

Helsinki bulletin



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PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: A STEP TOWARDS OR AWAY FROM EU?

Donald Trump as the US President Elect further toned up right-wing and dogmatically populist parties and movements worldwide, and particularly those in Serbia. Trump's victory was much yearned for and that was clear during his election campaign. However, his triumph was met with euphoria of the entire right-wing bloc including many if not the majority of members of Premier Vučić's party and electorate.

True effects of this "sovereignty-prone," actually anti-European enthusiasm so much present in the public discourse will be put to a first, true test real soon: in Serbia's presidential elections in early 2017. As potentially significant these elections will be in the focus of the Western community. Commissioner for European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Johannes Hahn said he was afraid the upcoming presidential elections could put a brake

on reformist moves as marked by “nationalistic rhetoric.”¹

The triumph of Donald Trump, an outsider and conservative, shocked the world, especially its liberal flank. In many analyses American elections and Britain’s walking on EU are, by global consequences they could produce, compared with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. And the year 2016 is seen as a death blow to the hope the events of almost three decades ago had inspired.

Some domestic analysts are also most fond of the “Berlin Wall” metaphor though using it in a quite different context. The fall of the Berlin Wall, they claim, gave birth to “the loathsome Euro-Atlantic order.” And this order, they say, is now falling apart as in the West we are now witnessing a “soft revolution” against “the global elite” the one that is “stamping on the legacy of Europe and its plants oversea.”² We already see some of its consequences – Brexit and then Trump in the White House. Angela Merkel may also step down the political arena, nationalists in Austria may triumph, things in France may change... This is an opportunity for Serbia’s conservative, nationalistic bloc /the mainstream/ to “free the country from cosmopolitan occupation and steer it towards Serbian interests and heritage, and make it see its proper geopolitical milestones.”³

Trump’s conciliatory statements about Russia’s President Putin over the elections campaign raised hope about Washington-Moscow future strategic partnership, which would change the present international climate. Serbia’s right-wing elite that counts on Russia’s support also counts on those “new circumstances” in which its

“national dreams” could come true: partition of Kosovo and integration of RS into Serbia.

Most important to Serbia’s prevalent public opinion and elite – apart from the attitude towards Putin – was to see Hilary Clinton defeated. All stereotypes were in play – the hateful Clintons, the bombardment in 1999, “snatching Kosovo away from us,” etc. Serbia’s ‘trumpism,’ notes columnist for the *Vreme* weekly Teofil Pančić, has nothing to do with the bombardment but just with “the understanding of the world that has not sobered up since 1989 and recognize the new global or at least the new European realities. As a rule, this understanding has always been with the wrong side, which means not that it has been mistaken out of ignorance; no, it has just been faithfully following its anti-liberal impulse.”⁴

Crossing political swords in the months to come – in Serbia’s presidential run – will be demonstrating how fragile Serbia’s international position is. Sitting on two chairs, still unready to choose between the two, Serbia’s has exposed itself to pressure from both sides, the pressure itself being growingly open and aggressive.⁵ No doubt that Moscow’s pressure will become even stronger, now on the wave of Trump’s victory and with the helping hand from Serbia’s pro-Russian parties, organizations, movements and influential figures. Editor-in-chief of the *Vreme* weekly Dragoljub Žarković summarizes the present atmosphere as follows, “As it seems at this point Aleksandar Vučić is somehow standing all alone at Serbia’s main political stage.”⁶

1 Politika, November 10, 2016.

2 When referring to ‘Europe’s legacy’ commentator Dragomir Anđelković implies sovereignty of nation-states, Christianity and demographic unchangeableness. „Trumps’ Election Triumph,” Politika, November 10, 2016.

3 The same author in Danas, November 11, 2016.

4 *Vreme*, November 10, 2016 (the column was published in the weekly before the outcome of US elections was known).

5 I predsednik Tomislav Nikolić i premijer Aleksandar Vučić ozbiljno su ovih dana upozoravali na zabrinjavajuće delovanje obaveštajnih službi „i sa Istoka i sa Zapada”.

