



INSTITUTE FOR REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

The Serbian election saga and the implications for its EU path

Stefan Ralchev

21 May 2012

Tomislav Nikolić of the opposition Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has won the runoff presidential elections in Serbia held on 20 May and will be the country's next president. He beat the incumbent Boris Tadić of the Democratic Party (DS) with 49.8% to 47%, according to preliminary estimates made by pollster CeSID. The election results have several implications.

First, it became clear that the majority of Serbian citizens are not satisfied with the DS record at the helm of all state institutions over the last decade or so. Despite DS's crucial role in setting a new democratic and pro-European Union agenda for Serbia and in improving the country's relations with its Balkan neighbours, the party (personified by its charismatic leader Tadić) seems to have failed to persuade the people about the correctness of its economic policies amidst the crisis and has started to show some arrogance given its grip on most levels of power. The two big investments made by Fiat and Benetton in new plants during DS's term were not a sufficient motivator, at the background of rising unemployment and social stress. Tadić and his colleagues also underestimated the need to be more active and engaged with the voters ahead of this runoff, with turnout as low as 45-46% and mostly Tadić supporters failing to go to the polls.

Second, it appears that current alliances at the top of Serbian political life are not reflected in the preferences of the voting public. The alliance agreement between the DS-led coalition and the one led by the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) – that is, the revalidation of the partnership existing so far – which was signed surprisingly fast after the general election on 6 May, did not drive SPS voters to automatically vote for Tadić. In fact, there is a good reason to believe that they supported his opponent and 'former' nationalist Nikolić, given the history of the SPS as the party of Slobodan Milošević and the destructive nationalist policies it conducted in the 1990s.

Third, in terms of foreign policy expectations, Nikolić made clear he will stick to Serbia's EU path, and this is well understood by all European and Western partners of Serbia (maybe the congratulation letter sent by mistake by the EU to Nikolić three hours before the polls closed was not accidental but foreboding?). Nikolić also stated, after the results came in, that Serbia's main ally in the EU will be Germany, a sign that he is willing to work with the strictest and harshest of all EU leaders, Angela Merkel. On the flip side, Nikolić keeps repeating the DS mantra that Serbia's goal is

not only EU membership but also preserving of Kosovo, i.e., unsurprisingly, he endorses strongly the controversial foreign policy dualism adopted by the DS-dominated Serbian leadership over the last decade. This dualism will become untenable at one point, and it will be the ex-Radical Nikolić as Serbian president who will have to take the burden of it. Nikolić also said his first foreign visit will be to Russia. Regionally, things may not be so smooth, at least initially, either. Tadić established a truly friendly and fruitful personal partnership with Croatian president Ivo Josipović, reflecting in the immensely improved relations between two countries formerly at war on issues from economic cooperation to war crimes to European integration; he also had the trust of Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik (who supported him at pre-election rallies) and acted as a restraining factor to Dodik's frequent nationalist outbursts in Bosnia. Nikolić, on the other hand, said right after the results were announced that Croatia and Serbia don't have to be brothers but cooperation will continue, quite a cool statement indeed. He, however, said he would work for improvement of relations with Montenegro and will cooperate with both the government and the opposition there. And relations with Republika Srpska and Bosnia as a whole are not expected to suffer either, whoever the president of Serbia is.

Fourth, domestically, Nikolić made a real democratic and responsible move by quitting as leader of the SNS now that he will be the next president. This ambiguity with the powers of the president and his relations with the other institutions in a parliamentary democracy such as Serbia has been confusing during Tadić. He was pulling the strings both in parliament and the cabinet via his powers along the party line, thus making Serbia something like a *de facto* presidential republic. Now that Nikolić explicitly stated he resigns from his party functions and will be a president of all Serbian citizens, the normal balance of power among Serbian institutions may be restored.

And **fifth**, the process of government formation and the urgent economic policies that need to be conducted now may be complicated by Nikolić's win. Both the DS and SPS leaders confirmed that their post-6 May coalition agreement stands (though SPS's Ivica Dačić admitted the situation was becoming more complicated now). Yet Nikolić keeps making bold statements that his deputy in the SNS Jorgovanka Tabaković will be the next prime minister. The SNS (73 mandates in a 250-seat assembly) needs the support of SPS (44) and at least one more formation to strike a majority of 126 seats: agreeable partners may be the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS), led by former prime minister and anti-EU Vojislav Koštunica who supported Nikolić at the runoff, or some national minority parties. On the other hand, a DS-led government is somewhat more likely, given the already signed DS-SPS agreement and the stated support for the DS from smaller pro-EU parties such as the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and parties based in the northern province of Vojvodina. Boris Tadić, however, has said he will not be the next prime minister and will not participate in the so-called 'cohabitation' when president and prime minister have to rule together but come from different parties.

Yet the most important conclusion from the runoff presidential vote and the entire election saga in Serbia this month is that Serbia's EU path will not be compromised and the country is irreversibly on the path to normalisation and democratisation. The Kosovo recognition moment will inevitably come to the agenda some time in the not-too-distant future, but until then Serbia may be preoccupied with completely different issues, such as whether to join the eurozone, for example. And having greater access to power may prove the best recipe for the true reformation of a party like the SNS.