

Serbia Walks Tightrope

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State of emergency presents the country with both a risk and a unique opportunity.

If the newly-elected prime minister Zoran Zivkovic can shake off the yoke of organised crime and bring in Zoran Djindjic's assassins, he will earn a place in the history books as the man who achieved in a few weeks what his predecessor failed to accomplish in two years.

However, if the fight against crime requires too many repressive measures, then Serbia could start laying the foundations for dictatorship. Zivkovic, 43, is walking a tightrope, but at present he enjoys international support and the backing of the public, who remain outraged at the death of their premier. For the foreseeable future, the Serbian people are prepared to wait and see what happens.

Elected by a slim majority on March 18, Zivkovic used his opening speech to tell parliament that the crackdown on the mafia was beginning to yield results. So far, around 2,000 people have been arrested in a widespread police operation across the country and many remain in custody. Crucially, however, the chief suspects in the assassination, Dusan "Siptar" Spasojevic and Milorad "Legija" Lukovic, have not yet been detained.

British ambassador Charles Crawford told the Belgrade daily Blic that the state of emergency is a "high price" to pay for the crackdown "but the price will be even higher if you do not confront these issues" and added that "the state of emergency should be approached in a democratic manner and lifted in the near future".

However, some opposition groups believe that the government is fighting some criminals more than others. "Will the fight against organised crime include the Surcin gang as well?" asked Dragan Marsicanin, vice president of Vojislav Kostunica's Democratic Party of Serbia, a reference to his party's suspicions that the government in the past tolerated the activities of the Belgrade crime syndicate. "There are 155 criminal gangs in Serbia and none of them enjoys protection," replied Zivkovic.

On March 17, the government banned two newspapers, the weekly Identitet, or Identity, believed to be close to Lukovic and Spasojevic, and the daily Nacional, which had recently fallen out with the authorities. The terms of the state of emergency prohibit any public comment or speculation on why it has been introduced.

The government said that Nacional, which takes a strong anti-government line on a number of issues, had been banned for breaching that prohibition in various articles.

Opposition concerns about the possible direction the emergency could take were raised by Zivkovic's comment that Djindjic's murder was "not only a showdown between the mafia and a man who wanted to destroy organised crime".

He added that "Djindjic's murder had a political dimension and political involvement" raising fears that critics of the government or those it doesn't approve of might also find themselves detained under the pretext of security measures.

Indeed, the government has announced a large-scale purge of the judiciary, with which it has been in open conflict for some months. "We will not allow citizens to be held hostage by incompetent people who enable

criminals to continue their crimes by setting the worst offenders free," Zivkovic told parliament.

Judges have interpreted his comments as a pretext to attack the independence of the judiciary, as the government seeks to appoint loyal lieutenants to the courts. The law on criminal proceedings will also be amended, since in Zivkovic's words it gives "too much freedom to criminals and not enough power to the security services".

At the moment, the unspecified duration of the state of emergency is raising more concerns than any specific measures involved. In an article published on the website of the magazine "New Serbian Political Thought" on March 18, political analyst and lecturer with the Novi Sad School of Philosophy, Slobodan Antonic wrote that if it is not lifted soon "it will become difficult to avoid the conclusion that it is serving the interests of one particular clique, which will be able to use terror and violence in a showdown with its rival".

Mirojub Labus, leader of the opposition G17 Plus party, told a press conference on March 17 that he supports the introduction of the state of emergency, but believes it should run for a clearly specified period. At present, the government has not given any clear indication of when it might end. That will in part depend on the police and security services, of course. Once the major gangs and crime syndicates are reined in and Djindjic's killers brought to book, then its raison d'etre will be gone - one hopes.

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