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PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: THE MIRROR OF CONFUSION AND COWARDICE

For months now the upcoming presidential elections have been in the focus of public attention, especially once the candidates became known. The opposition had promptly come out with two strong candidates, Vuk Jeremić and Saša Janković. Their presidential campaigns have been in full swing even before the elections were called at all and, from the very start, have been ruthlessly smeared and disqualified by the regime and the media under its control.

It was these two opposition candidates who revealed the cracks in the ruling coalition, the latter counting on victory in the first round. Tomislav Nikolić who badly wanted another term in office was not supported by his party taking that with him as their candidate the second round was to be taken for granted. Aleksandar Vučić decided to run for the presidency given as his party believed he is the only one to triumph already in the first round. Differences between

him and Nikolić, and the party's stance about the former's nomination split the Serbian Progressive Party /SNS/; as time goes by this split will become more and more obvious.

Though the President of the Republic is not a key political figure under Serbia's Constitution, the actual practice tells another story. Namely, whenever a strong political figure was in the presidential office the government – actually, the Premier – were marginalized (for instance, such was the case in Milošević's era or during the presidency of Boris Tadić). Further, the President can crucially decide the architecture of other branches of government, especially the executive branch and the Premier. This is what happened in 2012 when Tomislav Nikolić was elected the President and enabled Vučić to become the most powerful man in the country.

The pre-election atmosphere and rhetoric of both sides indicate that Serbia is still unable to position itself strategically and define its realistic and obtainable national goals. Confusion at the political arena is bigger and bigger.

Dramatic global changes seem to be bypassing Serbia once again. Although the ongoing turbulences (Brexit, Trump in US, the rise of right-wing and extreme populism in Europe, Russia's frustrated ambitions, etc.) affect – and very much so – Serbia and its socioeconomic development, and especially its prospects, judging by what presidential candidates are saying its position remains blurred and undecided between European course and reliance on another three pillars (Moscow, Beijing and Washington), a country of no vision about its place and role in the regional and international context.

DRAMA IN SNS

Nomination of the ruling party's candidate resembled a drama at first just to end as an unsavory farce several days later. We witnessed both the drama and the farce "thanks" to outgoing President Nikolić. A day after the SNS Presidency opted for Vučić's candidacy Nikolić broke the news that he would run for yet another presidential term. Following an unprecedented smear campaign in the media close to Vučić (out of Belgrade's eight dailies, seven are taking his side) Nikolić gave up. Most analysts and commentators take there was an under-the-counter deal between the two. Russia's role in Nikolić's self-nomination remains unclear.

Premier Vučić has claimed for long he would not run the presidential race. And all the time his own party, as well as his coalition partners (the Socialist Party of Serbia and its leader Ivica Dačić, and the Movement of Socialists and its leader Vulin) were role-playing situations of "having to convince him" to run. He is the only one who could triumph in the first round, they were claiming. His biggest coalition partner Dačić kept saying that his party would not nominate a candidate of its own should he decide to be the one.

Vučić's decision to replace the premier's chair with the presidential one testifies of his presently absolute power and is in the service of consolidating it. According to some analysts, however, his decision is a risky one at the same time raising many questions and dilemmas. Too much power in one's hands is also a chink in one's armor, they say, as Nikolić's self-nomination has hinted. Unisonous and big-mouthed party support need not necessarily be sincere. Bootlicking by coalition partners shows, above all, how much they are concerned for their own good, rather than manifest their loyalty in the long run. All this may lead to the conclusion

that with his (rush) decision Vučić has opened several fronts.

