



Serbia's May 2008 Elections *A Pre-election View from Belgrade*

Serbia's citizens go to the polls this Sunday, May 11, to select a new parliament, new local councils, and Vojvodina's parliamentary assembly. These elections come on the heels of presidential elections in January, won by incumbent Boris Tadic, and in the wake of Kosovo's declared independence in February. The May 11 election outcomes will have much to say about Serbia's future political direction and its democracy prospects. NDI/Serbia staff preview Sunday's all-important vote.

Kosovo's independence declaration created more polarization in an already divided political scene in Serbia, splitting apart a shaky governing coalition of Boris Tadic's Democratic Party (DS) and Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica's Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS). Kosovo's independence and Serbia's prospects for European Union (EU) integration have framed the pre-election debate since the government collapse in March. The parliamentary vote comes a mere 15 months after the last assembly elections and will be held concurrently with previously scheduled elections for municipal councils and the Vojvodina assembly.

Having won the presidency pledging to lead Serbia to Europe, President Tadic had little alternative in the wake of Kosovo's declaration but to maintain a strong pro-EU stance--despite Brussels' deployment of its EU Rule of Law Mission to Kosovo in support of the new state. Tadic has argued that Serbia can regain Kosovo inside the EU rather than outside of it. And he has said that Serbia's economic development is predicated on integration into Europe. To the contrary, the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), the Democratic Party of Serbia/New Serbia, and the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) insist that Belgrade should engage the EU only when Brussels accepts Kosovo as an inalienable part of Serbia.

If pro-Europe parties prevail in the elections, Serbia's pro-Europe agenda will be sustained but hampered by a strong opposition. If the nationalist forces win on May 11, Serbia's advancement toward the EU may be thwarted in favor of a Kosovo-first policy and suspension of cooperation with the International Criminal Court for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY). There is also concern that Serbia's democracy agenda -- protecting independent media, promoting civil society, building political structures inclusive of ethnic minorities, and creating linkages between governing bodies and the electorate on policy reform -- may take a back seat to nationalist issues. Ultimately, the voters of Serbia will decide which course the country will take.

Latest Public Opinion

Voters are not showing their cards in advance of Sunday's vote. With three days to go before the polls open, the parliamentary election is too close to predict. Surveys conducted in the last two weeks by the Center for Free Elections and Democracy (CeSID) show the Serbian Radical Party with a narrow lead over the Democratic Party and its allies. A poll released by Strategic Marketing on May 5th showed the SRS with 33.2 percent support and the DS coalition with 31.5 percent. The difference between the SRS and the DS in both surveys falls within the margins of error. The DSS-New Serbia coalition is third with 13.8 percent. Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the SPS-led coalition both stand at 7.5 percent. Ethnic minority and regional tickets collectively have roughly 4.5 percent of likely voters.

Both surveys predict high turnout, at or just below the level of participation in the second round of the recent presidential election, which stood at 67 percent. Jobs and the economy are top voter concerns; Kosovo's independence has receded as a leading issue.

An unclear outcome could lead to protracted negotiations around the formation of a new government — much as happened last year, when parties took nearly three months to form the government.

Democratic Party Coalition *Boris Tadic -- For A European Serbia*

The DS-led coalition, which includes G17 Plus, the Sandzak Democratic Party, Serbian Renewal Movement and League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina, has focused its campaign on the benefits of EU membership and protecting Serbia's sovereignty, asserting that the most effective way to regain Kosovo is by working as an EU member from the inside with the nine member states that have not recognized Kosovo to date.



A Democratic Party poster goes up in Belgrade. The party seeks to capitalize on President Tadic's popularity.

The DS coalition has struggled to make its case for EU integration in concrete terms. Until last week it struggled to answer the question — “*How will I benefit?*” — being asked by many voters and, consequently, had trouble driving the campaign agenda, spending the first month playing defense on Kosovo and accusations of corruption.

