

Helsinki *bulletin*



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RECONSTRUCTION OF THE GOVERNMENT: A CREEPING PUTSCH



FONET

For more than three months has the reconstruction of the government dominated the country's political and media scene. The entire "reconstruction" process was a bottomless source of speculation, wild guesses, foul plays and muscle showing. Nine ministerial seats out of nineteen were unseated including the one assigned to a vice-premier. The reconstruction that takes so long is not merely a reconstruction – it indicates that the Progressists are after absolute power, without having to call early election.

The protracted and often sickening reconstruction process changed the balance of power within the ruling coalition – it tipped the scales between the Socialists and the Progressists in the first place but also of the Serb Progressive Party /SNS/ itself. The fact that no independent professionals to upgrade the government's performance were appointed smashes the last hope about incumbent leaders' ability to pull the country out of the deep economic, social and moral crisis. Besides, the reconstruction was not carried out by a well-thought-out plan

or program for serious reforms. Everything indicates that behind the scenes the Progressists have been striving for quite a different goal – to become the main political power.

The coalition partner holding the reins of crucial economic-financial resources – the United Regions of Serbia party /URS/ – was ousted. Hence, eliminated was the last party that used to be in the democratic front ousting the Milosevic regime on October 5, 2000.¹ This only deepens the impression that the ruling coalition has no “program” other than marginalization of the Democratic Party /DS/ and marginalization of the role other democratically-oriented parties could play in the process of EU integration. This process has been dragging since 2000 – the same as Serbia has been dragging its feet towards Europe. The radical-progresses party had been among the main stumbling blocs in its way.

Incompetence, unprofessionalism and nepotism are the benchmarks of SNS personnel policies. The outcome was the entropy of the entire administration and public services. SNS’s meager “pool” of professional cadres was laid bare. Engagement of experts from abroad – characters with resounding names like Dominique Strauss-Kahn – Aleksandar Vucic, SNS leader and vice-premier has been announcing, can hardly turn the wheel of the ongoing deinstitutionalization.

URS and Dinkic were removed at the eleventh hour – and spectacularly. This unexpected turn of events divided analysts and commentators into two “schools of thought:” the one holding

1 „What we got once Mladjan Dinkic was expelled from the governmental stew – what we got with this spice taken out – was a pre-post-October executive branch. True, the balance of power changed in the meantime, even the ideas changed, except for Slobodan Milosevic and Vojislav Seselj, but people remained the same,” says Dragoljub Zarkovic, editor-in-chief of the Vreme weekly. Vreme, August 1, 2013.

that Premier Dacic /SPS/ who broke the news as his own decision, had only done what Vucic /SNS/ wanted him to do;² the other arguing that Dacic had played on the tension within SNS – especially the tension between President Nikolic and Aleksandar Vucic – and having found an ally in Nikolic, stepped out of his vice-premier’s shadow for a moment at least.³

The dragged-out reconstruction affected the implementation of the Brussels Agreement – which practically came to a standstill.⁴ A number of statements by governmental officials indicate a change of course when it comes to Kosovo North – although Premier Dacic denies it. However, the statement by Zvonimir Stevic, MP from SPS and the president of its provincial committee, saying that “the community of municipalities cannot have the status equal to that of Republika Srpska in Bosnia-Herzegovina but will have a similar

2 “... No doubt that cementing SNS domination was the main goal – for Vucic at least. And this goal can be attained in two ways: with SPS as the only partner once Dacic does his ‘homework’ of expelling URS from the ruling coalition and through early elections by blaming the Premier for the fall of his cabinet.” Vreme, August 1, 2013. „Dacic asked the President of the Republic to side with him, which means not that Tomislav Nikolic actually did what he was asked for,” say analyst Branko Radun; Politika, August 4, 2013; „Not that Dinkic was unaware that it was Aleksandar Vucic who unseated him while Premier Dacic was the one just to make an effective performance...with the blessing from President Tomislav Nikolic,” says commentator Dimitrije Boarov; Vreme, August 8, 2013.

3 „Rezultat rekonstrukcije (Vlade) je koalicija Dačić-Nikolić, koja je iznutra sprečila Vučića da preduzme korake ka raspisivanju izbora”, izjavio je predsednik Nove stranke Zoran Živković; Informer, 2. avgust 2013;

4 According to the Prishtina-based daily Tribune, the Brussels Agreement has been suspended for the time being; this means the end of dismantling parallel security structures and establishment of new courts of law; the reasons why the Agreement was suspended, claims the daily, are the crisis of the Serbian government, holiday season and problems with Kosovo’s Amnesty Law still waiting to be signed by Kosovo President Atifete Jahjaga; Danas, August 2, 2013.

one though not from the very beginning,”⁵ shows that the implementation will always be questionable on the terrain.

