

Helsinki *bulletin*



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EARLY ELECTIONS TO AFFIRM THE POWER OF THE SERB PROGRESSIVE PARTY



FOTO: ALEX FOTO/FONET

Shortly after the first inter-governmental Serbia-EU conference in Brussels, the Serb Progressive Party and its leader and the first vice-premier, Aleksandar Vučić, decided to call early parliamentary elections. Such a scenario has been speculated for six months, making headlines in the media in the first place. The international community (including Russia) was against it, arguing that early elections would be

a waste of time, and slow down necessary reforms. Aleksandar Vučić promised a brief election campaign after which the cabinet would be formed in no time, considering the electoral triumph of his party. The new cabinet, he said, would be more efficient in domestic reforms, further implementation of the Brussels Agreement and normalization of the relations with Prishina. The parliament and the government

to be constituted would be imbued with fresh reformist energy,” he explained¹

Consequently, in January 2014 President Tomislav Nikolić dissolved the parliament and called early parliamentary elections. The elections were called with one goal in mind: to make it possible for the “Progressists” to capitalize on their high ratings and secure undisputable power in the next four years. There were no reasons whatsoever to call the elections under the Constitution, which provides such a scenario in the case of non-existent parliamentary majority, a governmental crisis and the like.²

Vučić had discussed his decision about early parliamentary elections with Russian officials. In an interview for the Zagreb-seated *Globus*³ he confirmed that the elections had been on the agenda but said “no comment” on the stance taken by his Russian counterparts.⁴ According to the magazine, Russians did not want to see any change in the composition of the incumbent ruling coalition.⁵

Russia’s influence on the Serbian political scene became more evident with the establishment of the Serb Progressive Party /SNS/ - a prominently pro-Russian player, as President Tomislav Nikolić himself confirmed on several

1 “The government wanted to put its legitimacy on test...I am sure a new government would be imbued with more energy and enthusiasm, once freed from the problems this government has solved,” said Tomislav Nikolic announcing the early elections; *Politika*, January 30, 2014.

2 Arguing that because of the atmosphere of fear and „criminalization of the opposition” conditions for the elections had never before been more unbalanced as now, editor-in-chief of the New Serbian Political Thought Đorđe Vukadinović says, „The leader is one and only, and early parliamentary elections are called just to verify this reality;” *Politika*, February 4, 2014.

3 *Danas*, January 30, 2014.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Isto.*

occasions. Even the outgoing SNS – Serbian Socialist Party /SPS/ coalition government formed in 2012 when Nikolić won the presidential race had been composed at Moscow’s initiative. That was actually why the earlier ruling coalition between SPS and the Democratic Party /DS/ had to be broken.⁶

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN

The ongoing election campaign differs from all the earlier campaigns, as it is not marked by the rivalry between the regime and the opposition. True, political parties with outstanding debts from the earlier campaign now lack funds. The only one that has moneys is SNS – simply because it freely spends from the state budget. The entire campaign has practically boiled down to confrontation in the media and demonization of political opponents (breaking news about scandals), especially officials of DS and SPS. Not a single party has come out with a convincing political program – they all parrot flossy promises about new job opportunities, swift reforms and foreign investors. In the forefront of “foreign investment promises” is SNS with its megalomaniac project “Belgrade on the Riverside” and ant-corruption campaign, which has actually raised its ratings although without any judicial epilogue.

Most opposition parties restrain from criticism of the outgoing government; this indicates that they all, more or less, look up to the expected winner – SNS – in hope to secure some office in the next government.

6 The news story about Vučić’s pre-election talks with Russians coincided with media speculations that SNS and SPS had already agreed on another coalition government. This is because, speculated the media, Ivica Dačić is „Moscow’s man,” let alone the vice-president of his party Dušan Bajatović, director of „Serbia-Gas” and co-president of the Russian „South Stream” Pipeline.

