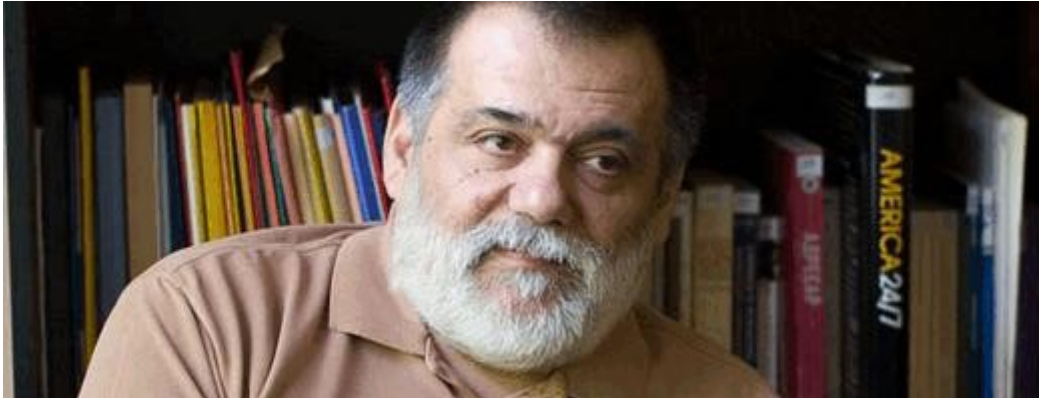


# “Most foodstuffs cost more in Serbia than in Western Europe”



**Miljenko Dereta is one of those Serbian Intellectuals whose critical view of the social conditions in his country did not drive him into the camp of the nationalist populists, but instead led him to formulate a differentiated criticism of the changes in the country. Born in Belgrade in 1950, he was active in the Gradjanski Savez Srbije, the Socijaldemokratska unija and the Serbian anti-war movement during the 1990s. Today he is director of Civic Initiatives, a network of NGOs and civilian initiatives in Belgrade. Report spoke to him about poverty and hunger.**

**Thomas Schmidinger: Belgrade has several very good restaurants.**

Miljenko Dereta: Nowadays, we have quite excellent restaurants. Very few people outside of the country are aware of the fact, but I can definitely recommend Serbia from a culinary point of view.

**But presumably many Serbs can't afford these good restaurants.**

The good restaurants are, of course, only something for the upper and middle classes. The losers of the economic reforms don't have enough money to eat there.

**Hasn't the social situation in Serbia improved since the fall of the Milošević government eight years ago? What effects have the political changes since 2000 had on the living conditions of the population?**

Today the social differences are much greater than under Milošević. At that time, almost everybody was poor – with the exception of small group around Milošević himself. In the past few years, however, a kind of middle-class has arisen, which, by and large, has voted for the Democrats and for Europe. After all, they have profited from the economic boom and now need political and economic stability.

Who voted for whom can even be seen from the urban situation in Belgrade, if you can believe a taxi driver with whom I recently had a very interesting conversation. He told me that all of his colleagues who owned new cars had voted for the Democrats. The ones who had old cars, on the other hand, had voted for the “Serbian Radical Party”. The Radicals almost exclusively banked on a socio-demagogic mobilisation in Serbia that appeals to the losers of the current situation.

**So who are now the poor in Serbia?**

On the one hand, it is the pensioners – who have to get by on an extremely low pension – and, on the other hand, young unemployed people. The very young and the very old probably form the

majority of the poor. Yet there is not only a division of society according to age, but also according to profession. You have to remember that there is practically no manufacturing whatsoever in Serbia today. Industry as a whole has been shut down.

The only people still earning anything today are those working in service industries and intellectuals. The whole of the working class has become unemployed. Then there is also an ever-increasing divide between the city and the country. The rural population actually has no possibilities of earning anything anymore and has to provide for itself.

**On my travels to Serbia I repeatedly had the impression that there is, in addition, an ethnic divide. The Roma must be the poorest of all sections of the population.**

I didn't mention the Roma separately because they are amongst the poorest everywhere. This situation is no different in Hungary, Romania, Macedonia or Bulgaria, and therefore is not specific to Serbia. Yet it's true, they are certainly the poorest of the poor. We now have some hope that something might improve. The civil rights organisations are working intensively to get rid of at least the legal obstacles for the Roma. You have to imagine that, at present, is not possible for many Roma to even get a job, since they don't have a legal address. They usually live on some piece of squatted land, where there are no street names or infrastructure. Yet without a fixed place of residence, there is absolutely no hope at all of finding a regular job.

The next obstacle is the lack of education. Most of the Roma children are, at the moment, put into special needs schools for mentally handicapped children. Once there, they never get the necessary education that is today a pre-requisite for almost any profession whatever.

Even the government is now trying to do something. Serbia is participating in the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015 and since 1 July has even taken over the presidency of the campaign. At least there is some sense of a change of attitude.

**In certain circumstances, what the Roma and other poor people have in common are the survival strategies that they need to adopt. How do those people who are affected try to cope with poverty?**

It astounds me time and again that these people can survive at all. Yet somehow they manage to do so. Take the example of an old lady who has to get by on 110 Euros a month. I personally know of such a woman. She has to spend half of that amount on medicines. How she manages to survive on the rest is a mystery to me.

In Serbia there are still informal solidarity networks, or else people have a little bit of money saved from better times, with to get by on somehow or other. Relatives in the country are also important. At the weekend, Belgrade is completely empty. On Sundays, people come back with foodstuffs that they bring from the country. We have unbelievably high prices on the Serbian weekly markets, as well as in the shops. Most of the foodstuffs cost more than they do in western Europe.

**How come? Given the level of wages and prices in general this seems rather absurd.**

There is a monopoly enjoyed by some managers (tycoons), who are forcing up the price of food. In this way, foodstuffs at market prices are no longer affordable for many people.

**It sounds like a return to a kind of subsistence economy.**

Not quite, but poor people who don't have the support of relatives really have hardly any access to affordable foodstuffs. What has developed from that is not a subsistence economy, but rather more informal survival strategies than are necessary in, for example, western European countries.

**What role does migration play in all this? Ever since the "guest worker migration" of the 1960s, there have been thousands of families in Western Europe who have also supported their families at home.**

Migrants are part of these informal solidarity networks. But today they are no longer as important as they were some years ago. We Serbs don't have such close family structures as do, for example, the

Albanians in Kosovo. Even for the migrants themselves, the situation in the West has become more difficult. They hardly have any money left to send back to their relatives in Serbia. On the other hand, for the woman I mentioned before, it simply makes a huge difference whether somebody transfers to her twenty extra Euros or not. The new Serbian migrants are all very young and have not been able to establish themselves abroad in the West yet. Consequently financial support today has declined.

**In one of his poems, Bertolt Brecht had a poor man say to a rich man “If I hadn’t been poor, you wouldn’t have been rich”. We know who is poor in Serbia, but who is rich and is profiting from this situation?**

At the very top there are the tycoons from the Milošević era, who have profited from the sanctions and from the war. To this day, these people are still very influential in politics and are therefore able to defend their wealth and even increase it. They act solely for their own economic profit and do not accept any social responsibility.

Then there is a group of new managers and financial experts, who over the last eight years have become important for the employment market. These people receive a good income from international organisations or multinational companies.

What these wealthy people have in common is that they all belong to an urban class and are between forty and sixty years old. Of course, some of them also hide in the country, so that they don’t have to pay any taxes, or don't have to answer accusations of connection to organised crime. But most of them live in the big towns and cities, and the rural areas are becoming poorer. The majority are over forty. The young people you see driving around in expensive cars are almost always criminals.

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