6 Blic, 14. novembar 2014.

Presidential elections being for months “the hottest topic” in Serbia’s media testify of the importance attached to them. However no one – either from the ranks of the regime or the opposition – has announced his or her candidacy so far. The only certain candidate is Leader of the Serbian Radical Party Vojislav Šešelj. Back last spring he said he would run for the presidency and now sees Trump’s residency of the White House as a personal triumph and sign of his own victory.⁷

THE REGIME’S POTENTIAL CANDIDATES

Tomislav Nikolić was elected the President in May 2012 and his first term in office will be over in the spring of 2017. His candidacy for the second term, though expected (probably mostly by himself) is still not certain. His party (he withdrew from its leadership when elected the President), the Serbian Radical Party /SNS/, has not announced its candidate so far. True, last spring Nikolić was speaking about planning to join the presidential race⁸, but became more cautious about it later on saying that he had “not yet” made his mind.⁹ On the other hand, he hinted, not long ago, that he would like another presidential term; but his party and Aleksandar Vučić absolutely do not comment this.

Other politicians from the ruling coalition interested in the presidency are waiting for SNS and Aleksandar Vučić to make their mind. Probably most restless about it is Ivica Dačić who has run several presidential races for his Socialist Party of

7 Intervju tabloidu *Kurir* naslovljen je citatom njegove tvrdnje, „Dočekaću Trampa u Beogradu kao predsednik Srbije; Kurir, 14. novembar 2016.

8 „I have some unfinished business, this term was too short for it. I think that Aleksandar Vučić needs Tomislav Nikolić as Serbia’s President to finish this business together since this is the business that takes time,” said the President in April; Danas, September 3, 2016.

9 Blic, September 8, 2016.

Serbia /SPS/. Recently he said that his final decision would depend on whether or not the ruling coalition went public with a common candidate; in the case of the latter he would give up.

About the same reasons Vice-Premier Rasim Ljajić; he would run for the presidency only if nominated by /his/ two parties”, the Social Democratic Party of Serbia and its Sandzak-based “sister” party. His party is preparing itself of the elections, though there are some preconditions to meet, he says. The most important of these preconditions is the stance taken by his coalition partners, SNS above all. “Let’s see whether we shall have one candidate or the parties will be allowed to participate on their own,” he says.¹⁰

As usual everyone looks up to Aleksandar Vučić for an answer. However, the Premier has denied any comment so far (claiming it was too early) but also, several times addressing the press, denied the possibility to stand up for the presidency himself. The word has it in analysts’ circles that he, being Serbia’s most powerful politician, holds all the trump cards in his hands. And that his decision will depend on the circumstances at the time the elections are called, including the effects of the changes in US political scene.

POSSIBLE CANDIDATES OF THE OPPOSITION

The victory of an opposition candidate in the upcoming elections would mark “the beginning of the end” of Vučić’s rule. However, all attempts at finding a common candidate have turned futile so far. The weak, disunited opposition burdened with their leaders’ vanities can hardly unite over one, common candidate to stand up against Vučić.

Different ideologies also stand in the way of unification. On the one pole are clear-cut,

10 Politika, November 13, 2016.

pro-European and liberal parties such as the Liberal Democratic Party /LDP/, the Democratic Party and the League of Vojvodina Social Democrats /LSV/, while on the other extreme right-wing and openly pro-Russian ones like the Serbian Radical Party. True, SRS is not after any opposition “unification” whatsoever, since Vojislav Šešelj sees himself as self-sufficient. And yet, there are other parliamentary parties in the Euro-skeptic and pro-Russian bloc – the Democratic Party of Serbia /DSS/ and Dveri; these days the leader of the latter, Boško Obradović offered himself to be a common candidate.¹¹

Non-partisan, well-known figures were also considered over the talks on a possible common candidate. Ombudsman’s name - Saša Janković – was popping up most frequently in this context in the past couple of months; ex-foreign minister Vuk Jeremić who had run for the office of the UN Secretary General was second on the list.

Though neither of the two said anything definitely about the issue (Saša Janković only providing Pythian answers to reporters’ questions, while Vuk Jeremić not either such) smear campaigns against them (Janković especially) in the tabloids close to the Premier indicate that the regime is not indifferent about two candidates as such.

Judging by everything, the opposition will participate in the elections in several “columns.” So far not even the most principled problems like ensuring a fair election campaign have made them sit put their heads together; hence, it is hard to expect them to speak like one about some other issues. And agreement seems even further away considering their ideological polarization.

