

SRDJA POPOVIC

Ariane Sommer: He is a thorn in the flesh and a threat to dictators and autocrats worldwide for democracy fighters from Tehran to Minsk, to Istanbul. He is the guru of peaceful resistance. My guest today is the Serbian political activists Srdja Popovic. Srdja is one of the founders of the student movement OTPOR!.

And one of the leading figures of the revolution that toppled the Milosevic regime of Yugoslavia in October, 2000. International media calls, Srdja, the secret architect of global revolution. He is co-founder of the Belgrade think tank CANVAS center for applied non-violent action and strategies.

And to this date, he has trained pro-democracy activists in over 50 countries over the world. He also lectures on the topic of nonviolent struggle and building movements at universities, such as Harvard, Johns Hopkins and Columbia. Apart from being nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012 Srdja was listed as one of the top 100 global thinkers by foreign policy magazine.

And in 2014, he was named one of the young global leaders by the world economic forum in a Davos.

Fantastic to have you on the Superhumanize podcast today.

Srdja Popovic: Ariane it's a pleasure to be with you and the Superhumanize podcast and good day to all of your listeners.

Ariane Sommer: Thank you so much. You have decades of experience with helping protesters around the world.

Learn effective, and also often humorous nonviolent tactics. According to you, a cake is one of the most effective weapons and peaceful resistance. Please explain.

Srdja Popovic: Well, I mean, first of all, uh, people take protests very often too seriously. And that's probably because what we see on the TV is when it gets angry.

So see the bunch of angry people yelling and throwing and burning stuff, actually, most of successful non-lawyers. Protests are related to creativity and the way to make them funky and the way to make them cool because funky and cool attracts people and the more movements attract people the more effective they become.

So within the OTPOR! we worked with all of those groups through CANVAS, we figured out that we really want to focus on creativity and wit of nonviolent tactics, which we very often call Laughtimism.

So what is the laughtimism? It is combination of laughter and activism coming from a non-English speaker like myself.

So it's a coin that doesn't exist. We try to establish it and it takes a look into how humor really works. So first of all, you need to figure out that the humor works in our own life. And

if you take a look at how it works in movement and how it works in life, it's really, really very similar. So first thing that humor does, humor breaks, fear and apathy and our most common obstacles to change.

And most common reason is status quo. You know, dictatorship, you have people who are afraid to act because they will get in trouble in a democracy. You have people who are too busy buying at Walmarts and in the nonviolent struggle because target has a new sale. So what happens with humor is, the humor effectively breaks, fear and apathy both.

So take a look at your, your normal life. You're preparing to go to the dentist. If you are the person who is afraid of dentists or to the major surgery, and here comes the doctor say, Oh, you see this little shiny metal objects. We're going to put it inside your mouth. And this is what we're going to do with that.

And you're like, immediately, you'll get afraid. You don't want to know anything about the process. Dan, a good friend of yours comes in and says, Ariane, it's not a big deal. And he cracks a joke. And when you start laughing immediately, this fear disappears. So this happens in your life. It happened to me many times, probably happened to many of your listeners, humor breaks fear.

Similarly, non-violent struggle. If you're looking at a very fatherish figure of Vladimir Putin. And then immediately there is a group of people staging the protest with toys, because this is what really happened in Russia. In 2012, the people were banned from protesting, but they came out and they organized a little legal protest.

They built the legal city, they bring whatever kinder toys. And then the police was forced to ban this protest because the people had so much fun watching it on YouTube, that they tend to start thinking that they should replicate it. So humor works, breaking fear in your life. Humor works, breaking fear in the fight for democracy. Another very powerful engine of status quo is apathy very often, change doesn't happen because people don't care.

People have their own lives. Politics is for somebody else and, you know, explanations of that kind. Let's go to the apathetic situation in your own life. What's the most boring part you've been in your lifetime. So here is the bunch of people, not even enjoying their drinks, figuring out what the heck in the world they came over here immediately.

A prankster comes in and starts teasing everybody. And what seems to be the very boring party turns into the very insightful and cool social event that you don't want to leave. So, very similarly, when you use pranks in nonviolent struggle, if you bake a birthday cake for a president and then, you know, put on it, the things that he or she has done in the past and they know if she gets angry about it the media will talk about it. You look cool. And the people love being around that person's work. Cool. Yeah. You could look at your phone book, who is the most, uh, attractive person for you to be around? The most clever one, the most educated one, the one with biggest money, the one with biggest file on IMDB?

No, the one who can always make you laugh.

Ariane Sommer: The prankster, and this is exactly right. Something that is such a core philosophy of your view on protests. It's laced with humor, it's laced with rock and roll and it's helped mobilize movements worldwide. And you just published your latest book, *Pranksters Versus Autocrats*.

And in it, you explain the concept of so-called dilemma actions structured and a strategic approach to fighting back against authoritarianism. And for defending democracy. So explain to us the concept of dilemma actions.

Srdja Popovic: Uh, once again, back to tactics, because people are seeing too much protests and rallies, it's normally the first thing they pull out when they're angry or dissatisfied with something very similarly, like having a toolbox with only a hammer in it.

And then every problem looks like a nail. Uh, the thing is there is like more than 220 different registered tactics of nonviolent struggle, ranging from things, you know, like rallies and marches, all the way to the weird things like protest, disrupting, and thinks of that kind, you know that because you participated in kind of a protest disrupting campaign with PETA

Ariane Sommer: Yes!.

Srdja Popovic: So the thing is like, there are many of these tactics and what you do when you pick your tactic, firstly, one-on-one to look whom you want to impact. So sometimes you want to disrupt your opponent. Okay. Block, occupy, stop traffic, do things of that kind, overwhelm with calls. And then sometimes you want to bring attention to something.

Sometimes you just want the people from the middle to join. So before getting engaged in a tactic, you want to take a strategic inside. And a very important part of this strategic insight is that this is chess and you have two players. So it's not only what you play, but also what your opponent will play.

