

Serbia's elections: less of the same

By Eric Gordy,
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Global media have been portraying the result of the parliamentary elections in Serbia on 21 January 2007 as a victory for the far-right Serbian Radical Party (SRS). The BBC reports that SRS "claimed victory yet failed to gain an absolute majority", while Ian Traynor says in the *Guardian* [1] that SRS "romped to a comfortable victory". *Reuters* [2] led its story by quoting SRS leader Tomislav Nikolic, who claimed: "The Radical Party has won these elections."

All very interesting, and possibly shocking, these are accounts of a huge election backlash in which the SRS sailed to victory - except it wasn't, and they didn't. The Radicals have never formed or taken part in any government on the basis of free and fair elections. They will not now, and they are not any closer than they ever have been. Domestic media were more mixed in their reports. The rightwing daily *Vecernje novosti* [3] reported (correctly) under the headline "SRS gets the largest number of votes", while the populist daily *Blic* reported (also correctly) that "the democratic bloc won."

First, to the result obtained by the SRS [4]: the party will have the largest single group of parliamentary deputies, with eighty-one of the body's 250 seats. That is one seat fewer than it held in the previous parliament. 28.7% of voters chose the SRS, which is not only short of "an absolute" majority but a sure sign that 71.3% of voters chose a different party.

For a party that intended to capitalise on the publicity surrounding their leader Vojislav Seselj's [5] war-crimes trial, on the imminent final-status resolution for Kosovo, and on the economic difficulties of transition, the most that can be said is that the SRS maintained its previous electoral position. A 28.7% result for a far-right party may be disturbing by itself, but it does not represent a threat of restoration of the old regime, a broadening of this party's coalition potential or base of support, or a substantive change in the party's political role.

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Also by Eric Gordy in openDemocracy:

"The Milosevic account [8]" (17 March 2006)

The battle after the war

The parties of the old regime will not have that power over the next government. Since the last elections in December 2003, Kostunica's right-leaning Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS [9]) has declined in support from 17.7% to 16.7%, and from fifty-three to forty-seven seats. The more liberal Democratic Party (DS) led by president Boris Tadic has increased its support from 12.6%

to 22.9%, and from thirty-seven to sixty-five seats. Together, the DS and the DSS control 112 seats of the 125 necessary to form a government.

Coalition offers will be available from the technocratic G17+ party led by finance minister Mladjan Dinkic, which won nineteen seats, and from the parties of the national minorities (the Coalition of Vojvodina Hungarians, the Sandzak List, and two new Roma parties) which together control seven seats. Also newly represented [10] in the parliament, but probably not joining any coalition government, is the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), headed by former student leader Cedomir Jovanovic, which advocates a decidedly pro-European programme.

Negotiations over the formation of a new governing coalition [11] will probably last several weeks, but some parts of the outcome can be anticipated. It will be a majority government, less susceptible to pressure from the political fringes. Either Kostunica will continue as prime minister or his place will be taken by the DS candidate Bozidar Djelic, a well respected liberal economist. Whichever party does not get the prime-ministerial position will be able to put its candidates into the "power ministries". The chief weakness of the government will involve conflict between the DS and the DSS over the pace of reform and the degree to which Serbia is willing to accede to international pressure, especially related to conditions for candidacy [12] to the European Union.

The role of the SRS is meaningfully reduced by these changes. The party will no longer be able to control the work of parliamentary commissions. It will no longer carry a realistic threat of bringing down the government. And assuming that the new government is formed without the LDP, the far right will no longer offer the only strident voice of criticism in the parliamentary chambers. The SRS will continue to be able to use the parliament to generate publicity, and that is about all.

From its formation in 1991 until the end of 2000, SRS existed mostly as a satellite of Slobodan Milosevic's SPS, to be brought into government at moments of intensified aggressiveness and pushed aside at moments of international accommodation. After 2000, the party has functioned as the reserve destination for Milosevic-era loyalists, particularly those who regarded the hesitant and contested efforts at "reform" by the remainder of SPS as representing a betrayal of Milosevic's nationalist programme.

