

HELSINKI Bulletin



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N^o 56 • January 2010

Serb Progressive Party: A Pretended Transformation

Serbia's entire political establishment and some other elites – those in the judicial branch in particular – welcomed the transformation of a part of the Serb Radical Party /SRS/ into the Serb Progressive Party /SNS/. There is no doubt that Vojislav Seselj's inappropriate behavior before the ICTY that compromised SRS was among the reasons why some Radicals decided to form a separate party. Another major reason was to have a two-party system in Serbia, some elites have been striving after. Hence, the new Serb Progressive Party attracted undivided support from the media: with such backing it relatively shortly won over the majority of "old" Radicals and managed to obtain relatively good results in some local elections (for instance, in Vozdovac, one of Belgrade's municipalities).



EU and all foreign observers in Belgrade also welcomed this change of attire. Tomislav Nikolic, party president, and

Aleksandar Vucic, his deputy, were doing their best to win over the sympathies of domestic and international public with their changed rhetoric. For the same purpose, Aleksandar Vucic paid a visit to US, though not an official one, and even delivered a lecture at the Woodrow Wilson Center.

The Statutes of the SNS puts emphasis of the following goals: safeguard of Serbia's territorial integrity with Kosovo and Metohija as its component and inseparable part; assistance to Serb people outside Serbia, notably in the territory of ex-Yugoslavia; the rule of law; improvement of Serbia's international standing and membership of EU along with Kosovo and Metohija as its component part on the one hand, and developed relations with Russia, China and India on the other; respect for human and minority rights, etc.¹

¹ <http://www.srpskanaprednastranka.org/sr/o-srpskoj-naprednoj-stranci/statut-srpske-napredne-stranke.html>.



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Military neutrality, underlines the party's "Vision of Serbia," is "the only logical and reasonable solution for the Serbian state against the background of sharp confrontation between NATO and Russia." "Military neutrality also implies an efficient, well-equipped, professionalized and powerful Serb army that will restore the people's trust in it but also, at all times, be a deterrent against any potential aggressor."

In a short time, SNS acquired new premises and budget though it was not a parliamentary party. Many public figures close to the Socialists in 1990s joined its ranks – among them were historian Oliver Antic, writer Brana Crncevic, journalist Branislav Grubacic (editor of VIP ezine), academician Mihajlo Markovic, etc. Goran Knezevic, Democratic Party official and ex-mayor of Zrenjanin, charged with misconduct and detained for over a year, also joined the party once let to stand trial while free.

The "progressists" have been overemphasizing their new image but have not changed much their attitude towards Ratko Mladic, Srebrenica, Statute of Vojvodina or Russia. Their populism rise to the surface frequently and particularly when it comes to social and economic problems. This is where they see their chance. Hence, they call for early parliamentary elections they hope to win and subsequently come to power with a helping hand from the conservative bloc. As an informal leader of that bloc, Vojislav Kostunica has been as of lately actively denouncing the ruling coalition for the country's economic and social situation.



SNS stance toward Seselj and the Radicals' policy

The very break with SRS boiled down to criticism of Vojislav Seselj and his authoritarianism. Much information about the manner in which SRS functioned emerged after "the divorce." Aleksandar Vucic questioned the speculation about Seselj's soon return to Serbia. How possibly can the Radicals know that Seselj will be back, he said, "when Krajsnik and some others totally innocent people have been sentenced to who knows how many years of imprisonment."² Claiming that the Radicals stand no chance for regaining popularity, Vucic says, "We need not a political front to get them marginalized, this is what they managed on their own with their ideas and policy. No one will vote for curses, shoe-throwing or lies about spies. Would those voting for them set themselves for Karlobag? I wouldn't say the Radicals will change their behavior – turning to boot-throwing might be the only change they are capable of making. And what possibly could they change in their rhetoric? Start cursing our grand-grand children instead of our children and grand-children?"³ He also rules out any cooperation with the Radicals. "No way can we cooperate with people invoking curses on our children and engaged in shoe-throwing? But we can cooperate with Democratic Party /DS/ and Socialist Party of Serbia /SPS/," says Vucic.⁴



Some analysts (such as Branko Radun) take that Seselj is a nightmare of SNS but not for DS – because he might

² *Politika*, January 17, 2010.

³ *Press*, January 17, 2010.

