

Milosevic Tightens Hold on Kosovo Serbs

Author: [Zvonko Tarle](#)

Milosevic is trying to use the Kosovo Serbs to scupper the province's administration.

Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic is stepping up his efforts to turn the Kosovo Serbs against the new administration.

The Belgrade leader is using his political allies, economic assistance and the media to derail attempts by the administration to integrate the 90,000-strong Serb minority.

Milosevic is telling his ethnic kin in the province, who live largely in small enclaves within predominantly Albanian towns and villages, that backing for the new authority is tantamount to support for an independent Kosovo.

The ruling party in Belgrade the, Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), has been drumming up support for Milosevic by holding conferences in all the main Serb enclaves in Kosovo, during which delegates sing the praises of the Serbian leader and denounce the international organisations helping to govern the province.

The gatherings are told that Milosevic is the "guarantor of Serbia's sovereignty and integrity, while the head of the UN mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), Bernard Kouchner, "works together with the Albanian narco-mafia towards the separation of Kosovo."

UNMIK appears to tolerate the Belgrade interference, even providing security for conference delegates.

Meanwhile, the Interim Executive Council of Kosovo, an administrative body loyal to Milosevic, which governed Kosovo prior to the NATO conflict, is re-establishing itself in the province's Serbian enclaves. The authority, said to have its headquarters in Kopaonik in southern Serbia, serves as a parallel Serb authority in the region, issuing salaries, pensions and humanitarian aid.

The authorities have also begun organising a Serbian assembly for Kosovo, whose deputies are either members of the extremist Serbian Radical Party or the SPS. The body's decisions are being implemented as if they were legal directives.

The council and the assembly are beginning to mirror the parallel institutions set up by the Albanians when Belgrade administered the province. Then as now these political structures were symbols of resistance.

The presence of Milosevic-controlled authorities in Kosovo is undermining the influence moderate Serb representatives. The Serbian National Council, which preaches reconciliation between Serbs and Albanians, is struggling to get a foothold in some of the larger enclaves, such as Mitrovica, Leposavic, Kosovo Polje and Zubin Potok.

National Council leaders Bishop Artemije and Momcilo Trajkovic, who work closely with the UN, even have difficulty attracting support in their own backyard. Gracanica, the home of Bishop Artemije, is adorned with pictures of Milosevic. And when foreign diplomats visit the bishop, crowds chant pro-Milosevic slogans.

Milosevic exploits the media to reinforce his influence over the Serb minority. Belgrade already controls seven radio stations in Kosovo and more are planned, with the Interim Executive Council of Kosovo playing a key role in helping to set them up.

Belgrade is hoping to broadcast television programmes from Mitrovica and Pristina. The output is to be edited in Belgrade at a station founded by the SPS and managed by Milosevic aide Zoran Andjelkovic.

Newspapers too are being mobilised in the propaganda offensive. The pro-Belgrade Novo Jedinstvo, the only weekly magazine in the Serbian language in Kosovo, censors the activities of Bishop Artemije and Momcilo Trajkovic. Both are regularly attacked for collaborating with "Albanian terrorists and NATO aggressors".

So far the international community has done little to try to curb Milosevic's influence in Kosovo. But if he is allowed to continue to hold sway over the Serbian enclaves, the minority's more moderate representatives, who are crucial to Serb integration, will find themselves increasingly marginalised and ineffectual.

Zvonko Tarle is the director and editor-in -chief of Radio Contact in Prisitna.

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