As for international scene Vučić's candidacy seems to suit the Western community – Brussels, Berlin and Washington alike.¹ Speaking of the leading duo, so far Moscow has trusted Nikolić more than Vučić, which could lead to the conclusion the former, is its favorite.² However, some analysts argue that the East and the West have reached a consensus about Vučić.³

OPPOSITION CANDIDATES

Despite its longstanding weakness, discord and disorientation, the opposition has set its heart on the upcoming presidential elections with more resoluteness than on the past, early parliamentary ones in 2016. In addition to well-known party leaders like Šešelj of the Serbian Radical Party, Boško Obradović of the Dveri Movement came up as “fresh blood” of the right-wing current, while, so to speak, pro-European and civil corps is being represented in two candidates – former Ombudsman Saša Janković and former Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremić.

Neither of the latter two comes from party structures, which is a curiosity per se. Their

decisions to run for presidency, especially Saša Janković's, were preceded by public actions subsequently supported by some political parties: the Democratic Party (Dragan Šutanovac) and the New Party (Zoran Živković) sided with Saša Janković, while the New Serbia (Velimir Ilić) and the Social Democratic Party (Boris Tadić) stood by Vuk Jeremić.

The two candidates have been campaigning for several weeks now; both are under the pressure of opposition parties – those that have not yet revealed their support – to withdraw his candidacy in favor of his counterpart so that the entire “civic corps” would have only one strong candidate to cross swords with Vučić. So far the League of Vojvodina Social Democrats (Nenad Čanak) and “Enough is Enough” /Dosta je bilo/ Movement (Saša Radulović) have given their support to the idea about “a single opposition” candidate, launched by the Liberal Democratic Party (Čedomir Jovanović).

However rational such an outcome might seem, one can hardly expect it: both candidates have already invested ambitions, potentials and resources of their own in the presidential race. And, beside, for months both have been brutally smeared by tabloids close to the Premier. Having withstood them stoically, both of them probably take they have “well-deserved” their candidacies.

Almost all commentators and analysts agree that even a single, unique opposition candidate would obtain enough votes to stand against Aleksandar Vučić in the second round; and the more so since one of the two (Janković) lacks political experience while the other (Jeremić) has been absent from domestic political scene for too long to be able to cope with its present challenges.⁴

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- 1 Quoting certain diplomatic sources the Danas daily wrote that Washington had given Vučić a free hand for his candidacy about which he had been informed during a visit by high official of the Department of State, Mathew Palmer. Danas, February 20, 2017.
 - 2 This was especially speculated during several „stressful“ days – between Nikolić's announcement of his candidacy exclusively given to Russia's Sputnik Belgrade-seated branch, and his withdrawal. .
 - 3 According to the editor of the Nedeljnik daily, argues that in 2012 Nikolić and Vučić came to power thanks to overlapping interests of big powers; namely, “the West took under its wing Serbia's nationalists capable of untangling the Kosovo knot,” while “five years later Nikolić became useless to everyone except for the Russians.” Nedeljnik, February 23, 2017.

- 4 Though biased, as made by Branko Radun, the analyst close to the Premier, his argument is not without a “grain of truth.” “The opposition is still looking for its

THEATRICALITY WITHIN THE RULING COALITION

Until recently no drama has been made of regular presidential elections or anything dramatic expected from their outcomes: just yet another victory of the ruling party's coalition and, at best, a somewhat better score (than in parliamentary elections in 2014 and 2016) for a candidate of the opposition, in bits and pieces, and disoriented. The only suspense and the matter of speculation at the domestic political arena arose from unusually long time it took the regime to announce the name of its candidate.

President Nikolić made no bones about having an eye on yet another term in office. At first, in the spring of 2016, he was quite open about it, and then he became much more cautious.⁵ However, when in late 2016 the campaign for Vučić's candidacy was gaining momentum in SNS Nikolić blundered that the ruling party would announce the name of its candidate at Christmas (January 7, 2017). Vučić denied this arrogantly, announcing himself that he and the President would reveal the name of their candidate at Serbia's Statehood Day (called Sretenje, February 15).

