

## **Pavkovic Used as Stalking Horse?**

**Author:** [Daniel Sunter](#)

Former army commander's candidacy may be an attempt by Djindjic to sabotage Kostunica's bid for the Serbian presidency.

Djindjic loyalist General Nebojsa Pavkovic appears to be contesting the September 29 presidential election to draw votes away from the Serbian prime minister's main political rival, federal head of state Vojislav Kostunica.

The former army chief of staff threw his hat into the ring as independent candidate earlier this month, but analysts suspect that he was pushed into doing so by Zoran Djindjic, his current benefactor, to help the man the premier hopes will triumph in the poll, the reformist Miroljub Labus.

Although Pavkovic virtually has no chance of winning, those close to Djindjic believe he could appeal to some nationalist voters, especially in southern Serbia where he is well known and respected. Pavkovic used to command army units based in the region and is still revered there for his role in combating the Kosovo Liberation Army, KLA.

Under the slogan "The Winner", Pavkovic's campaign message stresses the importance of integration with European institutions, better cooperation between Serbia and neighbouring countries and the transformation of the Yugoslav army into a professional force.

At a campaign rally in Vrsac last week, Pavkovic made great play of his military record, claiming that NATO had praised his troops during the Kosovo conflict. "You know where I was and what I did," he told the crowd.

This may have impressed some of his loyal followers in the south of the country, but the vast majority of people in Serbia recall that his army lost the battle for Kosovo and regard the Vrsac claims as dishonest if not ridiculous.

During the war, when Serbian propaganda led people to believe that the army was doing well, Milosevic sought to cast Pavkovic as an army media star, encouraging him to make frequent public appearances. A book he published at the time, *On the Media Front*, which glorifies his role in the conflict, can still be found in many Belgrade bookshops.

After the war, Pavkovic remained close to Milosevic. In the run up to federal and presidential elections in 2000, the general and his associates led an openly pro-Milosevic campaign within the army, urging soldiers to vote for the latter and bullying those suspected of favouring rival candidates.

But by October 5, 2000 - the day the Milosevic regime crumbled - Pavkovic's allegiance had switched. Sensing the Yugoslav president's days were numbered, he refused to obey his order to lead the troops onto the streets. Instead, the general offered his services to the Democratic Opposition of Serbia, DOS and its leader Vojislav Kostunica, volunteering to mediate and persuade Milosevic to surrender power peacefully.

Pavkovic's timely intervention brought him closer to the new Yugoslav president, with Kostunica opting to keep the general in his post despite calls from the international community that he be removed due to his former ties with Milosevic and role in the Kosovo war.

But Pavkovic's survival instincts were tested when the Serbian media began asking questions about his luxury flat in downtown Belgrade and sumptuous villa in the plush suburb of Dedinje.

Pavkovic fended off the criticism thanks to his ally Kostunica. The Yugoslav president increasingly relied on the on the general's army power base in his rivalry with Djindjic.

Ever the pragmatist, Pavkovic soon came to the conclusion Djindjic, who controls the Serbian police, was better placed to protect him from possible arrest on corruption charges at home or extradition to The Hague.

His switch to the Djindjic camp finally prompted Kostunica to sack Pavkovic this summer. His removal was strongly backed by the international community, which had named Pavkovic as a key obstacle to rapprochement between NATO and Yugoslavia.

Pavkovic responded by airing Kostunica's dirty linen in public. The general claimed recently that the Yugoslav president's advisors had intended to use an army commando unit to storm the Serbian government communications bureau, which they believed was being used to spy on Kostunica's offices.

A Serbian parliamentary board of inquiry was set up, but the investigation was compromised from the outset. The board's terms of reference only covered allegations that Kostunica's staff sought to abuse the role of the army and not those that the president's offices were bugged.

Daniel Sunter is IWPR programme manager in Belgrade.

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