

Helsinki *bulletin*



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2016 ELECTIONS: VUČIĆ, THE THWARTED WINNER



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Following the 2014 parliamentary elections Premier Vučić had a comfortable majority, almost a unisonous parliament, all of which made things rather easy for him. When deciding to call early parliamentary elections for April 2016, except for wanting to prolong his mandate for another four years, he had an eye on laying his yoke upon Serbia's political scene. However, he failed to win the absolute majority vote (but 48.23) he had hoped to, failed to boot out the Socialist Party of Serbia /SPS/ and its leader Ivica Dačić, and failed to conquer three

central municipalities in Belgrade (Vracar, Stari Grad and New Belgrade) despite all the fervor of his activists over the elections campaign. And he failed to eliminate the Democratic Party /DS/ he had busily worked on in the past four years.

His biggest triumph was in Vojvodina he had been after ever since he came to power in 2012 wanting to attune the provincial government to

the republican one.¹ Though having tried many times to oust the Democrats in the province they managed to remain in power throughout their mandate. Interestingly, instead of campaigning against autonomy – his Progressists want to have annulled – this time focused on allegedly corrupted provincial leaders.

All the right-wing options (not only party but also groupings that have been undermining the provincial autonomy all the time) cheered SNS victory in Vojvodina. This victory, they take, would an end – at long last – to “separatism” and “autonomists.” Serbia’s territorial integrity in the matter of Vojvodina should be disputed never again, they argue.²

The elections relativized Vučić’s power when compared with the absolute one he had in the previous period – and that is their major trait. True, he won more votes than in the 2012 elections but less parliamentary seats as more voting lists passed the election threshold; an outcome as such actually indicates that his power declines.

What also marked the elections was his reaction to “unexpected results.” Having annulled the results at 15 polling places – in the attempt to undermine the coalitions that passed the election threshold by a hair (DSS-Dveri, LDP-SVL-SDS) - he demonstrated the “hue and cry” about his loss of power in the future.

The composition of the “new” parliament will differ much from the earlier – mostly because anti-European and pro-Russian parties won seats now. Among other coalition partners Vučić was running the elections with a new

one – the Serbian People’s Party led by Nenad Popović, which is extremely anti-European and pro-Russian. This change – when compared with the earlier, absolutely “pro-European” parliament – will at least impart some new momentum in the proceedings.

By the number of parliamentary seats won, the coalition between Ivica Dačić’s Socialist Party /SPS/ and the Unique Serbia came in second (10.97%). There still is not telling whether Vučić will take them for partners in the government. Together with SPS he would enjoy a solid majority in the parliament.

With 8.11% of the vote Šešelj’s Serbian Radical Party /SRS/ will also be in the parliament. It was not represented in the previous period. Its comeback is mostly due to Šešelj’s “victory” over the Tribunal in The Hague. It is followed by Saša Radulović’s movement *Dosta je bilo* (*Enough is Enough*) and the coalition between Bojan Pajtić’s Democratic Party, Zoran Živković’s New Party and the Democratic Alliance of Croats in Vojvodina having won 6.2% of the vote.

The fact that at least six election lists won parliamentary seats, including those analysts and, most of all, public opinion polls had kept below the election threshold or, at very best, “close to it by a hair,” in encouraging.

Former supporters of the Liberal Democratic Party /LDP/ and the Democratic Party /DS/ in urban areas, mostly the young, seemed to have turned to the movement “*Enough is Enough*” now. Saša Radulović’s election campaign (mostly at social networks) had targeted corruption, notably its “center,” Aleksandar Vučić, and patocracy that “eats up Serbia.” His movement has no ideological profile; how successful it will be in the next electoral round, remains to be seen.

1 Four years ago, the Democratic Party won the majority vote in Vojvodina. Together with its coalition partner, LSDV and the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians, it managed to stay in power despite the Progressists’ constant endeavor to oust it at any price.

2 Pečat, April 29, 2016.

The Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS)-Dveri coalition and the Radicals will stand for clerical-nationalistic parties in the new parliament – and considerably influence parliamentary debates as such.

With the confusion it created, let alone serious indications about a put-up job, the Republican Electoral Commission /RIK/ only further undermined institutions. Dragging its feet while counting votes and then giving contradictory statement about who has and who has not passed the election threshold, it only brought the post-election atmosphere to a red heat and lost much of its legitimacy.

