

## **Rally Underwhelms Belgraders**

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The public's lukewarm response to a planned anti-government rally in Belgrade is yet a further sign of its disillusionment with the opposition.

Serious doubts over the aims and unity of the Serbian opposition are likely to take the bite out of an anti-government demonstration in Belgrade later this week.

The April 14 rally called by 17 opposition parties and coalitions, which signed an agreement on January 10 to participate in a joint campaign for early democratic elections, has so far failed to get the public excited.

For the first time since the mass protests of winter 1996-1997, the two largest opposition parties, the Serbian Renewal Movement, SPO, and the Democratic Party, DS, will appear before Belgraders together.

But two major failings have served to dull anticipation. The bond uniting the opposition parties remains very weak and their leaders have failed to set out exactly what the rally is meant to achieve.

Since the January agreement, the opposition has been pushing for republican and presidential elections, scheduled for next year, to take place along with local and federal polls this spring.

The Milosevic government has dismissed these demands twice already, without provoking any real response from the opposition.

Ognjen Pribicevic, an advisor to SPO leader Vuk Draskovic, admits calls for local and federal elections before the autumn are unrealistic. Such timing would not suit Milosevic's Socialists and their coalition partners, Vojislav Seselj's Radical Party. And for technical reasons it is already too late to call spring elections.

Opposition hopes are therefore pinned on the demonstrators succeeding in forcing early republican and presidential elections. To date, however, the opposition has yet to present such an ultimatum to Milosevic. And even if they were to do so, the demonstrators are unlikely to remain on the streets should the president refuse.

The proposed rally in Belgrade resembles those already organised across provincial Serbia. Barring some unpredictable development, the protest will probably be uneventful.

The opposition's January agreement did improve their public image but many old problems remain.

For ten years the opposition failed to unite, thanks largely to the vanity of its various leaders and meddling by Milosevic's moles.

Now, when unity offers the only hope for survival, Draskovic and DS leader, Zoran Djindjic, continue to squabble. And other divisions have reared their ugly heads too.

Draskovic, for example, recently had a falling out with Velimir Ilic, the mayor of Cacak and a former activist in the SPO. This breach created difficulties when it came to planning the rally.

Draskovic vetoed Ilic's appearance and speech. In the end, Ilic stood aside for the sake of unity but said he was sick to death of the constant wrangling between the opposition parties.

Goran Svilanovic, leader of the Civic Alliance of Serbia, said the Ilic incident made him "ashamed" of the opposition.

The Milosevic government has been quick to exploit these divisions. One of its well-publicised utterances runs as follows, "Those who quarrel over who is to speak at a rally are not the people to carry out change."

Draskovic carries most responsibility for sowing confusion in opposition ranks. Since an assassination attempt on October 3, 1999, which killed four of his SPO associates, Draskovic has rarely appeared in public. Many observers believe the incident provoked a change of strategy.

Rumours, vehemently denied by the SPO, suggest the lukewarm preparations for the April 14 rally stem from Draskovic's change of tack.

The SPO won the last local elections in Belgrade and currently run the town council, leading to speculation that Draskovic is also keen to delay local elections for as long as possible, for fear of losing control of the city.

Such speculation flies in the face, however, of Draskovic's trip to Moscow last week where he asked the Russian Foreign Minister, Igor Ivanov, to use Russia's influence to persuade Milosevic to call early elections.

One thing seems almost certain - Milosevic will not bring the ballots forward, regardless of events on April 14 or pressure from abroad.

Given the opposition is not prepared to deliver an ultimatum, the rally will not be a real test of opposition unity. Only if the local and federal ballots go ahead in the autumn will that unity really be put to the test.

Unless the opposition participate on a joint list, all their efforts will prove futile. A survey by the Belgrade agency "Medijum" projected that a joint opposition would win 58 seats and a majority in the federal parliament. The ruling coalition would lose 20 seats. The survey, which covered only Serbia, predicted a similar outcome for local and republican elections.

But the autumn is still a long way off and there is plenty of time for opposition unity to fracture and for Milosevic to extend his repressive measures.

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