As this date was drawing nearer the tempo of developments was raising. A day before the holiday, on February 14, the SNS Presidency said as one that Vučić was to be nominated. The same evening Vučić said in the one-to-one interview aired by the RTS, "I love Nikolić but love Serbia more."⁶

leader. Saša Janković's campaign is much too 'civic-oriented' while the one staged by Vuk Jeremić is much American in style though wiser than Janković's for targeting a larger audience – it targets not only 'pro-European' voters but also 'patriots' and 'socialists,'" he wrote.

5 In November 2016 he told the Politika daily that he had not made his mind yet but should he decide to run for the presidency it would be only logical that SNS nominates him. Politika, November 27, 2016.
6 The "Upitnik" (Question mark) talk show, RTS, February 14, 2017.

A day later just Vučić but not a single member of his cabinet showed up at the reception hosted by the President of the Republic of Serbia to mark the national holiday. However, the same evening the website of Russia's "Sputnik," growingly popular in Serbia, announced that Tomislav Nikolić (too) had decided to run for the presidency. Judging by their reactions, Vučić and his party comrades were shocked.

An avalanche of tabloid insults came tumbling down on Nikolić ("A Knife in Vučić's Back: Nikolić Sides with Yellow Bandits, Foreigners and Tycoons," "Mišković Ordered Toma to Betray Vučić," "Dragica Ordered Toma to Go for Vučić" and the like). The truth is that in return for his withdrawal from the presidential candidacy Nikolić asked Vučić to install him as party leader again and, in that capacity, as the Premier.

Politicians from other parties, the media not under Vučić's control, analysts and commentators were taken by surprise with such chain of events. A personal conflict was analyzed against a larger geopolitical background: the East-West rivalry in the Balkans and Serbia. Some claimed that without Moscow's "go-ahead" Nikolić would have never taken the plunge and that pro-Russian and pro-Western parts of Serbia's establishment – including tycoons, spies and the media – were about to cross swords.⁷

And then we watched a farce: on February 20 the President and the Premier met and issued a joint release about "continuing close mutual cooperation." Nikolić had thrown in the towel. Instead of what he had asked for he got only a promise about discussing it "after the elections."

For the time being the denouement of the crisis in the radical-progressive "family" is put aside and hushed down. What can be taken for granted is that a conflict had taken place and ended

7 Danas, February 22, 2017.

by Nikolić's apparent defeat; but that the epilogue is still to come.⁸

SMEARING OF THE OPPOSITION

One of alleged reasons why Nikolić should be eliminated from the presidential race are public opinion polls showing that he could have to compete with an opposition candidate in the second round. But Vučić and his SNS obviously badly need yet another electoral triumph.

Just for sure, the media close to Vučić have been flinging dirt at opposition candidates for months now. They are after Saša Janković and Vuk Jeremić while sparing Vojislav Šešelj and Boško Obradović. The smear campaign against Janković and Jeremić is now at full swing and will surely further intensify in the weeks to come.

Indicatively, both Janković and Jeremić are being linked with two tragic events with fatal outcomes.⁹ Besides, in his office as the Ombudsman Saša Janković, unlike other institutions (the police, the prosecution, courts, etc.) was ignoring the pressure from the executive branch and was hence often accused of political misuse of the institution he was in charge of. Searching for his "new" blemishes tabloids have recently "revealed" that he had been friends with Minister of Healthcare Zlatibor Lončar (infamous for his alleged ties with the Zemun gang) and that Vojislav Šešelj learned from his informer that

8 "Nikolić's decision to withdraw himself should not be interpreted offhandedly as a heavy and probably his last political defeat. To know how much he had lost, one should know how much he had invested in the party...and how high was his redundancy pay...Probably, after all, he got what he deserved but certainly not what he wished." NIN, February 23, 2017.

9 Saša Janković is being connected with the suicide of his friend in his apartment 25 years ago, while Jeremić with unsolved murder of two soldiers in Topčider in 2005.

