

V.I.P. Daily News Report

V.I.P. News Services, Čika Ljubina 6, 11000 Belgrade, Serbia

phone/fax: (381 11) 32 82 360, 32 86 140, 32 86 141

e-mail: office@vipnews.rs vipnews@sbb.rs

Publisher: V.I.P. News Services Editor-in-Chief: Vladan Marjanović

News Desk Editors: Rade Stanić, Davor Lukač

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COMMENTARY

Nikolic's Victory Surprises Many, but Not All

In the end, what no one, with the exception of *V.I.P.*, dared mention as a possibility actually happened, and no one with the exception of former independent MP Vesna Pestic publicly wished for publicly when the outcome of the parliamentary and presidential elections was concerned: that the hinted creation of a government that would most probably once again be headed by the Democratic Party (DS) and the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) did not provide DS leader Boris Tadic with momentum in the second round of the presidential elections, and that in the end he was defeated by Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) leader Tomislav Nikolic, who will now become the new President of Serbia.

Back while it was not certain whether the presidential elections would be held at the same time as the presidential elections, in late March *V.I.P.* predicted in the analysis titled "Tadic Painted in the Corner" (*V.I.P.* No. 4827) the possibility that the DS, if it is not far behind the SNS, would form government with SPS and one or two partners – the United Regions of Serbia (URS), led by Mladjan Dinkic, and/or the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), led by Cedomir Jovanovic – but that then Tadic would not get sufficient support in the presidential elections from the voters from these parties nor from their party structures.

This is precisely the situation that was created on Sunday evening. Regardless of Nikolic's still surprising victory, and contrary to estimates by many commentators on the election night, that this victory could bring about a reversal in the creation of the parliamentary majority - where the SNS could appear as pillar of the new government - this is still not especially likely. It is far more likely that in the end the government will be formed by the circles of parties that made up the previous one.

The creation of the government might be somewhat more complicated, since Nikolic could naturally offer the mandate for forming the government first to the SNS, because it won the greatest number of votes in the parliamentary elections. However, the SNS practically has no way of providing parliamentary majority. This is the reason for the estimate that the survival instinct of DS, SPS and other parties will prevail, now that after Tadic's defeat they have an additional motive to reach an agreement on forming the government. In any case, the leader of the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) stated, as soon as the outcome of the presidential elections was apparent, that the agreement between his party and the DS on forming the parliamentary majority is not in danger.

Since on the election night Tadic dismissed the possibility that he might be Prime Minister in such a government, it is very likely that he is completely aware that after following his electoral defeat, his inviolable position within his own party has been brought into question, raising the issue of his political future. The low turnout in the second round indicates that many of his former voters have turned their backs on him. There was an apparent absence of a large number of supporters of his DS, as well as the URS and LDP, and to some extent that of the SPS supporters. The votes of all of them would have probably led to Tadic's third victory over Nikolic in a row, but Tadic did not get them. Perhaps it was partially due to the appeal by Pestic (whose views have been extensively reported by *V.I.P.* in the past three months) that in the second round of the presidential elections one should vote for the opposite side from the one that is likely to form the government. However, quite certainly it happened because factions in the DS that want to see Tadic fall, as well as likeminded members of the URS and LDP, now simply denied him their votes.

It was also no accident that Tadic won lower support than Nikolic even in Belgrade: too great a concentration of actual power in his office, although under the Constitution the government should have the greatest power in the country, and an excessive favoring of Tadic by DS-controlled media in Belgrade, produced a strong counter-effect that backfired on the DS leader in the worst way.

Tadic lost some votes also to the SNS's claims (which, truth be told, sounded unconvincing to most people) about a parliamentary election fraud on May 6, and won nothing, either, by his sole televised debate with Nikolic, in which he made no appreciable impression despite claims to the contrary by media favorable to him.

Whatever the combination of these factors, the conclusion is always the same: without the office of head of state, Tadic is now completely exposed in the party and will have to fend off attacks from all sides.

With Tadic's status such as it is, another thing that will now inevitably be called in question in the DS is the status of his closest loyalists, such as Dusan Petrovic, one of the party's deputy chairman, and also - which will probably be of special interest to Western diplomats - of Tadic's protégé, outgoing Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic, who has lately been preoccupied with his candidacy for president of the UN General Assembly.

Tadic's defeat is sharply at variance with the excellent result that Dragan Djilas, DS deputy leader and mayor of Belgrade, scored in the May 6 local election in Belgrade, and also with the equally good result of the DS in Sunday's second round of Vojvodina's parliamentary election, where yet another DS deputy chairman, Bojan Pajtic, is certain to secure another term as provincial prime minister. All this cannot fail to produce turbulence inside the DS. This is an opportunity that has been awaited by some circles in the DS for a long time, which is why the forthcoming developments in the party will be some of the most interesting.

Nevertheless, more important than future developments inside the DS is certainly what can be expected from Nikolic as president in the most likely situation where he will have to cohabitate with a government formed by parties across the political divide from him.

The first practical consequence - one welcome in every respect - should be the downsizing of the office of president to its proper measure in keeping with the Constitution. Nikolic will certainly be unable - and probably unwilling, too - to use his office in the way that Tadic has done, far overstepping the limits of his formal powers. Even if Nikolic were to try such a thing, the government would block him. This would probably lead to tension from time to time, but from the point of view of division of power and the emplacement of a system of checks and balances such as has not existed over the past four years, this would be a good thing for the country.

There are other reasons, too, why Nikolic will not be able to be the strong president that Tadic was. The fact that he has not been tried and proven at the most responsible government offices, his lack of experience in international politics, and unnecessary problems that he plunged himself in with the domestic public over his iffy university degree obtained under obscure circumstances, all make him vulnerable.

And then there is a small matter of his ultranationalist past during his time in Serbian Radical Party (SRS) of Vojislav Seselj, who is on trial in the Hague Tribunal for war crimes.

However, one must emphasize once again that all this will have no great consequences for the political situation in the country, since the government will be the decision-making center.

As Nikolic himself said in election night, the country's pro-EU orientation will not be jeopardized, contrary to simplified interpretations by numerous foreign media. Regardless of the agreement between the SNS and the anti-EU DSS about the need for calling a referendum for the people to have their say on EU integration, Nikolic will not risk losing his position, won at great pains, of being acceptable to Brussels as a partner in negotiations.

In this context, one will certainly long remember the amusing episode of Brussels' premature message of congratulations to Nikolic, issued by mistake while balloting was still in progress. Given the Serbian propensity for believing in conspiracy theories, one might think that this was not a gaffe, but something more.