

Courting The Next Conflict

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The Belgrade regime continues its propaganda campaign, bringing home the same dangerous rhetoric it so recently used in Kosovo.

Marko Milosevic offers entertainment in his Pozarevac amusement park, allowing children to enjoy a ride into a land of fairy-tale and fantasy for a mere 10 dinars (around 50 cents). Meantime, his father, the Yugoslav president, is dragging Serbian citizens into an even bigger delusion that could cost them even more than the conflict in Kosovo.

At a meeting August 16 in Belgrade with his close associates, including political figures who have been indicted with him for war crimes, President Slobodan Milosevic accused the international forces and the United Nations of collaborating with the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) in perpetrating the greatest suffering ever faced by the Serbs.

Referring in particular to the violence against Serbs in Kosovo, the announcement at the close of the meeting seemed meant as a serious warning against the keepers of the (fragile and partial) peace in Kosovo - ie, NATO. Improve the situation, it suggested, or the Yugoslav army and police will have to take matters into their own hands. The threat is only the latest in a gradual but steady ratcheting up of the criticism Belgrade has directed against the international troops and civilian agencies in Kosovo. It began with the suspension of NATO bombing campaign, when the regime lavished praise upon the wise Yugoslav leadership for the victory over NATO forces and doled out mild criticism of defeated NATO soldiers.

As Western troops under a UN flag entered the relinquished Yugoslav province, NATO was criticised for not paying enough attention to the security of local Serbs.

The complaints grew into "grim resentment" at the arrival of the KFOR units, then into a "very solemn" request for the UN to approve the return of the Yugoslav Army to Kosovo to protect vulnerable Serbs. Until the most recent statements, it had gone as far as "most severe" threats from some Yugoslav generals that the army's return to Kosovo is imminent unless KFOR gets serious about protecting the Serbs.

According to broadcasts on the state TV, the culmination of the campaign was reached at the August 16 meeting. The irony is that outside the borders of Yugoslavia, and even within Kosovo itself, no one takes such threats from Belgrade at all seriously.

Yet the reality is that they are serious indeed - but primarily intended for domestic consumption. The aim of such propaganda, in the first place, is to extend the illusion of the power and influence of Serbia and its leader.

But the real purpose may be still more worrisome. For even as it stands now, Kosovo serves Milosevic's purposes well, offering continuing incentive for more adventures. The key is for Milosevic to maintain the impression of a crisis in which Serbs are the victims - and keep emotions high that Serbs are always willing to fight.

The next obvious targets are the domestic political opposition and the growing number of citizens who would like to see Milosevic step down.

Thus while playing up accusations against NATO for post-war chaos in Kosovo, the Serbia media also link the opposition to the West. The opposition coalition Alliance for Changes is regularly dubbed the "Alliance for NATO." Both the military alliance itself, and the opposition, wish to enslave Serbia to the West. In a recent interview in the Belgrade daily Politika, Serbian President Mirko Marjanovic went farther, dubbing the opposition parties "terrorists".

Such campaigns are not just about words. In Kosovo, around two months passed between the launching of propaganda dubbing the Albanians 'terrorists', to the beginning of an actual violent anti-terrorist campaign. And in propaganda terms, Milosevic would present it not as a civil war but only the continuation of the country's successful defence against NATO.

Milosevic will thus exploit the ongoing suffering of Serbs in Kosovo until he is ready to engage in a fight against the followers of NATO in Serbia who, according to regime propaganda, "with their street protests represent a threat of civil war and the spreading of Kosovo crisis throughout the country".

Then the Yugoslav army and police could once more take matters into their own hands.

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Location: Serbia
Kosovo

Focus: Balkans: Regional Reporting & Sustainable
Training

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