SERBIA'S PUBLIC OPINION

Over the past year Serbia's public opinion has changed considerably about EU. According to most optimistic assessments, hardly 50% of citizens support Serbia's membership of EU. Several are the reasons for this change of heart: turbulence within EU itself, mostly over the refugee crisis, the uncertain outcome of the referendum in the Great Britain, and above all, Russia's media offensive. Hence, citizens – whose turn of mind is anyway anti-reformist – are more and more ambivalent about the course Serbia should take.

Euro-skepticism and opposition to radical reform used to be strong but never so manifest in the parliament as now; most of all because Premier Vučić is untouchable leader of SNS and as such commands obedience and loyalty. At the same time, all this indicates that ratings of his SNS would have been much lower was he not so popular. And this is why an extremely pro-Russian party as his could not afford not to "follow" him on his "course to Europe."

According to sociologist Srećko Mihajlović, the biggest victims of the Premier and his cabinet's

"painful economic measures" have mostly cast the ballot for the SNS coalition. Workers voted out of desperation rather than conviction, he says. And some voted out of fear or tiny hope that things would go for the better. Or perhaps, he says, they were all under the influence of the media since they saw no one else there except for Vučić – who "had screened everyone else and covered them with a net of invisibility."³

VUČIĆ'S BITTER PILLS

Only an hour or two after the closure of voting stations, Vučić and his SNS proclaimed their victory "historical;" they claimed that not a single party before had ever won so many votes (a rather disputable argument).⁴ However, when faced with facts and electoral mathematics Vučić's triumphant mood suddenly plopped. First, his coalition now had more members than two years ago: the Party of United Pensioners and the Serbian People's Party.

Second, since more parties passed the election threshold than before, the leading SNS coalition received 131 parliamentary seats or 28 seats less than it used to have. Actually, SNS will have less than 100 MPs (98) as the rest has to be allocated to its coalition partners whose appetites Vučić will have to satisfy in other ways too.

Although he has not ensured an absolute majority Vučić can form his cabinet even without the Socialists /SPS/. The question he is faced with now is whether his "inner" coalition will have enough loyal MPs to keep parliamentary majority with 131 votes (the majority itself necessitating 126) or some of them would become aware in the meantime of their "potential for

³ Danas, May 9, 2016.

⁴ Analysts, for instance, remind of SNS triumph in the first multiparty elections in 1990.

blackmail” and set their price, higher than the one of the Socialists.

With constant smear campaign Vučić had tried to totally discredit DS – but failed to. In coalition with the New Party and two regional ones, DS passed the election threshold and gained 16 seats in the parliament.⁵

PRO-EUROPEAN BLOC ON THE DEFENSIVE

Parliamentary and non-parliamentary pro-European opposition had tried to agree on an electoral coalition. Once their negotiations failed, they marched into the elections in two columns: DS and its partners in one, and LDP, the Socialist Democratic Party /SDS/ and LSV in the other. Both groupings will be represented in the parliament – though with a minimal number of votes.⁶

The Democrats – stigmatized all the time – had not managed to get consolidated in the past four years since they lost the power. A coalition with two other pro-European blocs failed because of narcissism of party leaders as much as because of non-existent political platform voters could give their trust.

And not only at the level of republic but in Vojvodina too, had the authentic, anti-nationalistic and anti-fascist provincial party, LSV, suffered a fiasco. It had been in power in coalition with DS ever since 2000. But now, with only 9% of the vote won in the province it will have fewer MPs in the provincial parliament than,

5 According to some analysts, Vučić wanted to have the coalition DSS-Dveri below the election threshold; TV N1, April 25, 2016. .

6 This especially applies to the Čeda-Boris- Čanak coalition having passed the election threshold by a hair (5,03%); it failed to ensure seats in the parliament of Vojvodina.

say, the Serbian Radical Party. In some towns – their traditional strongholds such as Zrenjanin, Novi Sad or Kikinda – the number of the votes for LSV was almost halved. Since LSV was far from being such big target of the election campaign smearing as DS, its failure is to be ascribed to its leader’s inconsistency – his “flirting” with Premier Vučić.

