

# Helsinki bulletin



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## EARLY ELECTIONS: PRAGMATIC NATIONALISM WINS



FOTO: V. ANĐIĆ/RFE

The victory of Serb Progressive Party /SNS/ and its leader Aleksandar Vučić in the early parliamentary elections and in local elections in Belgrade was nothing unexpected but came as a shock nevertheless. The percentage of the vote they won exceeded even a heavy vote for Slobodan Milošević in the first multi-party elections in Serbia in 1990. Commenting on this outcome, Vojislav Koštunica, leader of Democratic Party of Serbia /DSS/ said, “The structure

of the new parliament associates 1990s – just once key actors, SPS and SRS, switched seats with SNS...Western powers crucially contributed to this electoral outcome, which perfectly suits them.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, with almost an absolute (two-third) parliamentary majority, SNS can form a government at will.

<sup>1</sup> Press conference by DSS, March 16, 2014.



Unlike its orthodox counterpart, “Serb pragmatic nationalism” that carried the day tries to fit into Europe’s model and realize its original project within it: to safeguard Kosovo within Serbia (or North Kosovo at least), to establish the Greater Serbia and to economically recover the country – the goal that cannot be attained with Russia’s assistance but only with the support of EU. Membership of EU ensures unimpeded communication with Serb “corps” in the territory of ex-Yugoslavia and keeps the idea of unification alive.

A major consequence of SNS’s electoral triumph – the outgoing Premier, Ivica Dačić, labeled ‘a political tsunami’<sup>2</sup> - is a quite novel configuration of Serbia’s political scene. Apart from the “Progressists,” parliamentary seats will be occupied by three political groupings only – Socialist Party of Serbia /SNS/, Democratic Party /DS/ and New Democratic Party /NDS/. Under the Constitution, three minority parties – Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians /SVM/, Democratic Action Party /SDA/ and Albanian Party for Democratic Action /PDD/ will also be represented in the new parliament as their seats are not preconditioned by the 5-percent election threshold.

Three parties represented in the parliament since their establishment – Democratic Party of Serbia /DSS/, United Regions of Serbia /URS/ and Liberal Democratic Party /LDP/ - failed to pass the election threshold.

As it seems, the electorate went in for most catchy promises on offer. SNS election campaign went in for best salable commodities – populism and demagoguery. “Having suspended democracy”<sup>3</sup> Serbia showed that it lost trust in democratic processes that failed to open vistas to everyman. It punished the parties that – as voters’ saw it – had been preoccupied with

2 Press conference by SPS, March 16, 2014.

3 Analyst Đorđe Pavićević, TVB92, March 16, 2014.

themselves and “their cadres” only rather than concerned with public interest. And this turned upside down its political arena.

Several factors played into the hands of the Progressists, most of all the good timing: Aleksandar Vučić’s popularity reached its peak on the account of his struggle against corruption. Combining traditional nationalism and populism with alleged modernism SNS and Aleksandar Vučić won over considerable portions of the right-wing, conservative electorate (potential voters of DSS, Dveri, Serb Radical Party and others), and the liberal one, logically inclined towards DS, URS or LDP. Last but not least, they ensured their success through aggressive and occasionally brutal smear campaigns against their political opponents with the helping hand from most of the influential media outlets.

Ivica Dačić, SPS leader and the outgoing Premier, came out as the second best. His coalition won about the same number of votes and parliamentary seats as in the 2012 elections. This shows that his coalition has consolidated and entrenched itself firmly at the political scene. Their election result is the more so significant since they have been ruthlessly criticized by both the opposition and their pre-election coalition partners throughout the election campaign.

DS and NDS alike passed the election threshold with much ado, while LDP and URS failed to. And so the so-called civil option suffered defeat.<sup>4</sup> This was the cost the opposition paid to its inconsistency, confusing orientation, splits and, generally, to being at a loss against the backdrop that was new to it. A part of the

4 Not a single party with the term “democracy” in its name won in any municipality; minority parties came out victorious only in their communities (Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians was successful in Vojvodina, Party for Democratic Action in Sandzak, and Democratic Activity Party in South Serbia).

present opposition /DS/ failed to adequately respond to SNS strategy for smearing the former regime, while the rest flirted with SNS with an eye to a partnership in the government.

Vojislav Koštunica, DSS leader, and Mlađan Dinkić, leader of URS, resigned after the elections. With the exception of Boris Tadić's exhorted resignation in the aftermath of the presidential debacle in 2012, that was for the first time in Serbia's modern history that highest party officials acknowledge responsibility for election defeats by their own free will. However, Vojislav Koštunica immediately joined the Slobodan Jovanović Fund thus continuing his ideological activism he had always prioritized over political. And this is exactly where he left his footprints on Serbia's present-day mindset.