Much of the party's public activity has involved scandal-mongering and personal attacks, along with some attempts to identify the political option they represent with the Jean-Marie Le Pen variety of international rightist anti-globalism. While this type of engagement has maintained the enthusiasm of a populist base, it has given the party a disreputable image, even among people (like Kostunica) whose politics are well to the right of centre but whose social identity is bourgeois. In general this has meant that, however large a political base SRS might start with, this base is unlikely to expand and other parties are unlikely to seek identification with them.

Indeed much of the speculation about the future of SRS in recent years has revolved around the question of whether of the character of the party might change [13], and whether figures like the acting party leader, or the party's highest-ranking elected official, Novi Sad mayor Maja Gojkovic, might lead SRS in a more moderate direction where it may eventually evolve into a plausible coalition partner for some mainstream party. By now the answer is clear: Nikolic has shown himself to be every bit as capable of inflammatory posturing as Seselj, and Gojkovic has been marginalised from the party leadership.

Where is Kosovo?

Much of this year's campaign revolved around economic [14] and social issues, and the leading parties worked under slogans that tended to elide political questions. These ranged from the

vaguely optimistic (DS: "Because life cannot wait") to the populist (DSS: "Long live Serbia!") and the enigmatically apolitical (G17+: "Expertise before politics"). In the background, however, remained questions of national identity and national pride. Kostunica insisted in his speeches, arguing against a non-existent postulate, that "our people do not have to deny themselves to join the community of European peoples."

There was no real competition over the issue of Kosovo: all parties except the LDP argued against accepting independence, and none of them will have much capacity to influence the eventual outcome. The relatively minor attention given to Kosovo in the campaign may result from the electorate's awareness that no party is likely to alter the situation, or may be a sign of the limitations, after long experience, of a purely "national" campaign. The Kosovo Serb politician Oliver Ivanovic, [15] based in the Serb-dominated northern Kosovan town of Mitrovica, already warned before the election that fiery rhetoric would accomplish little, and would not be likely to help in the necessary task of building relations with Albanians in Kosovo.

The new government will undoubtedly be faced immediately [16] with an unpopular decision, when international negotiators emerge with an (imposed) "final status" resolution on the position of Kosovo. Further pressure will come from without when Serbia asks to resume talks on accession to the European Union, which will once again place the issue of those indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY [17]) on the front burner. Both of these issues are sure to intensify tensions between the DS and the DSS, and may feed a nationalist backlash. Early missteps on the part of the government may prove to be dangerous.

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The uses of fear

On the other hand, all of the potential coalition partners in the new government except the DS have a reason to be afraid of new elections - both the DSS and G17+ face declining support. Serbian governments since 2000 have had a tendency to outlive their popular mandates for just this reason, and this one may hang on despite early crises as well. In a rare explosion of folk wisdom, Serbia's post-Milosevic prime minister Zoran Djindjic - murdered in March 2003 [24] - offered some advice on responding to irresistible pressure: "If you have to swallow a frog, don't look at it a lot, but swallow it right away. If you have to swallow several frogs, swallow the biggest one first."

If the incoming government is able to survive early difficulties and deliver to the voters, it may prove to be less unstable and short-lived than many analysts are predicting. If not, it could provide a genuine opening for the return of the far right to power.

The dilemma which the incoming government will face perhaps explains why the SRS, which is large but stagnant, continues to receive publicity that magnifies its importance. The party's continued popular support, while never rising above 30%, serves the purpose of international critics who want to show that Serbia has not changed since 2000. Its inflammatory rhetoric is useful to domestic liberals who want evidence of what they are up against. And its parliamentary position, more impressive to the casual observer than it is to a participant, is useful to every government that wants to show international actors what might be produced by excessive demands. The SRS is not, and probably never will be, in a position to control more than it does. But the thought that it might be is useful to a lot of people.

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[6] <http://www.clarku.edu/academiccatalog/facultybio.cfm?id=367> target=_blank

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[8] http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-yugoslavia/milosevic_account_3363.jsp

[9] http://www.dss.org.yu/index.php?change_lang=en

[10] <http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics->

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[11] <http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2007/01/23/europe/EU-POL-Serbia-Election.php>

[12] http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/serbia/eu_serbia_and_montenegro_relations_en.htm

[13] <http://www.birn.eu.com/en/66/10/2106/>

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[17] <http://www.un.org/icty/>

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[23] http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-yugoslavia/warcrimes_2633.jsp

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