⁴ *Politika*, January 17, 2010.

negatively affect the ratings of the “progressists.” “His /Seselj’s/ former brothers-in-arms do not want him back, whereas his opponents do.” “It is highly unlikely for SRS to have that many followers any more. What happens next depends on Seselj’s and the Radicals’ behavior but also on some other political factors. A party with strong social rhetoric could have an upper hand should the second wave of economic crisis be bigger than this one. And Seselj has mastered social rhetoric. One cannot tell for sure how other opposition parties will be treating Seselj and what will be his attitude towards them. But Serbia’s political scene will surely be more interesting with Seselj at stage,” says Radun. He rules out the possibility of a cooperation between SRS and SNS saying, “Too many personal feelings are in play here. Seselj cannot but go for exposing SNS and knifing them in the first place. At the beginning they will not cooperate. But no one can tell what might happen later. Wounds are still open. They used to operate as a family and, therefore, cannot separate in cold blood.”⁵

Instrumentalization of social and economic problems

Like other opposition “populist” parties SNS has not seriously analyzed the country’s economic situation or predicted its strategic orientation. SNS is rather close to DSS when it comes to EU membership and other crucial issues, though DSS has developed a more detailed economic program. Both parties are in favor of Serbia’s membership of EU on the condition that it observes the country’s territorial integrity – which implies Kosovo as an inalienable part of Serbia. Their criticism of governmental policies boils down to slogans and promises about better economic and social conditions. And yet, neither of the two even hints at

⁵ *Politika*, January 17, 2010.



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the means leading to these goals. SNS has only one document that somewhat details its program. It is called “Ten Principles” and generally says little about any key issue.

Social and economic problems caused large-scale workers’ strikes that play into the hands of “progressists” and DSS. The two parties are cashing in on workers’ justified dissatisfaction to strengthen their demand for early parliamentary elections. Nikolic points out that economic, political and security situations in Serbia are deplorable and that citizens, by instinct, crave for a change. “We are the only alternative. I’ve wanted in the first place to form a party that will stand for an alternative to the incumbent regime,” he says.⁶

Though analysts differently interpret the political background of strikes, they all agree that the opposition tries to instrumentalize these strikes. SNS launched petitioning for early parliamentary elections. Nikolic announced, “Shortly after St. Sava Day we shall launch petitioning to collect one million signatures in a short while and thus demonstrate citizens’ attitude towards the incumbent regime and their readiness to change that regime. Faced with the power of those signatures no monster would dare prevent citizens of Serbia from casting a ballot for a regime they want to see.”⁷



Aleksandar Vucic says, “We and workers alike are dissatisfied with this regime. Therefore, SNS starts

⁶ *Vreme*, September 17, 2009.

⁷ *Politika*, January 21, 2010.

campaigning for early parliamentary elections by the end of this month. We shall petition for this initiative at 1,000 locations throughout Serbia. No one should be surprised when we collect one million signatures for early parliamentary elections.”⁸ The people want to have their say in the elections, says Vucic, adding, “For, when they /the people/can endure no longer, when the country is in a stalemate, they go on strike. With so impaired legitimacy the regime cannot go on for long. The situation was the same in 2000 – you cannot go on if the people would not have you, even if you work well.”⁹

Tomislav Nikolic and Aleksandar Vucic themselves signed the petition outside the “Russian Emperor” restaurant in Belgrade, on February 2, 2010.¹⁰

Attitude towards Russia and US

Tomislav Nikolic took seriously the promotion of his new image. He speaks of equidistance vis-à-vis big powers, i.e. Russia and US, and says he is going to pay visits to both countries. He claims the idea for his visit to US dates back at the time of Manter’s ambassadorship and then Serbs from US invited him for a visit. He has already been to Brussels to demonstrate his support for Serbia’s membership of EU. He even conditions a coalition with Vojislav Kostunica by Kostunica’s acceptance of pro-European course. Upon his return from Brussels, Nikolic told the press, “They told me they believed SNS policy was no worse at all than DS policy.”¹¹ According to him, what he was told in Brussels was, “Probably your pace would be slower, though no one can tell for sure until you come into power.”¹²

For SNS, Russia is Serbia’s main partner. “I don’t rely on Russia just because its veto in the Security Council determines the future of Kosovo and Metohija in our favor. I rely on Russia

because it is a huge country with huge potentials and with best prospects when it comes to exports of raw materials, gas, oil and minerals. In twenty days only Moscow consumes the energy the entire Serbia can produce. How can we possibly bypass such a partner?” says Nikolic.¹³ And then he adds, “I want to go to Moscow to see for myself who’s the one standing in the way of our relations with the Russian Federation and how come that no Russian investment turns successful over here. I want to see for myself who’s to blame - the Russian side or the Serbian side – whether someone obstructs the cooperation or the failure is to be ascribed to incapable people over here. Why have ‘Ikarbus,’ ‘Prva Petoljetka’ and ‘Lukoil’ that had taken over ‘Beopetrol’ failed, why cooperation with Russian turned a failure in Bor, why the Russian Bank in Serbia has been doing nothing?”¹⁴

