

Serbia's US Dilemma

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Belgrade is being forced to make a difficult choice over its international allegiances.

The Serbian government may have to choose between a future in the European Union and closer financial and diplomatic ties to the United States, before the end of the month.

Belgrade now has less than three weeks to accept or refuse to sign an agreement outlawing the extradition of United States citizens to the International Criminal Court, ICC, in The Hague.

If the agreement is signed before July 1 - as Washington insists it must be - Serbia-Montenegro's hopes of joining the EU, which is strongly opposed to America's demands for exemption from the ICC, may be dashed.

But if Belgrade chooses to stand with Brussels, millions of dollars of much-needed US aid could be lost, and with it any hope of revitalising Serbia's shattered economy.

The dilemma was summed up by Serbia-Montenegro president Svetozar Marovic, who said, "We live in Europe, and want to have our place there. But on the other hand, our foreign policy priorities are friendship and expanded cooperation with the US."

Foreign Minister Goran Svilanovic's June 7 statement that "there will be no haste in taking this serious decision", has led analysts to speculate that Serbia-Montenegro will not reveal its choice until after the EU's Thessalonica Summit on June 21 at the earliest.

Svilanovic has emphasised that while the Serbian and Montenegrin governments will make a final decision together, the process itself will be public, and arguments for and against Washington's request, will be presented to the people.

Belgrade is now in very delicate position. Not only are the authorities worried by Brussels' statement that "all those who wish to be a part of the European Union must honour its principles" - which implies the rejection of Washington's demands - they are even more concerned by the domestic implications.

Questions are now being asked in Serbia as to how America can demand that Belgrade extradite all war crimes suspects to stand trial at The Hague tribunal, while simultaneously asking that its citizens be exempt from the same process at the ICC.

Many local institutions and non-governmental organisations are now asking the government to reject the extradition agreement. Belgrade's Human Rights Centre, led by prominent international law professor Vojin Dimitrijevic, said, "It is hypocritical that America, which unambiguously insists on cooperation with ... The Hague tribunal, should undermine the attempt to found a permanent international criminal court."

The Serbian media has taken a similar stance, devoting much editorial space to criticism of the Bush administration while allowing little, if any, argument in favour of the non-extradition agreement.

Anti-American feelings have long run high in Serbia - a product of the isolationist tactics of the Milosevic regime and the 1999 NATO bombing campaign, during which people were encouraged to view NATO and the US as one and the same.

According to the latest public opinion survey, carried out in May by the Medium Gallup agency, 80.9 per cent of respondents said they thought poorly of NATO and 73.7 per cent viewed the US in a negative light.

However, a poll conducted at the same time by the Belgrade weekly NIN showed more than half of Serbia's citizens were in favour of the country joining NATO in the interests of reintegration with the international community - this in spite of their traditional antipathy toward the alliance.

Such opinions have implications for the ruling coalition, Democratic Opposition of Serbia, DOS, which is under increasing pressure from opposition parties clamouring for early elections.

The risk facing the government becomes clear when its slim majority in the 250-strong parliament is taken into account. If early elections are forced by the opposition, any decision to stand with America and sign the non-extradition agreement may prove fatal.

On the other hand, the government knows full well that it will be almost impossible to revive the economy and raise the Serbian people's low standard of living without financial help from the US. And unless there is a marked improvement in these areas, DOS stands little chance of being re-elected anyway.

Observers say that Washington is well aware of these factors, and has been engaging in some very subtle diplomacy to improve relations between the two nations in the run up to the treaty deadline.

The US let Belgrade off very lightly over the Orao arms-to-Iraq scandal - when it was revealed that Republika Srpska had provided equipment and training to Saddam Hussein's regime in defiance of the UN - and chose to turn a blind eye to Serbia's neutral stance over America's attack on Iraq.

Following the assassination of prime minister Zoran Djindjic on March 13, US Secretary of State Colin Powell visited Belgrade to express his condolences to the murdered man's family - a gesture that underlined America's interest in Serbia and its reforming government.

And on May 29, President Bush cancelled sanctions that had been in place against Belgrade for eleven years. At the same time, the government here was told that local companies may be given profitable contracts connected to the reconstruction of Iraq - which could help to revive the Serbian economy.

This alone would be a major boost to DOS's chances of re-election in the 2004 parliamentary elections - and could shift the balance in favour of signing the non-extradition agreement.

If it is guided by the current public mood - and stays mindful of the threat of early elections - the Serbian government may still reject America's request. But if it is looking to the future, it may have no other choice than to sign.

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