

Serbia: Further Action Against Mafia Demanded

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Does the end of the Zemun gang signal the start of a wider war on organised crime?

The break-up of the notorious Zemun gang in Serbia dealt a serious blow to organised crime in Serbia, but senior officials are concerned that it should mark the beginning rather than the end of a campaign to cleanse the government of mafia connections.

On April 29, the Serbian authorities charged 45 people, mostly members of the Zemun gang, with murder and conspiracy to commit murder in the March 12 assassination of prime minister Zoran Djindjic. On May 20, the prosecutor's office in Belgrade filed a request to investigate 25 members of the same gang to establish whether they had been trading in cocaine, heroin and marijuana.

The showdown between the state and the mafia was triggered by the Djindjic assassination. The government immediately declared war on the Zemun group, and police accused its members of killing the premier in a plot they hatched with the elite Red Berets interior ministry unit. Djindjic was gunned down just one day before a number of gang members were due to be arrested.

More than 10,000 people were detained in the ensuing sweep, and 4,500 of them remain in custody.

The police believe that their operation has destroyed the Zemun gang. Key leaders Dusan Spasojevic and Mile Lukovic were killed when police tried to arrest them in the Belgrade suburb of Barajevo. Ten other prominent gang members, including former Red Berets commander Milorad "Legija" Lukovic, are still at large. The group's drug distribution network in Pozarevac, Novi Sad and other Serbian towns has also been broken up.

The gang was regarded as the main drug dealing and trafficking organisation in Serbia and was also believed to have masterminded a number of high-profile abductions and assassinations of rivals. The existence of the Zemun "clan" was officially acknowledged in 2001 when Serbian police published a paper claiming there were 50 active criminal groups, of which Zemun was the most powerful, specialising in drug, cigarette and oil smuggling.

The strength of the Zemun gang can be gauged by the fact that it was able to publish its own weekly newspaper, *Identitet*, which carried accusations against the Serbian authorities, attacked rival groups, extolled the wartime activities of the Red Berets, and flirted with the Serbian opposition.

The Djindjic assassination marked a watershed in the government's attitude to powerful criminal interests. Analysts say it ended three years in which the mafia had effectively maintained a non-aggression pact with the governing party, the Democratic Opposition of Serbia, DOS. This arrangement dated back to its support for the overthrow of Slobodan Milosevic in October 2000.

For the government as a whole, victory over the Zemun group shows it is serious about dealing with the threat from organised crime. But some officials are concerned that parts of the government are still too closely intertwined with the underworld to allow the war on crime to be pursued to its end. They cite dubious linkages which they say exist between some of their colleagues and either the mafia or else legitimate businesses with a sideline in illicit smuggling.

"Some members of the Serbian government are in collusion with those involved in economic crime.... That is why the government in its present composition cannot really fight economic crime," Mladjan Dinkic, the pro-reform governor of the National Bank of Serbia, NBS, told the state TV station RTS on May 19.

At the beginning of May, Dinkic warned that massive transfers of foreign currency to bank accounts abroad were taking place. The capital was being shifted on the basis of fake invoices, and Dinkic said he suspected tax evasion and money laundering were behind it.

In early April, Deputy Prime Minister Nebojsa Covic accused some in the political establishment of cooperating with the Zemun gang. He urged the police to focus on economic criminals, who he said had so far been left untouched, as well as on groups engaged in smuggling oil, cigarettes and weapons.

Covic's criticism of political linkages with organised crime included the accusation that some members of the government had been in regular contact with gangland figures, and had spent time at their headquarters at a villa in Belgrade's Zemun district. In a sign of the differing opinions held within the cabinet, this accusation was vehemently denied by his fellow deputy prime minister, Cedomir Jovanovic, who was appointed to the post during the state of emergency.

The crackdown has highlighted the political ties and support the Zemun group enjoyed over the last three years with politicians, judiciary, police, the secret service and the military security service. Among those arrested are assistant state prosecutor Milan Sarajlic, former state security chief Jovica Stanisic, and former Red Berets commander Franko Simatovic. The latter two were close associates of Milosevic, and are to be transferred to the Hague tribunal to face accusations of war crimes in Croatia and Bosnia.

The ultra-nationalist politician Vojislav Seselj, who is already on trial in The Hague, is also alleged to have links with the Zemun gang. So are two associates of former Yugoslav president Vojislav Kostunica - his security advisor, Rade Bulatovic, and military security chief Aco Tomic. Both men are currently under arrest.

The investigation has not so far extended to members of DOS, although reports that some of them had connections with the Zemun gang have surfaced in the media. In mid-April, Belgrade newspapers published a photograph of Nenad Opacic, currently under arrest and described by police as the main drugs kingpin in Novi Sad, in the company of Nenad Canak, a DOS leader and deputy speaker of the Vojvodina assembly, together with Miodrag Kostic, owner of the sugar firm MK Komerc and a long-standing friend of Djindjic.

Canak has confirmed that he knew Opacic but denied any knowledge of the kind of business he was in. He told Radio Deutsche Welle on April 25 that Opacic was an opposition supporter who had provided security at all the opposition's meetings in Novi Sad.

"All credit to him for his opposition work, but he got the punishment he deserved for drug dealing, and is now serving his sentence. But those two things should not be confused," Canak said.

The latest test for the government's resolve is a scandal involving Serbian businesses which repackaged imported sugar and sold it to the EU. The affair resulted in a three-month suspension of Brussels' preferential terms for Serbian sugar exports. Although an investigation is underway, the authorities appear to be dragging their feet on identifying and charging the culprits. Again, this gives rise to concern that they are unwilling to expose the extent of official involvement in the scam.

Analysts in Belgrade say that crushing the Zemun network was an important first step towards dismantling the web of organised crime in Serbia, but it opened up a set of connections which go to the heart of how the country is governed. Now, they say, they will be watching to see just how ready the authorities are to

finish the job they started.

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