On the morning of 6 October 2000, it was obvious to all involved that the military had played an important role in facilitating the overthrow of Milošević. The tanks did not roll onto the streets to shore up the crumbling regime, and the generals refused to obey some of the more destructive orders given by Milošević in his moments of despair. That this happened through inaction rather than through a concerted effort by the top brass to intervene only served to underline the fact that the military was an independent actor that the new democratic authorities would have to learn to control in order to help consolidate democracy. In order to do that they would need to tackle a number of aspects of the civil-military relations dynamic inherited from Slobodan Milošević’s era.

The first imperative of transition to democratic civilian control of the armed forces was the process of restructuring of both civil-military relations and the armed forces as a whole. In the case of post-communist Central and Eastern Europe, this constituted the first and often most important step taken by new democratic authorities. There were three levels restructuring could take. First, restructuring meant de-politicisation, with a particular emphasis on the de-communisation of the armed forces, as well as ensuring that other parties did not replace communist control. Secondly, the policy-making apparatus of the Ministry of Defence needed to be civilianised, through the appointment of a civilian as minister, as well as through a programme of civilianisation of the defence bureaucracy which would ensure that the control of policy-making passed from the military to the civilian authorities. Finally, reshaping the armed forces would need to be given due attention. While the other two levels of restructuring, namely civilianisation of the Ministry of Defence and military reform and re-organisation, are dealt with in Chapter 4, this chapter assesses the first level of the process of
restructuring, de-politicisation, in the period from the fall of Milošević in October 2000 to Montenegro’s independence in May 2006. It looks at the impetus for change in Serbia and provides an assessment of de-politicisation efforts and their failure in the early years of transition.

Understanding de-politicisation

De-politicisation of the armed forces in Central and Eastern European countries had two aspects: de-communisation and the prevention of ties to new political parties. Initially de-politicisation entailed a process of de-communisation. The central role played by the Communist Party structures in political life and by extension in military affairs in all former communist states made removal of these structures a precondition of successful transition. The military needed to be an apolitical force of professionals in the service of their democratically elected political masters. Communist ideology and bureaucratic structures had no place in democratic civil-military relations. The removal of the formal structure of the party-army system was a clear priority. In practice it meant ensuring that:

- all main political departments, especially the MPA, were dissolved;
- the responsibilities of political officers were abolished or radically changed;
- committees, cells and Party workers in the armed forces were disbanded and abolished;
- military representation on Communist bodies removed; and military education remodelled.

This proved the easiest part of the process and one that was completed early. The exception was the remodelling of the military education system, which would take longer to achieve, and would form part of the larger issue of dealing with communist influence in the military. The problem ‘was the need to differentiate between those officers loyal to the former regime and those loyal to the state’. While dismantling the formal structures was easy and getting rid of the political officers seemed straightforward, the real problem lay in the need to secure the loyalty of those who remained. In practice this created a number of challenges including a loss of personnel and the deepening of distrust between the military and civilians.

The second aspect of the de-politicisation problem involved the fortification of what had been achieved. Once disbanding of formal structures was completed, it was important that these were not replaced by ties to any other political party, or parties, as this could lead to military