That changed on April 29th when, on behalf of the Serbian government, Deputy Prime Minister Bozidar Djelic signed a Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with European Union officials in Luxembourg. Djelic and Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic declared Serbia's EU path to be “irreversible.” The signing of the SAA sends a powerful message that Serbia is welcomed in Europe and opens possibilities for accelerated assistance that positions Serbia to

become an official candidate for EU membership. (Croatia and Macedonia are presently the two countries in the western Balkans region to enjoy such a status.)

Whether or not the SAA bolsters the DS bloc depends entirely on how it frames the debate and how democratic parties explain what the benefits of EU integration are. To that end EU diplomats are working to announce a visa liberalization policy. It helps that Italian automaker Fiat this week announced a 70 percent stake in the Zastava auto plant in Kragujevac—a major employment prospect in central Serbia, Securing the SAA was crucial to the DS coalition shifting the campaign away from Kosovo and onto Europe. A vast majority of Serbs is in favor of joining the EU, although their enthusiasm wanes when presented with the choice of either securing EU membership or keeping Kosovo.

The coalition promises an impressive ground game on Election Day, having developed a comprehensive Get-Out-The-Vote operation in 48 regional centers around Serbia. DS and its partners have trained 5,000 candidates and activists in voter outreach.

Liberal Democratic Party “Spread It Around/Širi Dalje”

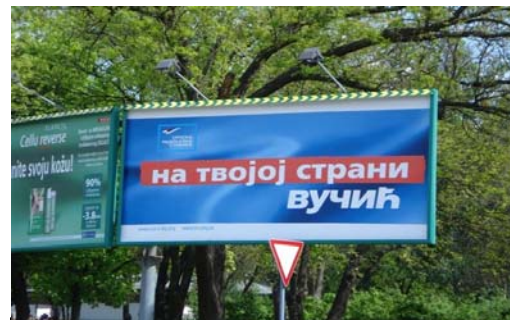
The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), led by former senior DS official and protégé of Zoran Djindjic, Cedomir Jovanovic, has also conducted an effective campaign. LDP is disciplined on message and direct voter contact and has seen its support climb since the first round of the presidential election when Jovanovic claimed 5 percent of the vote. The most recent polls show LDP at 7.5 percent, which is supported anecdotally by such voter comments as: *“I don’t agree with them but at least I know where they stand.”* The LDP accepts Kosovo’s independence and is ready to pursue European integration without it.

LDP has echoed the pro-Europe message. Despite a decidedly chilly relationship between Tadic, Jovanovic and their parties, Jovanovic has nevertheless pledged his support to Tadic in his efforts to secure Serbia’s future as a member of the EU. The LDP leader says that he is ready to join the DS in government as long as neither DSS nor the SPS is a member, and if DS and LDP can find their way to a joint position on Kosovo. LDP support is seen as critical to forming a pro-Europe government after May 11th.

LDP too has created an effective national get-out-the-vote (GOTV) operation and trained hundreds of activists and candidates who will be working to turn out voters in all regions of Serbia.

Serbian Radical Party (SRS) and Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS)

A late April headline highlighted the fusion of Radical and Kostunica campaign strategies in declaring: *“Radicals and Kostunica: Closer Than Ever.”* Tomislav Nikolic (SRS), Vojislav Kostunica (DSS) and Velimir Ilic of the smaller New Serbia party have kept Kosovo the central



“On Your Side.” The Radicals’ announced choice to lead Belgrade, Aleksandar Vucic, seeks to identify with the city’s voters.

campaign issue by coordinating their statements and strategies and making it clear that they will work together after the votes are cast. However, they have offered few details on how they would cooperate and have stopped short of stating they will form a government so they can maximize their vote.