So when you were structuring the dilemma action, which is the subject of the book and me and a marvelous person that you should interview for this call podcast, [Sophia McLennan](#) who is one of the one of the largest American experts in satire and how satire actually cures your brain. So I teamed up with somebody who knows psychology and satires and watch a lot of late night shows and we were figuring out why does dialogue actually works?

So the first well-known registered case of Dilemma Action is an Indian struggle for democracy that had this marvelous guy called Gandhi. He had this big goal to get rid of the, well, at that point, the largest world colonial superpower UK, and he had a lot of support, but he was facing a very, very powerful machine. So his idea was to pick an issue that everybody cares for, which was solved among other things. The colonial Britain was taxing salt in India. So it was weird. You're living in a country with 5,000 miles of seacoast.

Anybody can produce salt because what you need for salt is sea and sun and India has plenty of both, but you can't, you need to buy it from Brits and thus effectively fund the oppression over your own people. So his idea is this is what I'm going to do. I'm going to stage a big March. I'm going to go to the coast.

I'm going to be first Indian to defy this, I'm going to make the first handful of salt and then what the Brits will do? So the choice was if they arrest Gandhi for doing this, they will release him after two weeks because you know, the penalty for this is a few hundred pounds, or you spent a few weeks in jail and then if they don't stop them, everybody will start making salt and a very important income source for Brits will disappear.

Ariane Sommer: A win-win situation.

Srdja Popovic: So for Brits, it was a lose lose. So they were looking at a guy starting with 20 followers. And that crowd grew because he was marching through towns and getting more support. And then at one point you have 15,000 Indians making salt.

Ariane Sommer: So this is basically the essence of a dilemma action, where you put the adversary in that case, an autocratic regime, into a place where they can only lose no matter what they do. Do I understand that correctly?

Srdja Popovic: Absolutely. And there are many cases. There are many cases of structuring this dilemma action, and there are some great cases from American civil rights movement.

For example, you know, when people say, uh, Montgomery Bus Boycott, but they never ask themselves why Montgomery? Why not LA? And why buses, why not you know, public, uh, whatever metro system? The thing is you put your strength against your opponent's weakness. So Montgomery was a very important city because you know, this, this was where the oppression over the upper Americans was strongest and also they couldn't gather. They could go in front of the city hall, but nobody will care.

Because elected representatives were elected by the white majority that was supporting segregation. So they could do the tactic, but with no visible effect, instead of that, they figured out that there are those who have power and there is power by the numbers. The white people were rich enough to have cars.

The black people were using public transportation. So what they did instead of impacting electing officials within work, they impacted the transportation business. So they say, if we don't ride, you lose money. So what you can do is either change the seats. So everybody rides equally, or you stay with empty segregated buses and lose money.

Once again, they find something ridiculous. Majority of Afro American buyers in certain malls in southern American states, couldn't go in the food courts because food courts were for white people.

So they say, okay, you want our money. You want us to shop in your malls. You don't want us to sit in your McDonald's or whatever is was at the time. This is what we are going to do. They were occupying the food courts. So 50 Afro-American students will peacefully sit in where they are banned to sit in.

They will peacefully wait for the police to arrest them. The moment that car leaves with 50 people in it, the new 50 people sit there. If you are a mall owner, what will you do? A) you're

losing shoppers B) your food court is a complete mess. C) you're losing money in the food court. D) you have a troops of the policeman running around through a facility?

Of course, what they did was go back crying to their politicians and state. We need to desegregate this. It was the money. This is going to kill us, you know, the very well-structured Dilemma Action from American history.

Ariane Sommer: Yeah. And dilemma action seems like a really excellent tool and a lot of activists choose out of principle to follow the teachings of well, you mentioned Gandhi or Dr. Martin Luther King, right? Others, however, assume that violence is the only way to overthrow a violent regime. Why is non-violence the better political strategy for resistance groups?

Srdja Popovic: First of all, it has to do with the background phenomenon of successful struggle. And if you read Saul Alinsky, that's not a book that I will strongly recommend Rules For Radicals, you figure out that anger is in fact a very powerful mobilizer. Uh, seeing George Floyd executed on camera, causes rage, and it's a normal human emotion. And, and it comes from you. You want to do something about this, you become agitated. You look at what is happening. You look, if there is a protest, you look what you can do.

But if you are driven by anger only, and not anger with hope. Anger is a very destructive force per se. And, you know, when you're personally angry, you tell your friends or your partners things that you will regret. And, you know, yes, anger is a powerful mobilizer, but anger without hope and without the strategic approach it can easily turn into something that backfires.

Now, this phenomenon of violence, the main argument of the people who are advocating violence is that because you're doing violence, they will take you more seriously. So, you know, with peaceful protests nothing happens. And then we bomb, we burn the Wendy's restaurant somewhere, and this is where all the media come in.

Well first of all, you need to look at what really works in nonviolent struggle, and you want to dissect social change and every single social scientist will tell you it's all about the numbers. You need to reach a certain amount of the people, supporting certain things in order to shift institutions to follow you.

So the game of numbers works like this. We staged the peaceful demonstration. We bring drums in. We bring clowns in, we bring beautiful girls in...like PETA did with their 'I would rather be naked' campaign. Think the good spirit of what we call protestable land and immediately I see it. And I take my four-year-old and my six-year-old and we all go to protest.

So you effectively increased numbers. Not only me, I'm trusting your cause, but it's also my family. So, you know, this type of event will attract the normal people that will come with their kids, the elders, it will talk to everybody. So now there's a clash with the police.

There's a little tear gas, there's a little tension. Oh, I'm not bringing my kids to this. So I would be a fan of tear gas. I love the smell of it...nostalgia..smells like youth. And, but the thing is like, this is you, you can only count this stuff, people.

