

Djindjic's Man Riding High

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Serbian prime minister Zoran Djindjic is banking on an economics guru becoming the republic's next president.

Miroljub Labus, a reformist economic expert who favours forging ties with the West, has mounted a strong challenge against Yugoslavia's nationalist-minded president Vojislav Kostunica in campaigning for the September 29 Serbian presidential election.

Backing Labus is the Serbian prime minister, Zoran Djindjic, head of the governing Democratic Opposition of Serbia, DOS, coalition. Djindjic hopes he will stabilise his administration and maintain the fast tempo of free market reforms. Also in the Labus camp is an influential group of economic experts known as the G 17 Plus.

The most recent survey by Strategic Marketing, a respected polling organisation, showed Labus leading Kostunica by two per cent in the second week of September. The figures were 29.2 and 27.4 per cent respectively. But forecasters say that in the second round of voting Kostunica could pick up votes from supporters of the ousted president Slobodan Milosevic as well as from followers of the radical Vojislav Seselj.

The Labus campaign bears no resemblance to anything Serbia has seen before. Instead of concentrating on large election rallies he makes short stops in a string of towns and tours rundown factories, shaking hands eagerly and talking face to face with passers by.

Sometimes, the tactic comes unstuck. In the central Serbian town of Cacak, supporters of Milosevic pelted him with eggs and clods of earth. "You can't scare me," Labus shouted back at them.

Accompanying Labus on his campaign travels are members of G17 Plus, including figures like Mladjan Dinkic, governor of the National Bank of Yugoslavia and Serbian finance minister Bozidar Djelic. In addition, some popular actors, writers and film and theatre directors belong to the group.

Labus tells voters the country's huge problems - its economic recession and high levels of unemployment - can be solved only by financial and political ties with the West. Foreign investment, he says, is the key to reaching that day when "everyone will have a chance to work and earn a living".

At this stage, supporters of Labus are largely the same people backing Djindjic, who also understands the need for western help. Support comes as well from younger voters, hungry for fast economic and political change.

Serbian analysts suggest that Labus could also attract a small number of former Milosevic's voters, mainly public sector workers - many of whom identified with the leftist wing of the ex-president's party, the Socialist Party of Serbia, and are repelled by the kind of nationalism espoused by Kostunica.

The timing of the elections on September 29 could work to the disadvantage of Labus and Djindjic's DOS. They come when the harsh medicine of reform is becoming painful and long before economic gains are evident.

But a biography of Labus shows that he had always done better than expected. Born in Mala Krsna, central Serbia, 55 years ago, he graduated from the Belgrade School of Law in 1970, focusing on economic law and macro-economic research.

Following specialist training at the Cornell University in Louisiana in the mid-Eighties, he distanced himself from communism and turned towards reformist, economic policies.

Around that time, Labus quit the Alliance of Yugoslav Communists in protest at the politically-motivated expulsion of Kostunica from the Belgrade School of Law.

Labus shuns fiery oratory and disarms rivals with his cool eloquence. In informal talks, though, he is often very stubborn and seldom changes his opinions. Friends say he has never shown any greed for money or power.

Labus became politically active in the Democratic Party during the Nineties when Djindjic and Kostunica both belonged to it.

In the 1993 Yugoslav parliamentary elections, Labus was elected a member of the chamber of citizens. When Djindjic became head of the Democratic Party, he made Labus one of his deputies.

Labus resigned from that post after personal disagreements with Djindjic. Traces of the old animosity can still be detected. Their alliance in the fight against Kostunica is something of a marriage of convenience.

It would have been impossible for Labus to organise a presidential campaign without strong technical support from Djindjic's government and the DOS coalition. As for Djindjic, he has no other candidate who could so effectively compete against Kostunica.

In 1999, Labus became head of G-17. Prior to the toppling of Milosevic on October 5, 2000, the group's economic programme was officially adopted as the DOS election platform. G-17 was practically accepted as an equal DOS partner.

However, DOS broke its promise that once Milosevic was ousted, G-17 would form an expert government for a transitional period. All that happened was that Labus was made deputy prime minister for international economic relations.

Even then, at the very beginning of the transition process, Labus very bluntly told Kostunica that the country could not count on foreign assistance and donations without Milosevic's arrest and extradition to The Hague war crimes tribunal.

He said it was not an easy decision but one that urgently needed making.

That is when the rift between Labus and Kostunica began deepening and when Labus slowly started drifting back towards Djindjic.

The Serbian public sees Labus as the key figure in re-establishing Belgrade's ties with Washington and New York. His team very quickly found a common language with International Monetary Fund experts.

The general opinion is that Yugoslavia has Labus to thank for its integration into international institutions such as the UN, IMF, World Bank, EBRD, the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe and others.

Labus gained additional popularity last winter when he managed to have 66 per cent of the country's debt written off in negotiations with the Paris club of creditors.

Another factor drawing the prime minister closer to Labus is that if Kostunica won the election he might push for the dissolution of Djindjic's government.

Even though a Labus victory would also be Djindjic's, it does not mean the former would necessarily agree to be the prime minister's pawn - and this could lead to new disputes in the future.

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