

Putin's Victory is Bad News for Belgrade

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There are signs the Kremlin is distancing itself from Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic who has, once again, backed the wrong horse.

A shift in Russian policy towards Serbia is becoming increasingly apparent since Vladimir Putin took over the helm at the Kremlin last month.

Even in the run-up to the presidential elections, observers in Belgrade and Moscow noticed that Putin never once mentioned the Balkans or Serbia during his campaign.

Goran Svilanovic, president of the Civic Alliance of Serbia (GSS), commented, "Shortly before the start of the election, the Russian embassy distributed Putin's electoral manifesto to all the political parties in Serbia. It was quite clear from this document that Moscow has no intention of abandoning its policy of co-operation with the West. Putin's victory is bad news for the Belgrade regime."

The Milosevic regime, on the other hand, invited the ultra-nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy for an official visit to Belgrade on the eve of the March 26 election. According to all the polls, Zhirinovskiy -- who openly styled himself as a would-be dictator -- had no chance of winning the presidential race.

The Serbian opposition criticised Belgrade's decision to invite Zhirinovskiy, stressing that Serbia should woo parties and leaders who represent mainstream Russian politics and not extremists or communists.

The Russian daily newspaper Kommersant wrote at the beginning of April that Moscow had taken a conscious decision to distance itself from the "hated" Yugoslav president. Russia, according to Kommersant, "has no wish to support the regime in Belgrade".

According to a well-informed source close to the highest echelons of the Yugoslav Army, Russia has also broken off its military and technical agreement with Serbia.

Aimed at restructuring and modernising the Yugoslav forces, the agreement was signed by Marshal Igor Sergeev, the Russian defense minister, and his Yugoslav counterpart, Pavle Bulatovic.

Although the source refused to comment further about the details of the agreement, he stressed that Russia had unilaterally put the project on ice.

He added, "The signal is crystal-clear. Putin's administration is sending out a clear message to the political and military leaders in Belgrade."

The move was also prompted by new controls on the Russian defence ministry which mean that it can no longer act as a separate entity. In future, it will be obliged to co-ordinate its activities with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

A gas supply agreement between Russia and Serbia has also run into troubled waters. The Russian

company Gasprom has decreased supplies threefold without informing Belgrade.

The latest developments have taken Belgrade officials by surprise. An anonymous official from the Oil Industry of Serbia (NIS) told Belgrade media, "I don't know why this has happened, we have not been informed by Russia. There have been no problems up until now."

The change in mood is all the more surprising because Russia is currently supplying gas to Serbia on credit, despite existing debts totalling more than \$300 million.

Shortly after the gas crisis, Russian foreign minister Igor Ivanov met with the Yugoslav ambassador in Moscow, Borislav Milosevic, the brother of President Slobodan Milosevic. He called upon the Yugoslav Federation to show greater flexibility towards the international community in solving the Kosovo problem.

Ivanov added that Russia supports UN proposals to give Kosovo greater autonomy within the federation and that Belgrade should play a leading role in the process of stabilising the Balkan region.

Sources in Moscow claim that, during the Contact Group summit at the beginning of April, Russia expressed solidarity with Western states over Serbian attempts to destabilise Montenegro. Russia took the side of the Montenegrin president, Milo Djukanovic.

Moscow roundly condemned the Serbian blockade of Montenegro, commenting that Belgrade's policies had served to aggravate an already complicated situation.

A Serbian government spokesman told IWPR, "Igor Ivanov's behaviour at the meeting with Bora Milosevic, compounded by problems with the gas supply and Russia's support of Montenegro have come as a real shock to Belgrade. Draskovic's invitation to Moscow was an even bigger surprise."

Vuk Draskovic, leader of the Serbian Renewal Movement, SPO, opposition party, was the first Serbian politician to visit the Russian Federation following Putin's election victory on March 26.

A SPO spokesman said Draskovic met with officials from the Russian foreign ministry to discuss early elections in Serbia, Kosovo and Montenegro as well as the lifting of sanctions against the Yugoslav Federation.

Draskovic later said that he had gained Russian support for plans to hold early elections at all levels. Ivanov stressed that Russia stands firmly behind the democratisation of Serbia and opposes any policies of terror and repression.

Belgrade was quick to react to Moscow's diplomatic manoeuvrings.

Milutin Stojkovic, defence committee president and a senior member of the ruling Socialist Party of Serbia, SPS, accused the Russian foreign minister of pandering to the United States government.

"If Ivanov's diplomacy represents nothing more than attempts to appease America, then Russian interests," Stojkovic told a Russian Duma delegation in Belgrade.

Some of Milosevic's more reckless ventures may have cost him Russian support. In the past, his policy towards Russia has been littered with misjudgments.

During the attempted coup against Mikhail Gorbachev in 1991, Belgrade voiced open support for the rebels who wanted to rebuild the Soviet Empire.

Then Milosevic decided to throw his weight behind Zhirinovskiy, hoping that a nationalist regime in Russia would guarantee Serbia a nuclear arsenal of her own. At the time, the Serbian media buzzed with rumours of a secret weapon which Zhirinovskiy had allegedly presented to the government.

After Zhirinovskiy, Belgrade championed the Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov, who showed every sign of posing a real challenge to Boris Yeltsin in the 1996 presidential elections.

But there may be more pragmatic motives behind the shift in Russian foreign policy towards Serbia. Putin may be attempting to show the West that his relationship with Serbia is based on sound economic judgments rather than emotional and ethnic ties.

The Milosevic regime would therefore be forced to turn to the Far East and China in search of new allies.

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