Serbia: Exclusion and Its Consequences

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1. Introduction
Were passers-by on the streets of Belgrade, Nis or Kragujevac asked to describe the last 10 years of their lives, they would probably give the answers of “bombing, poverty, sanctions, repression, displacement.” The answers would not vary significantly were the same questions to be asked in other countries of the region. However, if we were to take these questions further with our passers-by in Serbia, to ask what was the singularly worst thing of the last decade, the answer would invariably be “unjust treatment and exclusion by the international community”. Since I worked in the NGO sector in Serbia from January 1999 to October 2000, I hoped today to describe the impact of exclusion on aid programmes and, therefore, on vulnerable people.

It is wrong to assume that the advocacy of the importance of humanitarian assistance to Serbia requires a stance regarding the Milosevic regime or the NATO intervention. NGOs in Serbia were entitled to take the international community at its word: that it had no quarrel with the Serbian people. This stance had the obvious potential to clash with the overarching Western quarrel – with the Milosevic regime and its policies in Kosovo.

In my view, in the period between the end of the NATO intervention and the October 2000 revolution, the political conditionality of Western aid policy, and its excessive caution on a number of fronts, led to the erection of distinctions between vulnerable groups that could not be justified by a comparison of their level of need. This has left a bitter taste and devalued the currency of humanitarianism. It negatively reflected on the activities and position of international and local NGOs. It had a counter-productive effect on the lives of vulnerable groups. It also contributed to the alienation of IDPs and refugees in local communities in Serbia.

2. Serbia vs. the Balkans
If we were to undertake the unenviable task of comparing the level of suffering of the populations of the given countries of the Balkans, and then see the corresponding level of aid they received, we would find an interesting and somewhat patchy map of inclusion and exclusion. Funds for humanitarian or development aid in the Balkans unevenly followed major displacements of populations, depending on the perceived and portrayed causes of displacement. Funding that was disbursed seldom deviated from the trajectory set by the international media and foreign policies of Western governments. Vulnerable populations in the region have therefore lived in a fickle aid environment, in which the potential for exclusion was ever present.

3. Funding
The outpour of public sympathy for victims of the conflict in the former Yugoslavia and subsequent donations received between 1992-1995 by charities were in many unprecedented. Funds received through public appeals after the fall of Srebrenica in 1994 were unsurpassed until the Kosovo crisis in 1999. At the beginning of the crisis, most organizations had launched public appeals for the Kosovo crisis or the Balkans, for assistance to Kosovar refugees in Macedonia, Albania and to a smaller extent Montenegro. In the summer of 1999, many of these organizations found it difficult to focus some of the media (and public)
attention to 200,000 (mainly Serb and Roma) IDPs coming from Kosovo as the situation on
the ground changed. The situation was much similar to 1995, when the overwhelming tone in
public opinion had been that the displacement of 220,000 Serbs from Croatia had been self-
inflicted and most organizations found it very difficult to challenge this assumption and to
raise funds. The decision to launch joint appeals that would cover the effects of the crisis on
the region was sound. However, it would be interesting to undertake a more detailed analysis
to see whether the decision not to engage more proactively with the media, in informing the
public on the complexity of the Balkans, in dissent to overwhelming opinion, was as good and
how it impacted on activities thereafter.
Humanitarian response in Serbia in the second half of 1999, in comparison to the responses in
Albania and Macedonia, was sluggish. In Montenegro, in comparison, humanitarian aid was
more than abundant. Fewer donors were willing to fund humanitarian response in a country,
governed by regime whose policies had brought about the displacement of over a million
people. Fewer international NGOs were willing to face the perils of working in the difficult
environment of Serbia and most chose the more prominent and politically correct Kosovo,
Macedonia, Albania and Montenegro. The few that did take the decision to work on both
sides of the intervention divide, were required to perform a fine balancing act of
humanitarianism.

4. The provision of humanitarian assistance
a. For Western governments, especially NATO member countries, the funding of
humanitarian assistance to Serbia was seen as contradictory to the path that had been taken
with the intervention
Humanitarian aid was seen as supporting the longevity of the Milosevic regime and
counterproductive to the foreign policy line that had been taken with the decision to intervene
in Kosovo. Western governments could also not divorce the notion of allocating aid from the
political situation, when the majority of the population seemed to be supporting the Milosevic
regime. The policy of exclusion was preferred to the policy of inclusion, with the exception of
the doubtful example of Energy for Democracy programme, to which I will return later.

b. There was also fear, albeit unjustified, that aid would be re-channeled and be brought
directly into the hands of the government. Many INGOs operating in Serbia, showed quite
confidently, that aid could be distributed effectively whilst ensuring a system of checks and
balances preventing misuse.

