

## **The Battle Over the Crude**

**Author:** [Vlado Mares](#)

Rivalries erupted among the opposition as soon as the EU announced its heating oil aid to two towns in southern Serbia. But the real risk is that the regime, too, has its eye on the crude.

Nis and Pirot, the two towns in Serbia selected to receive heating oil from the West, are bracing for attack--from government agents trying to steal the aid and from other jealous opposition-led towns furious at being left off the list.

Nis Mayor Zoran Zivkovic declared that there is no legal way from anyone, including Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic, to prevent the delivery of the oil. He made this statement shortly after the decision on the shipments was taken by the European Union in Luxembourg, October 11.

The two lucky towns are located in the south of Serbia, some 250 kilometres from Belgrade. The shipments will be monitored for six weeks, to see if it is possible to help the people of Serbia without benefiting the regime. If the pilot project in these two towns is successful, supplies of fuel may be delivered to other opposition towns in Serbia.

But the first threat to the plan emerged from an unexpected source--the ranks of the opposition. The day after the Luxembourg decision, Cacak Mayor Velimir Ilic accused the G-17 group of independent economists, who developed the idea, of having deliberately struck his town off the list for receiving fuel. Cacak has been known for its opposition activities, even during the bombing campaign.

"It was agreed in all the meetings that I attended that Cacak and Nis should get the fuel, and that they should distribute it to other towns that need it," said Ilic, who is a leader of the opposition bloc Alliance for Changes.

Ilic accuses Mladjan Dinkic, co-ordinator of G-17, of replacing Cacak with Pirot at the last moment. He argues that this substitution is not justified, because Pirot was not destroyed during the bombing. He believes the change was revenge because of rivalries and disagreements within the opposition.

Dinkic denied Ilic's claims. He said that Nis and Pirot were selected as pilot towns exclusively for their proximity to the Bulgarian border, which facilitates the transport of crude oil. He said that G-17 will not participate in the project if it is not extended to include other towns that need oil.

But Ilic was not the only opposition figure to complain. Mirko Bajic, chairman of the Conference of Free Towns of Serbia (where the opposition is in power), argued that after the six-week period, when the impact of this action will be assessed, it may be too late for the delivery of aid.

Subotica Mayor Jozef Kasa, who is the leader of the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians, criticised the European Union for having approached the problem superficially. He said that Brussels has failed to grasp the gravity of the crisis that has been affecting the citizens of Yugoslavia for ten years.

"Their stand is unacceptable. One cannot experiment with aid in the form of energy at the moment when the heating season is starting," Kasa said. "They have time, because it is not their citizens who are freezing, but ours."

The motives behind this sudden criticism coming from people who had taken part in agreeing the humanitarian aid project are unclear. G-17 co-ordinator Dinkic suspects that someone is trying to create a rift between the towns and the opposition groups. He emphasises that the main risk to the aid comes from the regime: if the deliveries cannot be prevented legally, that does not rule out the possibility that Milosevic will obstruct them illegally.

Indeed, Nis Mayor Zivkovic, who is vice-president Zoran Djindjic's Democratic Party, has signalled that any attempted to block the crude oil will be met with major protests.

"Several hundred citizens, the media, my colleagues and I will wait for the crude oil on the border, and every step from the arrival to the use of crude oil will be made public," Zivkovic said. He boasts that the plans are so precise that not a single litre of fuel should go astray.

"Heating oil for schools and kindergartens will be stored in the depots next to those buildings and it will have a 24-hour physical protection," he promised.

Regime spokesmen have so far said little about the project. Only representatives of the Socialist Party in Pirot have spoken out, accusing local authorities of selling themselves to the "enemy" for a few crumbs of aid.

Yet Milosevic could hardly remain indifferent when citizens start receiving badly needed help from Western European countries officially declared to be the source of all of Serbia's troubles. The risks are high that the cargo trucks may find obstacles at the border, or run off a ramp once they cross.

The head of Yugoslav customs is Mihalj Kertes, one of Milosevic's most loyal lieutenants. Since taking office in 1994, he has championed bribes as "legal customs levies"--limited to one carton of cigarettes and one bottle of whiskey per passenger. In 1997, he tried to prevent the entry of a dozen buses donated for public transport from Germany, backing down only after substantial media and diplomatic pressure.

It was also under Kertes' watch that the most famous instance of road robbery in Serbia occurred. This was in 1995 when, immediately after crossing the border, major TV equipment sent by the West to the then-independent Belgrade TV station Studio B was abducted. The equipment was never found, and it is assumed that it ended up in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the hands of the Bosnian Serbs who were waging war at the time.

Vlado Mares is a journalist for the Belgrade independent news agency BETA.

**Location:** Serbia  
Bosnia and  
Herzegovina

**Focus:** Balkans: Regional Reporting & Sustainable  
Training

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/battle-over-crude>