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Koštica has chances to remain prime-minister of Serbia

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Koštunica has chances to remain prime-minister of Serbia



Source: Centre for Free Elections and Democracy, Belgrade

Although his Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) suffered losses at the parliamentary elections on 21 January 2007, incumbent Prime Minister Vojislav Koštunica has some chances of remaining at the helm of Serbia's government.

The most probable coalition for a future government would include DSS, Serbia's president Boris Tadić's Democratic Party (DS) and the liberal G17 party of acting finance minister Mlađan Dinkić. Although DS with 65 mandates is the strongest of the three potential partners, Koštunica could claim that his DSS and G17, which were allied in the government since 2004, have together (47+19) one mandate more (66) and therefore should fill the premier's slot. Tadić is not likely to gather enough mandates for an alternative coalition, so that he would have difficulties to cope with such demands. Much would depend on Dinkić's preferences and he indeed nourishes a strong animosity to his former close friend and the DS candidate for prime minister, Božidar Đelić. It is hard to imagine that Dinkić would agree to serve in a cabinet led by his personal adversary.

If Tadić decides to resist Koštunica's ambitions to stay at the head of the government, then the highly negative prospect of new elections in late May is looming. Serbia's constitution gives the political parties three months to form a new government before a new vote has to be called.

The third possibility is that Koštunica's offers to Tadić to tolerate a minority government led by the DS. There are some advantages for Koštunica if he opts for

this: the crucial phase of the process to determine Kosovo's future status will most probably start on 2 February, when UN envoy Martti Ahtisaari is due to present his proposals. There are little chances that Ahtisaari's plans will please Serbia, so that any government that has to deal with this most complicated issue will unavoidably fare bad in the public's eye. Koštunica might decide to let Tadić handle the "hot potato" and then, once the Kosovo issue is brought to some kind of resolution, withdrew the support for the minority government and enforce early elections.

Alternatively, Tadić might consider it appropriate to let Koštunica burn his fingers with Kosovo and therefore refrain from preventing the incumbent premier from retaining his seat.

Whatever the outcome of the coalition talks, the voters in Serbia have shown a clear preference for the pro-EU parties, although the strongest single force in the parliament will remain the ultra-nationalist Serbian Radical Party (SRS) with 81 seats. Yet, this party has categorically excluded the possibility of entering a coalition with any of the democratic groups. Instead, SRS leader Tomislav Nikolić has said that his party will take over the government "after the next elections".

Out of some four Million votes cast, SRS gained close to 1.15 Million, some 100.000 more than in 2003. The other party in the "Milošević" camp (those supporting the previous regime of Serbia's strongman 1987-2000), the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) won 245.000 votes, some 50.000 less than the previous time. In other words, close to 2.5 Million citizens of Serbia showed a preference for democratic and pro-EU parties.

Authoritarian and populist political powers in Serbia, embodied now chiefly by the SRS, still fare strongly mostly because of the dissatisfaction of many economic "losers" in the transition process in Serbia – those industrial workers and other segments of the population who have lost their previously protected jobs and those whose education is not sufficient any longer for a changed labour market. The SRS can also count on many votes from the several hundred thousand refugees from Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. The prospects of the Western powers supporting the Kosovo Albanians' drive for independence also work for the SRS.

Tadić's DS more than doubled its score receiving 920.000 votes which is the most remarkable improvement by any political group in these elections. The "dissident" group from this party, the coalition around Čedomir Jovanović (his LDP is the only party favouring the secession of Kosovo) booked over 200.000 votes.

Koštunica's DSS and his allies received 680.000 votes which is almost the same figure as 2003. Dinkić's G17 lost considerably in strength – it had previously the support of 423.000 voters, and now only 275.000.

Around ten seats went to parties of the ethnic minorities – Hungarians, Romas, Moslems and also, perhaps, Albanian from South Serbia. The electoral law exempts these parties from the five percent threshold. Instead they had to win 14-16.000 votes for one parliamentary seat depending on situation in their electoral county.

Foreign minister Vuk Drašković, a veteran of the struggle against Milošević and one of the most versatile politicians on Serbia's political scene, failed to pass with his monarchist Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO) the five percent threshold – it gained

around 3%. He was the most stout pro-EU voice in the country in the past several years but his credibility vanished with time because of the many u-turns in his political orientation.

One of the most important positive features of this ballot was the strong turnout – close to 61 percent. Indeed, as the voter's lists in Serbia are not in the best shape and also include some one million people who either permanently live abroad or are, for some other reason, not in the position to vote, this turnout was very high by any standards. Yet, according to reliable polls, about half a million citizens of Serbia were not at all aware of the elections happening which indicates that there is a big marginalized segment of the society (elderly people living in remote villages, impoverished Roma and others).

Serbia's voters proved with the strong turnout that they care about their democracy. They also showed a strong pro-EU affinity. Another positive feature was the participation of the ethnic minorities that will provide for a representation of the country's ethnic diversity in the parliament and enable the representatives of the minorities a direct leverage in the law-making process.

In spite of the ultra-nationalists' strong results, this outcome has also strengthened Serbia's international standing. The West cannot ignore the clear democratic majority in Serbia and will be obliged to extend more support should a coalition of pro-democratic parties in Belgrade become reality soon. The EU presidency and the EU commission as well as the NATO have already sent signals to Belgrade that they are interested in forging closer ties with Serbia. In particular, as stated by the German EU Presidency, the EU would like to avoid a situation in which the search for a Kosovo settlement could harm the democratic process in Serbia.

It remains to be seen if this warming up to Belgrade will also include less strict conditions for the prolongation of the EU Stabilisation and Association Agreement negotiations. They were interrupted last year because Koštunica's government failed to co-operate on the arrest of the Bosnian Serb war crime suspect general Ratko Mladić who had been hiding for a long time in Serbia. Through the initial reactions of the EU and the U.S. and EU ambassadors in Belgrade, the West made it clear that it expects Tadić, Koštunica and the other chief political leaders to show responsibility and form swiftly a new government.

The prospects for an imposed solution on Kosovo have to a certain extent diminished after this outcome in Serbia. It appears more likely that talks between the UN and the involved sides will be prolonged and that the West might press stronger than before on Pristina for concessions. This is also clear to the Kosovo Albanian leadership which is concerned that the U.S. support for their cause could be limited in future because of the unwillingness by Washington to confront Moscow on this issue. Russian President Vladimir Putin reiterated during his talks on Sunday with German Chancellor Angela Merkel that Moscow is not giving up on its demand that the Kosovo solution must respect the international law, avoid setting precedents for other unresolved ethnopolitical conflicts and must be acceptable to both Serbs and Albanians.