

Serbia's Parliamentary Election May 11

And the Real Winner is . . . Koštunica, Again!

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Serbia's new prime minister could be again the old one: Vojislav Koštunica. A week ahead of the early parliamentary election on May 11, pollsters predict that none of the two big political blocs in Serbia will emerge from the elections strong enough to form a government single-handedly. The post-election negotiation about a new government could turn out to be long-lasting, chaotic and inconclusive. Koštunica will again occupy a decisive position, although he can garner only a fraction of the votes of each of the two big blocs. A new ruling coalition will most probably have to include his party in order to achieve the necessary parliamentary majority. Moreover, he could again demand for himself the position of the prime minister.

Koštunica has avoided pledging himself up to now. His national-conservative Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) could opt to look again for common ground with President Boris Tadić's centrist Democratic Party (DS). Together with several smaller groups, these two parties shared power in the government that collapsed in March after less than a year. However, a new *rapprochement* between the former coalition partners could prove difficult after having traded so many accusations and insults during the election campaign. Also, it is hard to envisage how they could agree on the issue of Serbia's future relationship to the European Union, which is presently angrily disputed between them. Koštunica accused Tadić of treason because the president approved the signing of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) between the EU and Serbia on April

29 (the first contractual step to eventual membership) and promised to annul the agreement once the new parliament meets.

Koštunica's preferred choice appears to be Tomislav Nikolić's national-populist Serbian Radical Party (SRS)—the party that was up to now "off limits" for democrats in Serbia because of its extremist nationalist ideology and long track-record of anti-democratic behaviour and warmongering. Its titular leader, Vojislav Šešelj, is right now on trial in the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague.

Milošević's Party Could Block the Return of the Milošević Regime

Yet, both Nikolić and Tadić will most probably have to look for further support

even if they manage to draw Koštunica to their respective sides. Additional political partners could prove indispensable in order to reach the absolute majority of 126 seats in the parliament or at least to secure support for a minority government. This enables smaller parties considerable leverage to influence the shape of the future government and its policies.

According to a representative survey with 2732 respondents carried out 14 – 20 April 2008 by the Centre for Free Elections and Democracy (CESID) in Belgrade, the distribution of the votes will be as follows:

Table
Expected Turnout at Serbia's Parliamentary Election on May 11

<i>Parties</i>	<i>Number of expected voters</i>
SRS (Nikolić)	1 480 000
DS (For a European Serbia) (Tadić)	1 370 000
DSS (Koštunica)	510 000
LDP (Jovanović)	330 000
SPS (Dačić)	290 000
Parties of the ethnic minorities	150 000
Other parties	110 000
Expected turnout	4 300 000 – 4 800 000
Turnout at the second round of Presidential elections 3 February 2008	4 580 428

Serbia's electorate consists nominally of 6.7 million voters. However, the true number is estimated to be around 5.5 million.

The Serbian Radical party has invited Koštunica's DSS and the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), the party of the late Serbian authoritarian ruler Slobodan Milošević, to form a coalition. Consisting of "patriots" and "honest" people, its goal would be to "clean up" Serbia from corruption and crime and, above all, continue the fight against the secession of Kosovo. In the eyes of most Serbs and external observers, the

emergence of a SRS-DSS-SPS alliance would be interpreted as the rebirth of the regime that was ousted eight years ago. On 5 October 2000 street protests and rallies throughout Serbia forced Milošević to concede defeat against Koštunica in presidential elections.

Currently, two paradoxes are emerging. The first one is that Koštunica's potential alliance with the Socialists and the Radicals would mean that the very man who defeated Milošević is now enabling the ancient regime to reappear. The other paradox is that Milošević's own party, the SPS, could prevent this. The SPS and its 42-year-old leader, Ivica Dačić, once hand-picked by Milošević, have reasons to prefer an alliance with the centre-left political bloc, which is President Boris Tadić's five-party coalition "For a European Serbia". Tadić's DS has already signalled that it would not reject an offer by the SPS, either to enter a multi-party cabinet or to provide support to it should the DS lead a minority government.