And then the next level. Is you used violence and somebody is using live rounds against you. Right now, you can get killed. Can you look at the level of participation in non-violent struggle? It's always connected with something we call the risk bar. So if you want to increase the participation, you lower the risk bar.

Ariane Sommer: That make sense.

Srdja Popovic: Makes entry for everybody. The way that you can do something meaningful, but still you can get away with it.

Srdja Popovic: So taking a look at the figures and the science, there's this great study, which started with a 323 cases. And now it's more than 600 cases run by, by Erica Chenoweth with Maria Stephan. They actually scientifically prove that if you have a demand and you have a campaign and your campaign is violent you have about 23% of chances of reaching this demand. So one out of four, if you have a demand and you have a campaign and you maintain involved in discipline, your chances grew up to 56%. So if you talk to the people, why not using violence aside of the fact that it's just, you know, ethically better to use non-violence you can sell to the people by throwing a stone you're effectively cut the chances for your demand to be met by half.

Ariane Sommer: These are the numbers. These are the results

Srdja Popovic: The science says yes.

Ariane Sommer: And so the one thing is the outset of a movement of the protests, um, and what the people decide. So let's say the people decide to participate in a movement. This is going to be non violent resistance.

And we look at the United States, we've seen an unprecedented wave of protest recently. So the one thing is the choice I make as an activist, but how do you keep a movement peaceful and prevent from being infiltrated or hijacked from the outside? Because oftentimes our third party agitators who want to incite violence and want to make your peaceful protest look like it's not.

Srdja Popovic: First of all, uh, the non-violent discipline is a skill. So this is like driving car and there are many elements of driving cars. There is a steering wheel that if you live in Europe, there is a manual shift gear. If you live in US, you are not troubled with that. You have some other stuff to do, and there are tires and you need to park it and things of that kind.

So people learn how to drive cars. Most people do so, people can learn how to maintain non-violent discipline, the same way that people learn how to drive cars in a slippery road or in a snowy road. People can learn how to maintain on one discipline, even if your opponent uses infiltrators. So, first of all is understanding that this is a skill.

This is not the moral choice. It's a great, if there is a moral choice, it's not a religious choice. It's great if you have religion behind it, but this is a skill. First element of this skill, you teach it, you preach it. So the first element is telling everybody in the movement, this is how we are going to do it.

It's because it's higher moral ground is because it's more effective. It's because it's pink and I love pink. Whatever is you're teaching you go to this teaching and you make sure that every single person that joins your organization knows that this is what you do and obeys, or kind of follows this code of conduct.

Of course there'll be drunk people. There'll be crazy people. I'll explain this later. Step number two, selection of tactics. Certain tactics are more likely to produce conflict than the others. You block the road. Somebody needs to drive the kid to school. Good chances for conflict. You March 10,000 people in front of the city hall in LA.

You'll try to get in good chances for conflict. You sit down, you block the major intersection. People can't go. Good chances for conflict. You go to your opponents political rally, your supporters meet his or her supporters. Good chances for conflict. So these are high-risk tactics. Most of these tactics are also tactics of concentration.

Other tactics are like, okay. I disagree with his politics, I wear a batch, I will wear a t-shirt. I disagree with the McDonald's politics on workers of color. I will boycott McDonald's. And I will pursue the other people to boycott McDonald's too. So you look at the tactics, which are less likely to produce violence because a) there is no contact between us and them, whatever that means, b) it disperse so it's happening on many places. So there is no concentration and capability of this adrenaline and, you know, excitement. D) to burn out, even if you want to stage a March and you know, you will face the police and you know, there'll be people in your ranks that were sent by your opponent that will start inciting things.

You can do a lot of things first. In Serbia, we were doing a lot of training before we go there. So you make sure that there is a banner that nobody walks in front of the banner. So the person controls the March who has a megaphone when he, or she says stop, everybody stops. So there is an empty space between your forces and the building.

You want to protect, there is an empty space between your forces and the police forces or your opening forces, whatever, you control the crowd. Then what we were doing was we were training people when they see the police, they sit down. So what happens is that if everybody sits down only crazy people or educators will be left standing.

So you can identify who these people are. And also when you sit down, you appear to look less threatening to your opponent. And also when you sit down and you're open it looks very bad on the camera. So all of these things are there. And then the last thing you want to create a buffer zone between you and your opponent.

Very often, this thing we, we did this, had the Banner. Which was saying resistance to the victory in Serbia, or it can say black lives matter in the US. We take a photographs from this

protest. You will see young women, elderly people, and disabled people in the front ranks. Why? So? Because they are the least likely to attack the police.

Also, if there is somebody in your ranks who wants to attack the police, they need to talk the women and disabled and priests first. That's not very likely to happen if this happened, you know, who this person is. Also the police is more reluctant to the nonviolent protestors if they're coming from these categories.

So you intentionally structure your mind. Yes. You decided you want to March, you know that there is a high risk. But you do whatever you can to prevent this violence to occur. Also one other thing is violent groups. So there may be the groups that comply with your goals, which is far as that, but they prefer throwing the red color over Madonna.

You experienced that in your activist life. So what happens is that, like, when you take a look at a G20 protest, we have this anti-globalization protest every time have a G20 meeting. And what normally happens is that you have tens of thousands of people coming from environmental movements, labor unions, LGBT rights, equality movements, super nonviolence.

And then you have groups like anarchists and Black Bloc and this and that who see the possibility for spotlight. So they come there and incite violence because they know that we'll get the cover pages of the newspaper. So one of the ways to deal with this is, first of all, you disfranchise these groups from you in the organizational stage.

You say, you know, we are not affiliated with you guys because we don't want to see us be seen as you guys, but more important. One very good lesson. It was in 2011, the large lefty demonstrations were organized in support to occupy. Uh, you, you know, it sounds funny. There was a time in this world where people were demonstrating in support of the United States...it happens sometimes.