The Brussels Agreement with Prishtina and its implementation earned SNS the West's support and sympathy. Catherine Ashton, EU high representative for foreign affairs, sent her congratulations and promised to visit Belgrade once a new cabinet was formed. As for Berlin, Christian-Democratic Union messaged that "with its clear-cut commitment to membership of EU, SNS managed to double its vote,<sup>5</sup> but also reminded that the road to Brussels led through Prishtina.<sup>6</sup> Russian Ambassador to Serbia Alexander Chepurin stressed out the good relations between Belgrade and Moscow ("Russia is very close to Serbia's heart," he said during the election night).

Aleksandar Vučić is now expected to work on Serbia-Kosovo normalization more decisively and efficiently than before. Indicatively, of all party officials addressing the press on the outcome of the elections, Ivica Dačić, SPS leader, alone stressed out the significance of a continuous normalization of relations with Kosovo

5 Politika, March 18, 2014.

6 Politika, March 18m 2014.

Having convincingly won the elections Vučić can now "decide on both the cabinet and the opposition."<sup>7</sup> Besides he had obligated himself and the future cabinet to the fulfillment of considerable, though rather blurred promises. This especially refers to economic reforms and Serbia's overcoming its dramatic financial and economic crisis. Though the reform was a catchword of his election campaign he never explained what "hard and painful" cuts its implementation implied meant to everyman. On the eve of the election campaign he signed a contract with United Arab Emirates on a one-billion-dollar loan to partially compensate the budget deficit and pay off salaries and pensions over a couple of months.

The arrest of narco boss Darko Šarić (who actually gave himself up) only contributed to Vučić's image of an iron-willed fighter against organized crime (and corruption). His "omnipotence" will be tested in the period to come. For, as German expert in the Western Balkans Johanna Deimel put it, "from now on he will be responsible for the future of the state, be it good or bad."<sup>8</sup>

Some analysts hold that Vučić faces two possible options – "he might either meet his promises and thus go down in history or prove himself incapable of meeting his promises and – bearing in mind the opposition as it is and the media as they are – join the democratic oligarchy."<sup>9</sup> Đorđe Vukadinović, editor-in-chief of Serb New Political Thought magazine, SNS victory is a bit "overwhelming" and as such "counterproductive considering all the responsibility on the shoulders of SNS and its leader Aleksandar Vučić."<sup>10</sup> Florijan Biber, professor at the Graz University, says, "Absolute power is a

7 Editor-in-chief of the Nedeljnik magazine Veljko Lalić, Nedeljnik, March 20, 2014.

8 Danas, March 20, 2014.

9 Naše Novine, March 18, 2014.

10 Politika, March 18, 2014.

threat to Serbia's democracy, especially because of inefficient mechanisms of control over the government, scarce independent institutions, most media loyal to the regime and the fact that two out of three opposition parties would rather team up with the Progressists than criticize them."<sup>11</sup>

## A CABINET TO BE FORMED SOON?

Domestic situation calls for a cabinet to be formed in almost no time. SNS is strong enough and needs not to waste time on the search for a partner to form a parliamentary majority with.<sup>12</sup> Vučić announced consultations with all the parties that obtained parliamentary seats and even with those that have not – they all, he explained, “have ideas about good things for Serbia to be done together.”<sup>13</sup>

Apart from SNS, he specifically named Dragan Đilas's DS and Boris Tadić's NDS. A premier to be appointed will face with poor human resources and, therefore, needs officials from DS and other parties with cadres fit for jobs in ministries and other institutions, including public enterprises and the administration of the City of Belgrade. SNS has always been deficient in human resources, even in the periods when it was entitled to nominate by far less officials than now.

<sup>11</sup> Danas, March 25, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> On several occasions parties such as SPS or URS banked on it and managed to entrench themselves in the ruling structure.

<sup>13</sup> RTS, SNS press conference, March 16, 2014.

## ELECTION LOSERS – WITHOUT IDEOLOGIES AND WITHOUT PROGRAMS

Parties that failed to pass election threshold were taken aback. This primarily refers to the three of them: DSS, URS and LDP to which all the public opinion polls had given “a green light.”

