

Milosevic Party Plots Comeback

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Socialists may hold the key to formation of new government.

After three years in the cold, the party associated with Serbia's disgraced ex-leader, Slobodan Milosevic, could gain a pivotal role in the forming of a new minority administration.

On February 4, backing from the Serbian Socialist Party, SPS, enabled the Democratic Party of Serbia, DSS, to secure the appointment of its vice-president, Dragan Marsicanin, as speaker of parliament.

The position is a crucial one. Without it, a parliament may not be constituted. Most importantly, as Serbia has been unable to elect a new president for over a year, presidential powers have devolved to the speaker.

The SPS negotiated the deal with the DSS after the four main moderate parties on February 2 again failed to form a government, leaving the country in limbo for a second month.

The SPS vice-president Milorad Vucelic also said his party would back a minority government uniting the DSS, the reformist G17 Plus and the monarchist Serbian Renewal Movement – New Serbia, SPO-NS, coalition.

Some analysts believe that although SPS's involvement is politically controversial, the party is a shadow of its former self and unlikely to exert much influence.

They believe that the SPS is motivated mainly by a craving to regain political respectability and has no fixed policy agenda.

The Socialists - marginalised since the fall of Milosevic in 2000 - have re-entered the fray owing to the refusal of the Democratic Party, DS, to join the three other moderate parties in a government.

After the ultra-nationalist Serbian Radical Party, SRS, recorded big gains in the December 2003 polls, all four parties need to combine if a pro-reform team is to take office with a majority.

The DS vice-president, Boris Tadic, on February 2 attacked the potential involvement of the SPS in power, saying it marked a regression to the Milosevic era.

"Through his party, Slobodan Milosevic is re-entering the system of power in Serbia," he said. "The DS has certainly not agreed to that." Tadic said the DS would oppose any government linked to the SPS.

In reality, a return to the Milosevic era is not on the cards. With only 22 deputies in the 250-seat parliament, the SPS will have little say on policy.

Observers say its main motive is to improve its tainted reputation. By backing the new government, they

say, the SPS hopes to reposition itself on the political scene and escape from under Milosevic's shadow.

Listing the party's terms for cooperation, the SPS demanded that the government re-examine the legality of privatisation schemes, halt cooperation with the Hague war crimes tribunal and fund Milosevic's defence.

But a DSS source close to the negotiating team told IWPR that in closed talks the SPS had put forward no pre-conditions; its shopping list was merely to placate the party's voters.

Political analyst Dusan Janjic told IWPR the SPS wanted also to avoid new elections, as it feared faring worse than it did last December, because of the party's growing friction with Milosevic.

The SPS took only 280,000 votes in the December ballot, a huge drop from the millions it gained in previous polls. Milosevic's most ardent supporters tend to be elderly.

The belief is widespread that the SPS - which during the Nineties expressed hard-line nationalist views - aims to position itself on the left. This is currently vacant territory, but the party's problem is that Milosevic continues to portray himself in The Hague as a right-wing nationalist.

The SPS is already undergoing a quiet transformation. Although Milosevic supported the party in the December elections, it purged his supporters from its list of candidates.

Party leaders staged their revolt after the Hague tribunal banned Milosevic from making telephone contact with his party colleagues.

Analysts suggest proximity to power will enable the SPS to make a final break with Milosevic and his cronies who have less and less influence within the party.

By supporting the pro-democratic block, the SPS will at the same time reinvent itself and shake off its old legacy.

With its poor international image, however, the prospect of an SPS role in government - however minor - may be unpopular abroad.

The EU's foreign affairs spokesman, Xavier Solana, commenting recently on Serbia's current political embroglio, called for the creation of a government composed of democratic parties.

Europe and the US may look critically at SPS attempts to market themselves as a party committed to western democratic values.

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