



The Belgrade Circle NGO

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BELGRADE CIRCLE NGO

A Brief History

"The Belgrade Circle is an association of independent intellectuals which promotes free, open, pluralist, and democratic civil society. The Belgrade Circle proclaims a general culture of peace, dialogue and cooperation, as well as tolerance among all political, religious, national and professional groups. The Belgrade Circle created institutional bases for the protection of all human rights, especially individual rights as well as the right of the other."

(Statute of the Belgrade Circle, 1992.)

Belgrade Circle (Association of Independent Intellectuals) was founded in February 1992 and as such represents one of the oldest and most influential non-governmental organizations in Serbia. Its decade-long history could be divided into two major phases: political engagement (1992-1997) and civic initiatives (1998-2004).

FIRST PERIOD: political engagement (1992-1997)

In the early years of its political activities (1992-1997), the Belgrade Circle counted approximately 500 registered members, many of whom bore the title of distinguished Yugoslav intellectuals: (Prof. Radomir Konstantinović, writer); Prof. Miladin Životić (Philosopher); Prof. Filip David (Dramaturge); Prof. Ivan Čolović (Ethnologist); Prof. Aljoša Mimica (Sociologist); Prof. Bogdan Bogdanović (Architect); Mr. Ivan Vejvoda (Sociologist); Prof. Ranko Bugarski (Linguist); Prof. Mirjana Miocinovic (Dramaturge); Dušan Makavejev (Film director); Mr. Nikola Barovic (Lawyer); Prof. Branka Arsic (Philosopher); Prof. Žarko Korać (Psychologist); Ms. Borka Pavićević (Art director), and many others. However, the Belgrade Circle takes its greatest pride in succeeding to attract courageous citizens, those disappointed and critical voices who have openly fought against the militaristic politics of Serbian regime, and specially, against ethno-nationalism, populism, war crimes and ethnical cleansing in the territory of Former Yugoslavia.



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In the period of 1992-1995 the Belgrade Circle conducted the project of *Saturday Sessions* (public lectures and discussions attended by both members and non-members) which hosted approximately 140 intellectuals from all former Yugoslav republics and abroad. These public gatherings, which represented a vital core for the political and cultural life of the so-called 'Other (in sense different, non-nationalistic) Serbia', were envisioned as opposition to the militaristic nationalism of Milosevic's regime, to its xenophobia and populism which had overtaken the Serbian society in the early 1990s. 'The Other Serbia' revisited legitimating to wars in Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia, thus sending a powerful message to Europe and the world that not all citizens of Serbia stand united in support of bloodshed and genocide. The *Saturday Sessions'* voluminous documentation and material was collected in two volumes edited by Ivan Čolović and Aljoša Mimica: *The Other Serbia* (1992) and *Intellectuals and War* (1993) – both were translated and published in many languages: French, Italian, Greek and German.

In the course of war and dramatic disintegration of socialist Yugoslavia, the Belgrade Circle maintained and fostered permanent contact with like-minded organizations in former Yugoslav republics. These ties were particularly strong with friends in Sarajevo, Mostar and Tuzla (Bosnia and Herzegovina) whom the Belgrade Circle delegation visited several times during the war, bombing and occupation. These visits were organized in the name of international solidarity and political friendship.

Together with the others NGOs, the Belgrade Circle functioned as the political and moral voice of 'The Other Serbia'. In the period of sanctions and isolation, the Belgrade Circle gained a respectable international reputation – in 1994 and 1995 its delegation was hosted by the French, British and Italian governments.

The first phase of the Belgrade Circle's history could be summed up in a few words: it was a political **movement**, the civic **action**, a moral **rebellion** and the cultural **resistance** against destructive militaristic politics of Milosevic's regime.



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In the period of political engagement (1992-1997) the Belgrade Circle's projects include:

- Saturday Public Sessions
- Civil Dialogue: Bosnia-Croatia-Serbia
- Youth Action for Open Society
- Serbian – Albanian Dialogue
- International student Exchange Program
- Publishing Projects
- Belgrade Circle Journal

SECOND PERIOD: educational programs (1998-2005)

Since 1998 the Belgrade Circle has been presided by Prof. Obrad Savic (formal title: Acting President). In new circumstances it has changed the focus of activities: the forefront is now occupied with strengthening of Civil Society programs and educational and cultural projects. The new strategic goal is *civic education* – re-education of citizens towards accepting liberal-democratic values which form the normative basis for democratic transformation and stabilization of Serbian state and society. In conducting such projects, the Belgrade Circle has been cooperating with many universities and academic intellectuals in former Yugoslavia, Europe and USA. In the same period, we have been in co-partners relationship with similar non-governmental organizations in the region and Europe.

During this period Belgrade Circle operates through the following educational and publishing projects:

- Democracy Seminars
- In Defense of the University
- Balkan as Classroom
- Transitional Justice in the Former Yugoslavia
- Belgrade Circle School
- Edition *KRUG* – local authors



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- *Belgrade Circle Journal* – international, bilingual journal
- Edition *CIRCULUS* – international authors
- Edition *COLLECTANEA* – collections and readers

- **International seminars**

So far the Belgrade Circle has organized and conducted more than 30 international seminars, hosting more than 100 lecturers from USA, Western and Eastern Europe, and Balkan region. Many of them came as guests of the **DEMOCRACY SEMINARS**, (1998-2002) a project originally conducted in cooperation with the New School for Social Research (New York, USA).

