

Serbia chooses a future, just

By Eric Gordy,
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The inconclusive result in the first round of Serbia's presidential election on 20 January 2008 led to a second round on Sunday 3 February [1]. Again, there was widespread fear that the extreme-right nationalism represented by the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) and its candidate Tomislav Nikolic would score a decisive victory; and just as in the first round, an extraordinarily high turnout prevented that outcome. The incumbent president Boris Tadic of the Democratic Party (DS) squeaked [2] through to re-election with 50,5% to Nikolic's 47,9%. In doing so Tadic has probably gained a bit of political autonomy in addition to his second five-year mandate [3], but nothing is secure.

There is no doubt that the factor that saved Tadic's candidacy was indeed the high turnout: 67% of voters participated, according to the figures of the respected Centre for Free Elections and Democracy (CeSiD [6]). This is higher than the 61% who voted in the first round, and represents the highest rate of participation in any election since the one that led to the removal of Slobodan Milosevic [6] from power in 2000.

The tide of non-habitual voters coming out to support Boris Tadic [7], however, probably does not represent any outpouring of love for the ineffectual politician. Many people voted simply to prevent the worst possible outcome, and to express their resentment at entrenched and unpopular politicians attempting to make deals without popular support. They now expect Tadic to deliver an alternative to the extremism of the SRS and to the increasingly bizarre brinksmanship of prime minister Vojislav Kostunica [8] and his Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS).

The best news

The significance of the election result has two aspects that are in running tension with each other. First, to echo what Tadic told the crowd celebrating his victory, the high turnout is a sign of "Serbia's democratic potential". When people do engage with the political process and make their preferences known, they have the ability to control the behaviour of the political elites. In this case they put an end both to the presidential hopes of the rebranded [9] Nikolic (who had said he would not run again if he were defeated by Tadic), and to the chronic overreaching on the part of Kostunica (who could claim until now that both the president and the government [10] owed their survival to his support).

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"Serbia's Kosovo claim: much ado about.. [5]." (2

Second, however, much of the potential demonstrated in this election remains unrealised, and this could continue to be the case. The presidential post is mostly ceremonial [11]; the head of state controls no major institutions other than the military. Tadic's political influence will continue to depend on Kostunica's party, for as long as the latter's government lasts. And Kostunica, having succeeded in 2007 in enhancing his power by flirting with the SRS [12] and failed in the early weeks of 2008 in maintaining it by intimidating [13] the DS, has no further motivation to remain loyal to his coalition partners.

October 2007)

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The pressure is on Tadic, then, to produce some concrete successes. If instead the stagnation at the top levels of government continues, the likely result will be regression: a withering of the political motivation reflected in the strong voting figures of the January-February 2008 election, and a return to public apathy and resignation. That would be read by Serbia's [14] elites as an invitation to oligarchy.

The good news

The turnout aside, a single fact about Tadic's victory is more important than any other: it was achieved without Kostunica's support, and consequently Tadic will not be beholden to him. The prime minister's DSS supported another candidate in the first round and sat out the second, leaving it a junior coalition partner with far less political capital than it had two weeks ago.

This significant development echoes another, little noticed one that happened in the week before the election. It was in itself a minor event, but something happened in the governing coalition for the first time since it was formed [15] after an arduous four-month process in May 2007 [16]: the ministers from the DS and the G17+ outvoted, *en bloc*, the ministers from the DSS and the NS. Few people will be materially affected by the decision, but as an announcement of the intention by the DS to function as an autonomous [17] political actor, its importance is unmistakable. The DS now has a president with a majority mandate, and it controls a majority of the seats in the cabinet.

If events continue to develop in this direction, there are two possible outcomes. Kostunica could plod along as prime minister, heading a government in which he is increasingly marginalised; or matters could come to a head and the government could fall, with the result that new parliamentary [18] elections could be called by the end of 2008.

The DSS official Nebojsa Bakarec, speaking to the BBC on 4 February, raised the possibility of a DSS-SRS coalition government. This solution is certainly not favoured by DSS members. For their own part, DS supporters would hope for a weak enough showing by the DSS in any parliamentary election to enable a government to be formed without it.

The bad news

For the people who abstained from earlier elections to support Tadic in this one, their vote had a defensive character. These people were not engaging themselves to support an admired

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leader, but to prevent what they saw as the disaster of Nikolic's election.

In fact, Tadic is currently the best that Serbia's democratic forces have to offer, and the best that can be said of Tadic is that he is not a Radical. The motivation for defensive voting is strong but not inexhaustible. At some point the DS and its allies will have to offer something beyond the promise [19] of a break with the past.

Aside from essential efforts to improve economic conditions [20] and public services, there are two intertwined [21] issues on which voters expect progress: Kosovo, and relations with the European Union.

With Kosovo, little can be expected. The authorities in Pristina are determined to go ahead with a declaration of independence; Kosovo premier Hashim Thaqi unhelpfully stated [22] on 30 January, four days ahead of the run-off in the Serbian election, that if Nikolic won, his government would take the decisive step [23] on 10 February, and if Tadic won, on 17 February (two days after the president is newly inaugurated [24]). Whenever it comes, the United States is determined to provide the new state with enough support to make it viable.

With the European Union, it is not clear what can be expected. In Brussels there is relief [25] at Tadic's re-election, and willingness to accelerate the process of accession; Tadic's victory will be followed later in February by a concession in the form of a visa and trade agreement with the EU. But the Belgian and Dutch governments have succeeded in keeping to a minimum [26] gestures of dramatic progress in the accession talks (such as the signing of a "stabilisation and association agreement" [SAA] with Belgrade; these states insist that the EU should first use what opportunities remain to ensure Serbia's cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal (ICTY [27]) at The Hague over the arrest and extradition of the wanted Ratko Mladic and Radovan Karadzic.

On Serbian websites over the past week, many people were encouraging others to go out and support Tadic "for Zoran", a reference to the prime minister murdered [27] in March 2003, Zoran Djindjic [28]. Such an appeal might indeed have been enough on this occasion to persuade a critical mass of people that in Serbia, democracy should not be permitted to fail. Is there anything that can persuade [29] them that it should be able to succeed?

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[3] <http://balkaninsight.com/en/main/news/7681/>

[4] <http://www.psupress.org/books/titles/0-271-01957-3.html>

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