

Milosevic's Men Are Jumping

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The high-profile defection by a previously stalwart Milosevic ally is only the most notable of a slow but steady unravelling of the ruling Socialist Party.

When Aleksandar Bercek, a member of the Socialist Party (SPS) executive and a leading personality in Belgrade, resigned from the ruling party, his message was short: "I want to engage in politics in a serious manner."

The culmination so far of a steady stream of defections from the governing party of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic, Bercek's move highlighted a common feature of these departures. Disillusioned with the increasing cronyism, and anxious perhaps about the indictments by the war crimes tribunal and responsibility for Kosovo, such former stalwarts of the president are not abandoning public life. They are joining opposition parties and thereby directly joining their calls for the president's resignation.

New Democracy (ND), Bercek's new party, has been the main beneficiary of this trend. According to one ND official who wished to remain anonymous, ten SPS officials have crossed over to the party in the past few weeks. Most of these are presidents of town councils controlled by the Socialists.

As a member of the SPS executive board, its top decision-making body, Bercek, 49, is of a different level. A renowned Yugoslav actor and formerly manager of Belgrade's National Theatre, the biggest theatre in the Balkans, he was elected as an SPS Member of Parliament four years ago.

Notably, Bercek claimed that it is the Socialist Party, and not he, which has changed. A powerful and respected figure in the SPS, he is exceptionally confident as a politician, avoiding public appearances but always loyal to Milosevic. Indeed, a party favourite, he was considered among the hard-line faction of the SPS, supporting the party programme to the letter.

Yet, according to one of his close friends, Bercek has been complaining for a year. He has privately criticised the party's transformation from a "ruling political force" into what he has called a "personal presidential service."

"Bercek enjoyed being in politics," his friend told IWPR. "But he was also indignant over the abuses committed by his colleagues." Bercek did dissent from the SPS on one point of strategy, rejecting the near integration with the Yugoslav Left (JUL) headed by Milosevic's wife, Mirjana Markovic.

New Democracy, Bercek's new home, is a member of the Serbian opposition bloc Alliance for Changes, which is calling for Milosevic to resign. Aside from JUL, New Democracy is the first party with which Milosevic has shared power. The total number of seats in the Serbian Parliament is 250. Of the 110 seats held by the ruling coalition, the Socialists have 87 and JUL, 19. Until recently, four were occupied by New Democracy.

Like Bercek, Dusan Mihajlovic, the leader of New Democracy, was formerly a close associate of Milosevic. He has been an envoy and mediator, and even served as a presidential spokesman in special circumstances, for example travelling as an envoy to the US.

Now he is a dissident. Three months ago, Milosevic ejected the four ND members from the coalition in favour of Vojislav Seselj, a deputy prime minister, and his extremist right-wing nationalist Serbian Radical Party.

Mihajlovic then turned his modest anti-regime campaign into an open war against Milosevic. His party is one of the wealthier political organisations in the country, and he has moved closer to the Democratic Alternative, also headed by a former SPS official and now fierce Milosevic opponent, Nebojsa Covic.

New Democracy officials see Bercek's departure as confirmation that the SPS is "imploding." As one party member claims, "What the political analysts have been predicting, and the opposition has been calling for is now happening. Milorad Vucelic [a former SPS vice president] has left, Zoran Lilic [a former deputy premier] has been marginalised, now Bercek is gone as well. The circle is getting narrowed down."

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