Resignation of Milan Pajevic, head of the Office for European Integration, in solidarity with URS will also have a negative impact on Belgrade-Brussels relationship.

The reconstruction of the government put off the eventuality of early elections, which was in line with Brussels’s and Washington’s expectations (and requests) from Belgrade. Namely, Brussels and Washington take that early elections will impede Serbia in meeting its obligations – the implementation of the Brussels Agreement in the first place – preconditioning the beginning of accession negotiations with EU.

On the other hand the “reconstruction process” showed that the Progressists were not as powerful as considered – it showed how deficient they were when it came to the cadre for negotiations with EU but also for the reforms on which Serbia’s progress hinges. In other words, it revealed the party’s true limitations. Its attempt at grabbing absolute power only further undermined Serbia and laid bare the ruling party’s incompetence.

DAČIĆ’S CHANGE OF HEART

Premier Dacic went public with the elimination of the third coalition partner, URS. He told the press on the occasion, “I suggested to Vucic that we should go on without Dinkic...I would say we (URS and the rest) haven’t seen eye to eye but I anyway thank Mladjan Dinkic for the work he has done so far.”⁶ He presented the act as his

ultimatum to SNS – otherwise SNS should seek for other partners or call early elections.⁷

One thing is obvious: if Dacic was the one to decide on elimination of URS, the Socialists are still capable of influencing SNS. A final decision on the character of the reconstruction was made shortly after. Vucic’s “reconstruction list” included his own resignation as the Defense Minister and deposals of ministers of agriculture, culture and sports, Milan Knezevic, Bratislav Petkovic and Alisa Maric. Minister of Transport Milutin Mrkonjic submitted his resignation – he was the only “scapegoat” from SNS. Minister of Education Zarko Obradovic (of SPS as well) also resigned in the meantime.

URS had tried to strike a deal. And they humiliated themselves in the attempt. The media speculate that from the very beginning the plan was to either “liquidate” Dinkic or deprive him of at least one portfolio – finances or economy. Allegedly, Dinkic was even ready to give over the economic portfolio to SNS and keep just the financial one.

Later on Dinkic argued that by eliminating URS Dacic was trying to save not only his premiership but also a ministerial seat (Ministry of the Interior) and that he (Dinkic) had been offered the vice-premiership and one portfolio in Vucic’s presence.

With URS already unseated Dacic met with Tomislav Nikolic and Aleksandar Vucic. A day later the press was told that there would be no early elections (although the majority of SNS Presidency gave their vote to the idea) because of the difficult situation of the country and the obligations deriving from the Brussels Agreement.⁸

⁷ TV B92, July 30, 2013.

⁸ „The majority favored early elections but I suggested that what mattered was the country’s stability and the government’s unimpeded work. As I insisted, they agreed with my suggestion,” said Vucic after the meeting of the SNS Presidency; Danas, August 1, 2013.

⁵ Danas, August 12, 2013.

⁶ Politika, July 31, 2013.

REACTIONS AT THE NEWS OF DINKIĆ'S OUSTER

URS leader Dinkic is among the least popular politicians in Serbia. For thirteen years since the fall of the Milosevic regime he has been a high-ranking official, mostly governmental. He has always occupied key positions and, as commentator Bosko Jaksic puts it, had a whip hand in Serbia's banking, economy and finances.⁹ This is why he is so unpopular – people only logically associate his name with Serbia's catastrophic economic situation.

It was thanks to Dacic that URS had been incorporated into the government in the first place.¹⁰ Its new place in the opposition is now overshadowed by speculation about the actual relationship between the two remaining partners – SNS and SPS. A commentary run by the NIN weekly is probably most to the point – the paper says that the two parties are in “an idyllic state of war.”¹¹ It goes without saying that with this reconstruction over the Progressists are not yet over with the process of seizing absolute power. It is believed that by proposing Dinkic's ouster Dacic has restored some authority the majority see as concentrated in Vucic.¹² Even if Dacic and his SPS made some profit on the affair, say some analysts, their profit would be short-lived.¹³

And yet not even the governmental reconstruction seemed to confirm Vucic's status of the unquestionably most powerful politician in Serbia. On the other hand, Tomislav Nikolic obviously strengthened his power. Vucic dared not depose Minister Milan Bacevic (whose daughter is married to Nikolic's son). And by opposing early elections

9 Politika, August 4, 2013.

10 SPS and URS signed a coalition agreement before deciding on whether to secure parliamentary majority to DS or SNS.

11 NIN, August 8, 2013.

12 Politika, August 4, 2013.

13 Politika, August 6, 2013.

Nikolic practically sided with Dacic. Most observers agree that what Vucic had in mind were early elections that would verify his high ratings.

