

Helsinki bulletin



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POPULISM MIRRORS IMPOTENCE

SERBIA'S CRYSTALLIZATION

The outcome of presidential election reflects Serbia's political climate, mentality and culture – in other words, rather limited achievements of its democratic transition. Ever since 2000 cabinets have been combinations of seemingly opposite political options. These combinations have slowed down the tempo of transition. Nevertheless, they have only mirrored Serbia's *actual* potential.

The effect of the election of Tomislav Nikolić for President of Serbia is tectonic: it will speed up the process of Serbia's crystallization into pro-European and anti-European currents, which equals further political fragmentation. The election of Nikolić questions Democratic Party's coalition with the Socialists as many among the later are inclined to Nikolić's Progressists: they share the same ideology and closeness to Russia. Serbia's strategic option for European integration is thus open to doubt.

The actual balance of power at Serbia's political scene hinders changes and essentially democratic progress. The political gray zone threw Tadić away having assessed that it could obstruct and slow down European integration



SRDAN ILIĆ

with Nikolić at the helm. The same political gray zone has prevented the country from facing up the past and putting an end to the warring policy that burdens domestic reforms and regional normalization.



SRĐAN ILIĆ

The Democratic Party of Serbia is an ideological core of the anti-European bloc. The party has been and still is the stronghold of anti-Europeanism but today it is also a “cadre reservoir” the Progressists need badly.

The post-election constellation threatens the Democratic Party’s stability and survival. Now on the carpet for all its failures the Democratic Party is under pressure from all sides. The Progressists and the political gray zone have an eye on its disintegration – like in the aftermath of Zoran Djindjić’s assassination. A dismantled Democratic Party – a political pillar of reforms – destroys Serbia’s reformist potential over the long run.

The outcome of the presidential race is a fiasco of the political engineering for Serbia’s integration into Europe that has been on since 2000. In other words, inadequate heed paid to rudimentary democratic processes – presupposing a stronger civil society, free and professional media, etc. – resulted in a fiasco.

DEMOCRATIC PARTY IN CRISIS

The defeat suffered by the Democratic Party is dramatic for Serbia. The defeat is not only a consequence of citizens’ dissatisfaction with the ruling coalition’s inefficiency and arrogance but also an indicator of the crystallized power balance in Serbia. Populism is a predominant current in Serbian politics (Milosevic, Kostunica, Nikolić). Economic inefficiency, falling standards of living and high unemployment provided fertile soil to the Progressists’ demagoguery.

The Democratic Party was punished for its irresponsible behavior and lack of spirit necessary for coping with fundamental problems. On the other hand, it had been faced with its own limitations and those of the society and the entire political elite. The presidential elections also mirrored Serbia’s political inertness and absence of the society’s – and, especially, its elite’s – potential for a U-turn towards truly democratic transition. Apathy and ideological confusion - originating from the fact that the society has not overcome the recent past – turned a nationalist and populist, Tomislav Nikolić, into an acceptable alternative. Thanks

to the same matrix Ivica Dačić, leader of the Socialist Party of Serbia, was most successful in the elections: he won twice as many votes than in 2008. Though he took the third place he was actually a true winner of the presidential race. None of the two “big” parties can form a cabinet without his support (unless they opt for “a big coalition”).

The newly elected president stands for a victory of the conservative bloc. Serbia is now faced with challenges the proportions of which can be guessed rather than predicted with certainty. What is certain, however, is that such turn of events makes Serbia an uncertain partner both for EU and its closest neighborhood. Its regional policy and attitude toward European integration will largely depend on the manner in which crucial issues emerging from the second round of the presidential election and Nikolić’s victory will be solved. Namely, after parliamentary elections and the first round of the presidential race (May 6) Tadić’s victory was taken as certain¹ the same as a cabinet to be formed in no time by his party, the Socialist Party of Serbia and a third partner (Liberal Democratic Party or United Regions of Serbia). However, with victorious Tomislav Nikolić all combinations are again possible – from a “big coalition” of the Serb Progressive Party and the Democratic Party, though the coalition identical to the last one, to a new one between the Serb Progressive Party and the Democratic Party of Serbia, but also the Socialist Party that preconditions a parliamentary majority.

