

In the eight years since Slobodan Milosevic was ousted, Serbia has made considerable progress in its democratic development. Much of the credit for that goes to the high degree of civic activism in Serbia. The courage of numerous non-governmental organizations, the independence of many media outlets and the democratic platforms of some political parties have shown that Serbia has enormous potential.

Unfortunately, the legacy of extreme nationalism fomented during the Milosevic years has not been so easy to break. While the damage the criminal and corrupt Milosevic regime did to Serbia is readily acknowledged, the evil that regime committed against Serbia's neighbors is not truly understood and, often times, denied. The hesitancy to admit a tremendous wrong is certainly not a character unique to Serbia, but it is a character of Serbian politics that today is particularly profound and limits the ability of the country and the region to achieve more rapid progress.

There is concern that Kosovo's declaration of independence in mid-February -- and the subsequent recognition of that independence by the United States, much of Europe and other countries -- may have upset an already unsteady balance in Serbia between democratic process and nationalist politics. In addition to the group of demonstrators who attacked the U.S. and other embassies in Belgrade on February 21, there have been numerous reports of intimidation and threats against independent voices in Serbia, as well as against some citizens who belong to minority populations. Meanwhile, new parliamentary elections have been called for May 11 in which the voters of Serbia may face a sharper choice than ever before between democracy and European integration on the one hand, and nationalism and isolation on the other.

How concerned should we be about these developments? How hopeful should we be about Serbia's democratic prospects? Our briefing today intends to give us a better perspective of how the contradictory forces in Serbia's democratic development may play themselves out in the short-term and the long-term.

Our panel of experts consists of three people representing organizations that have a strong track record of promoting democratic change in Serbia and many other countries in Europe and around the world. First, we have Ivana Howard from the National Endowment for Democracy, followed by Robert Benjamin from the National Democratic Institute and Lindsay Lloyd from the International Republican Institute. They will report on recent visits to Serbia, as well as on recent polling of public opinion in Serbia.