

Kostunica Strikes Back

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Kostunica attempts to erode Djindjic's powerbase, in an escalation of the Belgrade power-struggle.

Election-style fever is gripping Serbia - even though no election is scheduled. Within the ruling DOS coalition, tension is mounting between the two strongest parties, federal president Vojislav Kostunica's Democratic Party of Serbia, DSS, and the Democratic Party, DS, of Serbian premier Zoran Djindjic.

Despite the apparent differences between the two parties - the DSS is nationalist and conservative, while the DS is reformist and pro-Western - the struggle concerns not policy, but the balance of power.

Kostunica, whose popularity has been melting away for months, has been trying to strike back at Djindjic, accusing the Serbian government of corruption and demanding serious restructuring. If Djindjic does not make any concessions, Kostunica's ongoing calls for new elections in Serbia will become ever louder.

Over recent months, political and economic power has further consolidated in the hands of Djindjic's party, which is now estimated to control around 65 per cent of economic and institutional power in Serbia.

As Serbian premier, Djindjic has much greater scope for action than Kostunica, who presides over the federal shell of Yugoslavia - itself continually undermined by Montenegro's independence movement. By extraditing Milosevic to The Hague, Djindjic managed to trounce the indecisive federal authorities, personified by Kostunica, presenting himself to the West and the electorate as the unchallenged architect of reforms in Serbia.

According to the polls, however, Kostunica's party is still twice as popular as his rival's - although the strategic Marketing Agency in Belgrade reports that DSS support has fallen to 30 per cent from 35 to 40 per cent at the beginning of the year, while DS backing has settled at 15 per cent, having previously hovered between 10 and 15 per cent.

Indecision and lack of clarity over the fate of former president Slobodan Milosevic, reform and relations with the international community, account for the DSS's declining fortunes. The party has signally failed to display leadership qualities.

Having managed to assemble a Yugoslav government two weeks ago and halt - at least temporarily - the erosion of the federal state, Kostunica is now turning his attention to Serbia, where Djindjic rules unchallenged. According to unconfirmed reports from the Serbian premier's circle, Kostunica's party has requested up to six ministerial seats in the republican government, setting its particular sights on the police and justice ministries.

The same sources report that while Djindjic has agreed to replace justice minister Vladan Batic, leader of the pro-Djindjic Demo-Christian party, he will not replace police minister Dusan

Mihajlovic. Unlike Batic, whose attempts to overhaul the Serbian judiciary have been ineffectual, Mihajlovic is considered a successful minister, having advanced police reforms and concluded several important investigations, most notably one into the attempted assassination of opposition leader Vuk Draskovic in October 1999.

Two weeks ago, the popular governor of the National Bank of Yugoslavia, Mladan Dinkic, claimed Mihailovic drew on unsecured state funds when his New Democracy Party was in coalition with Slobodan Milosevic from 1993-1997.

Kostunica's party has seized on these allegations. Last week, Dusan Prorokovic, a high-ranking DSS official, told a press conference "there are indications of corruption in some ministries of the Serbian government and that certain ministers' work verges on the illegal".

Accusations of graft have certainly shaken Djindjic's position, but Kostunica has failed to use the issue to secure seats in the Serbian government - despite the fact that corruption promises to become the next big topic in Serbia.

At last week's meeting of the DOS presidency, Djindjic won time when Kostunica agreed that all ministries should compile reports on their work, which would then be used as the basis for any restructuring of the Serbian government.

Kostunica also agreed with Djindjic last Friday that elections will not be considered in advance of any constitutional changes in Serbia, which means that a ballot will not take place until the New Year.

However, if Kostunica is dissatisfied with the way Djindjic restructures the government in forthcoming weeks, he will resume his calls for new elections.

It is becoming ever more evident though that calls for the reconstruction of government in Serbia is not about the real competence of the ministries than yet another round in the power-struggle between Kostunica and Djindjic.

But what's also emerging is that this struggle is driven less by ideology than their thirst for power.

Kostunica is not always the sensitive nationalist-democrat he seems, nor Djindjic the unswerving reformer.

Nationalists are increasingly disappointed with the Yugoslav president. While Kostunica has tried to dump responsibility for 'unpatriotic moves' on Djindjic, he has conspicuously failed to respond to nationalist demands - from preventing the extradition of Milosevic, to helping Serbian forces in Bosnia and protecting the former leader's associates.

Similarly, the much-vaunted, pro-Western reformer Djindjic has done nothing to reduce state-control over the economy. Four months ago, through a decree which experts judged unconstitutional, he created a state monopoly over the import of liquid fuel. Liberal economists are judging his law on privatisation a failure, pointing out that the biggest and most unprofitable state companies will remain unsold and continue to burden the state.

Finally, in a bid to increase his popularity with nationalists, the republican, atheist Djindjic has adopted a decree introducing religious instruction in schools. The decision was opposed by Kostunica, who is by inclination pro-Orthodox.

In terms of their relative influence in the ruling DOS coalition, Djindjic has the backing of most of the small parties that make up the alliance - although two of them, the New Serbia party and the Movement for Democratic Serbia, fell out with him last week. This, however, will not necessarily translate into support for

Kostunica.

There may be no election in sight as yet, but the political stage is certainly set for a showdown.

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