

These voters are both hopeful and skeptical about the Serbian government’s recently-launched initiatives to combat corruption.

- The two related anti-corruption initiatives (the Anti-Corruption Council to investigate corruption in state bodies and a network of regional teams of experts to investigate and prosecute corrupt practices) are not well known.
- After hearing about them, voters give them high scores for “the ideas” – they believe it is important to make the effort – but they also give low marks for likelihood of implementation.

There is a widespread belief that all politicians are corrupt (except for President Kostunica), and voters would like to see something done about it. But expectations for improvement in that direction are minimal. It is the corruption they encounter closer to home, and that thwarts the efforts of ordinary people to move ahead in life, that truly angers and frustrates men and women in almost every group.

While some in each group say they have no personal experience of corruption, many others share stories about under-the-table bribes demanded by doctors, by judges, and by those responsible for promotions in the workplace. And in perhaps the most tragic aspect of this phenomenon, the environment where hard work and objective accomplishment is supposed to be most valued – the education system – is seen as among the most perverted. Regardless of the extent to which it is actually true, the belief is widespread that university students must pay professors to grade their papers fairly, and parents of younger children must pay teachers to promote students to the next grade.

The well-educated professionals who should be leaders in their respective communities, and who are relatively better off than most others, are instead widely seen to be the most corrupt. There thus appears to be an opportunity for the government to consolidate support for reform by tackling under-the-table payments demanded by school teachers and doctors, as well as in state-owned companies where kick-backs are seen to determine promotions and pay raises.

The January initiatives are a good start, but the skepticism that voters voice will only be overcome by consistent and concerted follow-through. Moreover, linking these anti-corruption initiatives to public calls for a real ethic of equitable treatment would resonate strongly with these voters.

DOS praised for changes, but supporters are weary of the squabbling

Because of the manner in which the focus groups were recruited, it is not surprising to hear praise for DOS and the transition to democracy it has led (see endnote). The coalition is seen by many to have been the principal agent of “the changes” that have led to the removal of Milosevic, returned Yugoslavia and Serbia to the good graces in the international community, and begun to repair the economy.

After briefly noting the good that has come from DOS’s efforts, however, the men and women whose votes brought the current governments to power very quickly move on to its perceived short-comings, and the most conspicuous feature is the constant fighting among leaders of the 18 parties in the coalition. The fractiousness of DOS is noted much more often than *any* of the governments’ accomplishments.

- These voters believe that continuing squabbling within DOS hampers reform efforts.
- Yet the concern expressed in the focus groups is more than just that reform is being hindered by the bickering. In some cases, there is real fear that the transition may yet run aground and all that has been achieved will be lost.

- The aversion to political fighting is so strong, in fact, that even those citizens who are unhappy with government seem to fear the heightened conflict that an election would bring more than they want change. Thus there is little support for early elections – even among supporters of President Kostunica, who has called for them.

Privatization is painful but necessary

While DSS supporters are less supportive of privatization than others who voted for DOS in 2000, and express more concern for laid-off workers, there is broad support for privatization, despite its near-term social costs.

- These focus groups demonstrate that, even as the pain of economic re-structuring begins to manifest itself with closures and lay-offs, that support remains intact.
- In part, this is because private employers are seen to demand a higher standard of performance from their workers.
- However, even among those who support privatization, there is widespread skepticism about the value of re-training proposals – particularly among older workers.
- The recent closures of four of the country's largest banks engender little sympathy from swing voters, as many believe the banks were corrupt and the laid off workers had it too easy for too long.

Image of Parliament is dismal

The focus groups underscore just how hard it would be to improve the reputation of the legislatures. A suggestion that the new Speaker of the Serbian Parliament would open its doors to citizens, NGOs and school children is greeted with scathing commentary and expressions of concern about how dangerous it might be for young minds to be exposed to something so vile.

A few people, mostly university graduates, think it would be beneficial to open the doors of parliament to the public, for establishing the precedent of public oversight of elected officials – and one law student in Nis noted that other parts of government should also be opened up to scrutiny.

ⁱ Each group included only those who voted for DOS in the December 2000 parliamentary elections *and* who are very likely to vote in future elections. Participants were further screened by age, education and gender to create homogeneous groups. In order to achieve political homogeneity, some groups contained only supporters of the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS), while others were composed of non-DSS voters within the DOS umbrella - principally supporters of the Democratic Party (DS). Moreover, the groups were further segmented between those who have

favorable or unfavorable views of Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic – and those who are pessimistic or optimistic about the economy over the coming year – as these tend to be significant dividing lines within the DOS camp.