Well, you know, you need to be proud of it and take a look at this. But what happened was that there were 100,000 people and they knew that there will be, there'll be a huge outcome. And they knew that the Black Bloc, which is a very well known, small, but very radical. And I guess the group were started burning things.

This is their idea of fun. So what happened was that. They put a \$50 website up and they said, okay, you get, uh, you know, uh, whatever a Twinkie and ice cream as the reward if you make the best photo or video of these idiots, we're going to incite violence. Effectively turned 100,000 people into the citizen journalists taping, meticulously 50 people who are inciting violence. So first of all, yes, for the police, it was really clear who's doing what. So there was no stampede. There was no conflict. B) they help police identify the perpetrators. So not only they prove their cause not only that, they were not labeled as perpetrators.

They were also labeled as the good guys, who want to do things legally. And yes, in Italy, you have the right to March and protest legally, if you're a number well, so the thing is here is like with a simple trick, like, you know, organizing a buffer zone between you and your opponents forces or organizing, taping, the people who inside the violence, you keep everybody busy and you prevent this kind of craziness from spreading, but you also, you also

send a very clear message to the spectators that yes, we are against this, but we are committed to nonviolence and yes, there is a five crazy guys that could burn the car.

Ariane Sommer: Outstanding techniques. And I know that on the website of the CANVAS center for applied non-violent action and strategies, which you are one of the leaders of, people can find a whole suit of videos and tactics.

One thing is very important, you know, to make your voice heard and speak truth to power. It seems as more important than ever today. However you want to combine that with a non-violent resistance. You don't want to fuel the fire and you know, something that we've seen time and time again, often movements start revolution and then they fizzle out into nothing. For example, let's look back to the Egyptian revolution in 2011, the task for activists are often not only how to start a revolution, but also how to ensure that the revolution doesn't get misused by all the forces. So how can they do that? And why do so many movements failed. What do they fail to take care of?

Srdja Popovic: First of all, CANVAS and in academia, it's really important to take a look at a failure as the opportunity to learn something. So failure is a defeat. Totally. If you don't learn anything from it and failed movements are actually the very, very few times field of research.

And basically what we figured out is that the movements failed in three different stages. Obviously sometimes they fail to catch fire and to catch numbers, but that can be overcome by using the successful techniques of recruitment and communication. Then in the engagement phase, which is the phase where movement had between two, 200 and several thousand members.

So it can perform tactics. They failed because of lack of strategy. They fail because they lose non-violent discipline. They fail because they use divisive tactics. But what is really interesting that majority of the movements fail when they're on the peak of their power. So turning large numbers and large mobilization into standing victory.

This is 60% of the failure. So theoretically, if you look at the same science I'm quoting, uh, you have larger chances to build from 10 people to help a million people than to make this half million people make lasting change. That sounds crazy, huh. But this is exactly what it happens with this movement. So first of all, you need the long-term vision of tomorrow.

You need to look at the day after. Successful moments are not looking into this ballot measure to go or this dictator to step down or destined to happen or that thing to happen. They look at how to maintain it happen. So Egyptians for example, were very powerful in mobilizing. Very good in building unity, you have the urban youth and then the more religious Muslim brotherhood types with beards and then even the Coptic Christians.

So the unity was there. The moment, the Mubarak was not there. They spread it to pause. They didn't participate in the process and they led the transition, just lying on the street. And what happens when power is on the street, the most organized group steps in. Military, Muslim brotherhood, and they keep wrestling around this power.

And now military has the upper hand, but the people who really shook the tree, they went up the tree when the fruit was started falling from the tree without collecting. This is the bear in front of the cave phenomenon. So somehow it was easier to mobilize people, even in the face of oppression against the bad guy, than keeping them focused on the transition.

Revolutions are sexy. Transitions are dull. So when I call you and say, so there is this awful guy, we need to protest against. Yes, it can be tricky. We should be running from tear gas, you know, there'll be some rush and you will think twice, okay. I want to do this because your adrenaline tells you that your activist adrenaline tells you that you want to do it and say, okay, let's go to the meeting to the city hall to discuss how we are going to, uh, to set the transparency process, to building the institution of ombudsman.

And you were like, okay, I need to go shopping. No. It's like I have other things to do in my life. I need to walk my dog. So the thing is like, because you have the enemy that somehow unites you. And that comes from our cave selves. So it's like it's older than the politics it's older than, than protesting it's coming from, from us, living in caves and being very hairy, uh, several, uh, several thousands years ago.

And probably there were clashes between the people within the tribe where we are going to hunt tomorrow, who is going to marry the hairy beauty of a tribe, whatever. But when the bear is in front of the cave, this argument stops till we get rid of the bear. And then we continue. So the thing is like, uh, having the bad thing in front of you, whether this is systemic racism, which spikes a lot of protest now in the US, whether this is a bad guy who, you know, runs Philippines right now, whether this is Bolsonaro in Brazil, who says, you know, the Coronavirus is nothing and you know what?

People are dying because of it. So wherever you look. If you have the visible enemy, once you're on the verge of getting rid of the visible enemy, this is where the problem starts. So you need to keep your eyes on the ball. And instead of a person, you need to take a look at the change. So it's not about Ariane or surge or both scenario or this or that.

This is about both scenarios. Don't giving a damn about the Amazon forest. This is why we need to stop building roads and giving this land for the people to grow crops because what they use is fire. And when they use fire, the zillion of acres of this forest burns now actually explaining the actual situation.

So what happens is that if you are an activist, protecting the Amazon forest, you may be pissed off at the president Bolsonaro, but just making president Bolsonaro, stepping down, doesn't solve the problem. Cause the new guy may come and understand that giving land to the people that will be cleaned by fire will give him a lot of water.