The SPS has reasons to assume that, as part of the right-wing coalition under Koštunica and Nikolić, it would have much less political influence than if the party was allied with Tadić. The SPS has attempted to shed whatever overtly connects them with the legacy of Milošević. Its ambition is to become a full-fledged political actor capable of entering coalitions on both sides of the political spectrum. They also yearn to become accepted by international partners. With Koštunica and the SRS, they would be seen as belonging to the compromised remnants of the past. With Tadić, the SPS stands the chance to establish itself in the political mainstream.

Yet, to reach the absolute parliamentary majority, Tadić needs broader support. It would most probably come from the ethnic Hungarians in the northern province of Vojvodina and a segment of the ethnic Moslems in the southern region of Sandžak. Nonetheless, without a new deal with Koštunica, Tadić's DS would have to ask the Liberal-Democratic Party (LDP)—a split-off from the DS—at least to tolerate a DS-led

minority government. The LDP, just like the SPS, has posted a political price tag. It could prove most difficult for Tadić's DS to balance all the demands from the small partners.

Should the DS in the end manage to forge a government coalition, Tadić's probable choice for premier would be the present finance minister, Mirko Cvetković, a little-known administrator. In this case, the president's political role both in international and domestic affairs would increase. Serbia's constitution grants a stronger position for the premier than for the president. With a weak political figure heading the government, the well-established chief of state would automatically gain in stature and power.

However, over Tadić looms the more probable prospect of an acrimonious and discordant cohabitation. Should the old instincts prevail in the SPS and it eventually succumbs to a coalition with the SRS and Koštunica, Tadić would be confronted with a strong government that would pursue a political agenda opposed to all that the president stands for. The chief bone of contention would remain the issue of how Serbia should define its future relationship with the European Union after a majority of its members recognised the secession of Serbia's Albanian-dominated southern province of Kosovo. This question turned out to be the most divisive topic of the ongoing pre-election campaign.

Serbia still favouring the EU over Russia

Koštunica and the populists argue that the signing of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU is tantamount to an implicit acceptance of Kosovo's independence. They insist that Serbia can continue its approach to EU membership only if the EU refrains from treating Kosovo as a sovereign state. At the same time, they want Serbia to pursue the closest possible alliance with Russia. Public opinion in Serbia still prefers EU membership, yet the camp of supporters of an exclusive alliance with

Moscow is also strong, as confirmed in a recent opinion poll by the Belgrade pollster *Politikum*:

“Do you favour joining the EU?”

	Yes (%)	No (%)	No opinion
October 2007	71.55	21.26	7.20
December 2007	66.96	25.79	7.25
February 2008	67.23	22.81	9.97
April 2008	63.89	22.44	13.67

“Should Serbia's closest ties be with Russia?”

	Yes (%)	No (%)	No opinion
October 2007	59.31	25.38	15.31
December 2007	57.35	26.27	16.39
February 2008	60.30	24.42	15.28
April 2008	58.81	24.39	16.79

An overwhelming number of respondents also refuse a trade-off involving Serbia's faster accession to the EU in exchange for accepting the secession of Kosovo:

“If recognizing the independence of K-M were a condition for faster accession to the EU, do you think that condition could be accepted?”

	Yes (%)	No (%)	No opinion
October 2007	18.11	70.21	11.68
December 2007	14.82	75.17	10.01
February 2008	15.76	73.92	10.33
April 2008	18.23	71.31	10.46

CESID's data complement this incongruous picture. Almost a third of the population does not identify a country that should serve as the best example for Serbia (27%). Russia is named by 17 per cent of the respondents as the role model, as is Western Europe (17%), closely followed by Scandinavian (16%) and neutral countries (16%). The United States, China and Eastern Europe are not perceived favourably—only 3 per cent of the public sees them as models for Serbia. Evidently, a majority still has a positive picture of the West, yet the favourable attitude is eroded by the lasting anger from

the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 and the frustration over the pro-Albanian attitudes of most Western governments in the Kosovo issue.

Serbia and EU in a Blind Alley

In addition, Tadić and the pro-European camp in Serbia have not experienced some of the recent external attempts to support them as helpful. By discussing openly possible “bribes” for Serbia in exchange for accepting Kosovo’s secession (for instance, in the form of visa liberalisation) and indifferently calling on the Serbs to “forget about the past” and “turn to the future”, some key EU and Western figures irritated a significant part of the Serbian public. This worked for Koštunica and Nikolić, who maintain that the EU, under US hegemony, is without principles, pro-Albanian and anti-Serb.

