

Serbia: Burying the Dictator

Transitions Online (Prague)

20 March 2006

by Igor Jovanovic

The funeral of former president Milosevic turns into a show of force by the Socialists and Radicals, which some fear could bring down the government.

BELGRADE, Serbia and Montenegro -- Some 80,000 people gathered at a memorial rally for former Serbian and Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic in Belgrade on 18 March in an event that many expect marked the end of an era. But the rally was also a major warning that Serbia's democratic order could not be taken for granted.

Milosevic was buried on the same day in his hometown of Pozarevac, not far from Belgrade.

He had been found dead on 11 March at the detention unit of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), where he had been standing trial for genocide and crimes against humanity in Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo.

Milosevic's family claimed that he had been poisoned with rifampicin, an antibiotic that would have diminished the effects of medication he was taking to treat his heart condition and hypertension, but a toxicological report refuted such claims.

An autopsy showed that Milosevic died of a heart attack. Russian physicians, sent from Moscow to check the Dutch experts' findings, concurred.

A FAMILY AFFAIR

Slobodan Milosevic was buried in the backyard of his family home in Pozarevac at dusk, in a heavy rain and to the sounds of a Russian military tune. His grave was dug under a linden tree, on the spot where he first kissed his wife, Mirjana Markovic, with whom he had a strong emotional bond.

Workers dug a double-width grave, Markovic to be interred there after her death.

Members of Milosevic's immediate family did not attend the funeral since they fear arrest should they enter Serbia.

His wife is charged with the illegal allocation of apartments during the period when her husband was president. She is also wanted for questioning regarding the abduction and murder of Milosevic's political opponent Ivan Stambolic in August 2000. Several members of Milosevic's secret police were given maximum prison sentences for the murder in July 2005, with the verdict identifying Milosevic as the person who ordered the murder. Had she traveled to Serbia from Moscow, where she lives, Markovic would

have had to submit her passport to the court and appear before a judge on 23 March.

Milosevic's son, Marko Milosevic, had been charged with roughing up a member of the Otpor (Resistance) opposition movement, but a warrant was canceled after the key witness withdrew his statement. However, Marko, who left the country immediately after the democratic change of power in October 2000, is increasingly being mentioned in Serbia in connection with international cigarette smuggling. The case was recently taken over by the special prosecutor for organized crime and Marko evidently considered it prudent to stay away from his father's funeral.

Daughter Marija Milosevic, currently living in Montenegro, is charged in Belgrade with firing shots in the air during Slobodan Milosevic's arrest on 1 April 2001. She quarreled with the rest of the family over the funeral, demanding that her father be buried in the Montenegrin village of Lijeva Rijeka, from which the Milosevic family originated. When her wish was not granted, she announced that she would not come to the funeral and would instead try to have her father's body exhumed for reburial in Montenegro.

POLITICAL FALLOUT

The sendoff for the former president lasted an incredible eight hours as the leaders of parties close to Milosevic turned it into a political showdown with democratic forces in Serbia.

The rally in Belgrade and the funeral in Pozarevac were predominantly attended by elderly citizens, who remain the most loyal supporters of the former president. Two died of heart attacks during the events and ambulance workers had to provide medical assistance as many as 60 times. The Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), of which Milosevic was leader even while in The Hague, and the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), whose leader, Vojislav Seselj, is also awaiting trial in The Hague, bused their supporters to Belgrade and Pozarevac from all over Serbia.

The events were marked by ultranationalist outbursts and hate speech against political opponents of the sort that had earlier marked the rallies over which Milosevic himself presided.

The honorary guard around Milosevic's coffin, which was wrapped in the Serbian flag, comprised retired army generals in full uniform. Also attending were certain ICTY indictees awaiting trial in The Hague, top SPS and SRS officials, Russian General Leonid Ivashov and Duma Deputy Speaker Sergei Baburin, former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark, and children dressed in military uniform. Among the speakers at the funeral in Pozarevac was Austrian writer Peter Handke.

Both events were under heavy police guard.

Milosevic's friends and associates declared that they would continue down the path he had set out on and blamed the ICTY, the Western powers, and even the democratic forces of Serbia for his death.

At the rally outside the federal parliament building in Belgrade, the site of demonstrations that toppled Milosevic's regime in October 2000,

a speaker read Milosevic's speech, made just a few days before the end of his rule, in which he had accused then-opposition leader Zoran Djindjic of wanting to establish a regime in Serbia controlled by foreign powers.

