

V.I.P. Daily News Report

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COMMENTARY

Giuliani's Visit Touches DS's Nerve

Last week's visit to Belgrade by former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, paid on the invitation of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), enlivened briefly a monotonous and uninteresting campaign ahead of elections scheduled to be held at all levels on May 6.

Giuliani's appearance at a press briefing together with SNS Deputy Chairman Aleksandar Vucic, the party's candidate for mayor of Belgrade, certainly was one of the more successful coups pulled off by a party during a campaign that so far has abounded in demagogical, bizarre, or just plain nonsensical statements by political leaders.

By bringing in such a high-profile guest -- with a view to picking his brain on how to enhance life in the Serbian capital -- Vucic and the SNS primarily wanted to demonstrate that they are eager and willing to cooperate with the West, which the governing Democratic Party (DS) has been steadily challenging.

Using media under its control, which is most of them, the DS has been trying to create the impression that it alone has the political, administrative, moral, and every other capacity to represent the country successfully abroad. Judging from the way in which the DS has been presenting things, it would appear that most of the other parties, except its own satellites, are quite incapable of such a thing themselves.

DS officials insist that, if the present opposition parties and especially the SNS should come to power, such a government would plunge the country back into isolation of the kind it was in under Slobodan Milosevic. In the most extreme cases, the DS has even said that, at the forthcoming elections, the people will be choosing "between war and peace," suggesting that the opposition's election to power might rekindle the conflicts of the 1990s.

These claims are all nonsense, of course, but this does not stop the DS's propagandists from constantly feeding them to the electorate.

In this kind of atmosphere, it was not surprising that DS Deputy Chairman Dragan Djilas, incumbent mayor of Belgrade, should have reacted nervously and, while paying tribute to Giuliani for his results as mayor, nevertheless tried to discredit him by saying that Giuliani was among the supporters of NATO's air strikes on the then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999. "I do not think that [Giuliani] is the right person to talk about the future of Belgrade and how to spruce it up," said Djilas, who is running for a second term of office as mayor.

The SNS swiftly responded by saying that Djilas's statement was completely off base. "Djilas's rhetoric smacks strongly of the [notoriously anti-West] Serbian Radical Party (SRS)," the SNS said, accusing the outgoing mayor of making statements that turn away foreign investors irrespective of what part of the world they may be coming from.

What the SNS did not say in its response and which is glaringly obvious to anybody that follows political life in Serbia at all closely is that, over the past 12 years, former and present government officials from the ranks of the DS have met times without number with Western officials that had incomparably closer ties to the NATO air strikes than Giuliani, such as the onetime frequent guest in Belgrade, Javier Solana, who was NATO secretary general at the time of the air strikes.

Besides, the DS is not saying a word about practically daily xenophobic statements of its coalition partner Ivica Dacic, leader of onetime Milosevic's Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), who is basing his entire election campaign on distancing himself from the policy waged for the past four years by the government in which he has been deputy prime minister.

The DS's frenzied efforts to hang on to power even after the next election are evident also from the behavior of media close to it, which hastened, like Djilas, to discredit Giuliani.

The most prominent in this respect was *Blic*, which carried a text to the effect that Giuliani "has on his client list numerous suspect firms and individuals, such as terrorist movements," and went on to quote a lobbying expert as saying that Giuliani's lobbying agency is secretive in its business dealings and that the "most problematic question of all is who financed his visit" to Belgrade.

Politika, however, quoted two political analysts as saying that "much more important [than the meeting between Vucic and Giuliani] was the meeting that Dacic had with [influential Serbian author Dobrica] Cosic, although it was given much less attention."

In this instance, too, media were only acting true to form. There is practically no opportunity for true political debate in the most influential electronic media, not only because of new rules that have significantly curtailed air time for the parties' promotional videos.

An equally important reason why there is no true debate is that electronic media fill their programs with statements by government officials and pro-government analysts to such a point that there is precious little time left for anybody else.

The situation is not much different in print media, either, part of which have discarded even the pretence of neutrality and have openly joined in the campaign on the side of the incumbent authorities.

“Media have become complicit in deceiving the public, since they no longer do the job as controllers of the authorities,” UNS (Journalist Association of Serbia) Chairperson Ljiljana Smajlovic said on Friday. The situation is reminiscent of the former Yugoslavia, where the Communist Party “rarely ever called up editors or reporters, instead of which editors-in-chief read their wishes from the eyes of the power wielders,” Smajlovic said.

Be that as it may, not even the episode with Giuliani will alter the overall picture of a lukewarm campaign atmosphere, which has not been enlivened even by the calling of a presidential election -- probably because most parties have been waging highly personalized campaigns from the start, anyway, putting their leaders in the forefront of their campaigns.

In such a climate, the only noticeable change is that the DS and its presidential candidate Boris Tadic have changed tactics and switched from Tadic's practically daily appearances in the country and abroad, on which the first part of the campaign was based, to a mainly negative campaign focused on discrediting the opposition, primarily SNS Chairman Nikolic. The rest of the campaign, too, is likely to be characterized by a combination of these two approaches.