

# Janjira Sombatpoonsiri: Humor & Nonviolent Struggle in Serbia

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Sombatpoonsiri's book "Humor & Nonviolent Struggle in Serbia" is the first book length account of the Serbian organisation Otpor and its role in the overthrowing of Slobodan Milosevic in 2000. Sombatpoonsiri has chosen to focus on the group's use of humour, but she also covers issues such as how Otpor was organised, its relationships with independent media, its opposition parties, and many non-humorous activities.

Silly and provocative street pranks was one of Otpor's trademarks, and Sombatpoonsiri places this use of humour within a strong Serbian tradition of black humour. This type of humour is expressed in absurd theatre, satirical pop culture, and tragicomic films. Additionally, the author traces the tradition of use of satire by performers at protest events during the early 1990's, and in slogans that were used by demonstrators. During the extensive protests in Belgrade in the winter of 1996/97 humour began to be used systematically as a way of doing protest that created joy and reduced hostility. A carnivalesque atmosphere made protest events fun and enjoyable, and contributed to what civil resistance scholars refer to as "nonviolent discipline" among the protesters. When demonstrators minimised hostility and protest did not end in riots, the regime did not have any excuses for violent crackdowns. Carnivals (and many other forms of humour) are celebration of life over death; they open up the mind towards other possible futures and different ways of perceiving the world.

Otpor emerged towards the end of 1998, and was initiated by students who had been active participants in previous years' protests. Sombatpoonsiri shows how their experiences with the use of humour and carnival influenced Otpor's decisions about what tactics and methods to rely on. She also convincingly argues how the tradition of black humour provided a large reservoir of ideas to draw from when the use of humour became more strategic and systematic. Sombatpoonsiri has separated Otpor's use of humour into three types.

The first type of humour is the *Satirical street theatre*, which for instance ridiculed the regime's propaganda and its leading figures. This reached an immediate audience of passers-by, but was primarily a gateway to extensive media coverage by independent media. *Parodic protest actions*, which is the second type of humour categorized in the book, reclaimed national symbols and events, undermining the regime by turning its own rhetoric against it. Although, the labelling of these two categories might seem a bit peculiar to a humour research (for instance parody is frequently an aspect of satire), Sombatpoonsiri provides a systematic tour through all of Otpor's humorous actions and shows how different types of humour could serve different purpose. This is an extremely valuable contribution towards a better understanding of how multifaceted humour is and the different functions it can serve for a nonviolent resis-

tance movement. When it comes to the third category called *carnavalesque events* it is not obvious what was humorous about concerts, festivals, and food that were given away at concert events. In this section the theme of humour feels a bit forced upon activity which were important parts of Otpor's campaign, but, not necessarily funny. Many of them could just as well have been included under a heading of "non-humorous activities".

Chapter 6 is a unique mapping of the varying circumstances Otpor operated under in different parts of Serbia. This chapter is an important reminder to everyone about allied opposition movement and its effects. To the Otpor, the affiliation of the allied party in the local government made a considerable difference in their movement. This was a boon to the Otpor, as, for instance, such affiliation made it easier for arrested activists to get released. Even in places where the allied-opposition were not strong, its presence meant that Otpor could count on help with renting of offices or getting access to vehicles for transportation of materials.

Also, in this chapter Sombatpoonsiri focuses on humour, and how different circumstances provide a context that are favourable or unfavourable to the use of humour. In addition, the chapter briefly mentions that humour was considered counterproductive in some location or too dangerous in regime strongholds. These themes should be explored further in future research, but, it is important to bear in mind that humour can have many different faces. Otpor relied primarily on provocative humour that ridiculed the regime and did not experiment much with more inclusive forms of humour. Sombatpoonsiri notes that in some places where the opposition and independent media were weak, less provocative humour was considered successful, and future research on the use of humour in other places might lead us to uncover the potential of humour.

Based on 49 interviews with former Otpor activists and people who cooperated with the organisation, Sombatpoonsiri tells the story from Otpor's point of view. This perspective gives detailed insights into what meaning the use of humour had for Otpor members and their thoughts about its effectiveness, which could not have been obtained through any other method. However, the interviews took place ten years after the overthrow of Milosevic, and the reader is left to reflect alone

about the possible consequence of the passing of time. From life-story interviews it is well known that interviewees create a coherent narrative, emphasising some parts of their lives more than others to “make sense” of the stories they create over time. Thus, I wonder about the ways in which Otpor members might have told the story about the role of humour differently, compared to when they were in the middle of the struggle. Is it possible that in hindsight, the use of humour is framed in more strategic terms than a decade before? Without doubting Otpor’s strategic approach to humour, it nevertheless seems reasonable to ask if some of the actions might just have happened in the heat of the moment because they were part of the “repertoire” of Otpor’s way of protesting, rather than the result of deliberate strategic choices every time.

I highly recommend the book to everyone with an interest in civil resistance and nonviolent action because of the thorough documentation of an organisation that played a crucial role in bringing down a dictator. Sombatpoonsiri’s research has also placed cultural aspects of nonviolent struggles firmly on the map for scholars of civil resistance. She has shown how important humour was as a “discursive subversion” of the claims to truth put forward by the Milosevic regime. The book will also be an important read for scholars of humour, and should be an eye-opener to those who think that humour cannot lead to any “real” resistance.

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