Like in 2008, the composition of the future ruling coalition and cabinet depend on the Socialists and their leader, Ivica Dačić. Dragan Bujošević, editor-in-chief of the *Politika* daily, holds that Dačić faces the same dilemma as in 2008: and in 2008 he realized that he would be

¹ In the first round Boris Tadić won 25.3 percent of total votes or less than 0.5 percent more than his rival, Tomislav Nikolić.

choked by Nikolić-Kostunica coalition, whereas a coalition with Tadić would enable him to grow stronger. “Now he calculates whether he profits more from cohabitation with Nikolić and the Progressists whose biographies he will ‘wash up’ as Tadić ‘washed up’ the Socialists, siding immediately with Nikolić for the sake of his own political prospects (presidential elections in 2017) or from staying with Tadić,” writes Bujošević.²

NIKOLIĆ’S VICTORY

The relative success of the ruling coalition in the parliamentary elections of May 6 when Tadić’s Democratic Party, Dačić’s Socialists and minority partners won 139 parliamentary seats, and Tadić’s tight victory in the first round of presidential elections were delusive. Exulted and convinced in Tadić’s sure victory in the second round the Democratic Party was put to sleep. They believed that media spinning and unquestionable “assistance” from all public opinion agencies that prognosticated Tadić’s triumph were enough.³

Their easygoing attitude combined with continued negative campaign discrediting Nikolić with his own statements given at the time of his “radical past,” put off many. Unlike in the 2008 elections with same candidates for presidency a campaign for boycott was launched at all levels of the society, including the civil sector.

This time everything was left to people to decide and to “certain prognoses.” So it happened that voter turnout was lower than ever before

² *Politika*, May 22, 2012.

³ Indicative of media spinning was the front page of NIN weekly three days before the Election Day. It ran a photo of Tomislav Nikolić and a banner “A Premeditated Loser.” Editorial argued that Nikolić “lost all chances for a presidency.”



SAVA RADOVANOVIC

– 46.87 percent, while 3.02 percent of invalid ballots were higher than the usual 1-2 percent (the “blank ballot” syndrome).

All in all, motivated voters and supporters of Nikolić and his party made a good use of this “empty voting space:” the moment polls were closed Nikolić’s victory was obvious. An hour later it was officially confirmed.

In his first address as a president elect Nikolić did his best to maintain his “reformed rhetoric.” He placed Serbia’s movement towards EU and protection of “its citizens in Kosovo and Metohija” on his priority list. Asked by reporters about his attitude towards EU and the agreement he had signed with Kostunica, Nikolić replied, “Neither of us has renounced his ideology and policy.”⁴ (Shortly before the Election Day Nikolić and Kostunica agreed that Serbia’s future foreign policy should be decided on at a referendum.) He also said that relations

with Croatia would be motivated by the future and cooperation (remarking, “As a Sumadija-born man, I am not genetically predisposed to hating Croats.”). “Serbia and Croatia should live in peace with each other. I will be governing a big country that must develop good relations with everyone. All Croatia has to do to have me as its unconditional partner is to demonstrate that it treats all its citizens equally and is a true member of EU,” he said. On the other hand, he pointed out that it was impermissible that relations with Montenegro with its big Serb ethnic community were “at a lower level” than relations with Croatia.⁵

Insisting on the need to have comprehensive relations with Brussels, Washington, Moscow and other countries, Nikolić apostrophized Germany saying that he would ask for a meeting with Chancellor Angela Merkel. “Germany is Serbia’s biggest ally,” he explained.⁶ The first

⁴ Nikolić live on air, TV Prva, May 20, 2012.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

visit abroad he had on his schedule was the one to Moscow.