As for US, SNS has evidently changed its attitudes towards it. For instance, after his visit to US Vucic said, “We have good relations with Americans – yes, we really do. After all, that’s the only way to save Serbia.”¹⁵

Attitude towards neighboring countries

The fact that Serbia still nourishes regional claims – if not for territories any longer, then certainly for a leadership role – probably best illustrates its political elite’s attitude towards neighboring countries. In this context, relations with Croatia are the most complex – because, in addition to everything else, Croatia is seen as Serbia’s major rival. Therefore, all Serbian politicians are referring to Croatia as an undemocratic country mortgaged by the genocide against

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Kurir, 4. oktobar 2009.

⁸ Press, January 15, 2010.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Tanjug, February 2, 2010.

¹¹ Vreme, September 17, 2009.

¹² Ibid.



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Serbs. Such rhetoric marks daily allegations against Croatia.



Nikolic's attitude towards Croatia fully corresponds to the prevalent one. He says, "I've been saying all the time that we cannot develop any relations with them until they solve the problem they have with democracy and respect for human rights, particularly minority rights for Serbs. But I've been also saying that for us Croatia is a state with borders recognized by UN."¹⁶ True, Nikolic no longer speaks of the infamous Karlobag-Karlovac-Ogulin borderline. "We do not want to make war and anyone who wants to should better make war in his own head. I solved the dilemma about changing earlier stands and surviving politically three or four years ago. That's not the question I ask myself about any more," he says.¹⁷

Referring to Croatia's charge against Serbia, Nikolic says, "The case is a complex one. Croatia is raising the subject now for reasons unknown to me. Probably it now sees Serbia as a country with repute in the international community and, therefore, wants to defame it. But this is a most welcome opportunity for defaming Croatia for the crimes it has committed and the crimes it is committing now by preventing Serbs from returning to their homesteads from which they were expelled."¹⁸

Neither Nikolic nor Vucic have changed their stands about Croatia. Vucic says SNS will always respect international norms and in its political

activity prioritize the protection of Serbia's national and state interests.

A crucial national goal, says Vucic, is to bring Republika Srpska close to Serbia "as much as possible in keeping with the Dayton Agreement and all documents Serbia and RS have signed."¹⁹ Interpreting the Dayton Agreement, SNS MP Bozidar Delic claims it provides the possibility for a referendum on secession in the event the interests of Republika Srpska are not respected properly in the Federation.²⁰

Like other parties of the "populist" opposition SNS is close to Montenegrin pro-Serb opposition parties. According to SNS, Andrija Mandic, leader of the New Serb Democracy (founded on January 25, 2009), is close to it, DSS and New Serbia /NS/. Addressing a rally against Kosovo's independence declaration in February 2008, Andrija Mandic said "the soul of the Serb people" in Montenegro would stand up and be counted in the same way as in Belgrade."²¹ SNS' stances on Montenegro are the same as those Nikolic and Vucic were voicing as Radicals. Hence, SNS protested strongly against Montenegro's and Macedonia's recognition of Kosovo independence, demanding that the Serbian parliament should urgently convene a session to discuss the impact these acts had on the situation in the country and the region. According to Vucic, the government should have prevented "the anti-Serb acts" by the regimes in Skopje and Podgorica by diplomatic means.²²

"Populist" oppositions in Serbia and Montenegro alike constantly demonize and criminalize Montenegrin Premier Milo Djukanovic and try by all means to create the impression that Montenegro's independence is open to reversal. SNS fully participates in Belgrade media's campaigning against Montenegro.

¹⁹ <http://www.bihvijesti.net/>, March 30, 2009.

²⁰ Glas Srpske, October 9, 2009.

²¹ VOA News, February 21, 2008.

²² Politika, October 12, 2008.

¹⁶ Vreme, 17. septembar 2009.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ RTS, November 19, 2008.

SNS and Vojvodina Statute

The same as the Radicals, SNS opposes Vojvodina's Statute and has voted against it in the parliament. "Vojvodina's Statute was co-authored by those who had been ousted in the so-called yoghurt revolution in 1980s. There is reasonable doubt the Statute's provisions – dilettantish from legal standpoint, but in fact deliberately blurred and imprecise – set solid foundation for the transformation of Serbia's northern province into an independent state under certain circumstances," claims the party's legal team.²³

