

Helsinki *bulletin*



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SERB PROGRESSIVE PARTY PREPARES THE TERRAIN FOR ELECTIONS

Serb Progressive Party (SNS) is vigorously preparing the terrain for elections – either early on which it insists or regular scheduled for 2012. Its major objectives at this stage are to attract as many as possible voters of Serb Radical Party (SRS) and to demonstrate its power at local elections called in certain towns in Serbia. It has been successful in both up to now. Its weaknesses, however, are in its poor human resources and actually no-existent party program. Up to now its rhetoric has boiled down to populism, social populism in the first place.

With the logistic support from the media, the entire conservative bloc has been promoting SNS. War propagandists from Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) in early 1990s make up its main strike force now. On the list here are Ratko Marković, author of “Milosević’s constitution,” Brana Crnčević, operative of ethnic engineering in Croatia and in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bozidar Delic, commander of the Prishtina corps in 1998-99 and witness for the defense in the Milošević trial (video tapes showing him torching an Albanian village from a tank incriminated him on the occasion), Goran Radosavljević Guri, head of Gendarmerie at the time of NATO

intervention and many other persons of similar profiles.

SNS’s strategy for attracting as many as possible public figures boils down to the takeover of the cadres of Democratic Party (DS), Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) and G17 Plus. To gain popularity it focuses on corruption but never tackles its causes. It tries to blame the ruling coalition for all “corruption scandals,” including the narcoboss Darko Šarić affair. The reform of the judiciary provides SNS plenty of room for criticism of the ruling coalition – and all judges and prosecutors who were not reelected are lending it a helping hand. To blur the sum and substance – the fact that judiciary reform was more than necessary – SNS presents every case of nonelection as a scandal. The point is that Serbia’s judiciary has been the last resort of the conservative bloc. Therefore, it has been “defending” it by all means.

The “transfers” of the secretary general of Serbia’s Presidency, Vladimir Cvijan, and the ex-advisor of Miroljub Labus, Zorana Milanović, to SNS falls under the party’s strategy that can be summed up as “one transfer a week.” This is how SNS actually attempts to delegitimize the

ruling coalition and induce early elections. Its one-million-signatures petitioning serves the same purpose (an initiative supported by NS and DSS).



THE CVIJAN CASE

SNS made a sensation when Vladimir Cvijan, close associate of President Tadić, joined its ranks. Cvijan said he had resigned in protest over corruption marking the reelection of judges. However, he has not produced any hard evidence of his claims up to now. All he brought before public eye as a CD with reelection data, which allegedly indicates misconduct in the reform process. Cvijan also accused Minister of Justice Snežana Malović and President of the Supreme Judiciary Council (VSS) Nata Mesarović of being involved in “the judiciary mafia.”

Commenting Cvijan’s change of allegiance, Tomislav Nikolić, SNS leader, said, “Political parties are like living organisms, people are coming and going.” However, he announced that Cvijan would present the evidence on corruption in the judiciary “to relevant authorities when they

ask him to.”¹ He added that SNS would help Cvijan to bring everything to justice.

For Democratic Party, that was yet another affair meant to have corruption pinned on it. According to the head of the “For an European Serbia” caucus, Nada Kolundžija, party transfers only testify of political immaturity of the Serbian society and that “the parties attracting turncoats have an eye on political struggle rather than on securing quality human resources.”²

The prosecution will have to react at Cvijan’s accusations. Ex-president of the Supreme Court of Serbia Slobodan Vučetić said, “The relevant authorities must thoroughly investigate Cvijan’s claims about corruption in the judiciary. Though the Ministry of Justice and the President of the VSS could press charges against him, the prosecutor office needs to react at some elements of his statement. His came up with strong accusations that should not end up as empty words only.”³

Spokesman for the Republican Prosecution Office Tomo Zorić called upon Cvijan to “present all the evidence in his possession to the Special Prosecution for Organized Crime.” To this, Cvijan responded that Vesna Rakić Vodinelić, strong critic of the reform of the judiciary, had been the one to submit all the corruption related evidence to the President of Serbia. Denying his claim, Ms. Rakić Vodinelić said, “I have neither presented nor sent any evidence of corruption to the Serbian Presidency or the Prosecution Office. I don’t know what to say about my relations with Vladimir Cvijan. I used to respect him while he was working for the Administrative Law Department at the Univer-

1 Tanjug, April 19, 2010.
2 Ibid.
3 Press, April 21, 2010.

sity. But I think he chose a wrong side when he joined Serb Progressive Party.”⁴

Justice Minister Snežana Malović called Cvijan’s allegations “senseless” and said they stood for “SNS’s attempt to discredit the necessary and unavoidable process of the judiciary reform.”⁵

SNS demanded resignation of President of VSS Nata Mesarović. The party said she had “lied” when claiming she knew nothing about the person called Vladimir Cvijan and to substantiate its statement produced a video recording of the conversation the two had.