In both cases (one or several candidates) the opposition should already come public with

11 TVN1, November 15, 2016.

actual names, the more so – as claimed by the regime and the opposition alike - Vojislav Šešelj’s campaign is in full swing. Speaking of the disunited opposition on the one hand, and the regime’s reticence about nominating the incumbent President, adviser to Serbia’s ex-President Nebojša Krstić says with a considerable dose of cynicism that the opposition’s best candidate would be - Tomislav Nikolić. Analyzing Tomislav Nikolić’s activity as the President of the Republic one can only conclude that the united opposition’s best candidate in the upcoming elections in 2017, he says.¹²

At present one can only guess what Vučić plans to do. However, one can feel rather certain that his decision will hinge more on international context than on domestic scene.

INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

As it seems, Donald Trump as the President-elect puts a finishing touch on an extremely turbulent year at Europe’s and global arena. The effects of his elections in the time to come – apart from uncertainty – are unpredictable. Britain’s Brexit itself has further deepened EU’s crisis; migrant waves are still flooding the Mediterranean coastline and, by reflex, frightens “the white, Christian” Europe, which, in turn, turns towards its own, authentic rightists and xenophobes. The failed coup d’état in Turkey tones up President Erdogan’s authoritarian instincts; Ukraine torn up, Crimea occupied and intervening in Syria have not satisfied Russia’s growing appetites: Russia is now more and more focused on the Balkans. Its meddling into Montenegrin elections was foreboding – and not finished yet. In recent presidential elections in Moldova and Bulgaria pro-Russian candidates won the day.

12 Blic, 19. August 2016.

Though formally undergoing the accession process to EU, Serbia has not made its strategic choice yet. In this context, the upcoming presidential elections may easily be a watershed. Some analysts such as Dušan Spasojević of the Faculty of Political Sciences take that if Vučić truly intends to pursue the course to EU he will have to “seriously confront (Ivica) Dačić and (Tomislav) Nikolić.”¹³ In other words, he would start a conflict within the ruling party.

Anyway, the Premier’s room to maneuver is smaller and smaller (if his pro-European mood is genuine). Supposing early next year – when he move in the White House – Trump and Putin agree to improve bilateral relations, and Trump, as a sign of his good will, accepts Russia’s annexation of Crimea, the outcome might be a series of attempts at secession and successful outcomes (?) – from Ukraine, through Georgia and Moldova to Bosnia, Kosovo and Macedonia - reasons US expert in the Balkans Daniel Serwer.¹⁴ And this is exactly the scenario Belgrade longs for.

While EU officials are cautiously expressing their expectations from Serbia’s presidential elections, Moscow keeps quiet. This certainly means not that it is indifferent about it; and it means not

that it has not be trying – through public and secret channels from the media to intelligence services – to promote its favorites (Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić being emphatically pro-Russian in his statements over past couple of weeks could easily be the first on Moscow’s list).

Besides, Aleksandar Vučić is not exactly Kremlin’s pet; though yielding under some pressure from Moscow (such as hosting the “Slovenian brotherhood” war game in late October), he nevertheless would not yield to some other. To all appearances, what irritates Moscow the most is the status of its u Niš-based humanitarian center the employees of which have been denied diplomatic immunity like NATO soldiers and officers. Besides, regardless of some announcements in this regard, the government has not yet “institutionalized” its cooperation with Russia through a special office the opening of which was supposed to take place last summer.

Over the past couple of years the incumbent regime has been balancing – relatively successfully – between Brussels and Washington on the one hand and Moscow on the other. The tightrope it has been walking on seems to be getting thinner and thinner. And in this context, the upcoming presidential elections are gaining in importance.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering Serbia’s social mindset at this point, a pro-European presidential candidate stands a rather poor chance to win the presidential race; his/her defeat would only further hamper Serbia’s Europeanization.

What candidate he would support is a huge responsibility on the shoulders of the incumbent Premier.

Euro-integration is the best choice Serbia could make from the viewpoint of strategic and statehood interests. The Premier should use all the means available (from the media to pro-European sentiments of a segment of the society) to create the climate propitious to the victory of the most appropriate presidential candidate.

¹³ Blic, November 14, 2016.

¹⁴ <http://www.peacefare.net/2016/11/15/what-toexpect-in-the-balkans/>