

Dangerous Electoral Marathon in Serbia

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In the eighteen months between September 2002 and June 2004, the Serbian people were called to the polls for no fewer than three presidential elections and a parliamentary one. On two occasions the presidential elections were declared invalid since the level of participation had not reached the required quorum of 50% of registered voters. The democratic candidate Boris Tadic was eventually elected on 27 June 2004, beating by the narrowest of margins his far-right opponent Tomislav Nikolic, the interim leader of the Serbian Radical Party (SRS). Meanwhile, the legislative elections of 28 December 2003 had established the Radicals as the main force to be reckoned with on the Serbian political scene. The far right currently counts more than a third of the members of the Serbian parliament, which gives it sufficient minority bargaining power to be able to block, for example, any proposed amendments to the constitution. Four years after the fall of the regime of Slobodan Milosevic on 5 October 2000, Serbia is finding it far from easy to shake off its nationalist reflexes.

A few statistics suffice to sum up the current political and social situation in Serbia. From one election to the next, at least half the Serb electorate fails to turn up at the polling-booths, and 30% of those who do cast their vote do so for the far right. Socially, the adult population of the country is divided more or less equally into three parts: those in work, the unemployed, and old-age pensioners. The reformers have not lived up to

the hopes the population placed in them, and economic reforms have so far scarcely got under way. Serbia has embarked on its economic "transition" ten years after the other Socialist countries, and the huge, grossly unproductive State combines are still awaiting privatization, a process which could itself deprive tens of thousands of workers of jobs which, if they do not provide them with a decent salary, at least constitute a minimum social safety-net.

The main mass of the Radical Party's natural supporters is to be found among those who feel left out by this bitter, unfinished process of transition. Likewise, nearly 10% of the 8 million people currently making up the population of Serbia (excluding Kosovo) are refugees and displaced persons who have been forced to flee from Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina or Kosovo. Many Serbs originating from Croatia or Bosnia have obtained citizenship of the Republic of Serbia, and so no longer have refugee status. However, these orphans of the dream of a "Greater Serbia," often harbouring illusory dreams of one day being able to take a revenge that may never come, frequently vote for the SRS.

Politically, the unity of the "democratic bloc" has only been forged by a common opposition to the Milosevic regime. Two general opposing tendencies have rapidly manifested themselves: the current Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica is the rallying force behind a nationalist, conservative bloc which is nonetheless firmly attached to the basic principles of democracy, whilst the late Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic, who was assassinated on 12 March 2003, has become the icon of the liberal, modernizing and pro-European camp. The political heirs of Zoran Djindjic can be identified by tendencies

that are either more or less liberal or more or less social (even if the notions of left, centre-left or right are still largely non-existent in Serbia). The two main political groupings have opposite stances with regard to all the key issues, whether it be the question of cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in The Hague (ICTY), attitudes towards the break-up of Yugoslavia and the wars of the 1990's, the reform process, or the possibility of the country's joining the Atlantic alliance.

For liberal democrats, the ICTY is a historical necessity making it possible to draw a line under past conflict once and for all. Cooperation with the international justice system is, moreover, a *sine qua non* for the normalization of Serbia's relations with its neighbours and the full acceptance of the country on the international scene, in addition to being a pre-condition for establishing ties with NATO and the European Union. Supporters of Vojislav Kostunica, not content with denouncing the "anti-Serb bias" of the ICTY, add that cooperation with The Hague is perhaps too high a price to pay for renewing relations with Europe, considering that Serbia's defence of its national interest comes before any question of European *rapprochement*. At the same time, they vigorously denounce the process of economic reform and privatization as a "cut-price" selling off of the country's essential interests.

All the main figures on the Serbian "democratic scene" take up their positions along the lines of these two basic tendencies, with variations according to the political contingencies of the moment. Thus the monarchists of the Movement for Serbian Renewal (SPO), headed by the writer and current Foreign Minister Vuk Draskovic, adopt a "moderate" stance

THE ACCESSION OF CROATIA AND MACEDONIA TO THE EU

On 21st February 2003, Croatia formally applied for European Union membership. In April of the same year, the General Affairs and External Relations Committee of the EU Council requested a report in this respect from the Commission. On 20th April 2004, the European Commission adopted a report in which it recommended to the Council that it start the negotiations for Croatia's accession to the EU.