SNS attitude towards the reform of the judiciary can be summed up in the statement by party official Nebojsa Stefanović, “The so-called reform of the judiciary was obviously nothing but a purge of honorable and honest judges, who were replaced by politically suitable ones. As Democratic Party was the one to design and carry out the entire process, it is obvious that it misused its political influence in the election of judges.”

CVIJAN UNDER INVESTIGATION FOR ESPIONAGE

The investigation of unauthorized tape recording of the conversation with President of VSS Nata Mesarović is underway. Vladimir Cvijan is suspected, with good reason, of having tape recorded the conversation with his own mobile in his capacity as acting secretary of Serbian Presidency. An act as such is scandalous given that the President of VSS and Cassation Court has equal standing as the president of state and the parliamentary speaker. Besides, as the President of the Cassation Court, she is the only one authorized to approve tapping in criminal investigations.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.



The tape recording of the conversation between Nata Mesarović and Vladimir Cvijan was publicized only once he joined the ranks of SNS. Regardless of the motives behind the tapping, the act itself is defined as crime under Article 143 of the Penal Law: unauthorized tapping and bugging. The punishment proscribed for the crime ranges between 6 months to five years of imprisonment. Besides, should the defendant be found guilty of espionage, the punishment ranges from three to fifteen years of incarceration.

Nata Mesarović said she was surprised by the “fact that members of VSS are accused of corruption in the process of election of judges” and that “an official in the Presidency submits his resignation on that account.” He explained that she had invited Cvijan ex officio to her office to learn about the indications and evidence in his possession. She added she had never said – as claimed by SNS – that she knew not the person called Vladimir Cvijan but said she didn’t know who he was given the manner in

which he presented himself upon his transfer to SNS.⁶

Minister of Justice Snežana Malović said, “Vladimir Cvijan has tapped many people, including the director of the Anti-corruption Agency, Zorana Marković. I can only suspect that he tapped me as well since I’ve talked to him. If that’s so, I publicly call upon him to air that recording.”⁷

Referring to her contacts with Cvijan, Zorana Marković says, “It’s only logical that I’ve been seeing Cvijan as an employee for the Serbian Presidency. I have no other comments! However, I don’t see why the relevant authorities have not reacted yet. For, only on the grounds of newspaper writings he should have already been taken in and prosecuted for unauthorized publication of information. That’s a crime.”⁸

OTHER TURNCOATS

The case of Zorana Milanović, ex-adviser to (ex-deputy premier) Miroljub Labus is also interesting. She said she was honored to have joined SNS team, because, as an expert in energetics, she was only too aware that state interests in this domain could “not be a matter of trade.” Serbia’s domain of energy should be “restored to its proper and realistic place,” she said – i.e. Serbia should be a regional center and a center of South East Europe not only in energy transfer but also as a energy supplier of Serbia and neighboring countries.

SNS has added yet another public figure to its ranks: Goran Radosavljević Guri, former head of Gendarmerie involved in the war in Kosovo. He was fully engaged in the party’s election campaign for local elections in Arandjelovac.

6 Blic, April 23, 2010.

7 Press, April 26, 2010.

8 Ibid.



SNS plans to win over officials of other parties too. They intend to bring in “a new man” on weekly basis. The word has it that an MP from the ruling coalition will join them after May Day holidays.⁹

THE ŠARIĆ CASE

SNS has also been using the Šarić case to prove the connection between the ruling coalition and organized crime. Tomislav Nikolić accused the government of having sponsored the “establishment of Šarić’s gang” and called upon President Tadić to come public with persons involved. Vojislav Koštunica – during whose premiership the Šarić gang bought almost all its real estate throughout Serbia – also blamed Democratic Party of the Šarić case, given that, as he put it, “at that time the minister of justice came from Democratic Party.”

