

Local Democracy In Serbia Under Threat

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The Serbian government is demoralising opposition-controlled local authorities.

"Now it is really over - I don't know how we are going to survive," protested the mayor of Kraljevo, Mladomir Novakoic, after the government cut its financial lifeline.

In the last few months, Serbian municipalities have been deprived of crucial rental income from state-owned properties. The premises have been sold-off by the government to pay for the rebuilding of the country following the NATO bombardment last year.

The privatization programme has dealt a particular blow to towns like Kraljevo in southern Serbia, one of eighteen municipalities run by opposition parties for the past three years.

The Serbian Renewal Movement, SPO, holds Kraljevo, where social and economic conditions are some of the worst in Serbia - and have deteriorated further with the arrival of 25,000 refugees from Kosovo.

"There is almost nothing we can do to improve the situation, and the

state is not will to do anything for the town because it is ruled by the SPO," said Novakovic.

As well as selling off their property, the authorities in Belgrade have cut state contributions to opposition-held municipalities, neglected to maintain or repair their infrastructure and subjected them increasing levels of general repression.

The European Union recently sent Pirot and Nis fuel for heating hospitals, schools and kindergartens. The government then charged the local authorities taxes equal to the value of the donated fuel. "Aid is aid, but we have to collect the taxes," said a minister.

According to lawyers representing residents of Pirot in disputes with the state, the number of police reports, magistrate penalties, hearings, and complaints about police surveillance during January and February were 20 per cent up on the same period last year.

The Mayor of Nis, Zoran Zivkovic, deputy-President of the Democratic

Party, was last week summoned for trial accused of spreading false information, but has yet to be informed why the charges were brought against him.

"It is obvious that the regime wants to generate chaos and despair at local level, and then to appear as the only guarantors of a decent life," said an official from Pirot. "That is the familiar strategy which has succeeded several times."

The state-controlled media meanwhile insists that the social and economic problems afflicting the

municipalities are the fault of the "greedy and incompetent" opposition parties administering them.

In Belgrade, the biggest opposition-controlled municipality, the official media for example blames the SPO administration for everything from poor public transport, car theft, salary delays, to the high number of homicides in the city.

The ruling Socialist Party together with its partners from the Yugoslav United Left, JUL, and the nationalist Serbian Radical Party are said to have been preparing the "fall of Belgrade" for several months." Restoring power at local level is our priority, " said a senior SPS official last week.

That prospect seems increasingly likely as little appears to be standing in the way of the ruling coalition triumphing in forthcoming local elections.

Immediately after the NATO bombing, anti-regime demonstrations flourished. Protests by parents who lost their sons in the war, workers who lost their jobs and military reservists who were not paid compensations were organised in numerous towns.

However, that spirit is dead - strangled, it seems, by the combined actions of the SPO and the regime.

The SPO leader, Vuk Draskovic, who had been collaborating with the regime at the time of the demonstrations, diffused the protest movement while the regime arrested and jailed many of its leaders.

The opposition remains weak and quarrelsome and the regime continues to intimidate.

On Tuesday, 1 March, 20 supporters of the Vojvodina Coalition were arrested at a meeting after proposing the province become a republic. A day later members of the student organization, Otpor, Resistance, were detained for putting up posters ridiculing the authorities.

The electorate is now largely apathetic, believing that all those in authority are "thieves". Such is the level of disillusionment that some even believe it would be better if the communists returned to power.

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