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Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

24 January 1985

The "Belgrade Six" Trial

SUMMARY

The Yugoslav government is now attempting to extricate itself from the cycle of domestic criticism and the international embarrassment caused by its trial of six Serbian intellectuals on flimsy charges of conspiracy. While regime moderates are prevailing, the government as a whole has been hurt by the widespread popular perception of its ineffectiveness. [redacted]

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] East European Division, Office of European Analysis. Comments and questions are welcome and should be addressed to [redacted] Chief, East European Division, Office of European Analysis, [redacted]

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Yugoslav hardliners, worried about the potential for political unrest in a period of increasing economic austerity, forced the arrest last spring of six Serbian intellectuals on conspiracy charges. The widely publicized trial, which began in November, became a focal point of dispute between the hardliners and moderates in the leadership. Sympathy for the defendants among the populace and in the media suggests that the hardliners misjudged the difficulty of staging a political trial in Yugoslavia's increasingly open society. [REDACTED]

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Yugoslav moderates publicly opposed the trial from the beginning partly out of concern that negative Western reaction would affect Belgrade's debt relief negotiations. Serbian moderates obtained the release from custody of the defendants in July. As the weakness of the prosecutor's case became apparent--only one witness testified against the defendants--even some hardliners admitted privately to US diplomats that the trial was likely to hinder rather than help government efforts to curb dissent. The trial often displayed a comical atmosphere, further embarrassing the regime--at one point a defendant was allowed to leave early to pick his daughter up from school. The moderates' fears were realized when Western political groups, media, and governments showed high interest in the proceedings. [REDACTED]

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Sources of the US Embassy in Belgrade reported last week that Yugoslav political authorities had removed pressure for convictions and the court response came quickly this week. On Wednesday, the prosecution dropped charges against one defendant, reduced charges against another three, and pledged to do the same for the remaining two in the future. The court probably will mete out light sentences to some of the defendants in an effort to save face for the regime. The reduced charges of promoting hostile propaganda carry a minimum sentence of only six months, versus five years for conspiracy. [REDACTED]

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Belgrade is now attempting to extricate itself from what has become an international embarrassment. Although the outcome is more favorable to moderates, the regime as a whole has been hurt by the widespread popular perception of government ineffectiveness. The hardliners are now likely to turn to low-profile harassment of dissidents, such as increased secret police surveillance. [REDACTED]

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