

Serbia's presidential election: the best-laid plans...

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The best-laid plans of the unpopular party in power came to nothing in the Serbian presidential election on 20 January 2008 [1], mostly because the voters decided to surprise everybody by turning out in large numbers. In the immediate aftermath, the headlines report that Serbian Radical Party (SRS) candidate Tomislav Nikolic "won" the first round against incumbent president and Democratic Party (DS) leader Boris Tadic with a 39.6% plurality of the vote to the 35.4% received by Tadic [it should be noted that these statistics are from the projections by the observer group, the Centre for Free Elections and Democracy [CeSiD [2]]; the results reported by the Serbian electoral commission may be different, though probably not by very much). This, however, is a partial and misleading gloss on a more nuanced outcome which should be read against the background of current Serbian politics.

The lack of an absolute majority of votes ensures [5] that a decisive second-round run-off will be held on 3 February between the leading two contenders. But the result represents a defeat for the parties that were hoping for a stronger showing by Nikolic, who does not have adequate potential support to succeed in the second round. Experience suggests that Nikolic never had the potential to go far beyond his first-round result [6], so the main effect of the first-round elections will be to limit the power of the prime minister to push other parties (and his own!) to the right.

The main parties in Serbia and most of the domestic and global press would like to claim [7] that the 20 January elections were about Kosovo [8]. But they were not, principally because all of the prominent parties (save the small Liberal Democratic Party / LDP) shared the same position on that question. One of the parties, the far-right SRS, cast their rhetoric a bit more aggressively, but their bombast combined with the repeatedly demonstrated limits of their appeal have already moved them from the field of politics to that of horror entertainment.

So what *were* the elections about?

The party system's character

In the first place, they were about the continued viability of the threat posed by the Serbian Radical Party [9]. This is a party - repeated claims to the contrary notwithstanding - that has never won an election. It exercised power in the 1990s as a satellite of the Slobodan Milošević political machine, to which it has in the

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meantime become an heir. It presided over the parliament [10] for a day or so after the parliamentary election of January 2007 as a result of a (successful) ploy by prime minister Vojislav KoÅtunica [11] - head of the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS [12]) - to scare the rival Democratic Party (DS) into submission. Overall, however, the SRS is the representative of the 30%-35% of the population that would have been satisfied to see MiloÅevic [12] remain in power rather than be ousted in 2000. The age of this group and the changing conditions in the country suggest that there is little potential for growth there.

"Serbia's Kosovo claim: much ado about.. [4]." (2 October 2007)

Anything short of a first-round plurality for the SRS would have been disastrous for the party. This is the sort of result that causes international observers to make alarmist claims that the far right has "won" an election, when in fact the result is far more modest (see "Serbia's elections: less of the same [12]", 23 January 2007). "Winning" the parliamentary election a year ago meant that the SRS formed the largest group in the parliamentary minority; "winning" the 2008 presidential election means passing into the second round, which the SRS candidate will lose.

The continued prominence of the SRS is useful for the SRS itself, of course, in as much as it assures continued access to public funds and attention. But it is even more useful to the declared political opponents of the party, the Democratic Party [13] (DS) led by Boris Tadic and the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) led by prime minister Vojislav KoÅtunica.

For these two ruling parties, the SRS provides a pretext to form coalitions with one another, and to avoid developing the sort of clear political profile which would allow elections to take on the character of a meaningful decision among clear and realistic political options. Instead, the DS has generated not a liberal profile but a managerial one - and has ceded the field of liberal politics to the ethnic-minority parties and the small LDP, which is supported principally by younger voters and urban intellectuals. For its part the DSS has not adopted a conservative profile but a contrarian one, and as a result there is no coherent conservative political force in the country [14] but rather a motley collection of populist and ultra-right movements.

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The DS and the DSS are not liberal and conservative parties in the sense that these terms are understood in modern politics; rather, both are in the mould of the highly adaptable and utterly immovable "parties of power" that characterised politics in the period between the two world wars throughout the region (see Dejan Djokic, Elusive Compromise: A History of Interwar Yugoslavia [15] [C Hurst, 2007]).

The prime minister's power

In the second place, the election was about how far prime minister KoÅtunica can go in asserting his power. After the parliamentary elections in January 2007 [16], he succeeded in parlaying his party's third-place finish (with 16.7% of the vote) into retention of the premiership and dominance of the cabinet. How? Fundamentally, by threatening to withhold support from the more successful DS. The formation of a government was delayed for three months as KoÅtunica successfully

engineered a high-wire act - he pretended to have formed a coalition with the SRS, which lasted until the DS gave in to all of his demands. At least temporarily, the DSS succeeded in translating a weak electoral performance into a dominant position in the post-election negotiations.

KoÅunica hoped to repeat the feat this time around. The DSS, rather than endorsing the prime minister's coalition partner Tadic, offered its support to the populist Velimir Ilic [17], a colourful and controversial figure whose strong regional base of support is fundamental to the survival of the DSS. Most likely the calculus was to put KoÅunica in the position of kingmaker, with the expectation that Tadic and Nikolic would be about evenly matched (which they were), and Ilic would receive strong enough support to determine the balance (which he did not). The 7.6% support that Ilic received is less than half what the DSS got in the parliamentary elections a year ago, and will not be decisive.

There is a further problem: just as the DSS supporters did not follow their party leadership's preference for Ilic in the first round, Ilic voters are not likely to allow themselves to be instructed in the second. A pre-election survey [18] by CeSiD suggests that a broad plurality of Ilic voters would vote for Tadic in the second round, and only 2% for Nikolic. KoÅunica may believe that his party can go either way, but this view is manifestly in conflict with the views of most DSS members.

Beyond that, there are few other places where Nikolic can turn for additional support. The 6.0% who voted [19] for the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) candidate Milutin Mrkonjic will have nowhere else to turn, but among other potential sources of support there is no party that received more than 1% support. The 5.6% who voted for the LDP and the 2.2% who voted for István Pásztor of the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians [20] will certainly vote for Tadic. Unless KoÅunica is able to demonstrate that he can exercise strong control over the voters who preferred Ilic in the first round, his capacities as a kingmaker may be very limited.

It could be argued that the hope of being able to broker a second round was based on the expectation that the electorate would continue to be dominated by older and rural voters, while young and urban Serbians would stay away from the polls one more time. The high turnout [21] in this case (which CeSiD estimates at 61% nationally) seems to have provided the margin that depletes that capacity and makes the result of the second round more or less predictable.

The result also means that in the period both before and after the second round on 3 February, President Tadic may have greater capacity to act independently and to stake out a genuine alternative to the politics of KoÅunica and his cabinet. Potentially, these elections may mean the beginning of the development of a political landscape in Serbia on which right and left compete.

That possibility, however, is predicated on the chance that Tadic will prove himself to be a bold strategist and a programmatic thinker, qualities of which he has shown no sign so far.

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