

Serbian presidential elections: the view from Macedonia

by Saso Ordanovski and Aleksandar Matovski

The reaction in Macedonia to Serbia's elections – both before and after the victor was known – was one of a general lack of excitement. On one level, Macedonia is so deeply enmeshed in its own domestic political gridlock, similar to Serbia's, that extraneous events tend to have hardly any obvious impact on the political scene. On a more substantive level – despite the hubbub about it being yet another 'historic referendum on the European course of Serbia' with profound repercussions for the Balkans – the election in Serbia does not really change the broad geopolitical dynamics in the region a great deal. Despite Tadic's victory, Serbia remains a country deeply divided between two priorities (the EU and Kosovo) and will continue to produce the same schizophrenic politics as before.

From the point of view of those in Macedonia with a more interested and nuanced view of the region, Tadic, with a touch of Balkan paradox, would have been 'a better force for change as a narrow loser than as a narrow winner', as today's Stratfor Analyses would also agree. With such a small margin of political space for manoeuvring – the presidential election result is a draw, with Tadic being proclaimed a winner by the ethnic minorities in Serbia – Tadic's proclaimed EU accession agenda will now be hostage to Kosovo's status and Prime Minister Kostunica's self-interested manoeuvring around the issue. That leaves less space for Tadic to make required concessions on Kosovo than for Nikolic, who has both better radical credentials and nobody more radical to challenge him if he gives in.

That is absolutely no guarantee that Nikolic and the Radicals would have put their better bargaining position to good use. On the contrary, they might have pursued the same old hyper-nationalist politics that wreaked havoc in Serbia and the region in the 1990s. But there is no guarantee that the current schizophrenic configuration of Serbia's politics will not result in the same outcome either. Serbia remains in a deadlock between Tadic, who will continue to push for his prime electoral pledge for EU accession, and Kostunica and the Radicals, who will condition with demands that the EU respect Serbian sovereignty, effectively blocking progress on the EU path. The frustration of the electorate from the inevitable lack of ability to deliver on both Europe and Kosovo will only push Serbia's entire political spectrum towards the radical position, even in a mid-term perspective. So, Tadic's victory, in a sense, has effectively delayed the political catharsis over the loss of Kosovo that Serbia will in any case have to go through at some stage.

Macedonia's biggest concern, however, is that the European Union will continue its unproductive attempts to balance this delicate internal political dynamic in Serbia by holding back from making a definite commitment on a solution in Kosovo and the Euro-Atlantic integration of the (still) undisturbed parts of the region. Delaying the inevitable in Kosovo only reinforces the position of radicals on all sides and heightens the risk of an explosion in Kosovo, to which Macedonia is extremely vulnerable. Lack of commitment on Kosovo could spill over into lack of commitment on integrating its vulnerable neighbors, especially if things take a bad turn. With Macedonia's crucial

* Saso Ordanovski is Programme Director and Member of the Board, FORUM, Centre for Strategic Research and Documentation, Skopje. Aleksandar Matovski is Director of Studies at FORUM).

NATO integration already hanging on a thread because of its internal problems and the Greek veto threats, this dynamic could potentially further jeopardise the country's key interest to brace itself for Kosovar independence from under the Euro-Atlantic security umbrella. Also, the EU's bungled attempt to appease Serbia before the election with a fast-track visa facilitation regime has reverberated very badly in Macedonia, which is almost 10 years ahead of Serbia on the road to EU accession and has been waiting for the same favour for some time now. These kinds of faltering policies can easily undermine the brittle inter-ethnic consensus in the country that is solely centered on the joint interest of a fast Euro-Atlantic future for the country, seriously adding to the spillover potential of any impending Kosovo crisis.