

The Next Serbian Conflict

Author: [IWPR](#)

Even if the troubling details of the Kosovo agreement can be resolved, Serbia faces new conflict at home.

The acceptance by the Serbian parliament of NATO's terms for an end to the bombing campaign may open the way for a resolution of the Kosovo crisis. But many details remain to be resolved, and the settlement leaves open the fundamental question of political control in Belgrade, over which considerable conflict is likely in the coming months.

The precise details of the agreement, including the wording of a resolution before the UN Security Council, and the speed and reliability of Serbian compliance with the document remain the key questions. An end to the NATO bombing campaign is conditioned upon successful movement on these points, particularly withdrawal of Yugoslav security forces.

Yet even if these obstacles are overcome, the primary political problem for the Belgrade regime remains. For the 12-point document accepted by the Serbian parliament is fundamentally the same as the Rambouillet accords, and in some important details even harsher from their perspective. As such it represents both a substantial capitulation by Belgrade, and a testimonial to the futility of the past three months of defiance.

Initial reports by the Serbian media have been unemotional and informational. But having led Yugoslavia into a confrontation with NATO and extensive destruction and loss of life, Milosevic and the regime media will have a difficult time portraying him now as the saviour of Serbia.

"The issue is not whether Kosovo has been lost, but whether we have been lost--all of us," says an independent analyst in Belgrade. "Ten years of disasters and then two and a half months of bombing only to return to the Rambouillet accords. All of it was for nothing."

In these circumstances, internal opposition is expected to mushroom. "Social discontent, especially on a local level, is substantial," says one Serbian human rights activist. "As a result of the war, power has become decentralised. Citizens, local initiatives and regional media are outside the control of Belgrade, and it is possible that they will become sources of new opposition."

A critical indicator will be the response of Montenegro, the restive second republic within the federation, which can be expected only to increase its efforts to distance itself from Belgrade.

Another unknown is the Albanian response. Kosovo Albanian leaders have not been privy to the agreement and find it difficult to accept the concept of autonomy within Serbia. Albanian sources have expressed particular concern over stipulations allowing Serbian involvement in border control. Moreover, the Kosovo Liberation Army is currently regrouping under a new commander-in-chief, Agip Ceku, and is unlikely to wish to disarm.

Some figures within Serbia, meantime, are immediately positioning themselves for new roles as interlocutors with the West. Speaking at his own press conference, Serbian Renewal Movement leader Vuk Draskovic, ousted during the war as a deputy prime minister, was positioning himself for an early comeback. Signalling a new co-operation with Milosevic, he expressed support for the peace agreement and stressed the need for international reconstruction aid--clearly offering himself as the Western link with Belgrade.

Yet the extremists are hardly ceding defeat. At a press conference immediately following the parliamentary vote in favour of the agreement, Deputy Prime Minister and leader of the Radical Party Vojislav Seselj strongly denounced the agreement as a major defeat for Milosevic. He severely criticised Milosevic for accepting it.

While still holding out hope for "double-key" command of the international forces which would leave substantial control over parts of the province in Russian hands, he warned that, under pressure from Washington, the final terms of a UN resolution could be even more severe for Serbia. Threatening to leave the government, he insisted that the Radicals would consider all foreign troops in Kosovo "occupiers".

Seselj's long-time role as the regime's in-house radical gives reason for scepticism about real intentions of any such statements. But they also fuel concern among Serbs that an end to the fighting in Kosovo will only bring conflict home--by direct violence if not by other means--to Serbia. Independent journalists, human rights activists and others in Belgrade have, throughout the bombing, feared that lists were being drawn up of those expressing "insufficient loyalty"--with retribution to be meted out in the aftermath.

A key concern is the response of the military. The agreement calls for the withdrawal of all forces from Kosovo, and their willingness to comply will be the first key test of the accord. There may remain considerable haggling over the scope of any continued, even token, presence of Serbian forces in the province.

Yet if they do return to Serbia proper, this could create substantial new internal tensions. Some troops may express their dismay at returning to an impoverished and embittered country in street protests like those staged by relatives of soldiers in recent weeks.

Others, however, angry at the capitulation in a war which, on the ground at least, they had reason to believe they were winning, may be keen for revenge against any internal opposition to the ruling structures. The stage is set for a nasty, and possibly violent, reckoning within Serbia.

All of these factors are likely to be complicated by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, in The Hague. With Milosevic already under indictment for war crimes, Western countries will face increasing pressure not to provide any support that will help stabilise the regime. This will impede the provision of much-needed financial and reconstruction aid.

With Kosovo under effective international protection, war crimes investigators will immediately begin intensive research into the recent events within Kosovo, and may even dredge up charges against the Belgrade leadership over the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This will further isolate the existing establishment, and create further pressures for a change of regime. Assuming that does not occur soon, a vengeful and embittered Serbia may turn in on itself for its next conflict.

Anthony Borden is executive director of the Institute for War and Peace Reporting. An IWPR correspondent in Belgrade contributed to this report.

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