The Democratic Party of Serbia /DSS/ is different from the rest: it is isolated in its anti-Europeanism elaborated in the party leader Vojislav Koštunica's book "Why Serbia rather than EU." The book itself is a political platform arguing for Serbia's neutrality – "no" to the membership of EU and NATO, and annulment of the Brussels Agreement. DSS has a steady electorate (7-10 percent of the vote): it assembles intelligentsia and relies on the Serb Orthodox Church /SPC/, right-wing non-governmental organizations and conservative social strata. This means that the party has a by far bigger ideological influence than manifested by its electoral results. DSS is a kind of ideological umbrella for SNS that has no "intellectuals" of its own but uses populism to win the parliamentary majority.

DS, presently undergoing the deepest crisis ever, is systematically targeted by SNS and the media under its control. Boris Tadić's schism further weakened DS although all the prognoses say his new party and DS would pass the electoral threshold. DS is the only party criticizing SNS results at domestic arena. DS has paid dear for its "both Kosovo and EU" policy. Unless it reformulates its strategic orientation and proves to be a truly democratic and pro-European political force, Serbia will be left without a relevant opposition party in the long run.

SPS is exposed to a similar smearing campaign, although for different reasons. Hoping to nest themselves in the new cabinet, opposition parties spare the key player, SNS, and its leader Aleksandar Vučić, and aim their criticism at the smaller coalition partner, SPS, and its leader Ivica Dačić.⁷

7 Liberal-Democratic Party released, „At the time of EU integration there is no place in the government for the fraudulent policy of Milošević's heirs;" Kurir, February 4, 2014.

SABOTAGE AGAINST DEMOCRATIC PARTY

DS is undergoing dramatic splits. Its honorary president, Boris Tadić, initiated deposal of the incumbent party leader, Dragan Đilas, at the crucial time when the elections for the City Hall with Đilas running for the Mayor had already been called. When his initiative was voted down at the party's Main Committee, Tadić first left the party,⁸ and then, a few days later, announced his participation in the parliamentary elections in tandem with some other DS "renegades."⁹ The main reason for the split in the party was the advocacy of one of its wings, with Tadić at the helm, for a possible coalition with SNS. The majority of party leadership and members, led by Dragan Đilas, flatly turned this down.

Having failed to unseat Đilas, Tadić formed the New Democratic Party /NDS/ joined for the election campaign by the Together for Serbia /ZES/ - also a party made up of ex-DS members – and the League of Vojvodina Social Democrats. So Tadić melted into the "SNS project."¹⁰

Tadić's act further undermined Serbia's disoriented and disunited opposition, DS especially. However and despite its presently low ratings, DS is still the only party with potential for strong opposition to the "Progressists" surging populism and their leader's authoritarianism.

8 His resignation was broadcast live by RTV B92 on January 30, 2014.

9 According to DS Vice-President Bojan Pajtić, having an outstanding party official leaving his party in the midst of an election campaign is „something unprecedented in the democratic world;" RTV B92, February 2, 2014.

10 Borko Stefanović, head of DS parliamentary caucus; Večernje Novosti, February 5, 2014.

WHAT'S ON OFFER IN THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN?

Few are “new” topics on offer in the election campaign. Apart from “a course to EU” all parties underline imminent reforms. The biggest and the most influential of all, SNS, most insists on reforms: actually, to justify early elections it invoked the need for speedier reforms that, as they put it, called for “fresh energy.”

