



A Blueprint for Climate Revolution

Srdja Popovic
Serbia

Like many young men, Srdja Popovic had a quite singular mind in his early twenties. He didn't see himself as a revolutionary. Quite the contrary – what he most wanted to do was go to parties and play punk music. “At that age I was more into dating girls and playing in a rock band,” he says. “I was thinking that basically activism is for old ladies who were fighting for dogs’ rights.”

Srdja played bass in the goth punk band BAAL, which was an up-and-coming name in the Eastern European music scene. He studied biology at the University of Belgrade, and – as mentioned – liked to chase after girls from time to time. He was, in many senses, a pretty typical youth. But as fate would have it, he would not be able to live this life for long.

In the early 1990s, in his native Serbia, the political situation began to deteriorate. The country's president, Slobodan Milošević, was ruling with an increasingly iron fist. Milošević, who became known as the “Butcher of the Balkans,” repressed student protesters, detained and jailed activists, and stole elections. He left little room for dissent; the result was a culture of fear spread far and wide across the country.

Seeing Milošević's power grow, Srdja and thousands of other young people were confronted with a harsh political reality – and a tough choice. Suddenly it didn't seem to Srdja that punk rock was the best use of his energy; nonviolent organizing to overthrow the regime was more important.

“Most of my generation had two options: One was to fight, and the other was to flee. I was stubborn, so I decided to fight,” he says. Srdja set off on a path that eventually led him to be called “the architect of the revolution” in Serbia – which led later to nonviolent revolution around the world.

Through the innovative practices they developed, Srdja and other student activists opened the world's eyes to Milošević's repression. In 1996, they marched peacefully through the streets of Belgrade every day for four months – braving bad weather and police brutality. Two years later, Srdja founded Otpor! (“resistance” in Serbian) with 10 other student leaders, following in the footsteps of student groups who had protested Milošević's regime in 1992, 1996, and 1997.

Otpor! aimed to non-violently overthrow Milošević – by voting him out of office – and even to have a little bit of fun doing so. They made promotional T-shirts, mugs, and posters. The iconic clenched fist that appeared on their merchandise, like Shepard Fairey's Andre the Giant OBEY image Years later, it became a symbol of their resistance. Thousands were arrested, but the movement pushed forward nonetheless. “Being wicked, cool, brave, ready to outrun the police—and well branded—you can bring down the dictator,” he says.

And in 2000 they succeeded. In the elections that year, nearly 90 percent of voters under the age of 29 cast their votes – almost all of them against Milošević. He didn't even receive enough votes to make it to the second round of voting. Like many dictators, he refused to step down from power. So the students organized a nationwide strike. That was the final gasp for Milošević. On October 5, 2000, he conceded power amidst unrelenting public pressure.

Seeing Milošević fall was a great feeling, but Srdja's work wasn't done. In fact, it was just beginning. He kept working to grow Otpor! and to spread their message of nonviolent resistance across the region and around the world. In fewer than 10 years, Otpor! became one of the most well-known youth movements of all time. In the mid-2000s, it had more than 20,000 members. The group would even inspire — in part — the Arab Spring, which rocked the Middle East more than a decade later, and overthrew a number of dictators. “It turned my life into a long-lasting passion for activism,” Srdja says.

Today, Srdja spends more time on planes than at home. In Los Angeles at the premiere of PBS' *Bringing Down the Dictator*, was honored to be among other great leaders who had taken a stand for their people and their country. Srdja has turned his student activism in Serbia into a lifelong commitment to helping to support nonviolent resistance in more than 40 countries. He says this type of work keeps him feeling young. “I am still figuring out what I want to be when I grow up,” Srdja says with a smile. “Basically my life is helping people figure out how to build movements for social change.”

After the fall of Milošević and the success of Otpor!, Srdja founded the Center for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies (CANVAS), which has worked with activists in 46 countries, including Venezuela, Iran, and Syria. Their list of successes is growing: the “Orange Revolution” in Georgia (2003); the “Revolution of Roses” in Ukraine (2004); and of course the “April 6 Movement” in Egypt (2011), which became an important part of the Arab Spring.

Climate change, he says, has always been a key issue for him — and is increasingly the key issue of our time. After the success of Otpor!, Srdja founded the activist organization Green Fist to take the same fight he waged over democracy to the realm of climate change and the environment. He now leads the nonprofit Ecotopia, which pushes for green policies in his native Serbia.

In his travels, Srdja sees how climate change is at the root of most global conflicts. He's pleased that the environmental movement Extinction Rebellion uses his book, “Blueprint for Revolution” to galvanize people into action. It's been translated into 11 languages. Srdja teaches courses on political protest at some of the best American universities, including Harvard University and New York University.

Srdja knows that movement building is not easy — especially when the enemy is something as overwhelming as climate change. But he wants to write a new blueprint to help tackle it. In fact, his many years of practice have given him a pretty good idea of what that blueprint will look like. It starts with four steps:

1. **Vision.** “You can never win by being *against* something,” he says. Instead, climate activists around the world need to present a new way forward. A Green New Deal? Maybe. “You need to find the visionary document, or idea, and explain how the world will be different if you win.”
2. **Unity.** In order for the movement to succeed, it has to stay together. “How do you unite different players?” Srdja asks. The ideologies behind climate change action can differ, but if nobody is on the same page about what steps to take, the fight will quickly unravel.
3. **Strategy.** What's the three-year plan, the five-year plan, for the climate revolution? “I think young people have always wished to change the world, but they very often lack the tools and skills to exercise their passion,” he says. It's important to take the time to develop a plan that can succeed.
4. **Numbers.** There's one thing that's more important than anything else, and we're seeing it displayed in cities and countries around the world — as young people take to the streets *en masse*. “The most important thing to know is the importance to of having big numbers,” Srdja says.

Becoming an activist — whether for climate action or other issues — is a lifelong job, Srdja emphasizes. And it can be difficult; but he assures youth that it's worth it. “It comes with a promise that you will never be bored; that you will be surrounded by very interesting people; that you may be misunderstood by your parents, who want you to work in a bank or have a law degree. But don't get discouraged by this,” he says.

Now 46, Srdja is just as passionate about activism as he was in the days when he and his punk rock friends tried — and succeeded — in overthrowing a ruthless dictator. Today he has two children, and he knows how important it will be for them to carry on the work he’s been doing for his whole life.

“Providing your kids with the skill sets they need to mobilize and work for social change can dramatically impact the world,” he says. “If there is one thing I see that can bring dramatic change to my kids’ generation, it may be enabling them to learn more about *how* to change the world; then they can decide *what* is the most pressing topic for them to work on.”

Nonviolent struggle is the most powerful means available to those struggling for freedom.

Gene Sharp

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