Many say that the biggest election surprise and the only true winner is Saša Radulović’s movement “Enough is Enough.” Not a single “official” public opinion agency had predicted that it would pass the election threshold. Historian Čedomir Antić called its success “a success of actually one revolted man.”⁷ The movement will be participating not only in the republican and provincial parliaments but also in local self-governments throughout Serbia and Vojvodina.⁸

REPUBLICAN ELECTORAL COMMISSION – THE HOTBED OF POST-ELECTION CRISIS

The fact that the Republican Electoral Commission /RIK/ failed to publicize preliminary results more than five hours after closing of the voting stations caused first suspicions in the fairness of elections. In the meantime, once credible CeSID and some other public opinion agencies, as well as political parties, have come out with superfluous and totally wrong prognoses. Since almost everyone had “busied himself” with a variety of information of his

7 Politika, April 28, 2016.

8 For instance, the “Enough is Enough” movement won more votes than DS and LSV although not long ago Radulović referred to Vojvodina as „an extra administrative expense;” then he corrected himself by saying that Vojvodina should have the highest level of autonomy „in some domains, including the legislation.” Vreme, April 28, 2016.

own, nervousness, tension and suspicions have soared.

The hue and cry about rigged elections began even before the Election Day only to be continued till the closing of voting stations; like in 2014 no evidence proved it. Premier Vučić himself spoke about rigged elections before they took place at all. However, till the legally set deadline only two complaints were presented to the RIK.

On the very same night all opposition leaders (except for Šešelj) went together to the RIK and announced to form a legal team of their own to double-check election results. Only a day later SNS leader Aleksandar Vučić announced the same, claiming that some “weird things” were going on “under the cover of the night” on Sunday (the Election Day). “How come that some parties passed the election threshold overnight and scaled down SNS results?”

The post-election galimatias went on even after RIK President Dejan Đurđević, three days following the Election Day (when the legal deadline expired), announced that he had received 60 complaints. Therefore, the RIK decided to have elections repeated in 15 voting stations. On Thursday, April 28, the RIK passed another deadline as it continued counting votes till the early morning of April 29. Eventually, it announced that DSS-Dveri coalition had one vote less and, therefore, failed to pass the election threshold.

All this taken together looked rather disturbing and utterly – suspicious. Accused by the opposition of manipulating and remolding “citizens’ election will” with the helping hand from the RIK (the RIK President is in the membership of SNS Presidency), the regime retorted that the

RIK was working in “impossible conditions under constant pressure from election losers.”¹⁰ Be it as it may, all this cast a shadow over the 2016 elections. As many observers noted, peaceful change of regime is among those few tenets of democracy Serbia has respected in the past 15 years. Developments of April 2016 seriously questioned this achievement since, as analyst Đorđe Vukadinović put it, “It’s hard to rebuild the trust lost in electoral proceedings.”

International observers assessed the elections as generally “fair” saying that irregularities that had taken place had not, in their opinion, undermined the electoral process as a whole.

MESSAGES FROM THE WORLD – AFFIRMATIVE BUT RESERVED

In their messages to the Premier and his party international officials congratulated him on “impressive victory,” especially in the context of the number of other parties to be represented in the parliament that would be supporting “Serbia’s course to EU.” This was the emphasis since this time Vojislav Šešelj’s right-wing and pro-Russian Serbian Radical Party will have its MPs – all of which is a red alert to officials from the West.

Having spent his “election weekend” in Belgrade, EP rapporteur for Serbia David McAllister said that Aleksandar Vučić had “asked for and got” a clear-cut mandate for his pro-European reforms. Now it is on the government and the parliament to implement the reforms in the domains of the rule of law, the struggle against corruption, public administration, and economy, and to ensure the freedom of the media, he said.¹¹

9 Politika, April 27, 2016. .

10 On the eve of repeated elections in 15 voting stations, President Tomislav Nikolić asked „the participants” not to pressurize the RIK.

11 Politika, April 26, 2016.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel was among the first to extend her congratulations, the same as EU Commissioner Johannes Hahn, French Premier Manuel Valls, EC President Donald Tusk, Austrian Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz and others.

However, some noted that the extreme right scored “dangerous points” in the elections. “It is no good to have the extreme rightist Radicals in the new parliament,” messaged Eduard Kukan, members of the EP and president of the Committee for Cooperation with Serbia.¹²

According to British political expert James Ker-Lindsay, “it is most disappointing to have nationalistic parties represented in the parliament.”¹³ However, he reminds that this was that public opinion polls had already indicated and, therefore, not a shock to observers. The Radicals’ in the parliament are harmful to Serbia’s international reputation, he said, adding that he nevertheless believed not “they would have any significant influence whatsoever on the realities.”¹⁴

Professor Daniel Serwer points to “huge support” Vučić received for his pro-European policy. According to him, the secret of the West’s “benevolence” for Vučić is in the fact that he successfully manages whatever EU wants him to.

