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# DIVISIVE FORCES



SHOESTRING DIPLOMACY **CHILD SOLDIERS** WATCHING OVER AFRICA

SERBIAN ELECTIONS **James Pettifer**

THE VICTORY OF NATIONALIST EXTREMIST RADICAL PARTY leader Tomislav Nikolic in the first round of the Serbian presidential election, with around a third of the vote, is likely to encourage the international community to mobilise support around his nearest challenger, Boris Tadic, for the second round at the end of June. This is the fourth attempt by Serbs to elect a president after previous failures because less than half of those eligible voted. This requirement has now been removed.

In the wider context of Serbia and the region, the result is likely to matter considerably less than some observers believe. The renewal of nationalism is only a symptom of the failure of post-conflict governments to resolve long-standing problems with the economy, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia at The Hague, and the future of Kosovo and Montenegro.

The unexpectedly large number of votes for third placed multi-millionaire businessman Bogoljub Karic and the eclipse of other candidates gives the international community several levers to pull to prevent a Radical party presidency. Tadic and Karic are seen to represent general modernisation, whereas Nikolic is regarded as harking back to the era of former President Slobodan Milosevic.

How far this is a realistic analysis, rather than public relations-inspired wishful thinking, is of course an open question. All candidates have deep roots in the political world of previous Serbian governments, and Karic and his family business empire were key figures in Milosevic's inner circle.

**STABLE SUPPORT**

It is doubtful if either a Tadic or Nikolic victory will make as much difference to the immediate political future as their supporters or the international community believe. Whether Nikolic is elected as second-round winner or not, his victory on June 13 demonstrates the apparently unalterable fact that between a quarter and a third of the active electorate supports many elements of the 'Greater Serbia' programme inherited from the 1990s. They are still in denial about the nature of that project and the practical consequences for Serbs of carrying it out. The proportion can increase considerably in times of political instability.

This heritage has been closely linked with the failure of post-Milosevic governments to face the challenges of poverty and unemployment. At the same time, small sections of the elite have greatly enriched themselves by working with foreign companies.

There has been considerable opposition throughout Serbia to the knock-down sale of state assets to achieve quick privatisation revenues. To try to ameliorate this, companies that have made large investments in Serbia, such as the British tobacco multinational BAT Industries, have taken over funding community development programmes in factory areas that in most industrial societies would be the preserve of government. This could, of course, be interpreted by critics of privatisation as sustaining local nationalist networks.

The nationalist factor in the electorate has remained remarkably stable and consistent since the December 2001 post-Milosevic poll. It could be said to represent a similar proportion of anti-globalisation, anti-European, anti-NATO public opinion that poll evidence suggests exists in many transitional European countries. This includes some 'new Europe' states that have achieved European Union entry, as the recent European parliament election results demonstrate. Support for NATO, in particular, has dramatically declined in Balkan nations like Bulgaria.

In Serbia, nationalism remains a political constant. In the December 2000 poll, the combined vote for Milosevic's Socialist party, the Radical party, the Yugoslav United Left party

# Nationalist Renewal

**A right-wing nationalist candidate produced a good showing in Serbia's presidential election. But does it matter? The amount of support for such views is fairly consistent and is, if anything, a symptom of failed attempts to deal with underlying problems.**

of Milosevic's wife Mira Markovic, and paramilitary leader Arkan's party came to a very similar proportion as Radical support in the June poll.

Extensive World Bank, International Monetary Fund and US backing for post-Milosevic governments since October 2000 has achieved little structural and fundamental change in public opinion. It has been impossible to form a stable pro-western elite with a democratic basis while voters continually elect sufficient nationalists to block the process.

Neo-conservatives in the administration of American President George Bush see the priority in Serbia, and elsewhere in the region, as the need to build 'strong states'. This is often in direct opposition to really effective financial and other strategies to encourage desirable political reforms. In the main, British Prime Minister Tony Blair's government has followed Washington's lead on this issue, so that, for instance, British-linked figures remain dominant in the police and interior ministry doing similar jobs to those they did in the Milosevic era.