The European Council of June 2004 welcomed the Commission's report, granting Croatia the status of applicant country. The Council called a bilateral meeting for the beginning of 2005 to start the negotiations. In its conclusions, the Council pointed out that Croatia should maintain full cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and take the necessary measures to guarantee the detention and transfer of the indictees to The Hague. Finally, the European Council considered that the candidature of Croatia should serve as an incentive for the other countries of the Western Balkans to proceed with their reforms.

In December, the European Council held in Brussels reaffirmed the conclusions of June and urged the European Commission to prepare a proposal of a framework for the negotiations with Croatia based on the experience of the fifth enlargement of the EU. The Council fixed the date of 17th March 2005 as the start date of negotiations with Croatia. However, the

Council reaffirmed, as it did in the conclusions of June, the need for Croatia to fully cooperate with the ICTY; therefore, in the Council's summing-up the start date of negotiations remains under the condition of Croat cooperation with the ICTY.

Sources:

European Commission: opinion on the application of Croatia for membership of the European Union 20th April 2004

http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/se/sap/rep3/cr_croat.pdf

Brussels European Council – 17th and 18th June 2004

http://ue.eu.int/cms3_applications/Applications/newsRoom/LoadDocument.asp?directory=en/ec/&filename=81750.pdf

European Council 16th and 17th December 2004

http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/ga/c/pres_concl/december_2004.pdf#croatia

Delegation of the European Commission in Croatia.

www.delhrv.cec.eu.int/en/index.htm

European Commission.

http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/se/croatia/index.htm#2

EU-Croatia Stabilization and Association Agreement

http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/se/croatia/com01_371es.pdf

The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) submitted its application for EU accession on 22nd March 2004 after the Council of Ministers urged the Commission on 17th May of the same year to present a report evaluating its candidature. For this, the Commission created a questionnaire, sent to the Skopje Government on 1st October 2004. This questionnaire attempted to clarify fulfilment of the Copenhagen political criteria on behalf of the candidate country as well as the current situation of their policies in relation to community heritage.

Parallel to this, on 1st April 2004 the Stabilization and Association Agreement between FYROM and the EU, signed on 9th April 2001, came into force.

Sources:

European Commission. Proposal for a Council decision on the European Partnership with the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/se/sap/rep3/part_fyrom.pdf

European Commission. Stabilisation and Association Report 2004 on FYROM.

http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/see/sap/rep3/cr_fyrom.pdf

Delegation of the European Commission in FYROM.

www.delmkd.cec.eu.int/en/about_us/history.htm

on many subjects, whilst Vuk Karadzic, for example, has been one of the most active supporters of full cooperation with the ICTY since himself taking up a ministerial post.

In this way no "natural" electoral majority can emerge, since it seems unlikely that the democratic nationalists or the liberals will have much hope of achieving an absolute majority on their own. Fear of the far right temporarily united the electorates of the two opposing democratic blocs in favour of the candidacy of Boris Tadic in the second round of the presidential election, but the local elections in September 2004 led to a large-scale political splinter-effect, with the formation of disparate coalitions varying widely from town to town.

Whilst the far right achieved outright victories in a large number of districts, the

newly-elected councillors belonging to Vojislav Kostunica's Serbian Democratic Party (DSS) formed alliances in some areas with the Radical Party and in others with councillors of liberal tendencies. Far from favouring a policy of exclusion with the aim of isolating the far right, Prime Minister Kostunica admitted to sharing many of its ideals.

Serbian political life is in fact still dominated by regional factors and the unresolved issue of what form the State should take. Since the end of the NATO bombing campaign in Spring 1999, Kosovo has been under the provisional administration of the United Nations. During 2005 negotiations are theoretically due to open to establish the "definitive status" of this protectorate. Among Serbian politicians there is an impression of apparent unanimity in demand-

ing the full implementation of United Nations Security Council resolution 1244, formally guaranteeing Serbian sovereignty over Kosovo.

