

Helsinki bulletin



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NO.77 // MAY 2011

PROGRESSISTS: A TRIAL OF STRENGTH



FOTO: MILOŠAN MILEKOVIĆ

Serb Progressive Party /SNS/ leader Tomislav Nikolic's "hunger and thirst" strike was a political failure. For, neither the general public, Serb Orthodox Church /SPC/, European nor Russian officials supported him in a way he might have expected. Democratic Party /DS/ profited from his strike by rebuffing it from the very beginning as a non-European method of political struggle, explained the director of Transparency

International, Vladimir Goati. "Democratic Party already has a head start since it is in power. If it manages to make a fresh step towards Europe, it will earn another score for the elections," he says.¹

¹ Blic, April 28, 2011.

Political parties began taking positions for the upcoming elections with Nikolic's hunger strike. The Pride Parade of October 10, 2010 was the first trial of strength between Serbia's two biggest parties: a trial from which Democratic Party also profited.

The strike itself had a sobering effect on all potential SNS and DS voters. Both parties will have to work hard to attract voters. They will have to stand before them with serious programs for many burning problems and with their visions of the future.

Progressists cannot just count on the votes of disappointed citizens and transitional losers. SNS has not yet offered them any solution to economic and social problems, let alone its plan for Serbia's future.

In the months to come Democratic Party will have to more seriously trade on European prospects, living standards and resolution of some burning social problems.

Radicalization of the situation in Serbia is still possible. Now everything depends on Democratic Party's ability to capitalize on Nikolic's fiasco. For its part, SNS will not stop trying to build its supremacy on the pressure from the street.

A FAILED INVESTMENT

Tomislav Nikolic has tried to stage several mass rallies but never managed to assemble more than 50,000 people. His expectations were about one million citizens each time.

The rally of April 16 was also indicative of citizens' disposition. It clearly manifested their distrust in both the government and the opposition. Even those who showed up for the rally did not come to demonstrate their support for

SNS but their dissatisfaction. And Nikolic was looking forward to a sort of Middle East revolution scenario at the streets of Belgrade.

Faced with a complete failure, Nikolic opted for a politically risky move and went on thirst and hunger strike (April 16). He was striking for eight days. On the second day he was taken to a private clinic in New Belgrade. "I will be striking as long as it takes for Serbia to become a normal country," he told reporters.² The word had it from the beginning that he was not striking at all. When he realized that his strike failed to produce the effect he had hoped for (induce early parliamentary elections and spark of mass protests against the government) he told the press, "My hunger and thirst strike is to be understood as a fast." He explained that his state of health was such that he had to accept a therapy for "his kidneys" and EEG.³

The strike was supposed to trigger off SNS protests all over Serbia. However, the planned scenario failed. SNS Member and supporters staged rallies "of support" in Pancevo, Vranje, Smederevo, Krusevac, Cacak, Leskovac and some other towns. The request for early parliamentary elections was reiterated by speakers on every occasion. A protest was organized in front of the presidency building too. Assuming the image of a tolerant man, Aleksandar Vucic, SNS vice-president, appealed to protesters in T-shirts with SNS logo to refrain from incidents. The protesters were shouting slogans against President Tadic and Democratic Party, blowing whistles and vuvuzelas. A heavy police cordon guarded the presidential palace.

Later on the protesters went on a "peaceful march," as Tomislav Nikolic asked them to in a message that had been read aloud. Another message was read aloud during the march, the message to President Boris Tadic. "President

² Radio Slobodna Evropa.

³ Isto.

Tadic, be a man, at least that's not so hard. Call the elections to save Serbia. You have plenty of time till the end of this year, though we are not quite sure whether that would be enough for you to cover up all the frauds your associates committed in your name as well, read the message."⁴

SNS officials' rhetoric at the rallies associated their discourse while still in the Serb Radical Party. And it threatened with more radical behavior. However, taken aback by meager support from citizens, they planned their actions day by day. That ruled out a more radical scenario at the time – but not their future plans for it.