c. The question that surfaced in Serbia pertained to the definition of humanitarian assistance,
or the fine line that sometimes divides humanitarian aid and reconstruction / development aid.
What constituted a humanitarian emergency and could one predict the humanitarian
consequences of non-intervention with certainty?
This was especially the case in repairs of infrastructure – e.g. pumps in public waterworks and
the electricity grid. Could we really demonstrate that inaction in the repair of water pumps or
the non-repair of the electricity grid would cause exposure to health risk or cold, and possible
increase in mortality rates. And if the argument is made that repairs of basic infrastructure are
essential to save people’s lives, the question remains whether the same debate would be
carried to not so faraway places such as the Caucasus.
In the case of Serbia, the argument varied – intervention in water and sanitation was seen as
legitimate in the first phase of the crisis if a demonstrable link was made to displaced
populations; repairs of the power grid carried more controversy. As no people died, the
elections drew closer and the regime became more repressive, donors began to find this
argument to be somewhat flimsy. The need for and definition of humanitarian assistance were
re-examined, which as an idea, would not have been without merits, had it not been politically motivated.

5. Chronic vs. urgent humanitarian needs
Different analyses of the humanitarian situation in Serbia in the months that followed the bombing, rekindled previous debates on the nature of poverty in Eastern Europe, its comparison to other parts of the world. In the case of Kosovar refugees in Macedonia and Albania, some ineffectual attempts had been made to debate the vast differences in the level of aid that had been provided to the Kosovars in comparison to levels and quality of aid in other parts of the world. Much of the discussion hit the brick wall of the existence of minimum standards in humanitarian response but the non-existence of a threshold of ‘maximum’ assistance. In Serbia, the issues were complicated by the fact that the ‘emergency’ was taking place in a country that had been experiencing a ‘chronic’ emergency for a number of years, with relatively subdued international response. A country that had a relatively decent infrastructure in 1990 that had been fallen into neglect and had suffered from lack of funds and additional pressure from growing unemployment and where almost 10% of its population was displaced.

6. Beneficiary exclusion
As with all assistance, the aim was to prioritise to give assistance to those that were most needy and to draw up criteria that would help us in this task. As practitioners on the ground, we knew very well that many of the criteria were artificial and excluded large segments of those who were equally vulnerable, it was very difficult to convince the donors. As mentioned earlier, few INGOs chose to act proactively in describing needs in the field and when the time for project proposals came, followed donors’s agendas.

a. The first exclusion encountered in Serbia, was the differentiation between people who had been displaced from Kosovo in 1999 and 2000 and people who had been displaced between 1992 and 1996. Most lived in very similar conditions, often in the same refugee camps. Some donors never accepted the fact that both groups should receive assistance. Many INGOs, turned to more receptive ears, whilst juggling with percentages and ratios, demonstrating that 10 or 20% of the assistance went to ‘other vulnerable groups’. As is common, by the second half of the year 2000, some urban areas in central Serbia were being excessively covered by humanitarian assistance, while other more remote areas (incidently, mainly regime controlled) were suffering from a severe lack of assistance.

Regionally, as the attention of the world turned to Kosovo, Albania and Macedonia, and later in Serbia, longer-term programmes supporting refugee returns in a period when returnee numbers increased significantly (e.g. in Bosnia, returns across inter-ethnic borders and returns to Croatia) found it much harder to find funding. Donor fatigue had set in and patience with years of low figures of returnees was running low, at a time when support for returnees became most important. The side-effect of this was that the willingness of the international community was perhaps followed through by expectations, but with no financial support. Despite numbers, this has caused many returnees to seek the only available option – to sell their property.

b. In Serbia, there was also the distinction between displaced and non-displaced and subsequent exclusion. The vast number of social cases in FRY, or people below the official poverty line, struggled to make ends meet. Donors found even greater difficulty to disburse funds for assistance to those who were not seemingly directly affected by the conflict.
c. The allocation of aid to ethnic minorities such as the Roma population, seen as victims of the Milosevic regime and suffering victimisation and discrimination from the general population somewhat improved their material condition. However, the disbursement of aid alone did not do much to improve the exclusion of Romas by local communities. Groups such as the disabled and elderly could also be squeezed in and rationale could be found, but there was little rational justification in the eyes of donors for assistance to the young in the 18 – 60 age group, regardless as to how desperate their individual situations may have been.

d. The exclusion of certain parts of the population also brought about a clear rise in tension between displaced persons and refugees in refugee camps, between the displaced and local population in local communities. As the humanitarian situation became worse, violent incidents at distribution points became more frequent.

e. The exclusion of certain geographical areas in the distribution of heating fuel further complicated the debate. Under the EU “Energy for Democracy” project, heating fuel was only provided to opposition-held municipalities. Regime-held and “undemocratic” municipalities were penalised by not receiving any of this assistance. Although the programme did not come from the EU humanitarian budget line and was termed as a political assistance programme, its impact and negative effects on the impartiality of aid, were the subject of much dispute. The European Union has vehemently denied claims that this may have in fact aided the Milosevic regime to divert more of the much-needed fuel to their centres of support. Assistance in heating could not be easily distinguished from other forms of humanitarian assistance, especially in regime-held municipalities, where the distinction between humanitarian and political for the average inhabitant was blurred to non-distinction. Little effort has gone on part of the EU to do a critical study of the lessons learned through this programme and more importantly whether exclusion was indeed a commendable tactic in this case. Given the political changes since, it is very disputable whether an analysis at the present time would indeed give a true picture.