SNS' overemphasized reformist rhetoric has not convinced economic experts and commentators in their genuine commitment to radical changes. The strongest criticism of this rhetoric originated from the office of the Minister of Economy Saša Radulović. Namely, on the day of Vučić's going public with the decision on early parliamentary elections, Minister of Economy Saša Radulović resigned from the cabinet (only a couple of months earlier he was incorporated in the “reconstructed” government as an independent expert tasked with preparing the terrain for structural reforms).¹¹

Explaining his resignation Radulović pointed a finger at non-existent political will for reforms. Three crucial reform-oriented laws – on labor, bankruptcy and privatization – he had insisted on had been turned down, he said. Instead, SNS called early parliamentary elections.¹² “The major fetter of reforms is the Office of the First

11 Radulović formed a party of his own – Enough Is Enough /„Dosta je bilo“/; the party program is based on liberalism, market-economy and radical reforms of the economy. He himself counts on entrepreneurs. However, his party will hardly pass the electoral threshold considering unscrupulous assaults from SNS.

12 Draft laws on bankruptcy and privatization have already been submitted to the parliaments, whereas the draft labor law has been withdrawn for “revision” under the pressure from trade unions.

Vice-Premier Aleksandar Vučić, “quotes his resignation.”¹³

The outgoing cabinet blames its predecessors for all economic difficulties and the country's crisis. However, during its short term in office the country's foreign debt grew dramatically, (pompously announced) foreign investors never showed up, public enterprises were not reconstructed, the number of public servants spiraled, the unemployment rate was not curbed...

Continued “absence” of political will and inability for radical economic and social reforms brought Serbia to the brink of collapse. With reconstructed cabinet in late summer, ministries of economy and finances publicized a register of public servants. Findings were shocking: almost 800,000 people were paid from the state budget. In other words, out of 1,700,000 persons with jobs in Serbia, 46 percent work in administration.¹⁴ Radojka Nikolić, economic analyst, says that the 2004 register included half-a-million public servants. In brief, in the past ten years 300,000 people – mostly partisan cadres, inadequately trained and professionally capacitated – have been recruited in the public sector.¹⁵

Nobody touches on these problems in the election campaign. All the parties insist on are reforms. But not a single party has gone public with a socioeconomic program of its own – simply because they hardly have any at all. Aleksandar Vučić announces “hard” and “painful” reforms, while Ivica Dačić and his coalition partners promise “no cuts” in salaries and

13 As quoted in the written statement by Minister Saša Radulović.

14 In Switzerland, for instance, the percentage of public servants amounts to 15 out of total number of the employed, while in the countries with high percentages these figures do not exceed 34-35.

15 RTV Vojvodina, February 18, 2014.

pensions. Neither bothers to explain how their pledges would work in real life. The Liberal-Democratic Party /LDP/ calls for the establishment of a central “reformist board” assembling experts and all stakeholders – from trade unions to employers.¹⁶

Three parties insist on Vojvodina as a major issue – but mostly to win over voters from the province. This refers to Čedomir Jovanović’s LDP, Boris Tadić’ NDP and Dragan Đilas’s DS. The issue of Vojvodina’s autonomy is pressing – but can be solved only through constitutional amendment. SNS’s destructive acts in the province over the past two years, coupled with negation of its autonomy by DSS, only logically explains the significance of the Vojvodina agenda for the provincial electorate.

Over the past two years SNS has chosen Budapest for its strategic ally and regional partner in the process of EU accession: actually SNS after undermining Vojvodina as a DS stronghold. No doubt that such a scenario would adversely affect the situation of minority communities in Vojvodina, including the Hungarian community in the south of the province. And then, two decisions by the Constitutional Court came “on top of everything:” the Court proclaimed a number of provisions of the Law on National Councils unconstitutional. This is why constitutional amendment is of crucial importance to Vojvodina; and it should solve Serbia’s main dilemma: to stick to centralism or to opt for a modern state enshrining contemporary European standards. More or less all Belgrade-seated parties advocate centralism.

Once again did tabloids revive the “Šarić case:” this time to compromise individual officials, primarily those from SPS. As things stand now, the “Šarić case” is much bigger and goes deeper: everything indicates that segments of the

state apparatus have been in the hookup with the gang.

