

Radicals Profit From Serbia's Dirty Presidential Battle

Author: IWPR

Ultra-nationalists may benefit most from war of words between pro-democracy candidates over the death of former prime minister Djindjic.

An attempt by Dragan Marsicanin, the presidential hopeful backed by the Serbian government, to make electoral capital out of the killing last year of prime minister Zoran Djindjic could backfire and benefit the ultra-nationalist Serbian Radical Party, analysts predict.

On May 17, Marsicanin's election team raised the issue as a way of scoring points against rival candidate Boris Tadic, who is a member of the Democratic Party which Djindjic once headed.

Dejan Mihajlov, the head of the Marsicanin team and an official in his Democratic Party of Serbia, DSS, called on Tadic and former prime minister Zoran Zivkovic to publicly name Djindjic's assassins. He accused officials of the previous Democratic Party-led government of complicity in Djindjic's murder in March last year.

The statement was widely condemned by other political parties and even by some members of the ruling DSS-led coalition, which came to power last December.

Two DSS coalition partners, foreign minister Vuk Draskovic's Serbian Renewal Movement, SPO, and G17 Plus, led by deputy prime minister Miroslav Labus, quickly distanced themselves from the accusation.

Although Mihajlov insisted he would clarify the allegation the next day, his failure to appear at a press conference scheduled for May 18 raised questions about whether he would do so.

According to sources close to DSS, Mihajlov has since been removed from his post in the election team.

Defending himself from claims that his team had muddied the election campaign, Marsicanin said the accusation was a legitimate response to a scurrilous campaign conducted against his government, which is headed by DSS leader Vojislav Kostunica.

"This was the only possible answer to the smear campaign which has been waged against the ruling coalition for some time," Marsicanin said on May 19, at a pre-election rally in Kikinda.

Marsicanin went on to accuse Belgrade's B92 television station of playing a key role in the smear campaign, saying it had laid itself "open to all those individuals who accused the DSS and its party officials of being involved in the crime [Djindjic's murder]".

Most Serbian commentators agree that the controversy is playing into the hands of the current front-runner, Tomislav Nikolic, candidate of the hard-line nationalist Socialist Radical Party, SRS.

Political analyst Zoran Lutovac, who is an adviser to the Democratic Party, told IWPR that infighting within the democratic bloc may result in followers of the moderate parties abstaining from voting altogether.

The blame game centring on the assassination has deepened an existing rift between the DS and DSS, the two leading parties in the bloc that overthrew the socialist regime of Slobodan Milosevic in 2000.

After Djindjic's murder, the DS-led government attempted to discredit Kostunica and the DSS by detaining several of his associates on suspicion of taking part in the conspiracy that led to the killing.

The controversy over the assassination has been fuelled by frenzied media speculation about the murder investigation. This has launched many contradictory theories into the public domain, including the claim that Djindjic was assassinated by his own associates.

The battle for the truth was stoked further by the unexpected surrender on May 2 of Milorad Lukovic "Legija", regarded as a prime suspect. Many expect his testimony on June 10 to shed new light on the murder. His court appearance takes place only days before the vote.

Legija's lawyers have suggested he may pin all the blame on the Democratic Party, thus sinking the election prospects of Boris Tadic.

Djindjic's mother, Mila, told the magazine Evropa in early May that she had been told by a former minister in her son's government that Zoran was murdered by his associates. She gave no names, however.

Analysts warn that Marsicanin may gain little from the outbursts of his election team, especially as his team have yet to substantiate their accusations.

Instead, he may lose the support of his coalition partners and of G17 Plus and SPO voters. "The DSS's coalition partners will have a hard time convincing their supporters to vote for Marsicanin," political analyst Zoran Lutovac told IWPR.

The air of nervousness on the Marsicanin team may reflect the poor ratings reported by several polling agencies.

The Skan polling agency in Novi Sad recently put Marsicanin in third place, behind Tadic and Nikolic. It said 26 per cent of voters intended to go for Tadic, compared with 23 for Nikolic and only 19 per cent for Marsicanin.

Other agencies have put Nikolic in front of Tadic, but they, too, have placed Marsicanin in the rear.

Skan's director, Milka Puzigaca, says a dirty campaign will not help Marsicanin. The heterogeneous nature of the government, she says, means G17 Plus voters, for example, may easily "disassociate themselves from the candidate backed by their party".

Voters of the monarchist SPO may peel away in a similar fashion, even though their party officially backs Marsicanin's campaign, she says.

Djordje Vukadinovic, chief editor of the magazine New Serbian Political Thought, says the accusations lodged against Tadic were "both damaging and unnecessary", especially since Marsicanin has failed to

corroborate them.

Vukadinovic predicted that the “current dirty campaign” would damage both the DS and DSS and disappoint both parties’ supporters.

The Radicals, on the other hand, are widely seen as having the most stable and committed electoral base, and are least likely to abandon their candidate.

Analyst Boza Prelevic says the two moderate parties may rue the day when they decided to waste their campaign efforts on attacking each other, so leaving the field open for the SRS.

"I cannot understand why the democratic options in this country are, through their disputes, practically clearing the way for a Radical victory in the election," said Prelevic.

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