The SRS and DSS-New Serbia have opposed the SAA, claiming that signing it is tantamount to recognizing Kosovo as an independent country. Their strategy is to emphasize that Serbia will present itself to the EU on its own terms and on the basis of full recognition of Serbia's territorial integrity. Their recent attacks on President

Tadic in the wake of the SAA signing suggest their alarm at the momentum the agreement could bring the DS coalition in the final week of the campaign. A DSS spokesperson declared the SAA illegitimate, noting that the DS coalition was “putting the seal of Judas on the Solana Agreement,” a reference to Javier Solana, the EU's foreign minister.

The Radicals have also opened another front in championing labor rights, accusing the outgoing government of corruption, and raising poverty and crime issues. This resonates with many voters who support a pro-Europe agenda but are disappointed with the government performance of pro-Europe parties.

The Socialist Party of Serbia (Stand Up, Serbia/*Ustani Srbijo*)

The latest polls are consistent in their predictions that the DS may need, in addition to LDP, a partner from the nationalist bloc to form a government. As the animosity between DS and DSS intensifies, it is very unlikely that those two parties can paper over their differences and form a coalition again. That leaves the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), whose leader, Ivica Dacic, has publicly stated that he will not enter into a DS-led government. He may be persuaded to change his mind, but if he does that may jeopardize LDP's participation.

Minority Parties

One month before the election, the Constitutional Court reversed a 2006 decision by the Republican Election Commission that allowed ethnic minority parties to register for parliamentary elections with 3,000 signatures, rather than the 10,000 normally required. Party leaders and activists representing Albanian, Bosniak, and Roma communities sprinted through the unexpected task of collecting three times as many signatures in fewer than three weeks—aided by the LDP, the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians and Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR) that organized in the Sandzak, Presevo Valley, and in Belgrade, Kragujevac, Nis, and Novi Sad.

While consternating in its timing, the ruling worked to the parties' advantage as it forced them to organize much faster, and encouraged them to form coalitions rather than running

separate slates. In south Serbia, the Coalition of Albanians of Presevo Valley, led by Riza Halimi and consisting of three parties, was formed last week after its members understood that they would not collect 10,000 signatures separately by the deadline.

Municipal Elections

Despite a recent law overturning the direct election of mayors, parties have announced their mayoral selections and are running campaigns as if they will be directly elected. Local Radical campaigns are well-organized and centered on local issues. DSS is also running positive campaigns at the local level. Polling shows the Radicals to be running even with the Democratic Party in Belgrade. The outcome in Serbia's second largest city, Novi Sad, will be worth watching. Former Radical leader and popular incumbent Maja Gojkovic is running as an independent, focusing on local issues. There are no indications which option she will join, if any, after the elections.

Civil Society

The campaign has been increasingly heated and not only in rhetoric. Nationalist parties at one point pledged to put President Tadic on trial for the SAA agreement. Nationalist groups have physically assaulted pro-Europe civic activists as well as independent journalists, branding them "traitors" and threatening to prosecute them. One Radical official has called for a fight against media and NGOs that espouse a pro-Europe agenda, suggesting a need to foster "patriotic and national spirit" in the young generation. Undaunted, civic groups are organizing to turn out the vote, particularly among young voters. Among the many efforts:



"We are important" says a NGO poster targeting Serbia's young voters. Many civic groups are posting video clips on YouTube and other Internet sites. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B5e8jik>

- YIHR is sending around a campaign caravan, interviewing people about what's motivating them to vote and posting the clips on YouTube;
- The Center for Development of Parliamentary Debate has staged three public debates among young parliamentary and local election candidates from all major parties;
- The Zajecar Initiative in eastern Serbia has gathered young people from small towns in 'Saturday Night Fever' events to popularize the elections, and has produced a TV ad calling on youth to decide Serbia's future: <http://www.youtube.com/zainicijativa>;
- Environmental Ambassadors are targeting consumers in public markets to discuss the public health and other benefits of environmentally friendly policies; and

- The Center for Free Elections and Democracy (CeSID) is mounting a large, nonpartisan GOTV effort and will deploy 500 mobile observation teams on Election Day. CeSID Election-Day reporting can be found at www.cesid.org.