

## **Serbian Prince Stakes Claim to National Role**

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A royal restoration looks a distant prospect, but Prince Aleskandar is becoming a sought-after public figure.

At the bottom of the drive of the royal residence in Belgrade, soldiers from the army of Serbia-Montenegro guard the man who would like to turn their state back into a kingdom.

It is an unusual arrangement. Aleksandar Karadjordjevic has no official status in Serbia. He inhabits a mysterious and very Balkan no man's land - neither private citizen nor head of state, but something in-between.

The son of Yugoslavia's last crowned ruler is certainly not an ordinary citizen. At the recent bicentenary celebrations of the modern Serbian state, chants of "We want the King" echoed round the politicians and bishops who had gathered in Orasac to unveil a statue to Aleksandar's predecessor, Djordje Petrovic, or Kara Djordje (Black George), whose 1804 uprising against the Turks restored Serbia's independence.

At the celebration, the Prince did not ignore the storm clouds looming over the country that his great-great grandfather liberated. With extreme nationalists emerging as a force in Serbian politics, Aleksandar delivered a ringing defence of a "European" Serbia that would defend the "equality of all citizens regardless of their religious or ethnic origins".

As the grim faces of some dignitaries showed, the words were not music to everyone's ears. But the Prince has always refused to take an easy road to popularity by espousing the kind of demagogic nationalism that so many politicians and, tragically, some members of his own family have employed with disastrous results.

Back in Belgrade, he told IWPR he was worried that after "the years of madness" under Slobodan Milosevic, Serbia may yet stumble on the road from authoritarian nationalism to real pluralism.

The country's economic woes trouble him yet more. "My concern is that neither politicians nor citizens understand what is needed," he said. "We are falling far behind - look at Slovenia and Hungary. Reforms are tough. The state has to function. The backbone of every economy is an entrepreneurial state, but here...(he sighs)."

"Jobs are the important thing," he added. "How to bring up the standard of living is a big task. To do that, you need unpopular things, like taxation, but you have to explain it to people first."

Aleksandar's return to Belgrade after Milosevic's fall in 2000 was the stuff of fairy tales, or of American movies about far-away European royals blown around by the winds of fortune.

After Tito's communists airbrushed the family out of Yugoslav history in 1945, Aleksandar never dreamed he would one day pace the spacious study that his grandfather King Aleksander I had used; pluck leather-bound tomes from the royal library (sadly plundered under the communists); or stroll terraces on which his tragic father King Peter II played as a child, before exile doomed him to a lifetime of roaming the world.

His delight to be home - albeit a home he never saw until middle age - is transparent as he points out the

red stars that Tito ordered to be painted over the royal coats of arms in one of the downstairs rooms.

It was only when the Berlin Wall fell that Prince Aleksandar realised a historic window of opportunity was opening, and it was only after Milosevic fell that he finally left England for the state his ancestor forged, his father ruled and which he, too, hopes to reign over.

Belgrade city officials handed him his father's palace without ado. "They said, 'Here are the keys - there you are!'" he recalled, laughing. But while the army provides a guard, any comparison with Buckingham Palace stops there. There is no system as in Britain where the state contributes to the royal family's household expenses.

Aleksander used private savings to redecorate rooms, employ courtiers and have woodsmen take away 600 dead trees in the grounds. There is still much to restore - including a splendid, blackened Poussin in the hallway.

The question of who pays would be academic if he became head of state, but Serbia's future arrangements remain shrouded. Popular faith in the politicians is at a nadir but most do not see a monarchy as the answer.

A poll published recently in Reporter magazine said only 1.3 per cent listed the Prince as "Serbia's potential saviour". But even God scored only 2.5 per cent and no one got more than 8. The truth is that people do not know who to trust.

"I profess the solution of a parliamentary monarchy, which works pretty well," the Prince maintains. "I'm talking about a constitutional, not a political, role. We need a system where the head of state is not a member of a party and can act as a focal point."

When that happens is not important, he says. People "need to understand what a parliamentary republic is before they know what a monarchy is".

Through country tours and receptions at the palace, Aleksandar has won over a colourful group of allies that range from nationalist politicians like Vuk Draskovic to the Mufti of Novi Pazar, the Muslim stronghold in Serbia's south-west. "He's a good guy," the Prince muses about the Mufti - an unusual remark in islamophobic Serbia.

But to many outside the royalist heartland of Sumadija, he remains unknown. "He belongs to us and we to him" was the response of Sinisa, a photographer from Zrenjanin. But Vlada, a Belgrader, scoffed, "He is like an extra-terrestrial who has just landed in Serbia." "I am more interested in his son," admitted a local woman, referring to 24-year-old Prince Peter, who resembles his royal grandfather.

A royal restoration looks a distant prospect, but Prince Aleskandar has in the meantime without fanfare entered Serbia's national life. He was there last weekend among the dignitaries laying wreaths to mark the first anniversary of the assassination of former prime minister Zoran Djindjic.

Readers of the newspaper Danas the next day might also have followed the latest article debating monarchy versus republic. He may not have reclaimed the lead role, but the head of the Karadjordjevic family is already an actor on Serbia's unstable and sometimes dangerous political stage.

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