

Serbia: Kostunica Outfoxes Djindjic

Author: [Zeljko Cvijanovic](#)

Kostunica comes up with ingenious way of overcoming Djindjic's bid to stop him running for the Serbian presidency

Serbia's prime minister Zoran Djindjic appears to have failed to block his arch-rival, Yugoslav head of state Vojislav Kostunica, from contesting the Serbian presidency in September.

Kostunica announced his bid for the post at a press conference on June 23. As federation president, he enjoys only a fraction of the power he would have as head of Serbia. Victory would put him in a strong position to curb Djindjic's power.

Kostunica is supposed to remain in his present post until the adoption of the constitutional framework for the new joint Serbian-Montenegrin state, a complicated process currently underway, with apparently no end in sight.

Circles close to Djindjic had thought that early elections for Serbia's head of state could prevent Kostunica from joining the contest. This is why the elections, scheduled to take place when the current presidential mandate expires in January 2003, were brought forward to September 21 this year. But Kostunica found a loophole that he believed would allow him to be a candidate for the Serbian poll even while he remained in his current post.

Kostunica and Djindjic have long been bitter rivals within the ruling coalition, the Democratic Opposition of Serbia, DOS, which took over from the ousted Slobodan Milosevic. Although he was much more popular than his rival, Kostunica's job gave him little more than nominal power.

The agreement between Serbia and Montenegro, signed under pressure from the EU special envoy Javier Solana, has secured the establishment of the joint Serbian-Montenegrin state whose president will apparently have few significant powers, while real authority will rest with the leaders of the two republics.

At the moment, the Serbian head of state, Milan Milutinovic, has been indicted by The Hague tribunal for war crimes and is serving out his five-year term, without being able to use the powers vested in this post.

Djindjic speeded up the Serbia's presidential election in the hope of sidelining Kostunica and clearing the way for his own favoured candidate, federal deputy prime minister Miroljub Labus. Despite the popularity of the latter, opinion polls in Serbia show Kostunica would beat him.

Kostunica has for some time been facing a dilemma. If he resigned from the post of Yugoslav president to run for the position of Serbian head of state, this would bring into question his willingness to preserve the union between the two republics - something he was so far keen to support. The international community would regard his resignation with disfavour, taking the view that it would militate against the preservation of the union.

On the other hand, if he doesn't participate in the Serbian elections Djindjic would be left with a clear run to take over power in the country.

Kostunica found a legal loophole that enables him to contest the Serbian presidency election while still in his present job. He argued that whoever is elected to the former will not be able to assume power before Milutinovic's mandate runs out. So while the current constitution forbids the federal head of state from performing any other function, it doesn't stop him from running for the Serbian presidency and becoming the republic's president-elect.

And analysts believe that Kostunica is of the view that international pressure will succeed in completing the process of forming the new Serbia-Montenegro state by January, freeing him from his current post and opening the way for him to become president of Serbia.

Zeljko Cvijanovic is the editor in chief of Belgrade weekly Blic News.

Location: Serbia

Focus: Balkans: Regional Reporting & Sustainable Training

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/serbia-kostunica-outfoxes-djindjic>