Referring to a future cabinet he pointed out that political circumstances had fundamentally changed so that all combinations agreed on before the election were no longer to be taken for sure. He explained that Jorgovanka Tabakovic, his party had nominated before the election, would be a new prime minister.

DEFEATED BORIS TADIĆ

President Tadić responded to unexpected news about his defeat with dignity. He was among the first to congratulate Nikolić on his victory. His emotional address to reporters when “everything was over” reflected not the confusion and shock overpowering his election headquarters. “We shall discuss this new situation at party committees. I am the one who is most responsible and have never tried to avoid my responsibility. I am sorry that more citizens had not gone to the polls. After four years of constant criticism it was impossible to have tables turned,” he told reporters.⁷

Asked about the possibility of being nominated Prime Minister, Tadić said that was out of question. However, this is quite possible according to sources from the Democratic Party and messages from the Socialists.

Citizens, analysts, the media and the Democratic Party itself are now analyzing the “political earthquake” (Slobodan Antonić) caused by Tadić’s defeat. In the second round Tadić

⁷ Politika, May 6, 2012. According to many, including Professor Vojin Dimitrijević of the Belgrade Center for Human Rights, it was only a defeated Tadić who had addressed citizens as he should have in the first place. Tadić would stand much better chance had he spoken like that in the election campaign rather than listened to his marketing advisers and spin-doctors, said Dimitrijević.

actually won only in Vojvodina, including its biggest towns such as Novi Sad and Subotica. Given that the Democratic Party had scored well in parliamentary and, especially, in provincial elections (it won 50 seats out of 110 in the provincial assembly), it is obvious that the party vice-president from Vojvodina, Bojan Pajtić, is among the winners of the 2012 elections.

Even more victorious than Pajtić is probably the party deputy president and mayor of Belgrade, Dragan Djilas. In the parliamentary elections Democratic Party – that it, Djilas – won 36 percent of Belgrade’s electorate. However, it was Nikolić who won both in Belgrade and in Nis in the second round of the presidential run. Indicatively, voters in the towns with biggest investments in the past four years such as Kragujevac, Valjevo and Zajecar also raised their hands for Nikolić.

Elaborating the turbulence in the Democratic Party in the aftermath of the electoral fiasco, the media speak of invigorated Djilas and Pajtić.⁸ Quoting the same sources they point out the responsibility of other party vice-presidents (Dusan Petrović, Jelena Trivan and Dragan Šutanovac) – loyal to Tadić so far, who had been “in charge” of the provinces but “allowed” Nikolić to win.⁹

“Had Boris Tadić won on Sunday (May 20) that would have been his victory and no one else’s. His defeat is, however, Serbia’s defeat,” commented Čedomir Jovanović, leader of the Liberal Democratic Party.¹⁰ The entire Democratic Party that has parasitized on him has no cour-

⁸ „Djilas is untouchable now that Tadić lost Belgrade,” quotes Danas unnamed sources from the Democratic Party. „Djilas is now a party giant and an informal number one.” Danas, May 22, 2012.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ RTV B92, May 23, 2012.

age now to go public with its responsibility, added Jovanović. ¹¹

According to analyst Vladimir Goati, the President of the Democratic Party was a personification and victim of “everything his party hoped for but did not get.” “So, everything tumbled down on him – from economic problems to many mistakes made under his party’s auspices,” he said.¹² “The least guilty one was left holding the baby,” says Rasim Ljajic whose party participated in the elections in coalition with the Democratic Party.¹³

ELECTORAL ABSTENTION AND “BLANK BALLOTS”

Post-election analyses and commentaries have been deliberating the effects of electoral abstention and the “blank ballots” phenomenon. The experience shows, they conclude, that a low turnout plays into the hands of the Serb Progressive Party and its presidential candidate as they have a disciplined body of voters. The Democratic Party will soon have to discuss why was it that it “lulled to sleep” its voters by spinning a certain victory of Boris Tadić. Commenting the unprecedentedly low voter turnout in the second round of presidential election, analyst Miodrag Radojevic says that was because after the first round people thought “everything was over.”¹⁴

