

An Officer And A Politician

Author: [Srdjan Staletovic](#)

Former Yugoslav chief-of-staff Perisic launched a movement to oust his former boss, Milosevic. But he, too, has been accused of war crimes.

As calls for the resignation of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic grow ever louder, the latest challenger to join the chorus is former Yugoslav Army chief-of-staff Gen. Momcilo Perisic, whom many in Croatia and Bosnia consider a war criminal.

Perisic, 55, launched his new group, the Movement for Democratic Serbia, this week in Belgrade explaining that it was an umbrella organisation bringing together all parties, non-governmental organisations, student bodies and other civic groups opposed to the government. But it is not, he insisted, a political party.

The movement has one immediate aim, namely Milosevic's ouster, which it views as a sine qua non for democratic change in Serbia. To date, however, the general, whom Milosevic sacked in November last year, has not specified how he intends to force the Yugoslav president's resignation.

Some 50 individuals attended the movement's plenary session, at which a 10-person executive committee was formed and Perisic made it clear that he had no long-term political ambitions for himself.

The identities of the members of the executive committee have not been made public. But sources close to Perisic say that they are largely of his personal friends, including film director Predrag Bajcetic, academic Borivoj Lazic, Belgrade lawyer Miodrag Vidojevic, and journalist Ratko Dimitrovic.

The Movement for Democratic Serbia is the second political organisation in Serbia founded by a former general. The first was Gen. Vuk Obradovic's Social Democratic Party, which is a member of the Serbian opposition coalition Alliance for Changes.

In his first public reaction Obradovic wished his former colleague well, but expressed disappointment that Perisic had decided to form a new organisation instead of putting his weight behind an existing party.

Other opposition parties have yet to respond officially, although there are some indications that they too are disappointed by Perisic's decision. The Serbian opposition has been plagued by factionalism and infighting and many feel that Perisic has simply undermined its cause by creating yet another splinter group.

The Serbian government has been monitoring Perisic's political manoeuvring since his removal from office and especially since he publicly attacked the regime in a newspaper interview last month. And it has launched a media campaign to discredit him. Indeed, in a commentary on Serbian state television at the end of July, Yugoslavia's former chief-of-staff was referred to as the "American General".

Among stories which have been circulating in state-controlled media is one linking Perisic with Zoran Lilic, then the deputy premier whom Milosevic fired in a reshuffle yesterday. Lilic, it was reported, has planned to join Perisic and bring with him the reform wing of the ruling Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS).

Although Perisic has held talks with some members of the SPS, no one has yet jumped ship. Indeed, SPS sources say that those party members who met up with Perisic did so at Milosevic's request in order to gauge the general's intentions.

Cynics suggest that Gen. Perisic's decision to found his movement and challenge the regime is little more than an attempt to avoid being indicted for war crimes.

General Perisic was Yugoslav Army chief-of-staff during most of the Bosnian war, including at the time of Srebrenica. Before the Yugoslav Army's withdrawal in May 1992 he commanded operations in much of Herzegovina. Moreover, he is widely seen as the man behind the initial bombardment and destruction of Mostar.

Perisic was head of the Artillery School in Zadar at the beginning of the 1991-92 Croatian war. He has been accused of war crimes by Zagreb for his part in the shelling of Zadar and sentenced in absentia to 20 years in prison. However, in Serbia he is widely considered a hero for successfully overseeing the withdrawal of the weaponry and soldiers of the former Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) from Bosnia without loss.

Perisic was replaced as chief-of-staff by Gen. Dragoljub Ojdanic, a staunch Milosevic loyalist, and it is not clear how much support he still commands within the military.

Since his removal from office last year until the end of the NATO bombing campaign, Perisic spent most of his time restoring his family home in a village in central Serbia. During the last week of NATO air-strikes, he is reported to have moved into a new villa in Belgrade.

Since the end of the war, Perisic has frequently visited Montenegro and has met up on several occasions with Montenegrin Prime Minister Filip Vujanovic and other Montenegrin officials.

To date, only one ex-soldier has come over to his cause, Col. Dragan Vuksic, who asked to be relieved of his command.

A former colleague of General Obradovic, Vuksic was a member of Milosevic's negotiating team during The Hague Conference on Bosnia in 1993 and attended the Dayton peace talks in 1995. Since the end of the Bosnian war, he had represented the Yugoslav Army at regional disarmament talks in Vienna.

Sources in the Yugoslav Army say that few high-ranking officers dare risk compromising their positions, and the privileges they currently possess, by declaring their allegiance to General Perisic. A more likely source of support, it seems, will be from retired officers and other officials whom Milosevic has sacked in recent years.

Srdjan Staletovic is an IWPR correspondent in Belgrade.

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