Yugoslavia: EU Dreams Fade

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EU membership remains distant goal for Yugoslavia

Yugoslavia's long drawn out reform process almost certainly means the country has no chance of achieving its leaders' goal of securing EU membership within six years.

The fall of Slobodan Milosevic and his subsequent extradition to The Hague created a widespread impression that accession was imminent. But 18 months after the ex-president's overthrow, the pre-conditions for joining either have not been met, or are only just starting to fall into place.

Before talks with Brussels can even start, Yugoslavia must fulfil a checklist of basic conditions, starting with cooperation with The Hague tribunal, transformation of the armed forces, granting legal force to European human rights legislation and the decentralisation of government.

Although some government sectors are eager to push ahead, conservative forces remain entrenched. As a result, only laws of marginal significance have negotiated their lengthy passage through parliament.

At the same time, a power battle between the Yugoslav president Vojislav Kostunica and Serbia's premier Zoran Djindjic has distracted attention from the reform process, while a strong anti-Hague lobby in the army and the police has blocked the extradition of war crimes suspects.

A few arrests and extraditions have occurred - but only as a response to direct financial pressure from the international community.

Yugoslavia still needs another four to six years to adopt the minimum legislation needed for EU harmonisation. Weeding out Milosevic-era officials will take around eight years. The actual EU accession process takes two years. Even if all of this takes place at the same time, it is obvious that Belgrade will have to wait at least a decade before joining.

The business of cooperation with The Hague is moving slowly at best. For months Belgrade thought it had fulfilled its responsibilities when it handed over Milosevic, forgetting that his was only the first name on The Hague list of suspects.

The struggle to pass laws on cooperation with The Hague has dragged on for months, blocking the extradition of at least 15 indictees, even though experts say these laws are not even necessary as they are implied by Yugoslavia's UN membership.

The transformation of the Yugoslav army, a key chapter in the reform process, has not even started. No military chiefs compromised by their years of service under Milosevic have been replaced, not even the chief of staff, Nebojsa Pavkovic. To some extent, army reform is a pawn in the battle between Kostunica and Djindjic. Because Kostunica controls the military, he is against personnel changes.

The ruling Democratic Opposition of Serbia, DOS, coalition recently put forward a draft law on the army, cutting national service from 12 to 9 months and alternative community service from 24 to 12 months. It remains to be seen whether DOS will put these changes into practice. Many people suspect they are
merely a decoy to boost recruitment.

In May, the federal parliament threw out suggestions from a group of NGOs and expert bodies, such as the Yugoslav Association of Lawyers, to remodel the army as a professional force. The lawyers proposed reducing military service to seven months and incorporating conscientious objection as a basic human right.

Though beneficial changes have undoubtedly taken place in Yugoslavia over the last 18 months, especially in the field of ethnic minority rights, they have not been firmed up by new legislation and institutions. Many laws openly violating European norms remain on the books, such as the wide powers granted to the police.

The passage of legislation establishing ombudsman is also not in sight, even though it is a prerequisite of negotiations between Yugoslavia and Brussels. Leposava Karamakovic, President of the Serbian Supreme Court, launched an initiative to set up ombudsmen early in November during a seminar on judicial reform.

But nothing has happened. At the same time, although Yugoslavia signed a EU protocol on civil and political rights, it has not ratified the document, even though Belgrade must do so if it wants to join the Council of Europe, which is a step forward to EU membership.

There has been little progress on decentralisation, despite DOS leaders' pledges before the election to grant greater autonomy to the northern province of Vojvodina and also to allow a measure of self-government for the Sandzak area, in Serbia's south-west.

Both areas have substantial minority populations. While all DOS parties profess support for Vojvodina's autonomy in principle, in practice Kostunica's supporters want less power to go to the regions than Djindjic's colleagues.

Some of the hurdles retarding Yugoslavia's accession to EU are beyond the government's control. Montenegro, the junior partner in the Yugoslav federation, has said it will soon hold a referendum on independence.

If Montenegro leaves, the state of Yugoslavia would effectively have dissolved, reopening constitutional questions over Kosovo's future status. At the moment, though, effectively separated from Yugoslavia after NATO's 1999 air campaign against the country, Kosovo remains formally part of the federation under UN Resolution 1244.

With Yugoslavia's political transition seemingly at a standstill, it is clear that the DOS leaders will need far more time than they originally anticipated to secure the goal of EU membership.

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Kosovo

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