According to Sonja Licht, president of the Belgrade Center for Political Excellence, low voter turnout is a bad sign for a country in the initial stage of democracy. Since Tomislav Nikolić became a president thanks to the “choice” made by only one-fourth of Serbia’s electorate, she says, his presidential legitimacy is inadequately

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Politika, May 22, 2012.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Politika, May 22, 2012.

strong and founded.¹⁵ The generally low voter turnout on May 6 – less than 60 percent of the electorate – is ascribed, in the first place, to citizens’ dissatisfaction with the political elite. (Low voter turnout is not characteristic of Serbia.) By “voting with their feet” citizens messaged political parties and their leaders that they take them responsible for the bad situation of the country,” says Ljiljana Smailovic, president of Journalists’ Association of Serbia.¹⁶

Citizens’ dissatisfaction with and disappointment in the regime and the opposition like was the crucial argument of initiators of the “blank ballots” campaign. Most ardent promoters of the campaign – a new phenomenon at Serbia’s political scene, much disputed even before the election campaign begun – were three women: Vesna Pesic, Srbijanka Turajlic and Vesna Rakic-Vodinelic. Pavle Radic does not question their motives (to awaken politicians to their conscience through “blank ballots”) but reminds that the campaign got new impulses, products of “old weaknesses of the anyway weak middle class.” “This is all about individual vanities and claims, even a competition in moral chastity, about a tendency to indisputable arbitrariness, sectarianism and contemplating one’s own navel,” he says.¹⁷

Regardless of motives behind the “blank ballots” campaign the fact remains that its effect on the outcome of the election was below expectations and, as some put it, almost absurd. “Vesna Pesic and Vojislav Kostunica, persons addressing two ideological poles of the Serbian electorate, made Tomislav Nikolić acceptable,” says the Vreme weekly.¹⁸ Most analysts, commentators and journalists held this action

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ RTV B92, May 21, 2012.

¹⁷ Danas, May 22, 2012.

¹⁸ Vreme, May 24, 2012.

as unproductive, retrograde and parochial. On the other hand, Srdjan Bogosavljevic, director of IPOS Strategic Marketing, claims Boris Tadić would have won in the second round had there not been for some 100,000 invalid ballots, which amounts to 3 percent.¹⁹

However, out of this number only 30,000 were “blank ballots.” This figure had no effect on the outcome, says Marko Blagojevic of CESID.²⁰ “Things are quite simple - people who abstain do not influence the outcome,” adds his colleague Zoran Lucic.²¹

REACTION TO NIKOLIĆ'S VICTORY

First reactions to a new tenant of “Andric Venac” were protocolary and courteous. With few exceptions /LDP/ all leaders of political parties congratulated the president elect. In addition to Nikolić's coalition partners, Vojislav Kostunica, leader of the Democratic Party of Serbia, was genuinely happy with the outcome of the presidential race. For him, that was “a giant step towards a change of the regime.” Reaction of Muamer Zukorlic, mufti of the Islamic Community of Serbia, is most indicative: “I am glad that Tomislav Nikolić won,” he said. Though Tadić scored better than Nikolić in Novi Pazar and Sandzak, Zukorlic argues that “Bosniak votes decided the outcome of Serbia's elections.”²²

Over the past years Nikolić's changed rhetoric and declarative choice of EU course have “normalized” his standing in international circles from Washington to Brussels (though they looked forward to Tadić's victory). Vincent Degert, head of EU Delegation to Serbia, said in his message of congratulations that many

¹⁹ Danas, May 22, 2012.

²⁰ RTV B92, May 22, 2012.

²¹ Politika, May 22, 2012.

