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[Analysis of STRATFOR Leaks Misrepresents Nonviolent Movements](#)

Carl Gibson and Steve Horn have done an important service in writing [their article](#) outlining Srdja Popovic's inexcusable collaboration with the global intelligence company STRATFOR and his disclosure of the activities of movements and activists with whom he has worked. Unfortunately, as will be spelled out below, the article falls into a rather simplistic and reductionist analysis of Popovic's motivations and, more critically, misrepresents the nature of the popular uprisings in Serbia and other countries. The article also contains a number of factual errors and misleading statements.

I have not had time to review all of the emails and other information regarding communication between STRATFOR and Popovic and the emails within STRATFOR regarding Popovic and his Belgrade-based organization, the Centre for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies (CANVAS.) There are [some analyses](#) which offer a more benign explanation for this collaboration than those of Gibson and Horn, but I do not find them convincing. I am assuming, therefore, Gibson and Horn's depiction of the relationship between STRATFOR and Popovic is mostly accurate, which is very disturbing to say the least.

Even prior to the recent revelations, some of Popovic's activities were being increasingly recognized as problematic within the network of educators, activists, trainers and other proponents of strategic nonviolent action, including many of us who had worked with him in the past. Many of us were becoming concerned that, despite some very valuable contributions he and his colleagues at CANVAS have made to the field, Popovic appeared to be increasingly into self-promotion and lacking much discernment regarding those with whom he was willing to work.

Instead of simply providing generic information on the history and dynamics of nonviolent action, Popovic and CANVAS would often offer direct advice to opposition groups when asked, something most trainers and workshop leaders are careful to avoid. They also received criticism for a "one size fits all" approach based upon their experiences in the popular uprising against the Milosevic regime in Serbia, failing to fully appreciate the unique dynamics of the struggles within each country.

As a result of these and other concerns, a number of organizations that had collaborated with CANVAS in the past had distanced themselves from Popovic and his organization some years earlier. Since the revelations regarding Popovic's collaboration with STRATFOR have been made public, additional individuals and organizations have severed their ties to Popovic and CANVAS as well. The disappointment at these revelations stems not only from his willingness to work with an organization which such close ties to military, intelligence and corporate entities, but his passing on the names of pro-democracy activists and information about their activities constitutes a grievous violation of trust. Indeed, the first rule for any of us who have ever worked with people struggling against repressive governments is to keep the names of participants and any information we learn from them confidential.

Popovic has also received criticism for grossly overstating the role he and CANVAS have played in supporting various popular struggles, which many in the Western media were eager to exaggerate as well. This, unfortunately, fell right into the hands of autocratic regimes and their apologists which have tried to deny that

popular protests against them were based on legitimate grievances, but was instead the work of “outside agitators.” Meanwhile, in an apparent effort to distract attention from their support for various dictatorships and occupation armies, some Western governments would also exaggerate the significance of their limited support for some of CANVAS’s work and other opposition activities against autocratic regimes they didn’t like. Ironically, the Gibson and Horn article has naively bought into this very narrative of exaggerating the impact of Popovic and CANVAS.

Popovic’s Motivations

As wrong as Popovic’s actions may have been, it is inaccurate and unfair to portray him as a supporter of U.S. imperialism. He is a left-of-center Serbian nationalist who passionately opposed the NATO bombing of his country in 1999 and is outraged at U.S. support for Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence. He has been vehement in his opposition to the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. He has spoken at anti-war rallies in the United States and elsewhere. His workshops and trainings have worked with anti-government activists from more than forty countries, many of which have opposed the U.S. government or U.S.-backed governments. Popovic and others in CANVAS have worked with Palestinians and Western Saharans struggling against occupation by U.S.-backed governments and they have worked with pro-democracy activists opposing U.S.-backed regimes in Egypt, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, and elsewhere. In the United States, Popovic and other CANVAS staff have done trainings for anti-war, immigrant rights, economic justice, trade union, and other activists. The vast majority of their workshops have received no backing from any government or government-funded entities.

This in no way excuses Popovic’s collaboration with STRATFOR, his willingness to accept funding from the U.S. government and government-funded organizations, his trainings of right-wing oppositionists of democratically-elected governments, or any other legitimate criticisms. However, to imply he is simply a tool for U.S. hegemonic aspirations is unfair and inaccurate. Popovic believes more in himself than in any ideology and is more concerned with self-promotion than promoting U.S. imperialism.

