

## **Belgrade Election Frenzy**

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Belgrade is awash with political speculation and gossip in the run-up to elections later this month.

"SloboDA" (Freedom) the billboards say, a play on the name of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic. His face is everywhere, his eyes gazing purposefully into the future. Dressed immaculately, Milosevic looks serious, every bit the man of vision.

But Belgrade's voters are questioning this 'vision'. There is a sense a future under Milosevic can bring nothing but more misery.

The city is awash with gossip - the president is on the way out, his son Marko is already in China, his daughter is selling up her radio and television station ready to make a getaway. Some say Milosevic didn't want to stand, but his wife Mirjana Markovic made him.

Amid the speculation, however, there is an atmosphere of resignation. "We have been through this already. Sloba [Slobodan Milosevic] will rig the election results once again. Everything is in their hands," says Rada, a secretary from Belgrade.

Milosevic's Socialist Party of Serbia, SPS, is harking back to the good old days of 'Brotherhood and Unity' - a slogan from the Tito era. Posters bordered with the Yugoslav flag sport a map of Serbia, Kosovo and Montenegro, and the ever-present face of Milosevic. SPS coalition partner the Party of the Yugoslav Left, JUL, prefer to dwell on the recent past, "We're deciding and not NATO" the slogan goes.

In the main city squares police officers hover around the SPS and JUL banners to deter potential graffiti artists. Every opposition poster, meanwhile, is defaced with the words "traitors" and "shit".

The preferred tactic of anti-government student movement Otpor (Resistance) is to decorate the ubiquitous Milosevic visage with the simple message "He is finished: 24.09.00" (Gotov je: 24.09.2000).

Milosevic's main rival, candidate for the Democratic Opposition of Serbia Vojislav Kostunica, is playing up his so-called untarnished reputation. Where Milosevic is seen gazing into the middle distance, apparently unwilling to look down on the misery he has created on the streets below, Kostunica stares directly at the voters, his posters asking, "Who can look you straight in the eyes?"

Vuk Draskovic's Serbian Renewal Movement, SPO, is going for the heartstrings, reminding voters of his long struggle with the Milosevic regime. The SPO have, the billboards claim, stuck by the people through the hardest times. Their candidate Vojislav Mihajlovic is, the posters tell us, "Our Man."

In response to the Milosevic government's decision to bar international observers from monitoring the elections, the Alternative Centre for Free Elections and Democracy, was formed with branches in all the major cities. Their posters calling on ordinary citizens to enlist as observers are plastered along every street.

Milorad from Kikinda has signed up for duty at his local polling station. "I'm afraid the election results might be irregular, so I want to be present there and oversee the process with my own eyes. I feel that these

elections are important, that people feel that every vote counts, that the whole thing would disintegrate if we don't do something as individuals."

Djoka, a retired interpreter from Belgrade, says, "This vulgar propaganda will appeal to the peasants, but there is a chance to oust Sloba if a large number of voters turn out."

Bojan, an opposition activist from Kraljevo is certain Milosevic's days are numbered, "We will get rid of him, you will see, there isn't a chance that he can win this time."

An independent analyst from Belgrade, however, believes Milosevic will declare himself victor in the first round and then wait to see the public reaction. If it appears there may be trouble, the analyst suggests, then the president will engineer some distraction, a conflict in Montenegro or Kosovo perhaps.

While acknowledging Kostunica appears to have an unassailable lead in the polls, a Belgrade sociologist agrees Milosevic plans to manipulate the results by rigging votes in Montenegro, Kosovo, among the Kosovo Serb refugee community in Serbia.

People are demoralised. Serbia is sinking ever deeper into isolation, a ghetto where people are reduced to scavenging for survival. Whether voters are allowed to choose an alternative vision of the future remains to be seen. So too does their resolve to face down Milosevic should he act in defiance of the popular choice.

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