So what is going to happen is that you need to change the system. You need to educate the people on the ground. You need to make it illegal to do this kind of stuff. And then you don't care if Bolsonaro now or somebody else is in the power. So you are looking at the problem and you're looking at the systemic solution of the problem.

And you're looking at the long-term vision and this is the only way to pre-prevent you failing at the peak of your will. Because then the guy steps down, the problem is still there and your numbers are deflating.

Ariane Sommer: Meaning if you want to be a successful revolutionary, make sure you did your homework and don't just run on adrenaline.

Srdja Popovic: So if you want to be a successful revolutionary time after time, this Churchill said this, like, uh, however, the strategy may look beautiful -you may want occasionally look at the results. Yes. It's a whole thing, quoting clever people. Uh, I would, I would quote, uh, once again, the president Kennedy said an amazing thing.

He says, of course, if you don't believe this conspiracy theory, it's all done in Hollywood. Uh, he says, we need to bring a man on the moon, but we also need to bring him back, we need to finish things. You know, it's like, it's just making it, this guy stepping down, but we need to change the system. So it's not just bringing people on the moon.

They also need to be brought safely back here.

Ariane Sommer: Yes, Kennedy was brilliant. And, um, as much that he was able to put very lofty ideals into simple words that would reach people, not just their brains and their hearts and talking about lofty ideals, often people think that it's lofty ideals that will actually topple regimes. Sometimes the reasons are much, much simpler though, in your experience, and you have worked with many, many activists all over the world, and you've been a revolutionary at some point yourself and your experience, what is the number one real reason that brings regimes to fall?

Srdja Popovic: Uh, the number one real reason that brings regimes to fall...And there is a huge study by Carnegie Endowment a few years ago on the number of products in the world is what we call the bread and butter issues. And I would formulate it this way. Uh, yes, Ariane, people like us to find each other, very amused and energized by talking about the lofty ideals.

But unfortunately for us, unfortunately, for society, we represent only the small portion of the society. Majority of the people will join movements only if there is something there for them. Now people are selfish. Majority of people are selfish. This is not a judgment. This is a state of facts. So how to listen to the people and figure out what will move them is yet another way of thinking. Okay. I've spent most of my life in Belgrade, which is the dog poop capitol of the world. This is serious, now I'm serious. I'm serious. It used to be Paris, but now we overthrew the place number. So you're looking at your neighborhood and because I have two small kids and kids tend to pick things from ground and put it in their mouth, you're kind of quite concerned about this phenomenon.

People don't clean behind their dogs. So normally what your human nature will do is going to take a look at who has a dog. And then start yelling at that person. So we needed to find an enemy or you will stage a protest in front of the city hall and saying, oh, this ridiculous mayor can't get us rid of this dog poop. He or she must step down. Instead of that, clever movements are looking and building what we call the spectrum of allies. I'm explaining your

question. Why would people join? Okay. So now I'm running through the street. My obvious natural allies are people with kids. So I started by my own kind of supporters because of course, I assume that they have the similar problems like me.

So now my numbers grow. It's not only me. It's like five, six, seven, eight, 10 families. I'm growing my numbers. Maybe these people know some people that they will call so we can build from their personal contacts. They take a look at the balconies. You can distinguish the age and the background of a person living in the apartment in my city if you look at the balcony. If it looks evil, people are in and out and use this as a dormitory. If it's beautiful with a lot of flowers, you will expect the nice granny living there, taking care of her flowers in a very polluted urban environment. Now these grannies, who care about their balconies, they also care about the streets.

So my second level of looking into why people will join the movement. Now, it's not only me and it's not only my kids and it's not only neighbors with kids. Now, the people who widely care for this, and then I'm looking into the disabled people. Because disabled people moving in wheelchairs have a big difficulty when they need to remove the substance, from their wheelchairs.

And then I'm looking further. And then I'm looking to the local representative, the city hall, because I want to make the city call my ally in this process. And then immediately, I have one of these young persons who are the social media geeks and has like, uh, 700,000 followers on a TikTok or whatever, and she's living next door.

And then I once spoke, speak with her as well. So this is where I look for my allies, but for each one of them, I need to figure out why would they support my crusades against the dogs. So when we were doing the research for blueprint, for evolution, and also one of the things your listeners should watch is Sean Penn's Milk movie.

If you watch this movie, you will figure out that we doubt focusing on dog poop. We may well, not ever have LGBT rights in the United States. So how the dog poop relate to the LGBT rights? This sounds ridiculous. I'll explain this to you. Harvey Milk moved from extreme. He was a soap box preacher type of activists into mainstream.

He wanted to get elected for the city hall, but because he was running on the platform, which was very important and very dear to his heart and want to give it to my heart. Which is the sexual rights of the people. He could mobilize only debt amount of support that he can never get away. So he always ended up being fought or being whatsoever until he figured out that, you know, the polls show him that he spoke with his neighbors and can figure it out.

That the biggest problem of San Francisco at the time was not the gay rights, but the dog poop. There was a moment in time when San Francisco was playing in the world's league of dog poop - people do not clean after their dog. So he walks in and it's sexually very well staged in the movie. And he is going to announce that he's around for the third or fourth time for the city counselor and in front of the camera, he steps into the dog poop.

He was good in staging this type of event. And he shows his smelly shoes. And he says, you know, you know me, I'm running on LGBT rights for years and years now, but I want to tell you something completely different now, whether gay or straight I'm the person who's going to curtail you from a dog poop.

So this is where you're looking at a problem that really matters to the people. This is where you're looking at the person who understands this. And of course, Harvey Milk was one of us. He was learning from his own mistakes. And this is the revelation moment. He gets selected here, becomes the first LGBT person to get elected.

And now we are in a place where we're with these rights and we should advance them. But this is a very different world than the 80s when it was considered to be a mental disease. So when you are taking a look at this, you figure out exactly what you need to find if you want to mobilize the people.

