

Serbian elections: who has actually won and what does this mean for the EU?

by Denisa Kostovicova*

As roughly a half of the Serbian electorate and all of the EU hail the electoral victory of the Democratic Party leader Boris Tadic over his bitter rival from the Serbian Radical Party, Tomislav Nikolic, the key question for the analysts is: *which* Boris Tadic won the elections?

Is it the Boris who has spent the last four years of his presidential mandate diluting the message of reform and altering the political agenda to become almost indistinguishable from that of Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica and his Democratic Party of Serbia? Or is it the Boris representing the Democratic Party reminiscent of the days of Zoran Djindjic, when tough political calls, including cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), were worth taking political risks for the sake of Serbia's Europeanisation through a process of political and economic modernisation? And what does all this mean for the European Union and its policy towards Serbia?

Incumbent Tadic's campaign prior to the first round of voting would definitely favour the former Boris. However, Kostunica's ultimatum to Tadic on a signature to the coalition agreement annex that the despatch of the EU mission to Kosovo would be a violation of the initialled Stabilisation and Association Agreement, effectively a call for Serbia to turn its back on the EU, was a blessing in disguise. Tadic was forced to emphasise the pro-European message before the second round of voting, even as the EU prepares to bring about and recognise the independence of Kosovo. It turns out that it is the EU's future rather than the Kosovo past which decided the electoral result – at least for now.

This should not come as a complete surprise. Opinion polls in Serbia have consistently recorded a high level of popular support for EU integration. A recent government-sponsored poll found that 71% of those polled said that if Europe were to recognise Kosovo, the diplomatic fight for Kosovo ought to be carried on without severing relations with the EU.

Tadic should learn from this. He had stood to lose more by disaffecting the voters who want genuine democratic change and palpable progress towards the EU, than to gain by cajoling the nationalist and conservative sections of the electorate as he had done with his trip to Moscow. After all, the position of the Radical Nikolic, on a range of issues including cooperation with the ICTY – some would say a position not unlike that of Kostunica – , is difficult to outdo. If anything, Tadic ought to become an undiluted voice and a force for Serbia's European integration, while disentangling himself from Kostunica's embrace.

However, Kosovo may yet spoil the post-electoral celebrations in Belgrade.

* Denisa Kostovicova is a *Lecturer in Global Politics at the London School of Economics and Political Science*

Opinion

The EU's strategy of attempting to get Serbia locked into the process of EU integration, preferably with the SAA agreement, in order to make it difficult for Serbia to abandon the process after Kosovo's independence, has clearly failed. Instead, the EU has offered a partial political agreement to Serbia, which nearly backfired. The fact that the EU is not as keen on Serbia as it claims was a potent weapon in the hands of the Radicals.

The EU itself has been trapped by its own policy. On the one hand, signing the SAA without Serbia's fulfilment of the Hague conditions would seriously discredit the EU's policy and the integration process not just in Serbia but in the entire region of the Western Balkans. On the other hand, the EU insisted on the separation of Serbia's European integration and the Kosovo issue, while at the same time using the very integration process as a carrot for Kosovo's independence.

Now that Serbia has delivered the democratic candidate, the ball is in the EU's court. Its biggest challenge is to manage the fallout of Kosovo's independence, while keeping Serbia's European process on track but without compromising the tenets of European integration. On the contrary, Serbia may yet turn its back on the EU. Even worse, the widely-held assumption that ridding Serbia of Kosovo will accelerate Serbia's democratisation may prove to be utterly wrong. The question of 'lost' Kosovo may come to haunt Serbia's democratisation in the long run, by locking it into the vicious cycle of ethnic politics.