The failure of DSS – a party dominating Serbia's social and political arena with its conservatism and overt anti-Europeanism, and the influence of which exceeds its parliamentary representation of 6-8 percent of seats so far – came as the biggest surprise. This was the more so since its supporters and followers belong to influential intellectual circles in Serb Orthodox Church, the media and the Serb Academy of Arts and Sciences. Paradoxically, Vojislav Koštunica was more active in this election campaign than ever before: he toured Serbia tirelessly, delivered speeches, shook hands with citizens...and yet, he failed to pass the election threshold (won 4.1 percent of the vote). He explained his party's defeat by limited financial resources for the election campaign, adding, “It is most important to reveal the sources from which SNS financed its highly aggressive and expensive election campaign – that would be the most efficient form of the struggle against corruption.”<sup>14</sup>

Dragan Đilas,<sup>15</sup> DS leader, also highlighted the unfair election campaign. However, in his first public address after the elections he refrained from criticizing SNS and commenting on the alleged election bribery rumored throughout the election day.

Čedomir Jovanović (LDP) said bitterly, “The outcome of the elections came as a surprise only to those unaware of the Serbia they live

<sup>14</sup> Danas, March 17, 2014.

<sup>15</sup> DS press conference, March 16, 2014.

in.” Most public opinion polls had positioned LDP above the election threshold. However, the party won just 3.1 percent of the vote and for the first time since its establishment (2005) remained outside the parliament. According to some analysts, LDP lost its voters on its insufficient criticism of SNS and flirtation with it. LDP supporters would not have it. Đorđe Vukadinović commented, “It would have been easier for the Progressists to have LDP followers for partners than for LDP followers to have the Progressists as such.”<sup>16</sup>

Both DS and NDS obtained parliamentary seats but their representation will be rather meager. DS managed to pass the election threshold thanks to Belgrade’s electorate (DS won 16 percent of the vote in the elections for the city hall). NDS passed the threshold at the level of the republic thanks to Vojvodina’s electorate – or thanks to its coalition with League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina (it failed to pass the threshold in the elections for the Belgrade City Hall).

What caused DS’s dramatic entropy as of the May 2012 elections was SNS’s ruthless smear campaign that culminated on the eve of early elections when DS ex-president Boris Tadić walked out on it overnight and formed a party of his own. This entropy is also to be ascribed to the party’s inability to consolidate and establish itself as an ideological alternative to the ruling paradigm.

The elections that have practically rubbed out the opposition left the regime almost without any control. This is the more so since the media have so much compromised themselves that they can hardly present themselves as

16 “Their /LDP/ misfortune is that the things average SNS or SPS voters might swallow the educated and politically conscious electorate would not,” said Đorđe Vukadinović, *Politika*, March 18, 2014.

promoters and protectors of public interest. Everything indicates that SNS will remain in power for long. Srećko Mihailović, a highly reputed public opinion analyst, says Aleksandar Vučić will not “leave his present post soon.”<sup>17</sup> “Because,” he explains, “Vučić has destroyed both the opposition and Democratic Party that will not recover soon.”<sup>18</sup>

## VOJVODINA AND REPUBLIKA SRPSKA ON THE “WAITING LIST”

DS suffered a debacle in Vojvodina as well. The defeat is the more so heavy since the party had triumphed in the May 2012 elections in the province. Since then it has been enjoying in a comfortable majority in the provincial parliament in tandem with League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina /LSV/ and Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians /SVM/.

Vojvodina has been the target of Belgrade’s “centralistic” parties ever since 1990s. As of 2012 has been going against Vojvodina by “rearranging” local self-governments to “reflect” the composition of the central government. Novi Sad was the first to fell victim to their campaign. So far – and despite many disposals in other towns and municipalities, including SNS victory in several local elections – the provincial government has sustained this heavy pressure. But now, in not a single municipality did DS /or NDS for that matter/ won the majority of vote. The parties at the level of the province /in the assembly and the government/ are still in power – but it is hard to expect the Progressists, now triumphantly campaigning through Serbia, to leave Vojvodina to the Democrats.<sup>19</sup>

17 *Danas*, 17. mart 2014.

18 *Isto*.

19 Potpredsednik SNS Goran Knežević rekao je da je vlast u Vojvodini izgubila legitimitet i da hitno treba održati i pokrajinske izbore; pri tome je predsednika pokrajinske

Ištvan Pastor, speaker of the provincial parliament and SVM leader, takes that circumstances leading to early provincial elections have not converged yet. "The Assembly cannot be toyed with in the electoral paper war," he said.<sup>20</sup> And he said this with good reason – DS's present coalition partners, LSV and SVM, now trying to incorporate themselves into the central government will have to give something back. Hence, the outcome of the elections practically pulled the rug from under the feet of Provincial Premier Bojan Pajtić.