²² Politika, May 21, 2012.

challenges were facing Nikolić and that EU was willing to cooperate with him.²³ The highest EU officials, Herman von Rompuy and Jose Manuel Baroso, said Nikolić was now especially responsible for ensuring stabile and functional institutions. “Serbia will always have to demonstrate its dedication to the spirit of reconciliation and cooperation in the region,” they warned.²⁴

NIKOLIĆ'S POPULISM UNDERMINES REFORMS IN SERBIA

Victory of the Progressists and Nikolić tectonically changed Serbia's political scene. This questions the years-long endeavor to keep Serbia on Euro-Atlantic course. This victory opens the door to uncertainties not only at the political scene but in the society as a whole. Only three days after the second round of the presidential elections the EU exchange rate of national currency spiraled down for almost 3 RSD (on May 24 EUR amounted to 115 RSD). This dramatically hints at the scope of economic and social instability.

The decision on parallel parliamentary and presidential elections used to be justified by a “unique electoral cycle” whereby an entire 2012 would not be “spent on” election campaigns. The expectations were that the planned outcome would make it possible to form a parliamentary majority and a cabinet in almost no time. That was number one priority against the backdrop of the growing economic crisis.

Nikolić's victory changed everything: one can hardly predict when and what kind of a new cabinet will be formed. The Democratic Party puts across messages that the agreement on a coalition with the Socialists and a third partner is still in force. On the other hand, the

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Politika, May 22, 2012.

Progressists claim that Tomislav Nikolić will first nominate for premiership the biggest parliamentary group, that is his MP Jorgovanka Tabakovic.

The theses about the international community wishing to see “a big coalition” are being circulated. Ivica Dačić, leader of the Socialists, confirms such theses.²⁵ International players take that Serbia would better cope with serious challenges facing it – the startup of accession negotiations that would confirm its option for Europe, resumed dialogue with Prishtina and implementation of the agreements already reached, and consolidation of economy inasmuch as possible – with a convincing (two-thirds) parliamentary majority and a cabinet formed by it.

Such theses are supported by speculation that the international community would rather see “a big coalition” than, say, a coalition between the Serb Progressive Party, the Socialist Party of Serbia and the Democratic Party of Serbia. Namely, according to “well-informed circles,” international partners would not want see Kostunica and his party in the government because of their clear-cut anti-Europeanism and advocacy for political and military neutrality.

The possibility of cohabitation is still in play: the President from one /SNS/ and the cabinet from another political bloc /DS/. Though most analysts favor this option – also advocated by Čedomir Jovanović, leader of LDP, who argues it would demonstrate political maturity and democratic “normalcy” – some experts are quite skeptic about it. Cohabitation, says Vladimir Gligorov, would give the electoral outcome “a double meaning.” Namely, he says, decisions made at different levels of the elections are diametrically opposite – one option was decided on in parliamentary elections and

²⁵ Radio B92, May 24, 2012.

another at presidential. Such situation may generate instability and new /early/ elections figure as the only rational solution, argues this expert.²⁶

REGIONAL REACTIONS

Serbia is still a major player in the region. Elections in Serbia have always been hot topic throughout the region. All the countries in the region are in the processes of consolidation, democratic transition and social transformation. Tardy political changes in Serbia stand in the way of these processes in Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro.

At first the region reacted with restraint to the outcome of presidential elections in Serbia. Slovenian Premier Janez Jansa said he expected no changes in Serbia’s foreign policy.²⁷ “I respect the will of Serbia’s electorate,” said Croatian Premier Zoran Milanovic, adding there was no reason why the two countries should not “cooperate despite the fact that Croatia’s option is somewhat different.”²⁸ The official Sarajevo also responded with moderate optimism, saying it hoped Serbia, with Nikolić at its helm, would continue moving towards EU and pursuing the policy of neighborly relations.²⁹ President of Kosovo Atifete Jahjaga appealed to Nikolić to “collect enough courage to take steps towards establishment of good and peaceful relations with Kosovo.”³⁰

The European Union has already announced that after Croatia’s accession the policy of enlargement would be slowed down or even cancelled. This negatively affects the entire region of Western Balkans. It’s symptomatic that,

²⁶ Pravda, May 21, 2011.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

say, Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina have reached the same conclusions as a big regional power, Turkey: true, acceptance of EU requests preconditions continuation of the enlargement policy but guarantee only to a certain extent that the process would be predictable and end in full-fledged membership.

