

Candidate With No Illusions

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He may be the former ruling party's presidential candidate - but Velimir Bata Zivojinovic knows he doesn't stand a chance.

Acclaimed Serbian film actor Velimir Bata Zivojinovic knows he hasn't even got an outside chance of winning the September 29 presidential election, but his candidacy is significant nonetheless as his party, the Socialist Party of Serbia, SPS, hopes the move will help to distance itself from its leader Slobodan Milosevic and his powerful wife, Mirjana Markovic,

Last month, the SPS's steering committee opted to ignore instructions issued by Milosevic from his prison cell to back Vojislav Seselj, leader of the Serbian Radical Party, SRS, as a presidential candidate.

Most SPS members suspected Markovic, eager to increase her influence within her husband's party, was behind Seselj's candidacy. The move has split the party, with some of its nationalist members choosing to back the ultra-nationalist politician.

Cracks within the SPS became apparent shortly after the former Yugoslav president's transfer to The Hague, with its leftist and nationalist wings openly battling over the party's future.

The internal party strife sowed confusion and dismay among SPS members and supporters. In choosing Zivojinovic, a man already popular with voters thanks to his acting accolades, the party's leadership has attempted to shore up confidence among its members and re-establish the SPS as the main political force of the left.

Though Milosevic remains a leader of the party, Zivojinovic has been elected SPS deputy leader to boost his election prospects.

In his 45-year acting career, Zivojinovic starred in over 250 movies and television dramas. Still the most popular actor in former Yugoslavia, he is particularly famous for his portrayals of World War Two partisan commanders and heroes in films such as *Walter Defends Sarajevo* - which the SPS knows will play well with the Serbian public.

Zivojinovic joined the party shortly after it was founded, and entered active politics over a decade ago, serving as a low-profile deputy for 12 years and twice heading parliamentary commissions - jobs his colleagues say he carried out with dedication and efficiency.

A key selling points for the new SPS candidate is his good reputation - Zivojinovic has never been involved in financial scandals and is known for avoiding the all too familiar hate speech which plagues politics in Serbia.

Although earlier this month, Zivojinovic, while accusing Markovic of plotting to have Seselj selected as SPS presidential candidate, called Milosevic's wife a "red witch", repeating an insult used, ironically, by Seselj in 1994.

Zivojinovic said he doubted the authenticity of Milosevic call for his party to opt for Seselj both because it

"came in a roundabout way" and the " the SPS leadership has not been in direct contact with Milosevic for four months".

He accused the SPS' high official Bogoljub Bjelica and some other senior party officials of colluding with Markovic in "faking" messages from Milosevic and encouraging SPS members to join the SRS.

In his speeches, Zivojinovic attacks and criticises the Democratic Opposition of Serbia, DOS - the current ruling coalition - but less bitterly than Seselj.

Aware his chances of victory in the presidential elections are slim, the film star is often witty, ironic and somewhat reckless in his comments at election rallies.

While deriding the accomplishments of the present government, he said, "In the last two years DOS has managed to destroy the state more then we did in a decade."

Zivojinovic does not have a manifesto of his own, but has taken on bits and pieces of the old SPS platform, which has changed little in a decade. The party's policy is as ever dominated by calls for social justice and the fight against crime.

At the start of his campaign, Zivojinovic said his aim was to establish how much respect and support remained for the SPS, but he was under no illusions. He went on to say that even if he were to be elected president, this would not be enough to restore SPS power in Serbia.

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