

Serbia: Vojvodina Backlash

Author: IWPR

Vojvodina frustration at lack of progress on autonomy boils over.

A year after the collapse of Slobodan Milosevic's regime in Serbia, politicians in the northern province of Vojvodina are demanding why so little has changed. Frustration is bubbling over at Belgrade's failure to restore Vojvodina's autonomous status, despite promising to do so in the heady days after Milosevic's downfall.

On October 9 that frustration came to a head. Nenad Canak, president of the provincial parliament, seized control of the regional television station in Novi Sad from the centralised network of Radio Television Serbia, RTS.

In front of television cameras, a cursing Canak tore down the RTS sign, hurled it to the ground and stamped on it. "Television Novi Sad is founded by and belongs to the Vojvodina parliament, and is meant to serve the interests of Vojvodina's citizens," Canak said on air during a special broadcast that night.

"What has been done since the elections were won? Nothing! We got nothing in return, and (Serbia's leaders) don't intend to do a thing. Can a handful of paper-shufflers and parliamentary parasites in Belgrade trample over the will of Vojvodina's citizens?" Canak demanded.

Vojvodina's support of Serbian opposition parties during Milosevic's downfall was contingent upon the restoration of self-rule. The Serb-majority province, which comprises a multitude of minorities, was stripped of its autonomy in 1989 by Milosevic.

Opinion polls show that more than 70 per cent of the province's roughly two million population want greater devolution, especially in the economic field.

Accounting for a fifth of Serbia's 10.5 million population, Vojvodina generates more than 40 per cent of the country's revenue. But due to Serbia's tightly centralised structure, Vojvodina receives less than one per cent of the income it provides.

Vojvodina also bears the largest burden of refugees in Serbia. The republic shelters around three to four hundred thousand, with around half living in the northern Serbian province.

Aside the strong political symbolism of his move, observers believe there was also a very practical motive behind Canak's seizure of the television station - an attempt to secure media support for Vojvodina's parties ahead of possible elections in Serbia.

Canak's aim, according to observers, was to underline Belgrade's failure to keep its promises to Vojvodina and to focus media attention on his own policies. TV Novi Sad had recently appointed Belgrade politicians over local ones to run the station, which meant provincial parties, with the exception of those loyal to the current authorities in Serbia, would not get much coverage in the run up to a ballot.

The province's leaders know the issue of autonomy is unlikely to be resolved until after the elections, as the rivalry between the two Serbian leaders, Yugoslav president Vojislav Kostunica and the Serbian

premier, Zoran Djindjic, is pushing the ruling Democratic Opposition of Serbia, DOS, coalition towards collapse.

DOS has been sending contradictory signals to Vojvodina for months. Some parties in the coalition have been very sympathetic to the notion of autonomy, but have called for patience. Others have bitterly objected, calling devolution a step towards separatism. The loudest opponent is the Democratic Party of Serbia, DSS, led by Kostunica.

Pro-autonomy parties also have to contend with the provincial branches of parties loyal to the Serbian authorities. Vojvodina's 120-seat parliament is more or less split between the former and the latter.

On October 11, at the first assembly session after the seizure of the television, a majority of deputies voted in favour of a proposal to form a committee to investigate the circumstances surrounding the incident and Canak's "unsuitable conduct".

The vote did not deter Canak and his supporters. A day later, he went to the headquarters of Petrol Industries of Serbia in Novi Sad, followed by a number of journalists. He announced that if Belgrade continued to ignore Vojvodina's interests, the company - the largest in the country - would be placed under the control of the province's assembly, as would other firms in Vojvodina. Belgrade responded with a fierce attack on Canak. Milosevic's socialists branded it a strike against state institutions. The president of the Serbian parliament, Dragan Marsicanin, a highly placed figure in the DSS, called for legal proceedings against Canak, who retorted that his actions were merely in keeping with DOS pledges.

In July, Canak, and two other prominent pro-autonomy politicians, Miodrag Isakov and Jozef Kasa, asked their partners in DOS to work towards granting Vojvodina more control over the economy, education, culture and sports.

On August 21, Vojvodina leaders, meeting in Novi Sad, asked the Serbian parliament to start preparing a new constitution geared towards decentralising the country. And the Serbian government was instructed to prepare concrete proposals for transferring certain powers to Vojvodina's parliament and executive council within two weeks.

The two weeks came and went without change. The province clings to the hope that its fortunes may change after the elections.

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