Otpor! and the Uprising Against Milosevic

A more serious problem with Gibson and Horn’s article, however, is in its misleading and inaccurate portrayal of Otpor—the student-led pro-democracy group in Serbia which emerged in the late 1990s to challenge the militaristic and semi-autocratic regime of Slobodan Milosevic—as some kind of Western conspiracy. The people of Serbia, particularly those on the left, had serious problems with Milosevic’s role in provoking and prosecuting the Balkan wars of that decade which resulted in the deaths of nearly a quarter million people, his dismantling of Tito’s socialist legacy for a corrupt crony capitalism, his alliance with far right ethnic chauvinists, and his suppression of legitimate dissent. In their description of the 2000 popular uprising against Milosevic and similar popular uprisings during that period, however, Gibson and Horn effectively deny the indigenous roots of these rebellions and grossly exaggerate the role of the United States. Not content to leave well enough alone in their important and valuable exposure of Popovic’s misdeeds, they unfortunately distract attention from these revelations and raise questions about their own credibility by effectively re-writing history with a series of questionable and demonstrably false claims.

For example, Gibson and Horn describe Otpor simply as “the U.S.-funded Serbian activist group” and imply that Otpor’s existence was part of a U.S. conspiracy to bring down an anti-American regime. It was hardly that simple, however. As one Otpor veteran put it in describing their decision to accept money from foreign sources, “It was a tough choice, but important choices are never easy. *These countries bombed us* – talking to the representatives of their governments and heads of their foundations was not without discomfort. But the

decision to look for support abroad was informed by the understanding that the only people who had money in Serbia at that time were war profiteers and war criminals. All money in the country was bloody. Confronted by that reality, foreign support seemed the lesser evil.”

Gibson and Horn’s analysis of the uprisings in Serbia and Ukraine essentially denies human agency, coming across as a left-wing equivalent of Ronald Reagan’s insistence that the Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala experienced leftist revolutions because they were on a “Soviet hit list” and not because of the oppression and injustice of U.S.-backed military dictatorships. In reality, receiving some funding from the NED or other U.S.-funded agencies doesn’t make a revolution a creation of Washington any more than receiving Soviet bloc arms made a revolution a creation of Moscow.

As Ivan Marovic, a left-wing activist in Otpor who has been critical of Popovic, has disparaged the tendency of some self-described anti-imperialists in the United States when they “see US involvement, however small, in a country experiencing unrest” to “totally disregard the local context and put it in the American context.” This tendency to place the United States at the center of everything, notes Marovic, actually indicates “an imperialist state of mind.”

Indeed, most of the Otpor leaders were veterans of the 1996-97 student protests which not only did not receive any Western support, but took place during the time when the Clinton administration was supporting Milosevic, considering him a “factor of stability” in the Balkans and a guarantor of the U.S.-brokered Dayton Accords which ended the war in Bosnia in late 1995. When these Serbian activists created Otpor a couple years later, they engaged in major organizing efforts for many months, often in the face of serious repression by the Milosevic regime, prior to receiving any outside assistance. As Marovic noted, “We didn’t have an office for the first year – and when we got one, it wasn’t Bill Clinton who offered us a small apartment, but an activist’s mother.” Their decision of whether and how to apply the tools of strategic nonviolent action to their struggle was theirs and theirs alone. While eventually willing to take Western money, they generally ignored any advice.

To defend their downplaying of the Serbian uprising’s indigenous roots, Gibson and Horn resort to quoting Australian-based Trotskyist Michael Barker’s assertion that the stridently anti-American Serbian political leader Vojislav Kostunica—who won the 2000 election against Milosevic that the incumbent unsuccessfully tried to steal—was actually Washington’s “favoured candidate” chosen to “promote a neoliberal vision for Serbia.” In reality, the U.S. had actually been cultivating other opposition leaders who were far more sympathetic to U.S. political and economic interests to replace Milosevic. Kostunica, by contrast, was an outspoken nationalist who opposed NATO, the United States, and the European Union. Furthermore, Milosevic was responsible for far more privatization during his time in office than was Kostunica during his presidency. Barker, who has never been to Serbia and has little background in the Balkans, is notorious for his conspiracy-mongering and has a long history of falsely accusing a number of prominent leftists (myself included) who don’t follow his line of having CIA ties. It is disappointing, therefore, that Gibson and Horn decided to cite him instead of people who are actually familiar with the region. (In addition, Barker’s article from which they quote was not in Z Magazine, as they claim, but on the ZNet bloggers’ space on which virtually anyone can write. Z editor Michael Albert has acknowledged the inaccuracy of a number of Barker’s rants on his blog, but emphasizes they are not edited or even monitored that closely and that neither he nor other Z editors are responsible for their content.)