Djindjic became the first democratic prime minister of Serbia after Milosevic. He was assassinated outside the Serbian government headquarters on 12 March 2003, three years to the day before Milosevic's death. The man accused of masterminding Djindjic's murder is Milorad Ulemek, the former commander of the Red Berets, a special unit of the Serbian secret police, who in October 2000 sided with the demonstrators against Milosevic and is now in prison for the murder of Stambolic.

The prefuneral rally also marked the start of a leadership struggle within Milosevic's SPS, which is divided into at least two factions.

In the Serbian parliament, SPS deputies are supporting Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica's minority government; without their votes the government would be forced to call an early poll. It is very well possible that the SPS will now use the events surrounding Milosevic's death and funeral to present the government with a more specific catalog of demands in exchange for continued support.

Milorad Vucelic, the SPS vice president, whom the Milosevic family had assigned to organize the funeral, is expected to seek the party leadership. Vucelic criticized the government for not granting a state funeral for Milosevic and not withdrawing the charges against Mirjana Markovic. Vucelic was at the helm of Serbian state TV when it openly fanned the flames of conflict during Milosevic's rule in the 1990s.

The second candidate for the post of party president is Ivica Dacic, who has been the acting leader since Milosevic's extradition to The Hague and who has the reputation of a man with whom the government can negotiate more easily. However, Dacic was completely pushed aside in the organization of the funeral and is weakened by his involvement in a corruption affair, in which a former vice governor of the National Bank of Serbia has been arrested. While Dacic is not a suspect in the case, his opponents are using the affair in the political fight against him.

Faced with pressure from the Socialists, the Serbian government allowed the coffin with the body of the former president to be displayed at the Museum of the Revolution in Belgrade for two days. The museum complex also holds the remains of Yugoslavia's communist leader Josip Broz Tito. The government had to issue a license for this particular use of the museum over protests from the museum's director, who was supported by twenty theater and museum managers.

Serbian government officials defended the move by pointing to the need to preserve peace in the country, something the arrangement achieved: despite outbursts of nationalism and hatred, Milosevic's funeral passed without incident.

TWO SERBIAS

At the same time, however, the funeral also showed the depth of Serbia's division over its recent past. For days, a row was being waged through obituaries in the Belgrade dailies. Milosevic's opponents issued

death notices in which they accused him of being responsible for "our ruined lives, wars, and horrors." His supporters paid their respects to "the first who stood up against foreign occupation forces."

Former members of the Red Berets, the secret-police unit disbanded after Djindjic's assassination, also sent an obituary for Milosevic.

Milosevic's opponents also organized an unofficial rally in downtown Belgrade at the time when his funeral was getting underway in Pozarevac. No political party backed the rally, which was advertised mainly through mobile-phone text messages that called on protesters to carry balloons. But at most a few thousand people showed up, and after a short walk through the old town released their balloons from the Kalemegdan fortress.

The ceremonies surrounding Milosevic's funeral were fiercely criticized by Serbian Foreign Minister Vuk Draskovic, who had twice been the object of assassination attempts by the secret police under Milosevic.

Draskovic said that the prefuneral rally was "for the burial of the people." "It was not, as they said, a people's funeral, but a funeral of the people. All Belgrade streets and squares would be too small to take all the victims of Milosevic and his regime, all the killed, crippled, homeless, and displaced," Draskovic said. He added that "a murderer and his crimes were celebrated today."

If Milosevic's funeral was a big challenge for Serbia's fragile democracy, new challenges are just ahead. One of them is the extradition to The Hague of Bosnian Serb military commander Ratko Mladic, indicted for genocide in Bosnia but who remains at large. EU foreign ministers have set a deadline of the end of March for his arrest and transfer if Serbia wants to continue membership negotiations with the EU.

Should Kostunica's government arrest and extradite Mladic, it may well be its last action. Even before Milosevic's death the Socialists said that they would no longer support the government if any of the remaining indictees were taken to The Hague by force.

The SRS has now called for the Serbian parliament to hold a special session to discuss a resolution on stopping all cooperation with the ICTY. By 27 March, when the ICTY Prosecutor Carla del Ponte will visit Belgrade, the fate of the government and its relations with the SPS and the SRS may be clearer - but nobody is quite sure what direction parliament is taking.

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