Aleksandar Vučić formed a commission to investigate the political background of Djindjić assassination. The timing for a commission as such was indicative – two weeks before the elections. Here one should bear in mind the message Jelko Kacin, the European Parliament’s rapporteur for Serbia, put across – “The political background of the assassination of Premier Zoran Djindjić has to be revealed once for all,” said Kacin, adding that Serbia could not afford entering accession negotiations under the burden of doubts about credibility and stability of its institutions.

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

This is an unusually brief election campaign. Parties do not appeal to the electorate by traditional means as on earlier occasions – TV spots, billboards and posters are fewer. Parties battle not over a winner but “the second best:” a possible coalition partner in the cabinet to be formed. Hence, confrontations among opponents are weird mixtures of personal warfare, open affinities and secret interests. Though everyone agrees that Aleksandar Vučić and his party are champions, opposition parties assault their smaller coalition partners, SNS and its leader Iвица Dačić.

Unchallenged by a serious rival, SNS campaigns against some media outlets. The great majority of the media side with it – most tabloids, two high-circulation, influential papers such as *Politika* and *Večernje Novosti*, and powerful broadcasters, *RTS* and *TV Pink*.

Judging by all, Vučić was really infuriated by rather witty and pretty cynical comments circulated through social networks and in the

16 RTV B92, February 19, 2014.

media after the so-called Feketić incident.¹⁷ An avalanche of assaults fell on the media accusing them of being on tycoons' pay-lists (on Miroslav Mišković's in the first place). Allegedly, the media have been paid 100 million Euro for campaigning against Vučić.

SNS Vice-president Zorana Mihailović called the upcoming elections the most uncertain

of all given that "citizens will be choosing between the rule of people and the rule of tycoons."¹⁸ Appearing as a guest in *TV Pink* morning program, she pointed a finger at several media outlets - *Vreme*, *Danas*, *Blic* and *Naše Novine* – which, as she put it, "stage smear campaign against SNS" and "criminalize it."¹⁹

17 During the snow storm in Vojvodina in February, Aleksandar Vučić was saving people from stuck cars, including children, in front of TV cameras.

18 Ibid.

19 TV Pink, February 11, 2014.

CONCLUSIONS

Neither new people nor new ideas mark this election campaign. Almost all players parrot about “EU course.” DSS is the only exception – it openly declares itself as anti-European. The main purpose of the elections is affirmation of SNS power – or, creation of a political scene with SNS as undisputable arbiter.

Though it calls itself a pro-European party, SNS is still to be tested on its ability to consolidate Serbia as a modern and democratic society.

DSS will most probably find its way into the parliament (with 7-8 percent of the vote). Its capacity for undermining Serbia’s course to EU should not be underestimated considering the social strata supporting it.

Most conservative organizations and movements such as Naši, Obraz and Movement 1389 will take over the seats of the Serb Radical Party /SRS/ which will hardly manage to pass the electoral threshold. A new player at the political arena is the party called “The Third Serbia.” Ideologically, it is close to DSS.

The fact that a new cabinet will not be challenged by a strong and well-articulated opposition causes anxiety. DS must first reform itself to be a relevant opposition. It must disburden itself from nationalism and take clear-cut stances on the region, the recent past, decentralization, constitutional amendment, etc.

The West expects Vučić too keep his promises about Serbia’s movement towards EU. Even if he really means what he says, he will be challenged by objective circumstances: poor human resources, popular resistance to reformist cuts, and social and economic scarcity that can hardly generate the much needed political will. In addition to all, SNS electorate is extremely conservative and anti-European.

EU’s role in mobilizing Serbia for European course is special and its approach to the entire region has to be more imaginative. Winning citizens over for European option calls for serious work at all levels of the society, rather than just communication with political parties. What Serbia needs in this context are a stronger civil society and more professional and accountable media.

What the region needs is all-encompassing socioeconomic cooperation. Only such a cooperation can counteract the regional “coalition” of clero-nationalistic elites. The danger of social radicalization that may produce new forms of authoritarian rules must not be ignored.