Phantom Serb Voters

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Many in Serbia expect Milosevic will resort to fraud to secure victory in Sunday's elections.

Can Milosevic be prevented from rigging the forthcoming elections? That question is concentrating the minds of the Democratic Opposition of Serbia coalition, DOS, in the run-up to polling day. No one doubts that the regime will declare victory in the federal, municipal and presidential elections on Sunday - and that "victory" will be the product of outright fraud.

According to Belgrade statistician Miladin Kovacevic, Slobodan Milosevic faces a shortfall of 500,000 to 700,000 votes. The Institute of Social Sciences estimates that out of an overall electorate, excluding Kosovo, of 7,861,327, over five million voters will participate in the election. Of those, 2.5 million are expected to vote for Kostunica and 1.4 million for Milosevic.

Milosevic is expected to poll 200,000 votes in Montenegro, but even in the unlikely event that all 200,000 Kosovo Serbs - including refugees in southern Serbian towns, as well as those still in Kosovo - vote in his favour, his total rises to only 1.8 million.

So in order to hang on to power, he will need to make up the difference though electoral fraud. The best place for that, all the experts agree, is in Kosovo.

Professor Dragaor Hiber, deputy president of the Democratic Party of Serbia, claims that Milosevic and his associates have always treated Kosovo as a reservoir of spare votes. For an entire decade, Kosovo Albanians boycotted Yugoslav elections and in that time the regime maintained an iron grip on information about the electoral landscape in the province.

This facilitated rampant ballot box stuffing. During the Serbian presidential elections of 1997, phantom Albanian votes were used to secure victory of the SPS/JUL candidate over the nationalist Vojislav Seselj. Over 300,000 Kosovo Albanians who were boycotting the elections mysteriously voted for Milan Milutinovic.

Stranger still, these votes were allegedly cast in Albanian villages around Drenica, the centre of the Albanian uprising against the Yugoslav regime, where "Serbian police dared not venture without armoured vehicles."

This time, the Serbian government is insisting that the polling should take place in Kosovo, even though this is practically impossible. Security arrangements are so poor that remaining Serbs cannot even venture to their local supermarket, let alone walk to polling stations. The UN mission in Kosovo has announced that while it will not obstruct the voting, it will not support the process.

Nonetheless, the regime has announced that 300 polling stations will be open in the province for those who wish to vote. Although it is out of the question that any Albanian would vote in a Yugoslav election, 600,000 ballot-papers have been printed in Albanian, as if the regime is expecting Albanians to swarm to the polling stations and vote for Milosevic.

Suddenly, two towns in southern Serbia Vranje and Prokuplje have seen their electorates swell to over one million as the names of all eligible voters from Kosovo - both Serb and Albanian - are added to the lists.
It is expected that the ballot boxes of Kosovo voters will end up in Vranje and Prokuplje, which opens up unlimited possibilities for swapping ballot boxes and false “counting”. With no one there to check, the regime could easily claim that 30,000 Albanians from Pristina voted for Milosevic.

Moreover, with no definitive refugee electoral register, refugees might vote more than once, first in Prokuplje, then in Vranje. The DOS proposed using an identify spray to prevent multiple voting, but the Federal Electoral Committee rejected the idea.

After more than a year to ponder the disastrous consequences of the regime's policies, it is unclear if even the 200,000 Kosovo Serbs will vote for Milosevic, as they once did unswervingly and unquestioningly. "How can I vote for him now?" asks Veljo Perovic, who fled with his family from Pec in Kosovo leaving behind his home and his job.

Milosevic has not held any election rallies in Kosovo, as K-For announced that he would be arrested if he set foot on the territory. Similarly, on September 15, his wife Mirjana Markovic was barred from entering the province.

Instead, Milosevic supporters in the Serb part of Kosovska Mitrovica contented themselves by throwing stones at Milosevic's presidential rival Vojislav Kostunica. The Belgrade news agency Beta quoted an anonymous witness who claimed that the regime paid each assailant 3000 dinars - the equivalent of an average monthly salary - to do so.

Even Oliver Ivanovic, president of the Serbian National Council in the Northern part of Kosovska Mitrovica, accused the regime of orchestrating the incident. "The ruling coalition has little support in Kosovo, as people are disappointed by events in the fifteen months since KFOR arrived." The cancellation of SPS meetings in Gracanica and Priluzje due to poor attendance seems to confirm his view.

New opportunities for stuffing ballot boxes may be sought in Montenegro, where both President Milo Djukanovic and the ruling parties are boycotting the federal elections. The Serb regime plans to place polling stations in the houses of Socialist Peoples Party supporters who are loyal to Belgrade. And there will be no reliable observation or control of what happens inside.

Needless to say, there will be no international monitors. The regime refused to allow any participation from countries "which took part in the NATO aggression", limiting its invitations to "friendly states" such as China, Russia and India.

The opposition is attempting to limit the opportunities for fraud by deploying its own monitors. Zoran Djindjic, leader of the Democratic Party, has said that 98.2 per cent of Serb constituencies will have monitors and some monitors will also travel to Kosovo. The opposition has warned that it will not accept the results in areas where it does not manage to place monitors and Vojislav Seselj, leader of the Radical Party and junior coalition partner of the SPS and JUL in the Serbian government, has echoed that pledge.

While it may be impossible to prevent the regime from rigging the results, a major fraud could spark off a wave of protests across Serbia. So Milosevic faces the thorny problem of being unable to win the election by legal means, but risking uncontrollable consequences if he does manage to steal the requisite 600,000 votes.

Milenko Vasovic is a regular IWPR correspondent