Political commentators supporting Nikolic hoped his strike would succeed. They counted on "Serbia's love" for martyrs and its trust in those who suffer. They expected his risky move would mobilize the country and people's emotions. At one point, they went so far as to tell the public that Nikolic had placed his life in Tadic's hands.⁵ Journalist Zeljko Cvijanovic, close to Kostunica and the conservative bloc, wrote triumphantly that Tadic had no choice. "So, what will Tadic do, what will do the man known for not looking into the eyes of anyone asking something big from him and the man who would rather run away into an even bigger problem than start solving a smaller one? No matter how much his spin doctors like to equal this trait of his to his realpolitik, that's actually his problem in coping with problems. To my knowledge of him, he will first try to verify if Toma really means it. When he sees he does he will try to compromise him by claiming Toma eats behind closed doors, and only when the problem threatens with solving him will he start dealing with it," wrote Cvijanovic.⁶

4 www.b92.net, 19. april 2011.

5 <http://www.srpskapolitika.com/>.

6 <http://www.srpskapolitika.com/>.

According to analyst Zvonimir Trajkovic, Tadic's position was pretty complex – no matter what he does, he loses. Looking forward to the mobilization of the entire country, they claimed Tadic could not possibly prevent it. SNS and its coalition partners are entitled to radicalize the protest, which all dissatisfied citizens may join, they said. "If you, democrats, would rather kill a political leader for the sake of several months /before calling early parliamentary elections/, why couldn't we kill all you thieves? We only have to make one step to radicalize the protest."⁷

They stressed that Tadic was discredited in EU, while Nikolic's reputation in EU circles was growing. A conflict may break out any time and there is no telling who will be defeated, they said. "For a solution to be found either through agreement or a compromise, or in the streets, everything must proceed quickly. One of the two – either Toma or Tadic – will be unmasked, smashed and plunged into the dirt of the Serbian wallow," wrote Trajkovic.⁸

According to Slobodan Antonic, sociologist and political analyst close to the conservative bloc, the strike was not exactly a well-thought-out political action. Eventually, marketing results were mostly negative, he says, adding that SNS mistakenly believed that Nikolic's strike would generate public fury against the government create political pressure for early elections. The Progressists did not realize that public support to them was "shallow" and that the high ratings various agencies were ascribing to them were not the reports on the size of their obedient army that "would jump through a hoop for them," says Antonic. "They've staked everything on a single throw of dice – the dice made of prettified marketing, opposition rhetoric and Brusselized Europeanism. If the regime does

7 <http://www.srpskapolitika.com/>.

8 Ibid.

not make some bigger mistake and if SNS does not think out something new, the Progressists' ratings, after this failure, will hardly remain the same. SNS has maintained the temperature of opposition dissatisfaction with petitions and rallies for early parliamentary elections. Nikolic's hunger strike was a culmination. But the culmination that failed. One mode of action has gone down the drain, some other must be found."⁹

REACTIONS AT THE STRIKE

Most citizens and political actors was the strike as a radical and irrational move. Nikolic eventually lost but he managed to crystallize the political scene. For months, analysts have created the impression that a coalition between Democrats and Progressists was the only realistic outcome of the elections – consequently, it makes no difference for whom the undecided vote. However, Nikolic's strike reopened the question of possible coalitions.

Nikolic had looked forward to the support from the Patriarch. It turned out, however, that the Patriarch was well-informed about the situation in Serbia and, therefore, aware of the danger entailed in Nikolic's strike. Patriarch Irinej appealed to Nikolic to give up the strike, as "Killing and torturing one's own body in not a part of the Christian tradition."¹⁰ The Patriarch's reaction clearly showed that Nikolic's plan for destabilizing the country did not enjoy the Church support.

Nikolic's move manifested that Serbia's biggest opposition party feels not even a minimal responsibility for the situation of the country. According to Cedomir Jovanovic, president of the Liberal-Democratic Party /LDP/, the act itself

⁹ <http://www.nspm.rs/kolumne-slobodana-antonica/pouke-tominog-strajka.html> , April 29, 2011.

¹⁰ Politika, April 2011.

was "a return to a political Stone Age."¹¹ It has not only put him and his party to shame but also proved that they still work and think in Seselj-radical manner, he added.