This is why political cooperation with factors beyond EU is growing. For some Bosnian Muslims and Albanians reliance on Turkey is an alternative to deteriorated prospects for membership of EU. Speaking of Serbia's relations with Russia or China, it is worth mentioning that in 2008-10 Serbia turned down one-third of Brussels's requests to vote for its stands in international forums. In most cases it was when it came to EU's criticism of China and Russia.

ROLE OF FOREIGN FACTOR

Foreign factors influence the dynamics of political processes in Serbia and the region. Euro-Atlantic strategy was crucial for the region's stabilization and democratic transformation no matter how limited in some countries and in the region as a whole.

EU's and US's reactions have indicated that Serbia should stay on the course charted by the outgoing cabinet.

Moscow has never openly demonstrated its preference for Nikolić. President Putin said he expected continuation of the good bilateral cooperation, including implementation of the projects the two countries had already discussed.

Most international media ascribed Tadić's defeat to the country's bad economic and social situation, while reminding their audiences of Nikolić's nationalistic and radical past. Directly or indirectly, they were reserved about his pro-European orientation. "Whether a man who once said he would rather see Serbia become a province of Russia than a member of European bloc would continue to push Serbia towards a pro-European path," questions *New York Times*.³¹

At present the European Commission negotiates with Western Balkan countries the establishment of a traffic community by the model of the Energy Community. Similar integration mechanisms are possible in the domains of services, fight against transnational crime and corruption, use of EU structural funds, etc. The recent NATO summit meeting in Chicago concluded that Serbia should even more closely cooperate with NATO after the elections.

31 Ibid.

SUMMARY

Given the fragility of transition processes in the region and the present-day economic crisis plaguing both euro-zone and the region, EU should provide more room for the actions by candidate-countries. EU should have a realistic overview of the situation in candidate-countries to be in the position to define and adjust an efficient policy for achievement of European goals in the region. Slowed down or even blocked democratization processes in some Balkan countries indicate that it is crucial to have EU for a normative model and political agent of development, reforms and progress.

Serbia that may easily glissade to instability – with unforeseeable consequences on the region – needs a prompt reaction from EU, US and NATO. This is the only way to prevent the possibility of its disintegration.

Only the strategy that continually encourages accession could secure the region's progress towards EU, no matter how slow. With such a strategy only EU could manifest its responsibility for stability in Europe.

To make this strategy attractive to candidate-countries, EU should take measures that clearly demonstrate – to the governments and citizens alike – economic and political benefits of integration. At the same time these measures should contribute to economic and social preconditions to accession.

Measures for adjustment of educational systems in candidate-countries, as well as for gradual opening of EU labor market to citizens of these countries should be taken immediately.

Regardless of the crisis of euro-zone, EU should not reduce its presence in the Western Balkans. Prospects for membership of EU must be open, even more open than before, given complex and difficult circumstances in some countries.

EU's and member-countries' involvement in conflict-resolution processes in the region unavoidable involves them in domestic affairs of the Western Balkan countries. The impression about their smaller interest in the region or waning enlargement policy adversely affects Europe's influence and, consequently, the influence of pro-European forces in politics and societies – which undermines regional democratization and stabilization.

Prospects for EU enlargement to the Western Balkans are the only true prospects for democratic consolidation, stability and security in the region surrounded by EU member-states. Therefore, what is crucial is not only that EU is constantly present in the region but also that it integrates candidate-states into as many as possible domains – and thus safeguard stabilizing and democratizing effects of the policy of enlargement.