There are some uncertainties about US officials’ reaction to the electoral victory of the Progressives. Namely, in the Election Night US Ambassador to Serbia Kyle Scott paid a visit to DS headquarters rather than to SNS. The Embassy released that the Ambassador had wanted to visit SNS headquarters too but gave up since Aleksandar Vučić has had to leave the premises for “personal reasons.”

12 Politika, April 26, 2016.

13 Danas, April 26, 2016.

14 Ibid.

Even the message sent from the Department of State, noted columnist Radivoj Cvetičanin, and was unusually reserved when compared with Washington’s earlier support: namely, the message was not addressed to the Premier and was “very technical and utterly reserved.”¹⁵

RUSSIA – SATISFIED WITH THE SUCCESS OF THE “RUSSIAN FACTOR”

Directed towards Belgrade, Russia’s growingly aggressive campaigns in the region – especially after Montenegro was invited to the membership of NATO – were after drawing it to itself inasmuch as possible. Moscow has obviously replaced its soft power with hard policy. Sudden activation of the Russian

Russians were following the elections in Serbia with much interest. Judging by their commentaries, they are most satisfied with the outcome and disagree with the Western media that the pro-Russian option had suffered debacle. Unlike in the previous, 34 MPs (Radicals and Dveri-DSS coalition) will be in this one to openly argue for closer cooperation with Russia. Election results, they say, will crucially influence the balance of power in the parliament given that patriotic parties will be the opposition. There will be unison and uniformity no more.¹⁶ The presence of the Radicals in the parliament will narrow down the room to maneuver in to the ruling party when it comes to the issue of Kosovo, membership of NATO and EU.

Konstantin Kosachev of the Committee of RF Council for International Relations takes that the winning coalition includes two of Russia’s old partners – SNS and Serbian People’s Party. Both parties strongly oppose the country’s

15 Danas, April 30-May 2, 2016.

16 Nedeljnik, April 28, 2016.

membership of NATO and advocate closer relations with Russia in all domains.¹⁷

Peter Iskenderov of the Slavic Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences says that these were the first election in modern history in which citizens were voting for their country's foreign policy course and that no referendum on the membership of EU is in sight or concessions to be accepted for this purpose hoped for.¹⁸

Russian analysts – like, say, Oleg Bondarenko of the Strategic Communications Agency – take that the “Russian factor” has never before been so strong as it was in these elections and that it has now become all-encompassing.¹⁹ He especially praises Šešelj for such political

constellation. Šešelj is a political father of Serbia's incumbent elite in power and, hence, is inseparable from it, he says.²⁰

Russian commentaries are stressing the EU has completely exhausted its integrative potential and that Serbia's membership of it is out of question at this point. True, they admit that at this point neither Moscow has a geopolitical model and an economic package to offer Belgrade the government, therefore, should built its own geopolitical model together with neighboring countries – Hungary, Rumania, Bulgaria, Montenegro and Bosnia – so as to regain its status of a regional arbiter and mediator in regional conflicts.²¹

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The elections testified that citizens are interested in the issues of their everyday living – hence, “big policy” such as Kosovo, the past, NATO or EU was not decisive to their vote. Once again the majority of citizens said they trusted Premier Vučić most of all.

The democratic, pro-European opposition demonstrated all its weaknesses – especially for having failed to get consolidated and develop a joint and convincing political platform.

MPs from the ruling party will be fewer than before; fewer by 25 percent, which amounts to a tight majority one cannot rule with easily. This increases the coalition potential of smaller parties.

Serbia's pro-European orientation depends on Vučić's capacity to resist the pressure for Russia, the more so since his party's grassroots are mostly pro-Russian, nationalistic and conservative. If the Premier goes on with his double game and balancing (between Russia and EU) Serbia will end up in a blind alley in almost no time – and that means closer cooperation with Russia and postponement of its European future.

With right-wing and pro-Russian parties in the parliament national questions – in the back seat up to now – will be once again on the agenda.

The new cabinet's pro-European course will depend on its results. The trust placed in it cannot last for long, the more so since the Premier growingly manifests his bent to authoritarianism.

EU – that carefully observes developments in Serbia – should not neglect the so-called Russian factor and, hence, pass over the Premier's more than obvious authoritarian tendency. The beginning of accession negotiations with EU is imperative for Serbia, as well as a well-thought-out plan for the country's economic recovery.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.