We don't care only for what ideas, you need to find the smallest common denominator. And sometimes it's very, very banal, like a dog poop, like the education for kids, like the clean street, like the pothole, you need to figure out what will bring these people to you because they love you. And they are very trailed with you being on the eternal crusade for animal rights or veganism, but they will never join.

The trick is how they join you. I'm in Colorado now. And it's a very, very interesting state. It's a, it's very progressive in some things and very conservative in some other things. I had an amazing experience. Speaking with a guy two years ago, who lives in a very small place called Lake George and 3000 people live there. He never left that place. He tried living in a 10,000 city. He's a displaced too. He is renting horses. So we went on a ride and I had this dialogue with somebody who spent his life in a 3000 people place. And my dialogue is about something I care very much.

And a lot of the people living in small places in America are considering to be the Chinese hoax. And that's the climate change. Right. So how do you structure a dialogue with this kind of person? You start with polar bears goddamn. He was never in the zoo. You don't start by, by this kind of thing. And you walk slowly with him.

And at one point we see a dead tree. They have dry trees very often here in Colorado, we had fires, it's crazy. And there were days where you couldn't see the mountains, which is really weird in Colorado. Normally, you can see the mountains because of the smoke and what happens. You speak to this person. And you say, what is this? And he says, the Pines go dry because there is no rain. And I say how this impacts your town.

And he said, because we had seven farms, now four of them are closed. And they were sold to the big companies because individual owners who have only 30, 50 of cattles couldn't support it. So it went to the big companies, the people lose land. The people lose jobs. The city is changing.

Ariane Sommer: So it's a real pain point for the community.

Srdja Popovic: So instead of the polar bears and the big stuff that we're all going to drown because the sea level is going to start and we need less than 350 CC per cubic centimeter of something, which is very often the scientific language, the climate change activists taught, you need to figure out that you can go to the place that you consider the personal impact of your opponents.

Like, you know, the people who don't believe in this stuff, and you can start by looking at how the climate change impact them in their personal life.

Ariane Sommer: You need to make it personal.

Srdja Popovic: And for this guy, it is this dry pine that leads him to the dialogue of the draft. That enables me to get to ask him but have you also noticed less snow?

Ariane Sommer: Right. Exactly. And what you're talking about is so crucial in order to start for things to change. It's uniting people. And um, if we look at you, you just recently moved to the United States with your family, you're in Colorado. And if I'm sure you observed this too, I've lived through it. I've lived for many, many years in the US and partially grew up here. The social and political climate in the United States is extremely divided right now. And, you know, neighbors, parents, sisters, and brothers don't talk to each other anymore. One of the biggest things we face as a nation in the United States is how to heal the nation. So how do you unite people from different sides of the spectrum behind one?

Because how can each one of us as individuals within a society be part of the process of healing and coming together again? What can each one of us do?

Srdja Popovic: Well, first of all, I will speak about this on a theoretical / political level. I spent years in the politics. I know tribalism and I know divisions and I grew up in a 20 million country, which went through the six civil wars.

So now we have six countries. Because the things that divided us were more important than the things that united us...and what I can tell you, you shouldn't go that way. It's not really making anyone happy. And the thing there is like, first of all, you need to understand that you just formulated it nicely Ariane.

And I know you understand it, not only because of your intellect and passion, but because you feel it as a human being. The way to doom is when you wedged the lines and say us, and them. In America, it's even mainstreamed into, into something that is called political identity or identity issues.

Now the thing, which is political somehow becomes your identity. How this defines you as a human. I had a marvelous conversation with, well, I teach a class at NYU and very often we bring people from movements that serve as a case study and had an amazing opportunity to sit in the class and learn from young women.

It was the day of your president's inauguration a few years ago and all of this, you know, Women's March kind of stuff. And, uh, what they were telling me was, was an eye opener for me. I said, how many groups?

You know? So I was interested in the anatomy of this protest, especially interested in how such a large mobilization never turned into a permanent organization. So I was looking at how come you miss the opportunity of having millions of people without turning them into something steady that can advocate for your issues? And, and then one of them, Delaney, she was the name amazing, brilliant young woman, probably 150 IQ, far more, more smarter than I am. And, and a single case. We had all of this LGBT groups and, you know, civil rights groups and I said, okay, but what about the others? What about the conservative groups?

So it was interesting, you can mobilize your numbers, but can you go, you know, to appeal to the others. She said there was a large number of the groups, uh, coming from the conservative side of the spectrum that will stand against indecent behavior, or the president, it will stand against the unequal salary for women compared to men.

But, uh, you know, they were pro-life. And we didn't want to sit with them because they were against abortion. So understanding that you have a bigger fish to fry agreeing on what you can agree on and then disagreeing on what you disagree. So yes, we want all women in America to be equally paid and we will talk abortion later.

So this is where we are with this site, putting your order of battle in order to unite more people towards this and on a micro level, this is more macro level than micro level. It's, it's really interesting. It's like this afternoon, I'm going to take my kids to meet an amazing guy. Steve is his name.

He does something very unusual. He builds a communal park here in Colorado Springs. So what the guy did, he found the place, which is next to the railroad. It's a dump. Basically looks like a dump. I've seen photos. And then for 10 years he pursued community that community need the park. So you have this community where people already invested 10,000 working hours and it looks marvelous.

So now I have artists making sculptures there and I have, you know, the people who built this experimental playground for kids, which looks very different than the plastic ones that you can find in a normal approved park. Uh, he builds premises on the spot, so he gives the people free premises.

So they live and take care of the park. So a really, really interesting community idea. I've never seen anything like that. And now he's in a dilemma what to do with it because city may want to take it and it's public land. So now, because you know, it looks like crap five years ago, but after 10,000 working hours, it looks great.

Now of course every mayor in the world wants to cut this ribbon and, you know, April, it's an eight election year. So for the local elections we did this wonderful dialogue with him, and then we're going to see the building there and I'm going to take my kids. And what is really interesting is that this is how you build across the lines.