THE PARLIAMENT DISCUSSES NIKOLIC'S STRIKE

The Serbian parliament also discussed Tomislav Nikolic's hunger and thirst strike. Vehement polemics between SRS and SNS MPs marked the entire debate. SRS MPs were ruthless in tackling the topic. So it happened that Nikolic's former party colleague, Vjerica Radeta, said, "Nikolic is a clown lazing in front of cameras and role-playing a strike."¹² That is obvious since, as days go by, "he looks plumper and plumper, evidently well fed and watered."¹³ Aleksandar Vucic is the one to blame for the strike, having "fooled" Nikolic so as to "get rid of him as soon as possible," she said. As for the people visiting Nikolic in his bed, Radeta commented that businessman Milan Beko had come to "check up whether his investment turned a failure."¹⁴

MPs from SNS were reiterating the demand for early parliamentary elections. Dragan Sormaz of SNS said the media were controlled by DS vice-president, Dragan Djilas, and hence belittling and banalizing Nikolic's strike. He also clamored for Premier Cvetkovic's resignation: Cvetkovic, he said, "was destroying the state and impoverishing citizens." His party colleague, Vladimir Ilic, said the ruling coalition was leading Serbia into "total chaos" and that "the entire Serbia is against it."¹⁵

¹¹ RTV B92.

¹² http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2011&mm=04&dd=19&nav_id=507132.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Isto.

¹⁵ Isto.

NIKOLIC – A TOPIC IN BRUSSELS AS WELL

European Union interpreted the strike as yet another obstruction to Serbia's EU candidacy as at the time it seemed to threaten to plunge Serbia into an election campaign before the discussion on its candidacy. Jelko Kacin, EP rapporteur on Serbia, warned that the information EU was getting were disadvantageous to Serbia. *"I am glad that Mr. Nikolic's state of health is stable now, but I think that his associates should be actively work in the days to come so as to bring things back to normal and enable proper functioning of institutions. The messages coming from Serbia say 'the Parliament is inoperative' and 'the leader of the biggest opposition party is on hunger strike.' These messages are meant to convince EU that Serbia is in crisis and in general chaos. I would agree about economic and social crisis but would not about a general chaos,"* he said.¹⁶

Representatives of Serbian and European parliaments held a joint meeting on April 18, 2010 in Brussels. The meeting called on Tomislav Nikolic to end his hunger strike. "Bearing in mind the growing political tension in Belgrade and the deficit of trust between the ruling coalition and the government, the fifth parliamentary EP-Serbia meeting calls on SNS leader, Tomislav Nikolic, to immediately stop his hunger strike," said a special political statement issued on the occasion.

Stefan Füle, European commissioner for enlargement, told the meeting that he hoped Nikolic would end his strike, which was "contrary to the ambition for EU integration." For him, the hunger strike is "a wrong course." "It is essential that political discourse returns to the established democratic procedures and to the institutional framework. All political

disagreements should be dealt with within the framework of democratic institutions," he said.¹⁷

"The commissioner thinks the opposition should better try to solve the open issues through institutions or at least through procedures within institutional framework, because strengthening institutions rather than weakening them is the common goal both the regime and the opposition need to bear in mind," said Laslo Varga, chairman of the Serbian parliamentary committee for European integration.¹⁸

Vladimir Gligorov, economist, says that Serbia is already tardily meeting its obligations on the road to Europe and can obtain a candidate status only if Brussels politically decides so – not because Belgrade did its part of the job. He warns that a more complicate political situation in the country can postpone the decision on the candidate status despite all the political will in European circles. "If political conflicts radicalize, things will obviously have to be solved through the elections, which will place the issue of candidacy at the post-election agenda. Whether developments will proceed in that direction greatly depends on the so-called Progressive Party. We must wait and see how they will solve the problems they have created themselves."¹⁹

WHAT'S IN FOR RUSSIANS?

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov was in the visit to Serbia at the time of Nikolic's strike. Unlike Europeans calling on Nikolic to stop it, Lavrov called SNS leader's hunger strike Serbia's internal affair and said Moscow was closely observing the strike-related developments.

17 Politika, April 20, 2011.

18 Ibid.

19 http://www.slobodnaevropa.org/content/srbija_izbori_naprednjaci_nikolic_eu/9498905.html.