Editor-in-chief of the New Serb Political Thought (Nova srpska politicka misao) Djordje Vukadinovic takes that Vucic whose power has “geometrically progressed” in the past year had to “take a back step for the first time” and “no matter how hard he tried to sweep it under the media carpet everybody saw him withdrawing.”¹⁴ Finalization of the reconstruction will subject Vucic to a test. It will reveal his actual authority and capacity for bringing in “fresh blood” to ensure structural reforms.

CANDIDATES FOR VACANCIES

Back in July 2012 when the government was being formed it was obvious that the Progressists have a meager “pool of cadres,” especially people capable of running key portfolios like economy, finances, judiciary, army, the police... Although Vucic has kept the “hot topic” of the reconstruction on the agenda for more than five months, only nine ministers were ultimately deposed while their potential successors are still unknown. Ruza Cirkovic, editor of the Danas daily, says, “We don't have the slightest idea why those deposed were deposed in the first place, let alone why those who remained, remained at all.”¹⁵ Some of them (former Radicals, present-day Progressists) have been struggling to seize power for twenty years without taking as much trouble as to secure at least a handful of “smart customers” for at least a handful of offices, she emphasizes.¹⁶ Most analysts are of the same opinion.¹⁷

14 Column “Peace or Fragile Ceasefire,” Politika, August 6, 2013.

15 Danas, August 5, 2013.

16 Ibid.

17 “When a party with a 12-year track record in the opposition has no cadres to last longer than twelve months then it is obvious that the entire SNS rests on two

The search for cadres – from abroad in the first place – questioned the seriousness of the reconstruction enterprise. There is talk about figures such as Dominique Stross-Kahn, ex-president of IMF. There is also talk about Lee Kwuan Yew, the legendary Singaporean ex-premier. There is talk that these are not the only foreigners that are negotiated with.¹⁸ Gerhard Schroeder, the ex-chancellor of Germany, and some figures from Thatcher's and Blair's cabinets are also on the "candidates list."

Advisers from abroad or "our foreigners" have been incorporated into domestic political cadre since October 5, 2000, some of them assigned to high-level offices (Bozidar Djelic, Kori Udovicki, Radovan Jelasic and others). Reactions to all potential candidates whose names are popping out now are contradictory. Some argue that foreign advisers could change things for the better with their expertise, whereas others call these engagements a degradation and belittlement of educated people and experts at home. The Democratic Party of Serbia /DSS/ and its leader Vojislav Kostunica perceive all this from their traditionally conservative angle: foreign experts, they say, reflect "Euro-droning" of Serbia's leadership.¹⁹

political giants and scores of anonymities," says analyst Slavisa Orlovic; Politika, July 30, 2013.

18 Quoting its reliable sources, Nase Novine daily claims that Vucic is determined to bring in experts of repute and experience to handle domestic finances, economy and probably agriculture. "He strongly believes this would be the best solution to the crisis but also contribute to a change in the overall political mindset posting partisan cadres in high-level offices at any cost and regardless of how much they damage the state..." Nase Novine, August 6, 2013.

19 „We must make a choice between two courses: either 'Euro-droning' or our, authentic, Serbian. Serbia disappears while heading towards EU. No wonder, therefore, that it occurred to someone to have foreigners in our government," says Kostunica; Vecernje Novosti, August 7, 2013.

Over the first year of its rule the present government produced nothing tangible. The reconstruction process only laid bare that it has no vision, let alone a cadre of professionals. "The problem is not in the government but in the Serb political elite and its struggle to either seize power or remain in power at any cost," says Professor Boris Begovic of the Law School, adding that this elite is solely concerned with its own interests and the well-being of interest groups supporting it.²⁰

The problems challenging Serbia only grew deeper over the past year. Notwithstanding all the pomp marking the past 12 months of their rule the Progressists proved incapable of governing Serbia and reconstructing it in accordance with EU demands and rules. The credit they got from the Serbian public squanders fast. The public will also have a say this autumn considering further economic and social downtrend.

The past year's ostentation of Vucic's promotion in the media was not based on his actual achievements. His year-long domination of the media scene further undermined this scene prone to misuse, further marginalized the opposition and further neutralized the civil sector.

His appearance in the high-level office sort of catalyzed the Serb society's impotence. The unreserved support he obtained from various segments of the society proved the lack of critical thinking and the lack of vision, let alone the potential for taking stock of the 30-year faulty policy. With Radicals/Progressists in power the circle of a historically defeated project closed. Without the support from EU Serbia proved incapable of making any breakthrough whatsoever.

20 Politika, July 31, 2013.