Furthermore, doubts about the EU have grown significantly because of the drawn-out, intra-EU disputes on the subject of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with Belgrade. The European Commission’s ambition to sign the treaty with Belgrade as an encouragement to the pro-EU forces was blocked because the Netherlands and Belgium insisted that Belgrade has first to extradite all fugitive accused war criminals. The news media in Serbia pointedly reminded the audience that only a short time ago, under similar circumstances, Croatia had been subject to less strict conditionality. Ultimately, the EU states agreed among themselves to sign the SAA, but to implement its most important parts only after the European Council decides that Serbia should co-operate fully with the ICTY. In effect, the SAA has been suspended for the moment and it remains open as to when and how it could be implemented. This point has not been missed by the voters in Serbia.

Koštunica and Nikolić complement their anti-EU attitude by contrasting Russia as being the only ally of Serbia, although Moscow advocates Serbia’s membership in

the EU. Indeed, Moscow is fully supporting Belgrade’s arguments in relation to Kosovo in the United Nations and vis-à-vis the West. Moreover, Russia has recently offered economic incentives through the envisaged construction of a segment of the South Stream gas pipeline through Serbia. Moscow is visibly increasing its efforts to increase investments and establish strategic economic ties with most countries in south-east Europe, particularly in Serbia.

The chances for Russia and Serbia coming closer look at the moment more realistic than a further improvement in EU-Serbian relations: Even if the SAA is eventually ratified by the parliaments of the EU countries, it remains uncertain how Brussels and Belgrade can continue interlocking institutionally after the majority of the EU member countries have recognised Kosovo as a sovereign state. No government in Belgrade can sign any international treaty that could be interpreted to mean that Serbia is giving up its legal claim on Kosovo—and no government or parliament of a country that has recognised Priština can sign a new treaty with Serbia that could be understood to contain a legal claim by Belgrade on Kosovo. Therefore, even if Tadić and the pro-European parties manage after the forthcoming elections to avoid ceding power to the Serbian Radical Party, the relationship with the majority of Western countries and the EU will remain under heavy strain because of the Kosovo issue.

The Next Critical Moment

In the case of the SRS taking over control in Belgrade, Serbia’s dealings with the EU and altogether with the West will swiftly turn antagonistic just like in the Milošević era. Accordingly, regional stability and security will also be negatively affected, particularly in Republika Srpska in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where the SRS traditionally has enjoyed considerable support.

Yet, the worse repercussions would be in Serbia itself: As the SRS and its allies stand

little chance to achieve any gains in the confrontation with the West about Kosovo, their anger and aggression will before long turn against “domestic traitors”, that is, the pro-EU groups in Serbia. In a politically deeply divided country with unconsolidated juridical and security institutions, there is ample space for hostility and confrontations. If Koštunica establishes a ruling coalition with the SRS, Serbia’s democrats and their partners in the West can hope that he acts as a moderating influence, thereby preventing the extremists from capturing the state and inflaming the region again.

The next critical moment for the region is approaching in June, when the EU plans to discuss whether to lift the suspension of the SAA with Serbia. A positive decision looks improbable because the present fractured caretaker government in Belgrade does not appear capable of improving cooperation with the ICTY. It would be a surprise if by that time a new governing coalition has emerged in Belgrade. Therefore, little progress between the EU and Serbia can be expected.

Yet, the Kosovo crisis will enter a new phase: The new Constitution of Kosovo is expected to be in place by June 15. At the same time, the UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) seems to be preparing for winding down most of its operation as the new EU law and order mission (EULEX) reaches its full capacity. The Serbian majority in the north of Kosovo around the city of Mitrovica insists that no act is of legal relevance following the unilateral declaration of independence by the Albanian-dominated parliament in Priština and that EULEX is also illegal because it lacks approval by the UN Security Council. Yet, Priština is determined to establish control over all of Kosovo. Should the EULEX mission and the EU be seen as supporting moves by Priština to coerce the Serbs in Kosovo to submission under its rule, the precarious relationship between Brussels and Belgrade could collapse into hostility. Therefore, the EU has to concentrate now

on finding ways to work together with Belgrade and Priština, the UN, the US and Russia to avoid a new breakout of violence and to begin a dialogue between the confronting sides in Kosovo.

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