

Serbian Patricide (cont.)

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Former Serbian president Ivan Stambolic has been kidnapped just as he was making his political comeback and posing a potential challenge to his former protege Slobodan Milosevic.

The disappearance of former Serb president Ivan Stambolic has given rise to fears that political patricide has struck once again in Serbia - this time literally.

Last seen August 25 near his flat by a park in Belgrade preparing for his usual morning job, Stambolic had been the subject of considerable speculation. In advance of the September elections, there was talk that Slobodan Milosevic's old mentor, ruthlessly driven from office more than a decade ago by his former charge, might now return to active politics to challenge the current president.

With the electoral register for the presidential candidates set to close September 4, Stambolic went missing without a trace. The obvious fear was that he would be found dead like hundreds of other politicians, businessmen and other key figures assassinated in Serbia over the past decade. Rumours circulated of his imminent return, and equally of his death.

I last met a very vigorous Stambolic on a sunny Sunday morning in Paris this past June. I had read nearly all his pronouncements about Milosevic's putsch on September 24, 1987, which propelled Serbia into a nationalist crusade bringing the fall of Yugoslavia and a succession of bloody wars. But I had not had the chance to speak directly and freely with him since being expelled myself from Belgrade in spring 1994 as *Le Monde* correspondent for the region.

His visit to France was quite confidential. He had come to join Kiro Gligorov, the former president of Macedonia, and Azem Vllassi, the last leader of Kosovo before Milosevic abolished the autonomous status of the mainly Albanian province in 1989. This was the first time since 1991 that Stambolic, a Serb, and Vllassi, an Albanian, were meeting again.

Three former top communist leaders from Tito's Yugoslavia sharing their memories here in Paris was hardly a common occurrence. But it was not so surprising: communist they were, but all became much more European-oriented than most of the new leaders at home. And since the beginning of the end of old Yugoslavia, the three of them had stood against their own nationalists.

The former president was sitting with Vidosav Stevanovic, a Serbian writer in exile, in the lobby of The Meridian Hotel, and he looked just the same. Even though dressed in a suit styled from the 1980s, he still seemed elegant, naturally appealing like a movie star. When he ruled in Belgrade, he was often called a playboy, a rare description, in fact, for a communist leader even in Yugoslavia.

Stambolic, 64, has always been full of life. But I was expecting a face worn by resentment. He had never shirked his share of responsibility for "bringing the monster to the top". He admits his failure to take seriously the few warnings from his closest advisors about his protege, "mali Sloba" (little Sloba).

But in the post-Tito Yugoslavia, he had been one of the most prominent politician within the federation, the strongest politician in Serbia, popular in his own republic, feared by the Yugoslav communist establishment which was loosing public support, respected by Albanian party leaders. Until the day in 1987 that Milosevic manipulated a political congress in Belgrade to take control of the party and oust Stambolic and the reformists in a daring political patricide. Since then, Stambolic, formerly the popular leader, became a pariah.

The man could have been destroyed, filled with resentment and hate, and desire for revenge - especially with the disaster of the subsequent years in Serbia. But he appeared calm, serious-minded, and in control. He was ready to speak about his political banishment, the break with Milosevic, and Milosevic's conversion from his student to political manipulator extraordinaire and ardent Serbian nationalist

And he was ready to speak about the war, and responsibility.

"Most Serbs today are against Milosevic," he said. "But they don't know why because they refuse to answer the crucial questions. We Serbs do not want to confront reality and recognise our defeat. We would like to make an abstraction of all that has happened, to erase from our memories the last 13 years of nightmare because the price to pay is too high. We would have to share some of the responsibility with Milosevic."

It was obvious that Milosevic would not be able to prevent Stambolic from reappearing sooner or later. Milosevic had tried to stifle him once again, in autumn 1997, by taking over YUBMES, the bank Stambolic had build up with small shareholders to promote economic exchanges with neighbouring countries, mainly the ex-Yugoslav republics. "In a one-family, private state, with a state economy, it's surprising that they tolerated me so long," Stambolic had said.

Stambolic had always been a fighter - never really quitting the game despite his 13 years of internal political exile. Silent for many years, he spent his time reading and exploring the facts to understand how his country, how his Serbia, choose such an "anti-European and anti-modernist way." He seemed truly troubled that Yugoslavia, which had a greater potential for a democratic transition than many others, could have fallen off the train of History and sunk into war.

Following this period of self-examination, which he suggested every Serb would have to do, in 1995 he broke his silence, publishing a book, " Put u Bespuce " (Journey to Nothingness), giving testimony to the events which lead to his removal as Serbian leader, the victory of Milosevic and the rise of nationalism.

The book was produced by B-92, the independent radio station and publisher, and from that point, Stambolic joined friends or activist groups in defence of human rights, shared his thought with other banished intellectuals and started again to be in contact with ordinary people encouraging them to believe in future. Latterly, he became close to the Otpor movement, hoping that his political experience could be profitable to the youth.

A loyalist throughout, he continued to oppose nationalism and urge a European orientation. " Serbia cannot refloat without the West, " he insisted. " It has to build its future in Europe. "

Incapable of producing a realistic alternative, Serbia could draw on Stambolic's abilities, and privately he did not exclude the possibility of returning of running in the election. Clearly he had been pressed to enter the ring, and in any event, he was clearly back in politics.

Stambolic was " in peak political condition, " according to the former Kosovo leader Vllassi, who knew him many years, " in a mood to take part actively in politics ". Would Stambolic have run in the elections on September 24, scheduled for the 13th anniversary of Milosevic's coup? We may never know. But the question was certainly on the table, and could certainly have been a motive for of his disappearance.

Stambolic never believed Milosevic would leave power peacefully.

The breaking with Milosevic will be bloody," he said. " You cannot destroy a dictatorship from inside except with a new dictatorship." He was convinced change could only come with serious help from the West, and promoted the lifting of sanctions.

"Milosevic wants to make Serbia a prison because he needs total isolation to stay in office. The West must prevent him from establishing a Chinese wall, " Stambolic argued.

But he insisted that real change could only come from the people themselves. Ivan Stambolic was one of the very few Serbs to argue that " people have to understand that they will not change much by removing Milosevic if they do not get rid of nationalism at the same time. "

Now, Serbia has got rid of him, and the political patricide continues.

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