

Vojvodina's Autonomous Opposition

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Calls for autonomy are increasing in Serbia's remaining province, causing growing friction within the opposition movement.

Opposition rallies in Vojvodina are different from those elsewhere in Serbia. At daily street protests in the provincial capital of Novi Sad, the slogan "Down with Milosevic!" is followed by another distinct demand, "Return What Was Stolen!"

The "theft" refers to the political autonomy which Vojvodina enjoyed under the old Yugoslav federation and which, as in Kosovo, was revoked 11 years ago by Belgrade and Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic.

The demand has divided the opposition in Vojvodina from that in Serbia proper. And with calls for autonomy for the province on the rise, the Vojvodina opposition movement has now split from the main Serbian opposition over protest strategy, withdrawing from the daily protests.

Since September, demonstrations in Vojvodina have been jointly organised by the Alliance of Democratic Parties, linking the three main Vojvodina opposition parties, and the Alliance for Changes, lead by the Democratic Party of Zoran Djindjic.

The protests have continued, though drawing ever fewer people. From a peak of 10,000 people at the start, now on a bad day the regular rallies sometimes draw only a few hundred.

The Alliance for Changes believes their effectiveness should not be measured by numbers alone. It argues that overthrowing the regime is a long, arduous, even physical task, in which persistence is the key. Whatever the size of the crowd, it insists that the daily rallies prove the opposition's determination.

Now, two of the main provincial parties, the Reformist Democratic Party of Vojvodina and the League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina, have pulled out. "We have decided to change tactics, to distribute our forces better," says Miodrag Isakov, leader of the Reformist Democratic Party. "In the future we shall invite citizens [to protest] when we have something to tell them."

Isakov claims that the shift in strategy does not represent a break in the political partnership with the Alliance for Changes. He, like his opposition colleagues in Belgrade, insist that it is only a tactical difference on the path towards a common goal.

The third party in the provincial opposition coalition, the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians, never even joined the autumn round of street protests. Its representatives point to the mass rally they co-organised this summer in Subotica, while the opposition in Serbia proper was still inactive. They say they will join in fresh protests when more people come out on the streets in Belgrade.

Whatever the diplomatic phrasing, the sense of implied criticism of the main Serbian opposition coalition is strong.

Underlying tension between parties from Vojvodina and those from Serbia proper is unsurprising. Vojvodina's autonomy was revoked under the pressure of nationalist rallies staged in Vojvodina by Serbs and Montenegrins from Kosovo. Under the pretext of Kosovo, Belgrade asserted direct control over both provinces. Subsequently, it drained away much of the resources of Vojvodina, the most developed of the regions within Serbia.

People in Vojvodina feel the province has been simply looted. As a result, whatever their common view on Milosevic, opposition parties based in Novi Sad and Belgrade now find that they have increasingly distinct agendas.

Opinion polls in the province indicate that over half the population wants a much greater degree of autonomy. Polls also suggest that their number is increasing. Thus, for the opposition here, the removal of Yugoslav President Milosevic is not the only electoral goal in Vojvodina.

Predrag Filipov, president of the Vojvodina board of the Democratic Party, whose seat is in Belgrade, has suggested that a dual-currency system, as in Montenegro, should be introduced in Vojvodina, to "protect the national treasure of Vojvodina."

At the beginning of the street protests, a plebiscite by a so-called "great people's assembly" symbolically disbanded the official parliament of Vojvodina. It elected an interim, democratic, "transitional government of Vojvodina".

Serbian authorities were presented with a bill claiming that, over the past decade, Vojvodina has been robbed of some 3.6 billion German marks (\$1.9 billion). This is the difference between the amount the province paid into the Serbian budget and the amount it received in return.

Many believe that the amount should be quadrupled, to include the exploitation of Vojvodina's resources and their depreciation over the past decade - with interest.

The political parties from Vojvodina have thus sent a clear message to the Belgrade opposition. They assert that the genuine democratisation in Serbia is impossible without a decentralisation of power and the restoration of autonomy in Vojvodina. Parties in Vojvodina representing Hungarians, who make up 17 percent of the population of around 2 million, insist that a democratic Serbia is inconceivable without safeguards for minority rights.

But none of the Vojvodina opposition parties believe the Belgrade opposition has made their concerns a priority. Indeed, Dragan Veselinov, president of the Coalition for Vojvodina, a political group gathered around its charismatic leader, claims that the Belgrade opposition wants to "destroy regional parties to preserve the political domination of Serbia."

Two weeks ago, when the Serbian opposition signed a common platform of demands to the authorities for conditions for elections, Veselinov refused to sign. He criticised the agreement for failing to consider Vojvodina as a separate electoral unit. He has proposed a new law under which the province could call a referendum on its economic autonomy, protected by its executive, legislative and judicial powers.

The Movement for Vojvodina, an umbrella group of 10 parties and non-party organisations, believes the Serbian opposition should call for a constituent assembly rather than early elections.

Vojvodina parties have also shown a greater interest in securing the sympathy of Europe. All representatives of the opposition political parties from Vojvodina accepted the invitation by EU foreign ministers to go to Luxembourg recently. The Belgrade opposition leaders refused, fearing Milosevic's propaganda.

"As far as we are concerned, we have shown the readiness, will and strength for democratic changes and the return of our revoked autonomy," says Isakov of the Reformist Democratic Party. He has promised opposition forces in Serbia proper to return to the streets after "gathering together a critical mass."

"Novi Sad and Vojvodina are not places where Milosevic must be overthrown," he says. "He was not elected [in Vojvodina], but always lost the elections here."

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