STRATFOR Doesn’t Get It

The fact is that STRATFOR, like almost everyone else involved in U.S. military, intelligence, and diplomatic operations, have little understanding of popular struggles. Their view of power is top-down and state-centric, with little respect of the power of ordinary people to create change. Indeed, it’s rather odd that Gibson and

Horn appropriately depict STRATFOR as being duplicitous, but then rely on statements by their officials as evidence to make their case against Popovic and CANVAS. Like most groups in the military/intelligence complex, the analysts at STRATFOR just don't get how strategic nonviolent action or how it works. For example, the leaks reveal their simplistic understanding in their description of CANVAS: "They just go and set up shop in a country and try to bring the government down." In reality, CANVAS never has had more than one office, which has always been based in Belgrade and employs less than a half dozen people. More importantly, it is the oppressed people of the country in question that are responsible for bringing down a dictatorship, not a handful of outsiders.

STRATFOR's ignorance is further revealed in another quote Gibson and Horn cite, in which they claim that the CANVAS trainers "basically go around the world trying to topple dictators and autocratic governments (ones that U.S. does not like.)" First of all, outside trainers have never been responsible for toppling governments. Governments which fall to civil insurrections do so because of a combination of their lack of popular support and the much stronger support of opposition movements. Good strategic thinking is important in any struggle, and the CANVAS workshops may have been helpful in enabling some activists to think better along these lines, but it is not CANVAS that tries to topple governments; it is popular social movements. Secondly, as outlined above, neither Popovic nor CANVAS cares if a dictatorship is liked or not liked by the U.S. government. They have worked with activists opposing both pro- and anti-American regimes. Personally, I wish they had not worked with some of those in the latter category, but the evidence strongly suggests that their motivations were more opportunistic than hegemonic.

My studies of unarmed insurrections indicate that outsiders really don't make much of a difference in the success or failure of a movement. For example, the dozen or so Egyptian activists who attended CANVAS workshops were not significant figures in the uprising against Mubarak and a number of the other activists I interviewed found their contributions unhelpful in terms of the situation in Egypt. Despite this, there are those who want to credit (or blame) Popovic and CANVAS for the January 25 revolution. (Similarly, I've come across two websites which, citing a seminar which I helped lead in Cairo back in 2007, have claimed that I was personally responsible for the Egyptian revolution! Like those who exaggerate the influence of Popovic and CANVAS in Egypt and other countries in the Global South, such claims appear to be based on a racist mentality that people of color are incapable of organizing or strategizing for their own liberation and it is only through the influence of white people—intellectuals like Gene Sharp, trainers like Popovic or hybrids like me—can they suddenly become agents of change.)

And, while I am certainly bothered by the fact that CANVAS has worked with some of the right-wing oppositionists in Venezuela, I'm not particularly worried about it. The kind of nonviolent uprisings that CANVAS advocates can only succeed if the movement has a sizable majority of people on their side. Whatever legitimate complaints some Venezuelans may have of Hugo Chavez and his successor, few want to return to the rule of the old oligarchs. Doing a weekend workshop for twenty or so young bourgeois Venezuelans is no threat to the Bolivarian Revolution. In any case, in Venezuela or anywhere else, information on strategic nonviolent action is plenty available online and they don't need Popovic or CANVAS to learn about it.

Inaccurate and Misleading Statements

It is not just the analysis in the Gibson and Horn article that is disappointing and distracts from their important exposé of Popovic's interactions with STRATFOR, it's the demonstrably false and misleading assertions which appear in the latter part of the article.

For example, let's look at their claim that "Otpor! was so successful that it was ushered into Ukraine to help manufacture regime change there in 2004, using the template applied originally in Serbia with \$65 million in cash from the U.S. government."

First of all, it was not Otpor—which had been dissolved by that time—that was invited to Ukraine, but a small and now defunct Serbian group called the Center for Nonviolent Resistance (CNR). Secondly, they were invited to Ukraine by some elements of the Ukrainian opposition; they were not ushered in by the U.S. government. Thirdly, the \$65 million was the total given to all opposition activities in Ukraine, not what was provided to the Serbian trainers, which was no more than a few thousand dollars. More importantly, the December 2004 uprising in Ukraine was not a case of "regime change;" it was a successful demand to have a new election after evidence emerged that the previous election had been stolen. Finally, it was not "manufactured;" it was a popular uprising in which millions of Ukrainians took to the streets and braved sub-zero temperatures to demand that their votes be fairly counted.