Since the departure to the Hague tribunal of its indicted former leader Vojislav Seselj in January last year, the Radical party has grown as an organisation and shed some of its more inflammatory rhetoric. But many policies remain the same, particularly on the key questions of cooperation with the court, and the future of Kosovo, which the Radicals see as an inalienable part of Serbia.

**WOULD IT MATTER?**

Some sections of the diplomatic community believe that a Radical party victory would not necessarily matter as much as it once might have done, and that the international community has now achieved enough reform in Serbia to prevent serious internal consequences. This is certainly true in the economic sphere, where privatisation has mostly been successfully completed. It is not the case in the political or military worlds or, perhaps most important, in the paramilitary underworld, where informal Milosevic-era networks are intact despite the arrest of some leading figures.

Other international observers argue that a Radical party presidency would discourage foreign investment and be bad for Serbia's image. This approach reflects the heritage of the bogus 'revolution' of late 2000, when Milosevic's departure from power was seen as sufficient to rehabilitate Serbia in the eyes of the international community. This indicates diplomatic nostalgia for the Marshal Tito model of government and a failure to face the fact that the Greater Serbia project and the future of Kosovo was at the root of the regional crisis. Regional uncertainties over the future of Montenegro and Kosovo will persist whoever is elected president.



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### ENDGAME FOR KOSOVO

Kosovo is at the heart of the international community's crisis of influence in Belgrade. The disturbances of March 17-19 demonstrate that it can return to the world's front pages as a major issue, even in the context of the Iraq conflict and the 'war' on terrorism.

The main dividing line between the Radicals and other candidates is that they make Kosovo's future an important issue, whereas it is glossed over in the public pronouncements of the 'reformists'. On most other matters, the party programmes are quite similar. Reformist, in Belgrade realpolitik, actually means a government that is prepared to agree to Kosovo independence.

The endgame for Kosovo has begun, with the vast majority of the international community seeing independence as unavoidable, but unclear on how to bring it

about. Although the March troubles brought the Kosovo Albanians some bad publicity, they also demonstrate the unsustainability of the current situation. The handover of authority to the Kosovo assembly and presidency has been accelerating since the middle of last year, when the killing of Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic removed the last possible Belgrade leader who might have negotiated a political settlement for Kosovo within Serbia and Montenegro, and thus avoided independence.

The United Nations has been running down personnel, and in common with other international and non-governmental organisations has been handing over responsibilities to local political and economic groups. The NATO KFOR force was unable to intervene in a decisive way in many localities in March, given the number of Albanian protesters.

In the military sphere, the Kosovo Protection Corps, the national guard-type militia mostly composed of former members of the Kosovo Liberation Army, has developed. Economically, although privatisation has stalled, it will no doubt resume. A free-trade area with Albania is being established and several new border crossings have opened.

The most likely short-term outcome for Kosovo is increasing de facto independence, with the government, civil society and non-governmental organisations opening negotiations with a variety of bodies from reasonably sympathetic countries, such as Albania, Macedonia, Bulgaria and Turkey. Full independence is hostage to possible Russian or Chinese vetoes on the UN Security Council. In that sense, chronic problems in Serbia have replaced the Macedonian question as something Russia can use to promote regional instability.

### BLOCKING NORMALISATION

The lack of a resolution to the political status issue is often said by Kosovo's Albanian politicians to be damaging to regional stability, as it blocks access to normal international finance. It is equally true, if less apparent, that Kosovo is one of several factors preventing the normalisation of Serbian politics. Much the same applies to the structural uncertainty over the future of Montenegro.

The Vojislav Kostunica presidency inherited the Yugoslav mantle over Montenegro, and stood out strongly against separation from Serbia between 2000 and 2002. The current agreement keeping Montenegro within Serbia and Montenegro runs out at the end of next year, with a referendum on independence a strong possibility.

These basic regional uncertainties will confront any government in Belgrade, and it will not make much difference whether Tadic or Nikolic is elected. A Nikolic victory would mainly be bad for international community public relations, as it would finally and openly discredit the 2000 revolution.

