

Seselj's Revenge

Author: [a correspondent](#)

Draskovic was a PR figure for the West, to try to soften the most radical aspects of the Belgrade regime. Now the fig leaf is off.

Vuk Draskovic's appointment this past January as deputy prime minister of Yugoslavia fed his overstated ambition and tickled his Serbian romanticism.

But to President Slobodan Milosevic and the key parties in the governing coalition, the purpose was more concrete, and he has been sacked because this purpose became moot.

Draskovic, a firm if chaotic nationalist, had led the major street demonstrations against the regime two years earlier and was generally welcomed in the West. He was therefore a useful figure to try to persuade the Western powers that Belgrade was serious about its offers for political autonomy for the Kosovo Albanians (without NATO troops).

After several tough steps by the government--such as adopting a draconian Information Law and fuelling growing tensions between Milosevic and Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic--Draskovic's task was to ease international pressure.

As a symbol of the former "nationalist opposition," Draskovic's co-option into a position of power effectively left Serbia without any opposition, and appeared to signal his acceptance of the regime's policy in Kosovo.

With the start of the NATO bombing, Draskovic assumed an almost constant presence on CNN, the BBC and other international media, trumpeting Belgrade's line that Albanians were fleeing Kosovo because of the bombing, and otherwise wearing down listeners with his own bombardment of obfuscations and absurdities.

Now, at least figuratively, he is tossed back out on the streets. On Wednesday, April 28, Yugoslav Prime Minister and Milosevic loyalist Momir Bulatovic dismissed Draskovic--reportedly because of pressure from Vojislav Seselj's Serbian Radical Party and the Yugoslav United Left whose chief, Mira Markovic, is Milosevic's wife.

Jealousies over the extent of his public role may have played a part, as Draskovic had been receiving so much attention, especially abroad. But more importantly, with the regime at war, radical Serbia is ascendant, and it sees no purpose in holding out even the appearance of an opening to the West.

The implications are severe. Draskovic may have been positioning himself for a role as a potential partner with the West after the war. But any early prospects of a moderate course are extremely low. As Seselj stated Tuesday, "National unity in Serbia cannot be slammed by small politicians trying to cooperate with the aggressor and offering themselves to NATO as potential allies."

One of the key points in Draskovic's statements over his own Studio B television in recent days was that the UN Security Council would decide the composition of a UN forces in Kosovo. Now, opposition to any kind of international troops in the province will only be hardened. Serbia will not agree to anything.

The Serbian Information Ministry, which is controlled by Seselj, has issued a ban on broadcasting any statements from Draskovic or his Serbian Renewal Party. The other key point made by Draskovic in his televised statements was that Yugoslavia had to face the fact that it could not defeat NATO.

Statements critical of the regime by Vuk Obradovic, leader of the Socialist Democratic Party and a former general, were even censored from international broadcasts. This is the usual way of solving problems in Serbia: shoot the messenger.

The correspondent is an independent journalist in Belgrade.

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