For Aleksandar Vucic, the Statute is an anti-Serbia act that prepares the terrain for secession.²⁴ "By a stroke of a pen" all governmental affairs were transferred from republican to provincial level, all public servants are no longer in the service of the republic but of the province, and "by one stroke of a pen" Serbia renounced the property worth over one billion Euros, says Vucic. Referring to the planned opening of Vojvodina's office in Brussels, Vucic asked, "What region in Brussels Vojvodina intends to cooperate with and with whom it actually wants to establish cooperation?" He also pointed to Article 34, para 21, of the Statute regulating arrangement of courts in the territory of Autonomous Province of Vojvodina. According to him, Vojvodina was not only invested with full executive power but also – thanks to considerable financial assistance – with judicial power: "not yet elaborated but soon will be under the bylaws passed by the Vojvodina Assembly."²⁵

"The only way to fight this /Statute and the Law on Transfer of Authority/ is a constitutional appeal. Therefore, we shall not object the two documents but wait for the

²³ Pravda, January 31-February 1, 2010.

²⁴ www.b92.net, November 13, 2009.

²⁵

Ibid.



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Constitutional Court's ruling. If it rules the documents unconstitutional, they will be annulled. If not, we shall have to respect them," says Nikolic.²⁶

SNS and Srebrenica

SNS has changed the rhetoric about Srebrenica – but only to a certain extent. Namely, the party still denies the Srebrenica genocide and exclusively refers to it as "a horrible crime." Hence, Aleksandar Vucic says, "A horrible and mind-blowing crime was committed in Srebrenica and I am ashamed to say that the people who have committed it come from the people I belong to. The massacre is so awful that it makes no sense to discuss it any further."



The attitude towards Ratko Mladic only logically follows the stance on Srebrenica: SNS always associates his arrest with evidence of Serbia's responsibility for Bosnian genocide. "I think that the motive behind the search for him /Mladic/ is to have Serbia condemned for the so-called genocide in Srebrenica. I think a trial of Mladic would be fatal to Republika Srpska, and consequently to Serbia. There is no telling whether he is still alive, what his state of health is and whether he could sustain a trial. Three states Serbia cooperates with are trying to track him down. Someone should tell citizens of Serbia that he is long lost," says Nikolic.²⁷

²⁶ Blic, December 31, 2009.

²⁷ Blic, December 31, 2009.

SNS and campaign against LDP

SNS maintains SRS' attitude towards Liberal Democratic Party /LDP/ and its leader Cedomir Jovanovic. Campaigning against Jovanovic continues with the same purpose – to compromise a genuinely alternative option. Jovanovic is constantly criminalized through reproduction of the “stories” dating back at the time of the fiercest campaign against him.

In this context, Aleksandar Vucic keeps wondering in the media, “How possibly can a Serbian court sentence Milorad Ulemek Legija et al. to 40 years in jail for the murder of Premier Zoran Djindjic on the grounds of a testimony by protected witness Dejan Milenkovic-Bagzi, while Jovanovic goes free? After all, the said Bagzi told the court that Ceda was directly responsible for the murder of Sredoje Sljukic-Sljuka! How come that no one double-checked Bagzi's claims, how come there has been no investigation, and how come Bagzi has been released and given a new identity in return for his testimony? How possibly can the court and the prosecution believe Bagzi when he speaks of Legija, and ignore his accusations against Jovanovic?”²⁸

Assaults at LDP aim at destroying or devaluating the party's support to the pro-European coalition at crucial moments when the coalition itself is incapable of securing parliamentary majority. Hence, LDP is a constant target: the party tips the scales and thus keeps the pro-European orientation alive.



SNS has not developed a detailed economic program for coping with the economic situation it persistently criticizes. Its attitude towards EU or ICTY is also ambivalent.

SNS criticism generally boils down to phrases and slogans that cannot mobilize the masses for early parliamentary elections. Ideologist of this opposition is Vojislav Kostunica who also lacks a clear vision about the alternative to the pro-European.

Serbia's “populist” opposition and SNS cannot stand for an alternative to the ruling coalition's policy and have no capacity for coping with social problems. The conservative bloc has backing from the elites that have not given up the Greater Serbia project. Tomislav Nikolic and all “populist” parties, notably Kostunica, suit this bloc by far better than Democratic Party. The support it gives to Boris Tadic and his pro-European coalition is more circumstantial than optional.

The campaign for early parliamentary elections aims at preventing Serbia's membership of EU under the conditions, which SNS sees as offhandedly accepted by Boris Tadic and Democratic Party. The appeal by “200 intellectuals” for calling a referendum on NATO membership fits into the campaign for early parliamentary elections.

SNS was established with “a new image” within the strategy for creating an alternative option that would slow down Serbia's movement towards EU. That would definitely be so with SNS in power. Therefore, EU needs to back the fragile pro-European option and prevent early parliamentary elections. For, the elections will only waste Serbia's time in its still uncertain course towards EU.

²⁸ Press, April 7, 2009.