RELATIONS BETWEEN SNS AND DSS

SNS and DSS belong to the same ideological bloc, though SNS is more attractive as a political party due to its populism. The bloc’s main ideologist is Vojislav Koštunica, who is considered an heir apparent to Dobrica Ćosić. Such information has been circulating for some time now and is most manifest in the treatment Koštunica gets within the bloc itself and, above all, in Ćosić’s circle. SNS is a project of that

9 Blic, April 21, 2010.

circle, designed as Vojislav Koštunica's electorate. DSS had better cadres than SNS and has a party program, particularly an economic one. Besides, both parties are close to Russia they consider Serbia's main partner ("both Russia and EU") and both oppose the country's membership of NATO.

Nikolić follows DSS policy towards the ruling coalition: he backs DSS initiative for deposal of Minister of Economy and Regional Development Mladen Dinkić. Vojislav Koštunica claims that the incumbent government is fatal to Serbia, that all institutions are undermined the same as the country's territorial integrity, that adoption of Vojvodina's statute made establishment of a "state within a state" possible and that the regionalization plan further disintegrates Serbia "from within."

Koštunica denies that he is in conflict with Nikolić. The alleged conflict, he says, has been created and overblown by the media. "Nikolić and I have defined our relationship over several meetings. We agreed that only Serbia as a whole could accede to EU."¹⁰

LOCAL ELECTIONS IN ARANDJELOVAC

These elections indicate that the election campaign at republican level has already begun despite the fact that there is not telling when the elections will take place. According to election results in Arandjelovac, the ratings of DS and SNS are almost the same – to all appearances the two parties will be main rivals in the period to come.

Elections results of the coalition formed by the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) indicate growth of the party's popularity. SPS official Branko

Ružić says, "The Socialists are constantly on the upward curve. Citizens are aware of what the coalition does to serve their interests and those of the state." For G17 Plus, three municipal seats it won "justify the idea about a union of regional parties," whereas the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) takes the fact that it will participate in local parliament for the first time ever a great success.

According to sociologist Vladimir Vuletić, no party can be called an absolute winner of the local elections in Arandjelovac. "SNS has won the majority vote, but a party aspiring after early parliamentary elections cannot consider winning of one-fourth of total vote a triumph," says Vuletić.¹¹

Despite all endeavors, a two-party system in Serbia is still a far-fetched plan. SNS has been established with this in mind in the first place. The experience has shown that small parties are making coalitions to pass electoral threshold. On the other hand, a division into two blocs is manifest – DS making one bloc and SNS another.

At the assembly of Party of Allied Pensioners of Serbia (PUPS) President Tadić messaged the announced SNS-DSS-NS coalition that he would "prevent them from coming to power." He said "Belgrade was in fire when the coalition was formed in the first place" and called the three parties "evil omens."¹²

SNS leader Tomislav Nikolić interpreted Tadić's address as "aggravation of relations at political scene."¹³ He said in a written statement, "Progressists will be patient and act reasonable as long as the government refrains from attacking us physically or violating our human and political rights. In that case, we shall respond to

10 Alo, April 26, 2010.

11 Politika, April 27, 2010.

12 Press, April 27, 2010.

13 Ibid.

the President. I am ashamed that my president threatens me that I shall never come to power despite the fact that I've always been a fair politician. He cannot make me hate anyone, because we hate no one."¹⁴

Nikolić also warned Tadić to think twice about his doings against Serbia – because Tadić's threats were practically addressed to one half of its citizens. "At this moment, at least one half of Serbia's citizens supports SNS," said Nikolić. NS leader Velimir Ilić – known for his threats with physical violence against DS spokeswomen – said, "I can hardly believe that in the 21st century Serbia's president behaves undemocratically and in an uncivilized manner, and threatens the opposition."¹⁵ For his part, Koštunica underlines, "All this associates the communist era when the regime considered the very existence of an opposition intolerable."¹⁶

Analyst Slobodan Antonic says that Tadić's untypical use of "Radicals' vocabulary" is to be ascribed to his fear of the SNS-DSS coalition. "Vojislav Koštunica's address to SNS convention does not imply that the two parties are in coalition. The President assaults them though the coalition has not been seriously announced yet. Be it as it may, his pledge never to allow them to come to power is (EXCESSIVELY?) premature. Tadić seems confused and afraid of something non-existent," says Antonic.¹⁷

PROGNOSES ABOUT PROGRESSISTS

Having won over eight new members, all of whom are well-known in political and expert circles, SNS plans to strengthen its ranks and become a truly serious alternative to the regime. Political analysts take that all those new

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

figures are not outstanding enough to form a shadow government. They believe at the same time that SNS would continue recruiting fresh cadres.

