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From revolutionary to legend Mayor boosted town to forefront in effort to oust Milosevic

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CACAK, Yugoslavia - The story has reached legendary status even though it only happened this month.

Nearly 20,000 angry people, complete with bulldozer, spontaneously rally behind their charismatic mayor and propel their 15-mile-long convoy of vehicles through police barricades to storm Parliament and topple the brutal regime of former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic.

But like all myths, the rise of Cacak Mayor Velimir Ilic from obscure politician to international treasure is lacking some grittier details.

The unabridged version of the tale illustrates that banishing a dictator involves careful planning, police turncoats and a healthy dose of revenge to channel people's rancor. And bringing a bulldozer is not necessary.

"This was all planned for a long time," says Ilic, a ruggedly handsome man with thick hair and a cleft chin. "It was just a matter of waiting for the right time to motivate the people."

That moment came when Milosevic attempted to steal an election - an election he lost because of a decade of lost wars, unemployment, sanctions and corruption.

The Democratic Opposition of Serbia called for all citizens to march on Belgrade Oct. 5 to demand that Milosevic accept the defeat he suffered in elections in late September.

Hundreds of thousands crammed the streets to pressure Milosevic, but such mass demonstrations weren't a novelty in Yugoslavia, and in the past they didn't accomplish much. Storming the Parliament was a breakthrough, and that was Ilic's idea. That act ignited the crowd and emboldened people to stampede through a police cordon and a cloud of tear gas to destroy one of regime's major symbols.

The next target was the headquarters of Radio Television Serbia, the linchpin of Milosevic's propaganda machine. By nightfall both buildings were burned-out husks.

It was a message Milosevic could not ignore: He resigned the next day.

"They (the people from Cacak) came here and they led us. They saw what needed to be done," says Rastko Bacevic, a 21-year old medical student.

"Without them I'm not sure it would have been done."

Yugoslavia's new president agrees. Two days after the revolution, Vojislav Kostunica traveled to Cacak to thank the mayor and his people.

Several of the European diplomats who have come to Yugoslavia to congratulate Kostunica also visit Ilic. Local superstar folk singer Dorde Balasevic gave a free concert in Csak to show his appreciation for the people's efforts.

The mayor has appeared on news shows all over Europe, received over a thousand telegrams from all over the world and been lauded in the local press.

"The mayor has proven that sometimes big and wise politicians can't bring about anything concrete and that sometimes personal courage, energy and common sense for organization (are) far above high politics," wrote the daily newspaper Danas.

Many Serbs wished to rid their country of Milosevic, but Ilic's status as a former target of the regime injected him with a special motivation.

Ilic began plotting to unseat Milosevic during last year's NATO bombing when he was forced into hiding after criticizing the government's lack of a plan to protect citizens from the airstrikes.

His home was surrounded by police, so he concealed himself in nearby woods for 49 days while his family held the fort. Ilic came out of hiding only after the NATO attacks stopped, though he still travels with bodyguards.

"Believe me, I had plenty of time to think," says the 49-year-old father of five who has been mayor for four years. "I realized Milosevic was the heart of the problem, and we couldn't get rid of him with rallies and speeches. My slogan is victory or death."

A way to achieve victory emerged about seven months ago when Drazan Kusic, a member of the police special forces, contacted Ilic to discuss the political situation. The two gathered a group of about 35 men, many veterans of the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo, and began training them to be the front line in the attack on Parliament.

"We had experience from the war, so people knew what to do," says Kusic, a 27-year-old veteran of the Bosnian conflict.

And through his contacts, Kusic knew protesters wouldn't meet much resistance this time.

During the October uprising, much attention was given to the police who joined the protesters. In truth, many of those officers were from Casak and were brought in as Ilic's public relations prop. He knew ordinary people would be emboldened by the sight of police breaking ranks with Milosevic.

Few in Casak realize how carefully Ilic orchestrated his plan, nor do they care. The spontaneity of the revolt has been exaggerated, but the events wouldn't have unfolded without Casak residents' trust in their mayor and contempt for Milosevic.

Zoran Veselinovic was laid off from his job in a mine eight years ago and now owns a small bar where he barely makes a living. At least 80 people owe him money.

"People here are just sick - sick of no jobs, no money, waiting in lines to buy sugar and oil," says Veselinovic, a 40-year-old father of three.

"It wasn't just one thing that made people revolt. It was everything."

Cacak is a town of 130,000 about two hours south of Belgrade and like elsewhere in Yugoslavia, many of the factories have closed - victims of NATO bombs, a stagnant economy or both.

"The difference is we have a leader we can rally around," says Milan Milovic, a 44-year-old construction worker. "Ilic is one of us - a regular guy. He walks around and talks to everyone"

So when Ilic called on his people to storm the Parliament, they heeded the call. Local firms donated buses, trucks and what would become one of the most photographed bulldozers in the world - it was brought to plow through police barricades. It wasn't needed: With their bare hands, the men were able to push aside the trucks and cars used as a blockade.

"The adrenaline was just flowing," says Kusic.

Most of them can recall only a few details of the revolution that elevated Cacak to the hometown of a nation's heroes. The specifics are lost in a haze of tear gas, shoving, screaming and running.

"The tear gas was awful. You couldn't breathe," says Milovic. "There was no fear. What we were doing was too important to be afraid."

Yugoslavia, however, will remember the people of Cacak. "I will hold Ilic and the people of Cacak in my heart always," says Ivanka Radic, a 56-year-old artist who lives in Belgrade. "We all owe them our thanks and gratitude."

Ilic shrugs off such praise. "I'm just glad it is over," he says. "I'm happy the regime is gone. I'm happy we won."

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