

## **Djindjic Launches Battle for Kosovo**

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Premier's demand for Yugoslav forces to return to Kosovo is unlikely to be heeded abroad, but may win him nationalist votes in forthcoming elections.

Serbia's prime minister has launched a surprise offensive on the future on Kosovo to forestall Albanian moves towards independence and bolster his patriotic image ahead of early elections.

Zoran Djindjic wrote to NATO's commander in south-east Europe, Admiral Gregory Johnson, earlier this month requesting permission for Serbian police and military forces to return to the province, which was followed by a similar letter to the UN Security Council.

Djindjic told Javier Solana, the EU foreign policy coordinator, during his visit to Belgrade last week, that he wants the international community to launch talks on the final status of Kosovo by June.

It was the latest in the series of initiatives with which Djindjic, much to the surprise of domestic and international opinion, has brought the issue of Kosovo back on to the agenda.

The moves are seen as a response to ever more frequent calls from ethnic Albanians for the region to gain independence. At the same time, the campaign sounds a patriotic note in the run-up to inevitable early elections in Serbia.

Kosovo's status has remained unresolved following the retreat of Yugoslav forces from the province in June 1999. Since then, the province has remained formally part of Yugoslavia under UN Security Council Resolution 1244.

In practice, it is an international protectorate under the administration of the UN Mission for Kosovo, UNMIK. The Albanian majority strongly advocates independence, while the Serb minority has demanded reintegration into Serbia.

Djindjic's insistence on the protection of Serb interests marks the start of a counter-offensive against the growing pressure of Kosovo Albanians and their sympathisers.

In May 2002, the Albanian majority in Kosovo's parliament passed a resolution demanding independence. The international administration declared the motion void on the grounds that it violated Resolution 1244.

But the annulment of the Kosovo resolution only partially calmed the authorities in Belgrade, as the independence issue was not only championed by local Albanians but by well-known international organisations.

The International Crisis Group, ICG, in March 2002 drew up a blueprint called "Guidelines for future of Kosovo", which proposed "conditional independence" for the region if certain criteria were fulfilled.

A draft proposal based on this report was submitted to the US Congress in June that year, urging

Washington to support a sovereign entity. The proposal was re-submitted this January. Congressmen Tom Lantosh and Henry Hyde have since presented a new resolution on Kosovo to the House of Representatives, while another local initiative will be presented to the Pristina parliament on February 13.

Djindjic appears to have taken over policy-making on Kosovo from Nebojsa Covic, deputy prime minister and head of the government's coordination centre for the region.

The premier's new offensive was signalled last December, when he told the German magazine Der Spiegel that if Albanians organised a referendum on Kosovo's independence, Serbs in Bosnia might do the same, in which case the 1995 Dayton peace accord would have to be revised.

On January 16 this year, Djindjic returned to the topic, warning that the province was "turning before our very eyes into a state" and saying silence was no longer an option. "Now is the time to start discussions about the status of Kosovo and Metohija," he said. "It is better to react now than when it is too late".

Meanwhile, representatives of Serbs from northern Kosovo on January 20 founded a new local government group, the Association of Serb Municipalities, with the goal of strengthening contacts with Serbia. Oliver Ivanovic, a member of the Kosovo parliament presidency, said it was set up in response to fears that Kosovo was moving fast towards independence.

The association has said it will hold its own referendum if this takes place, demanding the separation of northern Serbian districts of Kosovo, around Leposavic, and their union with Serbia.

Djindjic's support for this strategy was underlined on January 28 when he convened a session of Serb representatives from Kosovo to draw up a joint plan of action.

Members of the Serbian National Council of North and Central Kosovo and the Povratak (Return) coalition attended the meeting, which gained the blessing of the newly formed Movement for Kosovo and Metohija, under Momcilo Trajkovic, a day later.

While the fine details of their strategy have been kept from public scrutiny, leaks from the meeting suggest they intend to build a new network of local councils in Serb-populated areas.

Ivanovic told IWPR this network would encourage displaced Serbs to return home as well as create the groundwork for northern Kosovo to request special status, similar to that of Republic Srpska in Bosnia, should the Albanians succeed in their drive for independence.

Partition is increasingly discussed as a way out of the Kosovo imbroglio, said Professor Dusan Janjic, of the Belgrade Forum for Ethnic Relations. "If it came to Kosovo's separation from Serbia, Leposavic would have every legal right to request unification with Serbia, as it was only joined to Kosovo in the 1960s," he said.

Djindjic may have chosen this moment to act, as the global political situation has shifted in Serbia's favour. America, the traditional ally of the ethnic Albanians, is preoccupied with Iraq. Brussels is more inclined to hear the Serb side, which is why Djindjic has requested its help in resolving the problem.

Last May, Michael Steiner, the UNMIK administrator in Kosovo, said in Berlin that at the end of this year the EU should replace the UN mission in Kosovo.

Western diplomats remain cautious about the Serbian premier's initiative. There are reports that Djindjic received discreet backing from Serbia's old ally, Greece, which holds the EU presidency and wants the Kosovo issue settled before the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens.

Others believe the premier counts on support from Germany, which holds the presidency of the UN Security Council this year. It is no ally of Serbia, but Djindjic has developed numerous connections with German politicians.

Djindjic has a strong political incentive to launch his Kosovo offensive. Early elections in Serbia are expected later this year and the premier needs to improve his patriotic ratings if he is to best his nationalist rival, Vojislav Kostunica.

Officials in Kostunica's Democratic Party of Serbia, DSS, are clearly annoyed by the premier's attempt to claim the nationalist vote. Dusan Prorokovic and Dragan Jovic denounced Djindjic's call for the Yugoslav army to return to Kosovo as "cheap demagogy and preparation for the upcoming elections".

In an equally cynical vein, radio Deutsche Welle commented that Djindjic's demand was designed for domestic consumption. It said in its commentary that the premier had deliberately chosen a "populist national tune that suits the Serbs".

But at a time when The Hague is putting pressure on the Serbia to extradite suspected war criminals - and when cooperation with the war crimes court remains unpopular in Serbia - Djindjic has every motive to try to neutralise his unpatriotic image over the tribunal with a patriotic achievement, such as rescuing Kosovo from ethnic Albanian separatism.

Djindjic's moves to curry nationalist support have also seen him recently developing ties with the Serbian Orthodox Church, which was formerly Kostunica's field of activity. On February 4, amid a blaze of media publicity, the premier publicly presented diplomas of gratitude to people who've donated funds for the new St Sava cathedral in Belgrade.

Either way, Djindjic is likely to profit from his Kosovo campaign. At home, he will collect patriotic points. And although his demands are not taken very seriously abroad, they may speed up the start of a dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade, at least on economic and other practical issues. Once more, Djindjic has displayed his strong political instincts for survival.

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