

BULLETIN

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Serbia Before the Second Round of Presidential Elections and the Establishment of a New Government

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The results of the parliamentary election in Serbia on 6 May will not fundamentally change the political scene in the country, nor the pro-Western course of its government. However, the outcome of the second round of the presidential election, scheduled for 20 May, may influence talks with the European Union and dialogue with Kosovo. Regardless of the result of the election, the EU should continue its efforts to start accession negotiations with Serbia.

The Parliamentary Elections and a Likely Coalition Government. The right-wing Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), the largest opposition party, won the Serbian parliamentary election, obtaining 24% of the vote. The main party of the ruling coalition—the centrist Democratic Party (DS)—won 22% of the vote. By contrast, 14.5% of the electorate voted for the other coalition partner—the left-wing Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS). The Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS), the only Euro-sceptic force in parliament, with 7% of public support, will also be represented in the National Assembly, which consists of 250 MPs. Moreover, the electoral threshold of 5% was exceeded by two smaller groups of liberals. All these parties co-created the previous parliament. Nevertheless, the extreme nationalist Serbian Radical Party did not win a place on the assembly. The new parliament will be completed by ten members of the minority parties, with the Hungarian groups accounting for half of these, alongside others such as the Bosnian and Albanian parties (the electoral threshold for these parties is 0.4%). The turnout was nearly 58%, and the election was considered democratic by international observers.

Despite the electoral victory of the right-wing SNS, the party is likely to remain in opposition. With such support it will not be able to build a majority coalition, as only the Euro-sceptic DSS could be its partner, a coalition which would guarantee only a third of the seats in parliament. Meanwhile, the leftist SPS, with a broad coalition capacity and which was also crucial in the formation of the previous government, announced its readiness to continue cooperation in the government with DS. The coalition will probably be filled by national minority parties, which was also the case in the previous coalition government.

By doubling the number of socialist party seats (currently 44), the position of SPS in a future coalition with the DS (67 seats) will be stronger than in the previous government. Therefore, it is likely that this group will push for its candidate to become prime minister during negotiations over the government's composition. This goal may be reached, bearing in mind both this party's coalition potential, and the fact that the role played by the head of the government in Serbia's foreign policy has been marginalised in recent years, through the minor international involvement of Prime Minister Mirko Cvetković (DS). Even if the smaller coalition partner does not obtain the prime ministerial portfolio—SPS leader and Deputy Prime Minister Ivica Dačić is ready to take the post—then surely it will receive several key ministerial positions.

Unresolved Presidential Election. Boris Tadić, DS leader and former president, and SNS chairman Tomislav Nikolić, gained the most support in the first round of the presidential election, held together with the parliamentary election, by obtaining 25.3% and 25.1% of the vote respectively. Candidates from other parties achieved results almost identical to their results in the parliamentary elections. Dačić, from the coalition SPS, placed third in the presidential election, already supported the candidacy of Tadić—as did most of the national minority parties. The presidential election was

allowed to be held together with parliamentary and local elections, because President Tadić decided to resign from office in early April, which shortened the presidential term by several months. Being the most popular politician in Serbia, Tadić aim was to strengthen the position of his party in the parliamentary election. Moreover, the move mobilised the public, prompting wider participation in the elections.

Polls show that Tadić retained an advantage over Nikolić before the second round of the presidential election. Tadić had been president of Serbia since 2004, and initially held the position within the union of Serbia and Montenegro. After its break-up and the change to the Serbian Constitution, he was elected in 2008 for his first term as the president of an independent Serbian state. In foreign policy, his presidency was characterised by aspirations to improve relations with Serbia's neighbours. A significant improvement in previously difficult relations with Croatia, as well as with Bosnia and Herzegovina may be considered as the success of this policy. European integration, while maintaining Serbia's territorial integrity, was a priority of his first term. The position of the president and the ruling coalition was strengthened after Serbia was granted EU membership candidate status in March.

Nikolić competed with Tadić in the second round of the presidential election in both 2004 and 2008. However, at that time he was a candidate for the nationalist Serbian Radical Party, and rejected both EU integration and dialogue with Kosovo. After losing the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2008, Nikolić created a new group, SNS, which—in the face of more than 60% of public support for EU membership at that time—became moderately supportive of European integration. Nevertheless, he criticised the policy of the government and of President Tadić towards Kosovo, which Nikolić assessed as submissive.

Conclusions and Recommendations. The formation of a coalition government of the centrist DS and left-wing SPS would mean the continuation of current policy in Serbia. Compared to the previous government, the role of a smaller coalition partner would be strengthened, mainly because of its charismatic leader Dačić, who, as current interior minister undertook an increasingly effective fight against organised crime. He announced that he would remain in this ministerial post, but if at the same time he becomes the head of government, the role of Serbia's prime minister in relation to foreign policy may increase, because of Dačić's ambitions. Although the government coalition parties rejected the possibility of recognising Kosovo's independence, a government of similar make-up to that now in power would have a stronger mandate to pursue a liberal policy towards Kosovo.

The results of parliamentary elections in Serbia show that, in recent years, Euro-sceptic parties have been significantly marginalised, while extreme nationalist groups have been excluded from public debate. This reflects the attitude of Serbian society towards EU integration, supported by more than half of the population. Slogans calling for a tough policy towards Kosovo are no longer guaranteed to win as many votes as in the previous parliamentary and presidential elections. At the same time, the economic recovery program—which was the central theme of the election campaign—brought most benefits to the socialist party, a trend which, in times of economic crisis, has also emerged in many other European countries.

Despite an almost identical result for two candidates in the presidential election, Tadić, the former Serbian president, has a greater chance of victory in the second round. Not only will supporters of the socialist party vote for him, but he will also attract the majority of voters supporting the smaller groups, which in foreign policy see the integration of Serbia into the EU as priority. Tadić's victory would mean the continuation of presidential policy aimed at moving Serbia towards the Union, and of the promotion of dialogue with Kosovo under the auspices of the EU. If Nikolić became president, it could cause difficulties in talks with the government in Pristina, and thus in cooperation with the Union.

Although a change of president in Serbia is unlikely, the EU should continue its policy towards this country regardless of the results of the second round of the election. After the new Serbian government and president have been sworn in, the Union should maintain its efforts to facilitate this country's dialogue with Kosovo, and to start accession negotiations smoothly. The example of Croatia shows that the initiation of talks on EU membership mobilises governments to conduct specific reforms identified by the Union. The current situation may be favourable, as the Serbian government will, after the recent elections, have a stronger public mandate to attempt to push through unpopular structural reforms. However, negotiations with the EU will also depend on further agreements with Kosovo, which may prove difficult to achieve until the end of this year. Poland—which in July will take the presidency of the Visegrád Group—should also use this forum to promote EU enlargement policy in the Western Balkans.