

Seselj Threats Provoke Media Boycott

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Serbia's independent media hit back as the regime and its supporters intensify their campaign to curb press freedoms.

Serbia's independent media are to boycott the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) and its leader, Vojislav Seselj, after he threatened to "liquidate" them.

Fourteen newspapers, magazines and electronic media agreed this week not to publish or broadcast any further statements from Slobodan Milosevic's chief sabre-rattler.

Just how effective this boycott will be remains to be seen, as it does not cover statements made by Seselj in his capacity as deputy prime minister of Serbia.

The boycott was provoked by Seselj's comments on February 10 following the murder of Yugoslav Defence Minister Pavle Bulatovic.

During a news conference, Seselj accused Radio B2- 92, and the newspapers Danas, Glas Javnosti, Blic and Vecernje Novosti of being "American mercenaries worse than any criminals" and "traitors, deliberately working for the murderers of Serbian children."

"Do you really think we would let you continue killing us off like rabbits," he said. "Whoever works for the Americans will have to bear the consequences."

When asked to clarify what these consequences would be, Seselj said, "the worst imaginable . . . you don't really think you will eventually survive our liquidation."

Seselj's comments caused great alarm in Yugoslavia. All the opposition parties condemned his blatant threats. Indeed, many discerned a degree of panic brought on by the Bulatovic killing.

Vuk Draskovic's Serbian Renewal Movement described the threats as "cold-blooded", while Democratic Alternative party leader Nebojsa Covic - a former associate of Milosevic and mayor of Belgrade - warned that the outburst indicated the government is moving towards declaring a state of emergency.

Indeed, Seselj's broadside is the latest of several ominous remarks which indicate that the Milosevic regime is preparing more radical steps against domestic political opponents.

In January, Seselj announced to the SRS party congress that only three parties would soon remain on the Yugoslav political scene - the SRS, Milosevic's Socialists and the Yugoslav United Left, led by Milosevic's wife, Mira Markovic.

Silencing the independent media would be an essential precursor to such a clamp down. The notorious Information Law which has imposed severe restrictions on the media has gone some way towards achieving this end.

Just to make absolutely clear what the regime has in mind, Markovic announced that "decontamination of the media" was imminent.

On February 13, the state news agency Tanjug accused the controversial Belgrade journalist Aleksandar Tijanic of being " a quisling". [See Tijanic, "I Know Who Killed Bulatovic," Balkan Crisis Report No. 116, 14-Feb-00]

Tijanic, a former minister for information in the Serbian government, currently writes a column for Nezavisne Novine, an independent newspaper published in Republika Srpska.

In a recent article, Tijanic predicted that in February either an opposition leader would be taken to court, an independent newspaper would be closed down, an editor would be jailed or a prominent person would be killed.

Press freedom is also under attack in Republika Srpska. Last year, Nezavisne editor Zeljko Kopanja lost both his legs following an attempt on his life. The editor of Reporter magazine, Perica Vucinic, found himself in a Banja Luka court charged with attempting to discredit Yugoslavia. Vucinic had branded Milosevic a dictator.

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