Our special guest speakers were: Prof. **Jacques Derrida** (France); Prof. **Terry Eagleton** (England); Prof. **Anthony Giddens** (England); Prof. **Richard Rorty** (USA); Prof. **Christopher Norris** (England); Prof. **Allison Jagger** (USA); Prof. **Donald Davidson** (USA); Prof. **Richard Bernstein** (USA); **Hans Magnus Enzensberger** (Germany); Prof. **Peggy Kamuf** (USA); Prof. **Drucilla Cornel** (USA); Prof. **Ann Snitow** (USA); Prof. **Albrecht Wellmer** (Germany); Prof. **Hauke Brunkhorst** (Germany); Prof. **Eduardo Cadava** (USA); Prof. **David Wills** (USA); and Prof. **Statis Gourgouris** (USA).

Many speakers who took part in the Belgrade Circle's Democratic seminars are distinguished academics who in the name of international solidarity and unconditioned politics of friendship offered their full political, intellectual and moral support to the Belgrade Circle.

- **International Conferences**

Since 1998 the Belgrade Circle has organized several international conferences, some of which had an international significance and resonance. These events contributed to a better theoretical and practical/political understanding of ex-Yugoslav crisis, as well as the process of post-communist transition of the Southeast Europe.



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Most relevant international conferences are:

1. Post-Dayton Serbia and the Question of Responsibility for the War (July, 1998)
2. Globalization and War: NATO in Serbia (Jun, 2000)
3. Responsibility and Evil (November, 2000)
4. Legacy of Hannah Arendt: Beyond Totalitarianism and Terrorism (July, 2002)
5. International meeting of European cultural journals – *Eurozine* (October, 2003)
6. Transitional Justice in Former Yugoslavia – (November, 2004)

- **Publishing**

The Belgrade Circle's publishing activity is dedicated to books, collections and readers by both domestic and foreign authors whose works cover the fields of humanities: social theory, political philosophy, gender, human rights, and postcolonial discourse.

1. The **Edition *Krug*** includes many critical books by domestic authors (30 books)
2. The **Edition *Circulus*** includes 25 books of translations by foreign authors (Jurgen Habermas, Manfred Frank, Charles Taylor, Richard Bernstein, Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Derrida, Etienne Balibar, Peter Sloterdijk, Slavoj Zizek) which have become a standard reading material at many universities in Serbia.
3. **Edition *Circulus-Globus*** is a sub-edition of the *Circulus*; it aims at translation of works from the field of post-colonial studies (Gayatri Spivak, Edward Siad, Edward Soja, Homi Bhabha and others). This collection is relevant for self-understanding of the Discourse of Balkan.
4. **Edition *Collectanea*** includes collections on Hannah Arendt and Karl Kraus, and will soon be enriched with readers on Globalization, Post-National Identity, Sovereignty, Balkan as Metaphor, and Gay and Lesbian Studies.



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5. **In cooperation** with the Belgrade Circle, The VERSO Press published the book (collection) edited by Obrad Savic, *Politics of Human Rights*, Verso Press, London and New York (2000): in cooperation with the MIT Press (USA) we published the collection edited by Dušan Bjlić and Obrad Savić, *Balkas as Metaphor*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., (2002).

6. **Edition *Transitional Justice*** includes the translation and publishing of the main books dealing with the legal, political and moral facing with terrible past. As reading materials for the series of the International Seminars: Transitional Justice in the Former Yugoslavia we should translate following books: Stanley Cohen, *STATES OF DENIAL* (2001); Nancy Adler, *THE GULAG SURVIVOR* (2002); Nancy Fraser, *JUSTICE INTERRUPTS* (1997); John Elster, *CLOSING THE BOOKS: TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE* (2004); Mary Kaldor, *NEW & OLD WARS* (2001); Helmut Dubiel, *LESSER EVIL: MORAL APPROACHES TO GENOCIDE PRACTICE* (2004); Omer Bartov, *CRIMES OF WAR* (2002); Ruti Tietel, *TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE* (2000); Mark J. Osiel, *MASS ATROCITY, COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND THE LAW* (1997).

- **The Belgrade Circle Journal**

Our main publication is an international, bilingual (Serb-English) quarterly – *The Belgrade Circle Journal* whose special issues include the following titles (in chronological order): "*The Critique of Centrism*", "*Pure War*", "*The Politics of Human Rights*", "*The Specter of Nation*", and "*In Defense of the University*", "*The End of Sovereignty*", Forthcoming, "*The Idea of Europe*" and *Transitional Justice in the Former Yugoslavia*. *The Belgrade Circle Journal* is the member of Eurozine - international network of European's cultural journals.



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- **The Library**

The Belgrade Circle owns a rich library of more than 2,000 specialized books and journals in political and social theory, contemporary philosophy, sociology, psychoanalysis, cultural, postcolonial and gender studies, and human rights – all of which are available to professors, students and colleagues for research and assistance. Some 100 VHS tapes with recorded documentation of the Belgrade Circle's activities, its conferences and seminars is also available at the office. Its visual archive can be used for reconstruction of the institutional history of the Belgrade Circle NGO. Within the world of academic discourse (Universities in USA, Germany and Italy) there are several MA and PHD thesis on Belgrade Circle NGO.

- **Resume**

A decade-long engagement of the Belgrade Circle has had a two-fold aim: on the one hand, it was a defensive (pacifistic) opposition to the prevailing militarization of the Serbian state and society, which brought to a brutal disintegration of socialist Yugoslavia. It was the unstoppable politico-moral struggle against the overpowering politics of populism and nationalism which led to and finally ended in xenophobia, violence, war and ethnic cleansing. On the other hand, we tried to preserve the violently broken ties with the democratic world and Western cultural tradition. All our political and intellectual efforts have been aimed at saving the endangered politics of international friendship and solidarity. In rough circumstances we fought to preserve the idea of cosmopolitanism which was the only thing that could have saved us from arrogant provincialism and parochialism. Finally, our program was to save within the Serbian culture precisely that European and world legacy which nationalism attempted to destroy and annul.