At the same time, different governments chose different paths. USAID decided in the year 2000 it was time to offer humanitarian assistance to Serbia. It rather unsuccessfully tried to launch a bid for an international NGO that would establish a distribution system that would exclude the Yugoslav Red Cross network, which was used by all INGOs in FRY in varying degrees and with various systems of checks and balances.

7. The inclusion and exclusion of civil society in Serbia and Montenegro

In the wake of the bombing and its aftermath, many international agencies transferred their offices and expatriate staff to Montenegro, which was seen as relatively safe haven in FR Yugoslavia at the time. The clear difference in the numbers of international NGO’s and agencies present in the period from June 1999 – June 2000 (33 in Serbia at one point in comparison to 160 in Montenegro) also show a marked disparateness in the amount of international aid that was being provided to the two parts of the Yugoslav federation. Montenegro received large amounts of humanitarian and development aid, the latter almost exclusively through governmental institutions, whilst local NGOs were mostly excluded from more substantive aid allocations. Little thought was given to developing alternative networks or investing into the capacity building of NGOs to act as levers of accountability in a state, whose institutions were clearly inexperienced and unprepared for the level of aid that it was suddenly receiving.

In Serbia, in the year that followed the bombing, NGOs, both local and international, were considered to be a more acceptable channel for the distribution of assistance and one that
would circumvent the hands of the regime. The proclaimed economic policy of the Serbian government in 1999 had been that humanitarian assistance would be the main source of income for Serbia. Expectedly, the Serbian government strengthened its gaze on the activities of international and local NGOs. Both found themselves subject to the scrutiny of their donors: wary of any activity that might be interpreted as support to the regime. The regime, on its part, became wary of any activity that might be endangering its power base. In addition to that, NGOs faced distrust from beneficiaries as to the underlying principles and causes for humanitarian action. “First you bomb us and then you throw packages at us” was a sentence often heard at distributions.

The international community placed great expectations on the toppling of the regime by the opposition in concert with more political NGOs. Most local NGOs were left with the choice – political or humanitarian alignment – whereas any that did not fall into these two categories because they chose to work on social rights, were excluded from funding. The exclusion of non-elitist and grassroots NGOs in rural areas was also evident in this period.

8. Expectations Beyond the Revolution
The bitter effects of a decade of different levels of isolation in Serbia will be felt for many years to come. The collective sight of relief in the days that followed the ‘revolution’ were tangible and showed how deeply felt exclusion had been. September and December election results have not ended exclusion at all fronts and precipitous inclusion also has its dangers. It remains to be seen whether the new government will rise up to the challenges that lie ahead. A scene witnessed at a distribution point, where hygiene parcels were being distributed to IDPs and refugees, a few weeks after the ‘revolution’ gives insight into one of the side-effects of exclusion. An elderly woman came up to the distribution assistant and asked whether she could get a parcel. The distribution assistant enquired about her status, possible displacement and found she did not fit any of the criteria. She angrily turned to us and said, “Now that the sanctions are lifted and that Milosevic has lost, the international community should be giving us packages. IDPs were the ones supporting Milosevic. It’s time for them to be excluded now.”

9. Conclusion
The tools for inclusion and exclusion of certain population groups from humanitarian aid in the Balkans have shown to be powerful and can be easily manipulated to fit proclaimed (and unproclaimed) political aims. Although many NGOs and agencies, to their merit, have struggled against political conditionality they have had to face it as an inevitable fact of life. What will be the long-term effects of exclusion and political conditionality in aid policy and can ten years of exclusion in varying degrees be easily undone?

Exclusion has certainly devalued the currency of humanitarianism, and it remains to be seen whether the inhabitants of Serbia will be able to change their perception of humanitarian aid from politicised to neutral. The position and neutrality of NGOs involved in humanitarian assistance has been compromised. NGOs will need to seek a new identity in the eyes of the inhabitants of Serbia and redefine their roles. This redefinition may be aided by the prominent role played in the revolution by some NGOs, which may also lead to misunderstanding on the role of the NGO sector.

International NGOs have yet to address the reasons for excluding some parts of the population. They will need to challenge false assumptions for assistance in aid, among donors and the general public and take a more proactive role in lobbying the media. They will also
need to look more carefully at the position of vulnerable groups and their integration into local communities (IDPs, refugees, Roma).

The decision to impose conditionality on humanitarian response was and remains controversial. Lessons can be learned from the Serbia experience and that similar pitfalls must be avoided in the future if humanitarian action is to be impartial and to steer as much away from the realms of political action.

The questions that remain are:
Have we learned enough about this experience to ensure that similar mistakes in the future?
Is providing analysis on exclusion sufficient or will we need to develop new tools to ensure its pitfalls?