

How Serbian voters will make their choice on Sunday

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The 2008 Serbian Elections have provoked much coverage and analysis, most of it presenting the election issue as one of a choice between the EU and Russia. The somewhat oversimplified representation of the elections has reduced the political complexities involved to ‘integration’ versus ‘isolation’. The majority win in the first round for the SRS candidate Nikolic has been interpreted by some as Serbia’s choice of nationalism over democracy, as represented by the DS candidate Tadic. Indeed, the almost equally split support for the two has also been interpreted as a sign of Serbia’s increasing political polarisation – left- or right-wing support with no ‘grey areas’ in-between.

Is Serbia becoming a more radicalised and nationalist society? Analysing the election in terms of the results certainly suggests this. But considering the election from a social and cultural perspective reveals more subtle processes at play and ongoing political concerns among the population which are not reflected in the seemingly clear-cut and self evident results (i.e. Nikolic’s victory in the first round). It would come as a surprise to most Western observers that some voters who vote for the SRS/Nikolic explicitly distance themselves from nationalism, and indeed some do not even consider the SRS to be a nationalist party. When more complex social processes are examined, there are no direct correlations between voting for Nikolic and support for nationalism; and no necessary or guaranteed correlations between voting for Tadic and ‘favouring the West’ over Russia. Voting and political support (as well as political agendas) in Serbia should not be viewed through a Western lens which identifies neat categories of politics, according to which one is either a nationalist or a democrat. In Serbian politics, issues are much more confused than that, and both agendas and voter motivations involve rather a lot of political ‘picking and mixing’. Such voting behaviour is not quantifiable and the complexities of political support cannot be reflected in election figures.

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Is Serbia really as divided politically as the election results would have us believe? A glance at Tadic's and Nikolic's Kosovo policies alone shows that there is not a vast difference between the two. Likewise, co-operation with the ICTY has not been the priority of either party (not in practice anyway), nor has the condemnation of war criminals or an open debate on the issues been made explicit by either. Both parties promise better living standards for the country's citizens. The only point where they explicitly and clearly diverge is in their stance towards the EU (an issue highlighted by external observers). But is this a clear political division, one which is enough to motivate citizens to vote for one candidate over another?

The answer is 'no'. Most citizens of Serbia, whilst they aspire to EU standards and believe in its benefits, do not believe that they will see the benefits of EU integration in their lifetime. This is certainly the case with the crucial 50-something generation (also crucial in the 1990s), as well as the younger voters – even those in their 20s today are dismissive about the benefits of the EU, should Serbia's projected integration date remain a distant prospect in the future. Thus, the only generation likely to benefit in real terms from Serbia's integration is the youngest, non-voting generation. In addition, many believe that Serbia's entry into the EU is not actually going to happen.

In addition, the EU has now announced the 30 January discussions on the possibility of visa-free travel for Serbian citizens. In practical terms, visa-free travel is probably the most visible, immediate and attractive benefit of EU membership for a majority of citizens. Despite encouraging citizens for their prospects towards EU integration, the upcoming talks may actually persuade some indecisive voters to veer towards Nikolic. This is especially true for the voters who like the idea of Nikolic's inward-looking policies and his focus on the domestic issues as well as his explicit anti-ICTY stance (in certain sectors, this could in fact be a major factor influencing voters in their decision to vote for Nikolic), but who also believe that Tadic may get them to the EU faster. If the visa-free travel is going to happen anyway, they may reason, then there is no reason not to vote for Nikolic.

It is difficult to perceive Kosovo being a crucial issue for voters. Many Serbs believe that Kosovo is already lost; and just as with the EU, the issue is far too abstract for many for it to have an impact in 'real life'.

The contradictions and murkiness of voter behaviour and overlaps in the programmes of Serbian politicians are also reflected in the fact that Tadic was beaten by Nikolic in most urban centres, including Belgrade. Support for the nationalist SRS had always been attributed, wrongly, to the uneducated, working or peasant classes. Not only is this again an oversimplification, but it has now been proven false in the elections. Nationalism, or its various elements, appeal to different sectors of the population differently. Arguably, the SRS stance towards the ICTY remains one of the most clearly identifiable ‘nationalist’ bases for support among many, including the educated, urban classes. On that note, whilst it may be a contradiction for Milosevic’s socialist supporters to move over to the nationalist SRS, it is more likely that they will vote for Nikolic than Tadic in the second round. Such voters are unlikely to focus on the finer points of the SRS’s ‘Greater Serbia’ rhetoric and more likely to go along with its anti-ICTY policies.

It seems that voter behaviour in Serbia is not entirely premised on party policies but rather on images and ideology. Serbs are not *against* the EU, nor the West; they simply feel mistreated by both. It should not be surprising that the candidate with the most votes is one who voices explicit anti-Western sentiments (expressed also through his ICTY policies), considering the ways in which Serbs have perceived their recent past and understood the West’s relationship towards Serbia.

It is a question of cultural politics. Serbs know they will one day join the EU (even if that is a long way off in the future); they know that they are almost guaranteed the support of Russia and they know that their politicians’ Kosovo policies (all being more or less the same) are unlikely to be translated into reality. In the meantime, they can express their disenchantment with a number of issues by voting for Nikolic – in particular, their dissatisfaction with the West’s treatment of Serbia and its insistence on Serb war criminals being delivered up, as well as their own perceived continued victimhood in their relations with the EU/NATO/UN and others. Alarming, this was exactly what created renewed support for Milosevic once his trial began to be broadcast from the ICTY. Milosevic was praised for ‘standing up to the West’ or ‘telling the truth about Serbia’ and many expressed support for him even though they never supported him as a politician. It would not be a far stretch of the imagination to say that Nikolic draws precisely the same support from voters who would not normally vote ‘nationalist’.

About the author

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