(As a leftist, I didn't find the opposition coalition in Ukraine much better than the incumbent government it defeated in the second round of the elections. To their credit, the opposition which led the Orange Revolution rejected their predecessor's call for the Ukraine to join NATO, withdrew Ukrainian forces from Iraq, allowed for greater civil liberties and lessened state repression, but it was essentially one group of elites versus another. The bottom line, however, is that neither Serbs nor Americans had much to do with what has transpired in that country of 45 million people.)

Other information Gibson and Horn cite is also conveniently misleading. For example, they note that "Popovic's wife worked at one of the U.S.-funded radio and TV outlets as a journalist and anchor B92 from 2004-2009." However, they fail to note that U.S. funding for B92 ended a number of years prior to her working at the radio station and her tenure at the station ended well prior to their getting married. (Interestingly, despite being informed of this, they failed to note that Popovic's mother worked for the official state television under Milosevic and narrowly escaped death when the U.S. bombed it in 1999—one of the many reasons Popovic opposed the bombing of his country—presumably because his mother's media affiliation didn't fit into their narrative as well as his future wife's media affiliation.)

Another example of Gibson and Horn's misleading narrative is in their mention of Michael McFaul, who—despite being one of the more liberal members of Obama's foreign policy team when he served in the National Security Council—is described as having met Popovic "while serving as a Senior Fellow at the right-wing Hoover Institution." While Hoover has certainly been the home base of quite a few prominent conservatives over the years and its political center of the gravity has long leaned to the right, the institute is part of Stanford University and has included academics of a variety of political persuasions. McFaul's primary affiliation was as a professor in Stanford's political science department, not his post at Hoover.

Making Change

In light of a spate of bizarre conspiracy theories regarding nonviolent action theorist Gene Sharp some years ago, a number of prominent anti-imperialist scholars and activists—including the late Howard Zinn, Noam Chomsky, Daniel Ellsberg, Paul Engler, Frida Berrigan, Elizabeth McAllister, Paul Ortiz, Greg Guma, Stephen Shalom, Sandino Gomez, George Lakey, Marc Pilisuk, Anne Wright, Mark Lance, Philippe Duhamel, and Stellan Vinthagen, among scores of others—signed [a letter](#) in his defense. The signatories called on progressives to "continue to struggle against U.S. imperialism in all of its manifestations," but to reject false allegations against those promoting the use of strategic nonviolent action and to "support popular democratic movements

engaging in nonviolent action in the cause of human rights and social justice in the United States and throughout the world.” As they noted,

“Those who attempt to dismiss recent popular nonviolent struggles against autocratic regimes as somehow being instigated and controlled by Western powers invalidate the ability of the millions of people who have placed their bodies on the line for freedom and justice to think for themselves or play a decisive role in determining their own nations’ future. The United States is no more responsible for the recent nonviolent liberal democratic revolutions in Eastern Europe than the Soviet Union was responsible for earlier armed leftist revolutions in Central America.

“Every successful popular nonviolent insurrection has been rooted in the belief by the majority of people that their rulers were illegitimate and the current political system was incapable of redressing injustice, thereby no longer deserving their obedience or cooperation. Unlike a military coup or other

U.S.-backed efforts at ‘regime change,’ it is virtually impossible for any nonviolent insurrection to succeed when the movement’s leadership and agenda does not have the backing of the majority of the population.

“The popular nonviolent uprisings which led to the overthrow of corrupt and undemocratic regimes in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine— like similar movements which ousted U.S.-backed dictatorships in the Philippines, Chile, Mali, Bolivia, and other countries in previous decades – were a result of independent actions by the people of those nations struggling for their rights. As a result, neither Gene Sharp nor any other foreign individual, organization or government deserves the credit or the blame for their victories.

“Nonviolent struggle has historically been the weapon of the poor and disenfranchised through which they can gain an advantage over powerful and wealthy elites whose capacity to use violence against them is usually far superior. It is therefore ironic that some of those who view themselves as champions of oppressed peoples mischaracterize these popular nonviolent movements simply as tools of U.S. imperialism and global capital.”

It is unfortunate, therefore, that the important revelations in Gibson and Horn’s article regarding Srdja Popovic’s dealings with STRATFOR were so compromised by their lack of understanding of this phenomenon.

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