16 RFE,17. april 2011.

“I hope all political forces in Serbia would behave within the legal framework,” he added.²⁰ Indicatively, Nikolic ended his hunger strike immediately after Russian Ambassador to Serbia Alexander Konuzin visited him in hospital. Konuzin said he paid the visit “as a personal friend.”²¹ Progressists and Radicals have always advocated partnership with Russia. Formerly, Tomislav Nikolic offered a military base to Russians (at Mt. Kopaonik).²² The draft agreement on strategic partnership discussed in the course of Minister Lavrov’s visit is not available to the public. The two countries have already signed an agreement in the domain of humanitarian assistance, extraordinary situations, prevention of natural and technological disasters, and removal of their consequences (signed by Police Minister Ivica Dacic and Minister for Civil Defense, Emergencies and Disaster Management *Sergei Shoigu*). *The agreement provided the establishment of a joint regional center for extraordinary situations in Nis. Though often referred to in the public, the general public itself still knows nothing about the character of the said center. In October 2009, during the visit by Russian President Medvedev, the word had it that it was about a military base. Quoting the articles published in the Russian media, Serbian “Ekonomist” magazine writes that the joint coordination center was unquestionable until the rumor had it that it could be used for intelligence and military purposes, if needed. This theory is supported by the fact that the South Stream pipeline will run through Nis and that the town is situated on Corridor 10.*²³ *In this context, Serbia’s speedy movement towards EU and its membership of NATO does not suit Russia. Hence the attempt to provoke early elections “coincides” with Russian interests.*

20 Politika, April 20, 2011.

21 www.kurir-info.rs

22 Blic-Online, December 19, 2007. “From some locations in Serbia Russian can definitely control the defense of their country,” said Nikolic.

23 Vesti online, February 7, 2010.

Jeremic-Lavrov joint statement demonstrated the sum and substance of Russia’s policy for Serbia: strategic ties with it are meant to slow down the movement towards EU and NATO membership. “We agreed that our bilateral relations are on the upward curve and that the draft agreement on strategic partnership to be signed by our presidents in near future reflects the quality of these relations,” quotes the statement. At the same time, Lavrov announced Moscow’s support to Serbia’s initiative for an investigation of the illegal trade in human organs under the auspices of the UN Security Council.²⁴

Aleksandar Fatic, director of the Center for Security Studies, takes that Russia-Serbia strategic partnership falls under Russia’s strategy for placing Serbia in the service of its interests in the Balkans and prevent its membership of NATO. “Concretely, this means that Serbia should be Russia’s strategic ally in the context of security and remain forever outside NATO and the only country in the region that is not in its membership. This is a policy of fait accompli: declaration of strategic partnership, donations to the budget, establishment of a Russian military base in Nis, construction of the South Stream pipeline and diplomatic support in the Security Council to the actions against Prishtina will place any future government in the position that it could not possibly join NATO, even if wants to, because NATO cannot admit a country that is so much in the service of the Russian security police,” writes Fatic.²⁵

24 Pravda, April 19, 2011.

25 Pravda, 19. april 2011.

SUMMARY

SNS leader's hunger strike did not change a bit DS's position about calling the parliamentary elections only once Serbia obtains the EU candidacy status. DS demonstrated resoluteness in defying blackmails by SNS and the conservative bloc. Had it acted otherwise it would have destabilized the country. The score it earned for its resoluteness could turn into a major profit if followed by creative and brave political U-turns.

Nikolic's hunger strike crystallized Serbia's political scene and announced the positions parties will take in the upcoming elections, particularly the two biggest of all, SNS and DS. Closer relations between SNS and DSS hint at a coalition between the two parties in the elections or after them. Nikolic's strike further homogenized the conservative bloc.

The strike once again split Serbia's scene into two political currents – pro-European and conservative. It demonstrated Nikolic's ambiguity about EU accession. EU clearly let him know that it was against such political methods and called on him to resort to democratic means. The strike itself was a political failure. This implies not, however, that the Progressists have given up a more radical scenario if the opportunity arises.

Russia once more supported Serbia's attitude of a client state and made no bones about its plan for resorting to conservative and anti-European forces in the country to attain its goals in the Balkans.

Serbia's stability depends on its political elites' sense of responsibility and capability to clearly define the country's national and strategic objectives, and priorities. A political consensus on Serbia's future is imperative to its stability and economic recovery.