Vladimir Goati, president of Transparency Serbia, says that the recruitment process is a follow-up to the one-million-signatures petitioning meant to keep the party mobile, but also to "show its muscles" to the ruling coalition. "These are not figures attractive to the public or capable of making changes and developing new policies. Unless SNS makes a sensation soon, this result so far is rather meager. I expect, however, that SNS would bring in some better known figure as it plans to upgrade its human resources structure," says Goati.¹⁸

According to Prof. Zoran Stojiljković, SNS has to be seriously perceived as an alternative to the incumbent regime. However, every new "transfer" may have a boomerang effect, he adds. "It is still to be seen how capable these people are. It is still to be seen whether some of them would substantiate their accusations. Will Cvijan manage to prove corruption in the process of the judiciary reform and will Goran Knezević, former mayor of Zrenjanin from DS, prove his innocence? Should they succeed, the Progressists would gain."¹⁹

SNS's new cadres are Bojan Dimitrijević – minister of trade during Koštunica's premiership and ex-official of SPO, Goran Knezević – ex-official of DS and ex-mayor of Zrenjanin, Radoš Ljušić – former member of DSS Main Committee and ex-director of Textbooks Bureau, Oliver Antić – professor at the Law School, ex-dean and SRS official, Brana Crnčević – writer and ex-member of SRS, Vladimir Cvijan – former secretary general of Serbian Presidency and ex-member of G17 Plus municipal committee, Zorana Milanović – expert in energetics and

18 Blic, April 22, 2010.

19 Ibid.

ex-advisor to Miroljub Labus, and Goran Radosavljević Guri – former commander of the Gendarmerie.

Marko Blagojević, CESID executive director, says a part of Serbia's electorate wavers between DS and SNS. "True, that's a small percentage for the time being but will surely grow in the period to come. According to him, it is unrealistic to expect early elections in the next twelve months. "DS will not call elections in the situation that is unfavorable to it. When Serbia obtains a candidacy status from EU, DS and the parties in coalition with it will be invested with huge electoral potential," says Blagojević.²⁰

Latest turncoats have not negatively affected DS ratings, says Blagojević, but all these transfers do impair the ratings of other parties such as DSS, SRS and NS. "These parties are now aware that SNS has set its eyes on upgrading its human resources."²¹

For Blagojević, SNS is a credible alternative to DS. However, he is not sure how the international community will treat them. "Having separated from SRS, SNS has become more socially acceptable by the very fact that it proclaimed its commitment to EU. The party is now faced with a crucial problem: can it or can it not counterpoise DS in terms of human resources, or does it have enough people of quality for all offices it would take over once it comes to power? They proved their strength by collecting one million signatures and are now working on collecting cadres," says Blagojević.²²

20 Danas, April 22, 2010.

21 Press, April 24, 2010.

22 Ibid.

SNS's target group are former voters of SRS, DSS and NS. Should it win over some prospective DS "voters" that would only be a "collateral benefit." And such a "benefit" is realistic.²³

Serbia cannot make a major advance towards EU until it reaches a consensus on the level of the entire society. The absence of such a consensus negatively affects all reform moves and slows down Serbia's movement towards EU.

SNS is obviously on the offensive that is backed by the entire conservative bloc. It uses all means to obtain quality cadres. However, its unconvincing European orientation and the fact that its "strike force" is made of the former warring lobby stand for the party's problem.

SNS does not have a program testifying of its pro-European orientation. It claims it will publicize its program once the date of elections is set. That is a rather poor argument but the one indicative of populism, which may secure it some scores in the present economic and social situation but cannot produce any solution.

In its communication with SNS, the international community – EU and US in the first place – need to insist that the party publicizes its program so that the public could critically review it. SNS's criticism of everything and failure to offer alternative solutions would be thus perceived from a new angle.

23 Ibid.