

Serb leader quits over Kosovo

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Vojislav Kostunica

BELGRADE (Reuters) - Serbian Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica resigned on Saturday, dissolving a coalition too divided over the loss of Kosovo to carry on governing.

Kostunica said he would recommend an election in May, to allow voters to decide the way forward.

Serbia's fragile economy has already been hit by the political uncertainty. The volatile stock exchange has fallen and the dinar currency has lost 6 percent since January.

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His announcement was the climax to a tortuous political struggle over a fundamental question that now faces Serb voters: should they go on working to join the European Union even though the EU has recognised the secession of their cherished province.

Nationalist Kostunica says 'No'. His erstwhile main coalition partner President Boris Tadic says 'Yes'. The strains between them reached breaking point three weeks ago after Kosovo declared independence and Belgrade was hit by anti-Western rioting.

"I have called a government session on March 10 to discuss dissolution of parliament," he said, adding that he would propose scheduling a general election for May 11.

Kostunica, 63, took the helm of the 10-month old government last May only after protracted coalition talks with Tadic.

"I respect the prime minister's decision that he is no longer able to lead the government of Serbia

and when I get the government's decision, I will call an election," said Tadic, the 50-year-old leader of the pro-Western Democratic Party.

"Elections are the democratic way to overcome political crises and the people are the only ones who have right to decide which is the way forward for Serbia."

Kostunica gave no clue on Saturday to whether his small nationalist party would now seek an alliance with the hardline nationalist Radical Party -- Serbia's biggest -- and the smaller Socialist Party of the late autocrat Slobodan Milosevic.

Such a coalition would be likely to adopt an unyielding position on Kosovo. The parties favour shutting down Serbia's bid for EU membership and possibly turning to Russia, which has strongly backed Kostunica's stance on Kosovo.

Kostunica said no party was against joining the EU but the question was "Should Serbia enter the EU with or without Kosovo?". For him the answer was clear: "Kosovo is Serbia, and Serbia can only enter the EU with Kosovo."

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Western powers say their recognition of the February 17 independence declaration by Kosovo's 90 percent ethnic Albanian majority is irreversible.

Whatever their views in private, no major Serbian leader feels able publicly to give up on Kosovo. It is not clear whether Kostunica genuinely expects the United States and EU allies to reverse course, or has some other objective.

Belgrade is now implementing what the EU sees as an attempt to hobble Kosovo's government by urging minority Serbs to ignore it and partitioning the Serb-run north, where mobs set fire to two customs posts last month, forcing U.N. police to flee.

The border posts are now manned by NATO troops.

In Kosovo, Serb history goes back to medieval times. But it has been under United Nations and NATO control since the Western alliance bombed Serbia in 1999 to force Milosevic to withdraw his forces and end a bloody ethnic cleansing drive.

Russia has blocked Kosovo's independence at the U.N. but the EU, backed by Washington, is going ahead with a 2,000-strong mission to the new republic to supervise its first couple of years -- a mission Serbia says has no legal basis.

The EU has tried to persuade Serb leaders that Serbia and the province which made up 15 percent of its territory will one day be together under one EU roof, with no borders.

Kostunica denounced that it as a ruse by the West to get its hands on a "NATO state" in the Balkans, whipping up a patriotic storm over Kosovo that ensured its loss would be far too traumatic for the EU's "better tomorrow" arguments to work.

Economy Minister Mladjan Dinkic said his liberal G17 Plus party wanted no part in "taking Serbia back to isolation".

"The only thing we care about is a Serbia that is economically strong and in the European Union," Dinkic said.

(Additional reporting by Ivana Sekularac, Ljilja Cvekic, Ellie Tzortzi, Gordana Filipovic; Editing by Matthew Jones)

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