So if you are a neighbor who helped build a park with your own hands and with your own time, or with your own money or with your own chair, whatever you donated to this park, how would you really react if the mayor comes to take it as a Democrat or Republic? Would you defend the park?

Ariane Sommer: You defend the park.

Srdja Popovic: You will probably be even angrier if this person comes from your party choice. Absolutely. It will even make you angrier. So you're looking at small things, community things can unite people, and then you go back to the real deep problem. You serve this problem with that black lives matter outlines very well.

And this is the problem of the American inner cities. It's a politically correct way to call ghettos. I'm a Serb. So I'm not very politically correct, but it's like when you look at the ghetto. Whether this is a Latin ghetto. So in LA where this is an Afro-American ghetto somewhere, it's not just the race, it's the lack of opportunity.

It's a social distance. It is the lack of possibility to get jobs, it's a lack of role models, because your son wants to become a gang member. So you're looking at what lacks, and then you look at how to bridge this gap. And I had this marvelous conversation with a former policeman in Baltimore, right after the violence in Baltimore.

And he told me that there was something there called community youth centers. So 20 years ago, people from Afro-American community could bring kids to get a meal and play basketball and have people in the uniform, basically police officers, firemen, and find a woman and this kind of people commute with kids and help them with homework.

And they will spend time together and they will learn about each other and they will become buddies.

And then these kids will be the first one to report about the dealers in their neighborhoods, to the police, people who were there. So you need to build a common space. And one of the links you want to put in, in under this spot cost is a great organization called Camerados.

It is run by a crazy guy called Maff Potts. He left a good corporate job to run a community organization. They big built public spaces. They started in UK. I met him when he was inspired by my book and had only one of them in Bristol. And now there is, uh, two dozens of them in UK and they have it in hospitals and here and there, and this is the place where you and me would go and cook for somebody who's homeless.

Ariane Sommer: Wonderful.

Srdja Popovic: And this is what the people would need will come to meet people with privileges, but unlike giving them help you ask them to help. So this is making them purposeful. So they have the principles and it now has a lot of neighborhoods are doing this, and this is how you prevent this us and them.

Because if you meet with other human beings, if you share with other human beings, you will be very, very reluctant to label them as the other.

Ariane Sommer: Yeah, something that I've just observed in the last years, this rhetoric of us versus them has just gotten to such a point where it is so highly toxic. We are brainwashed whether it's a new so-called news, whether it's in pop culture.

We are brainwashed into when we meet another human being to first be aware of the difference, the differences that we may have versus what unites us. And I think that's where each and every one of us is called, you know, as an individual person, as a parent, as a teacher, to just keep that in the back of our minds and correct it when we can, because this is not something that naturally grows.

You know, we as human beings like to cooperate. This is something that I really feel has been imposed on us and the cultural climate that we've been living in the last years. Something else that I would just like to hear your opinion on. There's been a lot of talk lately at all, across the different media in the United States, that the US is on the brink of a revolution.

If you compare what you're seeing here to what you witnessed as a young man in Yugoslavia and what you've seen in the last decades around the globe, do you think there's any merit to that talk or is it just hyped up click bait in the media?

Srdja Popovic: Well, I don't know if it's a click bait in the media or it's a, the way the Americans respond to unusual things because they're, they're used for things to work.

And then when hurricane Katrina hit and there were no services for days, you guys just freak out. Well, not you guys, you're German, I'm a Serbian, but basically the Americans stand, uh, to freak out with this. I don't think it's revolutionary situation. I think it's highly politically divided. I think it's a very sad that people don't talk to each other.

I see symptoms where the politics as you do, uh, impacts families. And, you know, I've seen this lovely guide Don by a friend of mine that is a journalists 'how to survive Thanksgiving without talking of politics'. This is it, you know, when you get to this stage, then this is a very serious situation.

But the political divisions doesn't necessarily mean a revolutionary situation. I think America is still a functioning, a democratic institutions. The thing with democratic institutions is that the democratic institutions are only as strong as the people support.

Ariane Sommer: 100% and who are active in it.

Srdja Popovic: There's this beautiful dialogue and ones again I to refer to Lord Of The Rings, you know, I love Lord of the rings.

Ariane Sommer: I know you do you have an altar for Lord of the rings at home? Don't you?

Srdja Popovic: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. I left his comb. I brought Bilbo Baggins with me in the pocket. So the, the, there is the smartest dialogue when, when the city of ministerial shall be sieved and they're looking at the defenses and there's this big wall, but there is a gate in the wall.

And then, then they say, we need to defend the gate because we can point the wall. And then the wizard Gandalf says, it's a good gate, but no gate will stand if people abandon it. So if you take a look at any given democratic ticket, look at the elections, the less people participate in the elections, the more likely you have the bad guy who mobilizes his

supporters and power. So as you take a look at any given democratic institution, take a look at the town halls, the less politicians will care for what people think if they don't turn out to the town halls. So take a look at any single democratic institution and you'll figure out that, well, I was not a big fan of Reagan the way I was fan of president Kennedy, but Ronald Reagan said the big truth in any society in the world.

Democracy is only one gentleman far from extinction, so don't get it forgiven. You don't take it for granted

Ariane Sommer: Do the “unsexy” thing, go out there and vote. Go reach out to your representatives, make your voices heard. And this comes from somebody who, such as you, who is alive it has been to effect, change, to fight for democracy and interesting fact about you is that you are a studied biologist. So your scope of looking at humanity and what's happening is informed from a lot of different places. In your mind what is the biggest issue you see humanity facing in the near future? What are the next big fights that we are going to be facing?

Srdja Popovic: Well, this is, this is a great question. And I'm in no means in the position to give the answer. I think, uh, as a father, I see, I see two major issues. One is of course climate change and environment and the way the world is changing, while we were taking a look at something else and a part of this is also the pandemic we are living it.

