Curuvija Murder Mystery

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A leaked report implicates Serbian secret police in murder of a prominent anti-regime journalist

Radivoje Markovic, the much-hated secret police chief and loyal Milosevic executioner, is on his way out.

He's refusing to resign, but his position is getting increasingly untenable, especially after an internal Serbian secret police, SDB, report implicating it in last year's murder of the anti-regime journalist Slavko Curuvija was leaked to Democratic Opposition of Serbia, DOS, leaders and local NGOs

"If Markovic remains head of the service after this, it's sure to be broken up," said a high-ranking state security service official, on conditions of anonymity.

The continued refusal of Markovic to resign has created a crisis within the Serbian government. Both the opposition and Vuk Draskovic's Serbian Renewal Movement, SPO, have made their stay in the government conditional on the resignation of the head of the secret police.

The leaked SDB report says its agents had been following Curuvija and his wife on April 11, 1999 - the day of his murder.

Oddly, the surveillance report, which had been ordered by Markovic himself, finishes twenty minutes before the journalist's murder.

"At 16:58 we stop any further surveillance as agreed with the head of department," reads the report. Around 17:15 three unknown men shot Curuvija in front of the building where he used to live.

The internal report, probably leaked by a former or current employee of the SDB, claims the agents tailing Curuvija were pulled back by Markovic and the head of the Belgrade SDB, Milan Radonjic, "so as not to see the assassins."

Hardly anyone in Belgrade believes it is a coincidence that the surveillance stopped right before the assassination. An even more widespread opinion is that the SDB either directly ordered the murder or at the very least pulled their people from the street knowing what was going to happen.

The leaker of the report added that, "The murder was perpetrated by three persons who then used a white Volkswagen Golf Mk3 as an escape vehicle." But he failed to identify the assassins or the car's registration number.

Curuvija's wife Branka Prpa confirmed on Wednesday that the surveillance report was "valid" and said the facts in it were correct. "There were some things in the report that only I knew, and which I had never said to anybody else either privately or publicly," she said.

A former SDB official Bozidar Spasic also believes the report is authentic.
"The surveillance described is consistent with SDB methods of operation," he said.

According to the SDB's procedural rules, says Spasic, surveillance could have only been ordered by Markovic, and approved by the then Minister of Police, Vlajko Stojiljkovic.

"It is obvious that the SDB have the information on how Curuvija was killed," said Spasic. "I am still expecting the appearance of many more such reports because several people have recently left the SDB, and I suspect they have taken official documents with them."

The report is good reason for Serbia's new leadership to pressure the provisional republican government to sack this loyal Milosevic supporter. Only last week he admitted that he was still in contact with the ex-president.

Provisional Prime Minister Milomir Minic, a member of Milosevic's SPS, refused to sack Markovic yesterday after consultations with the presidents of Yugoslavia and Serbia, Vojislav Kostunica and Milan Milutinovic respectively.

Markovic's refusal to resign provoked DOS anger. After yesterday's meeting, one of its three interior ministers in the transitional government, Nebojsa Covic, stormed out of a meeting and threatened to withdraw the alliance from the new administration.

A senior SDB official told IWPR meanwhile that the appearance of the surveillance report had less to do with revealing Curuvija's assassins than scoring political points by the SPO before elections.

The party lost badly in the September elections and is now desperate to improve its performance in the forthcoming poll by appearing more anti-Milosevic than DOS.

In addition, the party was demanding the sacking of Markovic way before the DOS called for his head. Draskovic has long claimed that the secret police were behind an attempt on his life - a mysterious car accident a year ago in which four of his close associates died.

Kostunica has been eager to avoid personnel changes in the secret service and the military before the elections. Some suspect that the SPO leaked the SDB document to force the removal of Markovic.

And indeed it might be argued that the party was already aware of what happened to Curuvija.

The SDB source said the SPO interior minister in the new government, Stevan Nikcevic, was Milan Radonjic's deputy around the time of the murder. He must have been familiar with the surveillance of the journalist.

While the SPO is campaigning against the SDB, their man inside the government, Nikcevic, is keeping very quiet about the whole affair.

DOS does not like Markovic, but at the same time it does not want Draskovic profiting from the sacking of the secret police minister. Indeed, it's known that the alliance was in possession of the leaked report on Monday evening but didn't react immediately. But after Natasha Kandic, the director of the Humanitarian
Law Fund, made the document public, they had to respond.

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