

Banja Luka Rails Against 'Milosevic Plant'

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Bosnian Serb politicians suspect Belgrade of trying to reassert itself in Republika Srpska.

Simmering tensions between Banja Luka and Belgrade boiled over again last week when Bosnia's three-member multi-ethnic presidency nominated a Serb allegedly allied to Slobodan Milosevic as the chairman of the republic's central government.

Though he has no known party affiliation, economics professor Spasoje Tusevljak was backed by Republika Srpska's wartime ruling party, the Serbian Democratic Party (SDS), once closely controlled by Milosevic.

The nomination has enraged RS prime minister Milorad Dodik, who accused Tusevljak of having strong ties with the Yugoslav president. Dodik claimed he lived in Belgrade throughout the Bosnian war, where he directed an economics institute, and enjoyed good relations with the regime. The allegations could turn the international community against Tusevljak.

Dodik, who heads the Sloga coalition, the SDS's main rival, became prime minister with the help of the international community in 1998. Before that, much of the statelet - the economy, the police and the media - was controlled by Belgrade. Milosevic also had a hand in the creation of new political parties, with the exception perhaps of the Serbian People's Party, led by Biljana Plavsic.

Since the war though, the international community has pressured political leaders to distance themselves from Milosevic or face exclusion from power.

Now, the only party to claim loyalty to Belgrade is the ultra-nationalist Serbian Radical Party of Nikola Poplasen - an allegiance which resulted in its being banned from participating in recent local elections. Poplasen had previously been sacked from his post as RS president by the international High Representative.

Dodik turned his back on Milosevic about 18 months ago, and threw his lot in with the international community. Since then there have been at least a dozen attempts to overthrow his government, most of them orchestrated by Belgrade.

Belgrade criticises Dodik for supporting the 'anti-Serbian' international community, and for welcoming Serbia's political dissidents, such as the well-known artist from Valjevo, Bogoljub Arsenijevic Maki, and activists from the student opposition movement Otpor.

Milosevic also accuses Dodik of organising the recent series of political assassinations, facilitating the kidnapping and deportation of war-crimes suspect Dragan Nikolic-Jenki and setting up a meeting between Otpor and Robert Frowick, the American envoy in Bosnia, during which, it has been claimed, the participants discussed how to destabilise the Serbian regime.

Dodik is undaunted by the Belgrade campaign. He recently visited the war crimes tribunal in The Hague, where he talked about increasing cooperation with the international body - a move bound to infuriate the indicted Milosevic.

The rift with Banja Luka is such that one of the most worst insults there that can now be slung at a political rival is to accuse him of having close ties with Milosevic.

The prime minister's office recently charged Dodik's reformist rival in recent elections, Mladen Ivanic, of being backed by Milosevic's wife, Mira Markovic. Plavsic has called her opponents "people who act according to the orders of Belgrade".

Milosevic's power base in the republic, undermined when he lost Dodik's support, has been further weakened by the Hague tribunal's recent arrest of SDS leader Momcilo Krasjinik. This has enabled the party to distance itself from Belgrade, and make moves towards reform.

Even the traditionally Belgrade supporting Socialist Party can no longer be counted on - only one wing of the party is loudly pro-Milosevic. Its leader, Zivko Radisic, is still trying - as Dodik did for a while - to keep both the international community and Belgrade happy.

While these signs of weakening links are welcomed by Milosevic opponents and westerners, there are real concerns that the Yugoslav president may resort to violence to reassert control. Given the spate of recent assassinations in Serbia, this includes fears for Dodik's safety.

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