And if you compare the amount of money that countries spending on the army compared to the amount of money that countries were spending in improving their health system....Then you are not amazed that we are with Coronavirus where we are. And when you take a look at any given part of nature can say that nature is kind of trying to get rid of us.

And it tried to do in the 14th century and that phenomenon was known as a great plague. So it happens time after time that we get warned that we need to do something about our environment. The question is whether we listen or not, we definitely listened in 14th century.

We decreased the number of rats and that decrease the quantity of plaque. And I mean, it's like when you take a look at, you know, sometimes you need to learn how to take care of yourself. You look at the 14th century, we were warned that, you know, too many people in too small environment polluting too much, it's going to kill us, virtually kill us.

And, you know, I think this is what nature tells us with our globalized world with all the crazy traveling with our exchanges and not caring for how we behave. And the second one which I'm getting growingly concerned is our dependence and addiction to technology. I think a 21st century, the gurus that will take your kid off the screen would be the best paid job in the universe.

Ariane Sommer: That is really interesting. Some just specially, um, from looking at the background, for example, so for organized protests where technology and social media has been such a vital instrument for a lot of movements, but I'm with you right there.

I think we really have to watch where technology will take us whether we own and use it wisely as a tool or whether we are owned by it.

Srdja Popovic: We might end up in a black mirror episode from Netflix.

Ariane Sommer: Oh, one of my favorite series. Yeah. Um, well you lived a very, very full life and experienced so many things. There is a question I ask each of the guests.

I have the privilege of having on the podcast. What are the practices that most profoundly, whether physically, mentally or spiritually changed your life for the better?

Srdja Popovic: Uh, one of the things is, is referring to one of the early books like Lord of the Rings was one of them. And then, uh, when I was young Carlos Castaneda, that was very popular and it's a very interesting anthropologist, who wrote very interesting books about the supposed life and religion of Yaqui Indians in central parts of Mexico. And, uh, he liked these teachings, which has kind of a very, very spiritual, but not religious kind of thing.

And, like the idea is that you can live like a normal person who can live like a warrior. The ordinary people take everything either as a blessing or a curse, warrior takes everything as a challenge. So this is how you see things. And then normal people do things as they must, or as they wish, or as they will, whereas they can, uh, the warriors live by the credo to give your best, whatever you do.

And I think this sentence probably shaped my life on a, on a very practical level. I got it as the inspiration on a very spiritual level, but basically we'll take a look and if you drive the car that drives the kid to school, try to be the funniest person to drive the kid to school.

If you try to wash the dishes, try to wash them really good. If you don't get rid of this focus in doing the things, because it keeps, you, keeps you whole and keeps you focused and keeps you concentrated. And then another practice, which is very important for me, go to nature or fish, be near to the water, speak to nature, ground yourself, ground yourself. We spend too much, uh, too huge portion of our life running, running, running, running. We need to be grounded a little bit. The only way to ground is to get away from the city. And one of the things that I'm noticing now for a month in Colorado Springs in the mountains is actually however exhausting the transition may be with two kids and, you know, finding a job for my wife and doing my job from home and, and an eight hours distance back there in Belgrade over to zoom, I go to sleep a little bit rested. You know why? Because the city is not around. Because we take hikes three times a week because you have wonderful parks and you see the presence of the nature is with you.

So not looking into the skyscrapers and the concrete. And I actually understood that. I used to run away for weekends to go fishing for years back then in my life. But these were quick fixes. This is like taking a tranquilizer

So the more calm moments in day you can have, the more calm moments and weeks you can have the more, I mean, you, you, you meditate. If you know how, I don't know how I would love to, but I don't know how, but try to ground yourself. So the first thing do your best, whatever you do. And the second thing, try to ground yourself.

Ariane Sommer: Mm, that is sage advice Srdja! So we just spoke about your book about Pranksters Versus Autocrats and I very, very much love the book you published before also Blueprint For Revolution.

How to Use Rice Pudding, Lego Men, and Other Nonviolent Techniques to Galvanize Communities, Overthrow Dictators, or Simply Change the World

So not only if you are somebody who wants to be politically active, but also if you want to be a great leader and community organizer, or even if it's within your business, you want to bring people together. I have learned so many valuable lessons from your books.

What is next for you now? And where can people find you? How can they connect to you?

Srdja Popovic: Well, first of all, uh, I don't really know what's next. Im trying to figure out how to bring this bigger research or the role of humor and this kind of stuff. I'm also trying to bring more activists to academia and more academia to activists, because I think, uh, you know, like in climate change, seeing things as one.

But hearing the solid scientific background, having it as a science look, one thing to say don't do violence and it's completely, other thing is to say we have, we have analyzed 500 cases and violence doesn't work. So it's like when you take a look at how to bring them more of this happy marriage of academia and activism into social change.

Uh, this is the particularly what I would be, uh, passionately working on. I left my email in the book. Uh, people can read the book and mainly a lot of people do that, that's how I met some of the very, very interesting people, including yourself.

I do have a Facebook page up, very interesting website www.canvasopedia.org, there are many free resources on how to build movements, including the short videos. All of them are free of charge. Some of them in very different languages than English or Spanish or Serbian. So you can follow me, but try to follow yourself, try to figure out that even the smallest creature can change the destiny of the world.

And there is no such thing as insignificant Social change if it's small, attack, change it and we'll just feel different. It's a life changing experience.

Ariane Sommer: Excellent. Srdja, I'll make sure to put all of that information in the show notes as always, it's been really great connecting with you and talking ideas and, uh, hearing your great insights on, you know, some of the biggest issues we face as humanity.

Thank you for sharing.

Srdja Popovic: Thank you for inviting me, Ariane, always a pleasure, thrill, and honor exchanging words, thoughts, and energy, which such a lovely person as you.