

In Serbia, Europe's other election

 insidestory.org.au/in-serbia-europes-other-election/

5/11/2012

1378 words

[Correspondents](#)

10 May 2012

Was the real winner of the Serbian election the party that came third? *Jasmina Kijevcanin* reports from Belgrade

President Boris Tadić, who faces a run-off with Tomislav Nikolić on 20 May.

Photo: [Izbor za bolji zivot](#)

SERBIA went to the polls last Sunday to elect three levels of government – the presidency, the National Assembly and local government. On the face of it, there were two winners: the “Let’s Move Serbia – Tomislav Nikolić” list won about 24 per cent of the vote and will have seventy-three deputies in parliament; the “Choice for a Better Life – Boris Tadić” list won 23 per cent and will have sixty-seven seats. Presidential contenders Boris Tadić and Tomislav Nikolić face a run-off election on 20 May; both men won about a quarter of the vote in the first round, with Nikolić outpolling Tadić by a slight margin.

Tadić, the incumbent, had resigned in early April, bringing forward next year’s presidential election to coincide with the national and local elections. His list is a coalition of six pro-European parties dominated by his own Democratic Party. Nikolić also formed a coalition around his own party, the Serbian Progressive Party. In the last two presidential elections, in 2004 and 2008, he narrowly lost to Tadić in the second round.

Sunday’s real winner, however, is the list that came third, the Serbian Socialist Party, which was once led by Slobodan Milošević. Not only were the Socialists able to almost double their vote to 14 per cent, which translates into forty-four of 250 seats in parliament. They will also be the kingmakers – both when it comes to the formation of government and in the run-off of the presidential vote on 20 May. Their leader, Ivica Dačić, was party spokesperson under Milošević.

Dačić was elated by the result. “Maybe it is still not clear who will be the president of Serbia but it is clear who will be the prime minister,” he stated confidently. Indeed, it is a distinct possibility that the prime ministership is the price he will exact for supporting Tadić in the second round of the presidential elections and for continuing the current ruling coalition between the Socialists and the Democratic Party.

LATE last month I attended a Socialist Party election rally in Kraljevo, in central Serbia. There, amid frenetic applause from the crowd, Dačić proclaimed that his party had “taken over the country.” “It does not matter who wins the election, Tadić or Nikolić,” he said. “It is a waste to vote for either of them because on 7 May, they will both have to come to us to form government. We will decide who is the winner and this will be an opportunity to avenge 5 October!”

I remember 5 October 2000 very well. That day several hundred thousand people rallied in front of the parliament in Belgrade to protest against electoral fraud in the recent presidential elections (which Milošević claimed to have won). Footage of protesters storming the studios of Radio-Televizija Serbia, led by a man driving a front-end loader, went around the world. In the face of enormous pressure from a united opposition, non-government organisations, ordinary citizens, the Serbian military and foreign governments, Milošević resigned the next day.

I watched his resignation speech on television in disbelief. Serbs had taken to the streets in protest against the Milošević regime several times during the 1990s, only to be suppressed by the police and the army, and many of them had therefore lost hope. It seemed as if Milošević was going to be around forever.

But 5 October marked the end of the era Milošević and the beginning of a new epoch – or so it seemed at the time. Soon afterwards, Vojislav Koštunica, the candidate of the Democratic Opposition of Serbia, an alliance of more than a dozen parties opposed to Milošević's Socialist Party and the true winner of the presidential elections, was sworn in as president. Radio-Televizija Serbia, the national network, gave airtime to dissidents. Following parliamentary elections in December 2000, the Democratic Opposition took the reins of government. Milošević himself was arrested early in 2001 and delivered to the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia sitting in The Hague; he died five years later of a heart attack in a Dutch prison cell.

Have Dačić and his Socialist Party learned the lessons of the past and committed to a post-Milošević democratic Serbia? From a European perspective, Dačić as prime minister might not be such a bad choice. He is pro-European. A year ago, a local organisation, the First European House, awarded him the prestigious title of *Naj Evropljanin* (Best European) for helping the accession of Serbia to the European Union. When this award had first been made in 2000, embracing Europe symbolised resistance to the Milošević regime. Previous laureates include Milošević's political opponents Dragoljub Mićunović (the founder of the Democratic Party), Zoran Đinđić, the Democratic Party prime minister who was assassinated in 2003, and Tadić. In comparison with the ultra-nationalists (of whom there are plenty both in and outside parliament), Dačić seems like a moderate rather than a hardliner.

But when Dačić says he wants to avenge 5 October, he reveals that there is more to his politics – that he wants to uphold the legacy of his former boss. In that regard, he is not the only one. Presidential contender Nikolić questions even the small steps that have been taken so far towards a reckoning with the past. In a recent [television interview](#), he said that as a future president of Serbia he has no intention of going to Srebrenica (the site of a 1995 massacre in Bosnia) or apologising for other atrocities committed outside of Serbia, “because atrocities were done from the both sides and we were both: victims and criminals. We need to face the past in Serbia and they need to do the same in their countries... Officials of other countries have not come to apologise to us and that's why I will never go to do it in their countries.”

Apologies have their limitations, of course, but they have also been catalysts in promoting dialogue and cooperation between groups confronting one another over past injustices. An apology might be a part of the long-term reconciliation process, which requires the formation of peaceful relations based on mutual trust and acceptance, cooperation, and consideration of mutual needs.

The symbolism of *Naj Evropljanin* looks to the future. But the post-Milošević governments are yet to face the past. They were meant to acknowledge the atrocities committed on behalf of Serbia both inside and outside of the country, to commemorate the victims and to ensure that the courts were in a position to convict the perpetrators. They had a moral and legal obligation to ensure that the crimes committed under the Milošević regime not go unpunished. Only lustration would help Serbs to heal the wounds and reconcile with the experience and the victims of the 1990s. There can be no serious societal rehabilitation in a country in which representatives of a former criminal regime are not held accountable for their actions.

The political background of the murders of journalists Slavko Ćuruvija and Dada Vujasinović, for example, and the assassination of Đinđić, the killing of sixteen Radio-Televizija Serbia employees during the NATO bombing of Belgrade and numerous other crimes have not been dealt with yet. By failing to pursue the perpetrators, Serbia has neglected the victims of the crimes they committed.

When Milošević resigned in 2000, Serbs were led to believe that the policies of the new government would be a radical departure from those of his government. But in one key respect that hasn't been the case. Instead of apologising, commemorating and creating the conditions for courts to convict the perpetrators, politicians in Serbia deny, relativise and forget. For this reason, there is no discontinuity with Milošević's leadership. There is, instead, denial: responsibility is transferred to others, whether they are Croats, Bosnians or Kosovars.

Twelve years ago, I couldn't quite believe it when I saw the end of Milošević's regime on television. In one important respect, 5 October was indeed too good to be true. •