For their part, the Kosovo Albanians are equally unanimous in calling for independence, and there seems to be no prospect of a possible compromise. In some Serbian political circles, however, alternative prospects are raised, generally based on the idea of a possible partitioning of Kosovo, which could take one of various forms: either Serbian areas would be quite simply detached from a Kosovo that would become an independent state, or a high degree of self-government would be granted to Serbian "cantons" within the framework of a Kosovo that would itself merely accept a status of autonomy. The Bosnian "model" is also sometimes referred to, with

the possible creation of a Serbian "entity" similar to the Republika Srpska in Bosnia.

On the other hand, the prospect of a progressive withdrawal of international forces creates the risk of engendering renewed tensions in Kosovo, and a recurrence of the riots seen in March 2004 seems highly likely. The Albanian nationalists are also playing the regional card by seeking to extend the scope of the possible resolution of an Albanian question which would include not only Kosovo, but also Macedonia (with 500,000 Albanians), Montenegro (with 60,000 Albanians), and the Presevo valley in southern Serbia (with 80,000 Albanians).

The number of Serbs still actually living in Kosovo is difficult to establish, since they undertake frequent journeys to and from Serbia. All the various international organisms agree, however, that more than 100,000 Serbs live in the territory. This community, which up to now has benefitted from no real guarantee of security and is subject to an extremely limited freedom of movement, is in general hostile to the international forces, but remains incapable of organizing itself into a coherent political bloc. The Serbian leaders in Kosovo are constantly locked in bitter backbiting despite the fact that their status is of doubtful legitimacy. The legislative elections held in Kosovo on 23 October, 2004 were boycotted by 99.7% of Serbian voters, in response to appeals made notably by both Prime

Minister Kostunica and the Serbian Orthodox Church. This massive boycott can be interpreted above all as indicative of the exasperation of a population caught up in a hopeless dead-end situation since 1999.

If negotiations do take place in 2005, the Serbs of Kosovo risk finding themselves represented by Belgrade, although the Serbian leaders are far from having a clear and coherent policy on the question. Kosovo "experts" try to make themselves heard both in the cabinet of Prime Minister Kostunica and in circles close to President Tadic, not to mention the "Coordination Corps for Kosovo and Metohija," still led by former deputy Prime Minister Nebojsa Covic.

Another highly sensitive issue is the state of relations with Montenegro. The separatist aspirations of this tiny southern republic were provisionally halted by the Belgrade agreement of 2002, and the proclamation on 5th February 2003 of the State of Serbia and Montenegro to replace the defunct Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. This union of states has very limited and ill-defined powers. Serbia and Montenegro, for instance, have two separate central banks, two different currencies (Montenegro having made the Euro its legal tender), and two separate Customs systems. It is also a state with a "limited lifespan," since after three years the two republics will have the right to re-define their relationship, and perhaps opt for a separation.

In reality, the unresolved issues of Kosovo and of the relationship with Montenegro continue to paralyse the whole question of reform in Serbia. Of which state is the city of Belgrade the capital? Of Serbia, or of a confederated state with Montenegro? Is Montenegro still included in this state? For the entire twentieth century, from the days of the Yugoslav monarchy through to the time of Marshal Tito's Socialist Federation, Serbia has always considered itself as the natural centre of gravity of a vast surrounding region. In today's world, the great challenge for Serbia is perhaps to accept its isolation and to embark upon a process of development within the narrow frontiers with which the course of history has now left it. If this scenario were finally accepted by Serbia, it would surely become easier not only to continue with essential reforms, but also to enter a new period of cooperation with the neighbouring states, an indispensable pre-condition for the integration into Europe of the "Western Balkans" as a whole.

Further reading:

Yves TOMIC, *La Serbie, du prince Milos à Milosevic*, Brussels, Peter Lang, 2003.

On the Internet:

Le Courier des Balkans,
www.balkans.eu.org