Despite all the efforts – both domestic and international – to break Bosnia's deadlock, Republika Srpska /RS/ is still an unsolvable problem. The statements on Bosnia Vučić gave on several occasions hardly different from those of his predecessors. Shortly after the protests that shook the Federation he met with Milorad Dodik and Mladen Bosić in Belgrade. Belgrade's goal is to safeguard RS, he said on the occasion. He also demonstrated his perfect knowledge of the situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina:

even Dodik and Bosić were surprised by all the details he came up with about the protests. According to the media in Bosnia, Vučić is regularly kept posted about Bosnia by the ex-minister of the police of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Fahrudin Radončić, with whom he has been on friendly terms as of recently.<sup>21</sup>

The Ukrainian crisis (Russia's annexation of Crimea) acted like a tonic on RS hoping to integrate into Serbia by the same "model." "For Republika Srpska, the referendum in Crimea is a democratic expression of the popular will," Dodik commented, adding that RS was following similar experiences worldwide and would try to implement "models of good practice" when the time was ripe for it.<sup>22</sup> Judging by his own words, Vučić's attitude towards Kosovo and RS is undefined. What he said was, "Serbia will try to protect its interests and be responsible to its people and territory, and, therefore, its stance on the situation in Ukraine has to be well-balanced, responsible and serious."<sup>23</sup>

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Vlade pozvao da podnese ostavku; Informer, 20. mart 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Danas, 18. mart 2014.

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<sup>21</sup> [http://www.slobodna-bosna.ba/vijest/12609/gusinska\\_buna\\_fahrudin\\_radonchic\\_referira\\_vuchicu\\_o\\_situaciji\\_u\\_bih.htm](http://www.slobodna-bosna.ba/vijest/12609/gusinska_buna_fahrudin_radonchic_referira_vuchicu_o_situaciji_u_bih.htm).

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.kurir-info.rs/vucic-srbija-nece-imati-neprijateljski-stav-prema-rusiji-clanak-1288559>

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/Politika/1555169/Vu%C4%8Di%C4%87%3A+Balansiran+stav+prema+Ukrajini.html>.

## CONCLUSIONS

The 2012 elections were the vote for the best “contractor” for the “pragmatic Serb nationalism” policy – the one promoting close cooperation with EU and the West without endorsing their value system, while nurturing pan-Slavic emotions (relations with Russia) and fundamental principles of Serb nationalism.

SNS’s convincing victory in the elections is fatal to Serbia’s political life. Pluralism is practically wiped out. The Parliament – a hardly efficient control mechanism so far – will be further downgraded. Partisan influences will be bigger than ever before. According to analyst Vladimir Goati, the parties that failed to pass the election threshold will be left without subsidies and individual donors, and thus hardly capable of surviving till the next elections.<sup>1</sup> Their existence is even more endangered by the fact that they do nothing to build their ideological identities and programs alternative to the regime.

Like in the past two years the cabinet “to be formed” has not come public with a concrete program yet. It wasted two years on smearing campaigns against their political opponents (DS in particular). The media have always been in the service of the regime. But in the past two years they have exceeded the worst expectations.

The crisis in Ukraine questioned the “new” cabinet’s orientation. Aleksandar Vučić’s and Ivica Dačić’s visit to Moscow at the peak of the Ukrainian crisis causes suspicions. The official statement about Ukraine disturbed observers in the West, who scrutinize all the developments in Serbia-Moscow relationship. At this point this relationship crucially determines the “new” cabinet’s attitude towards reforms and integration into EU, and membership of NATO in particular.

The “new” cabinet’s attitude towards RS still based on the policy of “safeguard of the Dayton Agreements and Republika Srpska” is most worrisome. The same refers to the fact that it was Milorad Dodik who came public with the stance on Ukraine after meeting with Aleksandar Vučić.

Future arrangement of Serbia is the biggest uncertainty. SNS has not even hinted at the course it would pursue in the matter. As for now, it is pursuing the policy of centralization, especially in Vojvodina. Vojvodina stands for the biggest defeat of the parties advocating autonomy. It was evident that Belgrade-seated parties – even when publicly advocating Vojvodina’s autonomy – were actually ambivalent about it.

Serbia’s economy is in deep crisis – and this is exactly the domain in which the new government is expected to make a breakthrough. SNS won the elections on demagoguery. In almost no time it will be faced with requests that entail fundamental systemic reforms and economic liberalization. This will be the biggest test for the new government considering the promises given in the election campaign (“Belgrade on the Riverside,” anti-corruption campaign, one-billion-dollar loan, etc.).

Only actions taken by citizens of Serbia, its civil sector and the media could compensate the thinness of the parliamentary opposition. They are now faced with a challenge: they need to warn against misuse of power. The problem is, however, that everyman in Serbia is more afraid of poverty than of tyranny.

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1 TV KCN, March 17, 2014.