Janković has been working for intelligence service for decades.¹⁰

Apart from accusing him of having been involved in the Topčider killing of two soldiers 12 years ago, tabloids are targeting Jeremić for "nontransparent sources of finances for his election campaign (costing some five million Euros, according to the Politika daily). Considering his long career at the international scene tabloids keep speculating about the "sides" he is working for (according to some, for Moscow, to others – for Washington, while his closeness with Beijing "is no secret"). Attending the meetings he held in the provinces, supporters of the regime are often inciting incidents (like in Smederevo or Pančevo).

NOTHING NEW TO OFFER

Saša Janković held his first convention in a packed sports hall in New Belgrade on February 19. The way he accentuated his address ('today's state is a buddy system, while institutions are used to wipe floor with,' "we need public servants accountable to law rather than to a political party," etc.) indicates his focus – the nature of Vučić's authoritarianism, destruction of the rule of law, and the practice of sweeping scandals under the carpet (from the Savamala case to the responsibility for the military chopper crash that has never been investigated before a court of law). Vuk Jeremić, the second candidate of the so-called civic option, tackles the same issues – the dysfunctional society and state. His electoral platform lists "national unity," "safe country," "access to justice," "new jobs," "knowledge," "cultural revival," etc.

However, both candidates are bypassing some issues crucial to Serbia's position in the region; in fact, they are sticking to the stands already taken by the present regime. Vuk Jeremić is stands

10 Srpski Telegraf, Februaray 24, 2017.

for Serbia's military neutrality, saying "I will ask all institutions of the establishment to further develop this policy and include it in all relevant official documents."¹¹ Known for bursting with patriotism in public, he had attended the disputed celebration of the RS Day, January 9, in Banjaluka. "The policy that respects sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bosnia-Herzegovina is not in opposition to development of strong and functional relations between Belgrade and Banjaluka," he said later.¹²

In an interview with the Vreme weekly (his first interview after he announced his candidacy) Saša Janković said that "the burning issue" of Serbia's membership of NATO was always used to divert people's attention from the problems of their everyday existence. A decision on the country's possible membership of this military alliance, he said, should depend "on the analysis of the effects this membership would

have on Serbia in five, ten or twenty years from now."¹³

He also said that Vučić's two governments have made bigger steps towards Kosovo's independence than any of their predecessors. Speaking of Serbia-Kosovo relations, he added that he would leave "to people's will to decide on how to formally round up the issue of the borders this regime had ceded to Prishtina. "I just hope one day the Albanians would not only have to but want to live in Serbia because Serbia would be a decent country," he commented.¹⁴

The two candidates of the so-called civil and pro-European option are obviously not ready for any brave U-turn in Serbia's position vis-à-vis Euro-Atlantic integrations and relations with its neighbors; and this is what stirs skepticism of the liberal wing of the country's electorate.¹⁵

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Presidential candidates and the atmosphere of the election campaign announce rearrangement of Serbia's political scene. A change of generation is coming: the new generation is mostly patriotic and conservative. Two key opposition candidates are nonpartisan figures aspiring to forming parties of their own.

At this stage the election campaign shows that there have been no major changes in the stances of the political elite, which is mostly recycling old theses and ideas. They are evidently avoiding taking stance about the region (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro and Kosovo); this indicates impassiveness about the issue truly affecting Serbia's position in the region and normalization of regional relations.

Media oppression against the opposition candidates indicates that conditions for fair and free elections have not been created. And for many reasons one may have doubts about the electoral process. All the elections held since 2012 indicate that gross misuse, intimidation and under-the-counter deals have taken place. And in the meantime institutions (such as CeSID) capable and qualified for monitoring electoral processes till 2012 have lost repute.

13 Vreme, February 9, 2017.

14 Ibid.

15 Po nekima od njih, u ovom bi trenutku politički racionalnije bilo glasanje za Vučića, kako bi mu se pomoglo da se „i on lično, ali i Srbija“ trajno okrenuli ka Evropi i svemu onome što Evropa simbolizuje; Jasmin Hodžić, član Glavnog odbora LDP, Danas, 21. februar 2017.

11 Ibid.

12 NIN, January 19, 2017.