

Serbian government faces collapse following presidential election

Paul Mitchell
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On February 4, voters re-elected Boris Tadic president of Serbia in a second-round contest against Tomislav Nikolic of the extreme right-wing nationalist Serbian Radical Party (SRS). Only 120,000 votes separated the two candidates. Tadic, leader of the Democratic Party (DS), received 2.3 million votes, and Nikolic got 2.18 million in a turnout of nearly 68 percent of the electorate.

Western leaders greeted Tadic's victory, claiming the result was an endorsement of their policies. US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said that the Bush administration would work with Tadic to promote Serbia's cooperation with the West. "President Tadic promised voters a European future for Serbia," McCormack said. "We will work with President Tadic and Serbia to see that promise fulfilled and Serbia firmly on the path to European integration."

European Union (EU) foreign policy chief Javier Solana said he hoped Serbia would now move "as rapidly as possible" towards European integration. "I think that the results—for me at least—signalled the wish of the majority of the people in Serbia who want to continue the path towards Europe, and I'd like to say Europe is very happy with that," Solana added.

The rush by EU leaders, within hours of the election result, to approve a mission to the breakaway province of Kosovo and to demand that Serbia sign a cooperation agreement with the bloc by February 7 caused the euphoria over Tadic's victory to rapidly evaporate. It has provoked a political crisis that could lead to the collapse of the Serbian government.

The 1,800-strong mission of police officers, judges and prosecutors is intended to oversee the transition to Kosovan independence, working alongside more than 7,000 local police officers and 17,000 NATO peacekeepers. Only one EU member state, Cyprus, opposed the move—concerned that it could set a precedent for the recognition of the Turkish Republic of Northern

Cyprus set up after the Turkish invasion of the island in 1974. Some other states such as Romania, Spain and Slovakia voted for the mission but remain wary of Kosovan independence fearing the effect it could have on minority populations in their own countries.

The most frequently mentioned date for the mission's deployment is February 18, when EU foreign ministers are due to meet. Some commentators believe its deployment will signal that Kosovo's declaration of independence is imminent...a view bolstered by recent comments made by Kosovo politicians. "The elections in Serbia have nothing to do with us, they are the elections of a neighbouring country," Kosovo President Fatmir Sejdiu said during polling. "There are only a few days left before we declare independence."

Kosovo Prime Minister Hashim Thaci added, "Independence is here. In close coordination with our US and EU allies, my government and the Kosovo Parliament will declare it in days."

The February 7 cooperation agreement focuses on free trade arrangements and relaxed visa requirements. Brussels offered the deal last week instead of a Stabilisation and Association Agreement—the first step to EU membership—which the Netherlands blocked over Serbia's failure to hand over Bosnian Serb fugitives General Ratko Mladic and Radovan Karadzic to The Hague-based UN war crimes tribunal.

Yesterday, the EU announced that it would not sign the pact on ties with Serbia as planned after Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica blocked the move, denouncing it as a trick.

The government could collapse, triggering new elections. The government was already fragile after it took months of wrangling before something could be cobbled together in May of last year. Although the SRS was the biggest party following parliamentary elections in early 2007, it did not have a majority. In the end, Tadic's DS

formed a coalition with the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) headed by Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica and two smaller parties, New Serbia and G17 Plus.

The rifts in the government deepened when Kostunica, despite being a coalition partner, refused to endorse Tadic as presidential candidate because of Tadic's pledge to pursue EU membership no matter what happened in Kosovo. Tadic made EU membership a key point of his campaign, claiming that the economic and social hardship facing the Serbian people could be overcome through EU integration. Unemployment is around 30 percent in Serbia, and living standards remain amongst the lowest in the region.

As polling day approached, Kostunica publicly announced that he didn't know if he would even bother to vote, because presidential elections were not so important since the president's powers were just ceremonial.

Kostunica has attempted to balance between Tadic and Nikolic by supporting EU membership with a more managed economic "transition" and a concerted appeal to nationalist resentment over the issue of Kosovan independence. But his room to manoeuvre has been squeezed. Although Nikolic also supports EU membership, he blames the bloc for Serbia's "hopelessness and desperation" and puts greater emphasis on relations with Russia, which he sees as "more supportive, a partner that does not put any conditions." Whilst both candidates are opposed to Kosovan independence, Nikolic has threatened punitive measures against the province and countries that back a declaration of independence.

Kostunica has called for an urgent parliament session to discuss the crisis, saying that signing of any agreement on February 7 "represents trickery" aimed at getting Serbia's "assent for Kosovo's independence."

"The EU's proposal to sign a political agreement with Serbia while at the same time sending a mission to break apart our state is a deception aimed at getting Serbia effectively to sign its agreement to Kosovo independence," Kostunica added.

Serbia's investment minister, Velimir Ilic, who leads the New Serbia party, said that if Tadic's ministers sign the agreement with the EU on Thursday, the cabinet could fall. "Thursday is D-day," Ilic said. "If they sign, anything can happen with the government."

"If someone wants to enter the EU at any price, and the EU wants to snatch 15 percent of our territory, I will not sit in that government," Ilic added.

The SRS has indicated it would support Kostunica in

parliament and give him the votes to block the signing. SRS officials point that it was only last December that Serbia's parliament passed a resolution calling for Belgrade to cut off diplomatic relations with any state, including the EU that recognises Kosovo's independence. The DS and G17 Plus, which are unable to form a majority in parliament, have tried to argue that the agreement should be signed because it is only an "interim and general character" and therefore does not require parliamentary approval.

If the government does fall, Kostunica could either seek new elections or try to form a new administration with Nikolic.

In Russia, ministers and officials, whilst generally supportive of Tadic's victory, warned once more about the issue of Kosovan independence. Russian Duma Deputy Konstantin Zatulin said the West and Russia should unite in welcoming Tadic's victory, but warned that the EU should "review" its position on Kosovo. Russia should use every opportunity at its disposal to block Kosovo's admission to the United Nations as an independent state, added Konstantin Kosachev, head of the Duma's International Affairs Committee.

Fears are being raised openly in the ruling elite in the US about the Bush administration's Kosovo policy. Former Ambassador to the UN John Bolton, former Assistant Secretary of Defence Peter Rodman and former Secretary of State Lawrence S. Eagleburger penned an op-ed piece in the *Washington Times* last week warning about the risk of ignoring Russia's opposition to Kosovo independence and the impetus recognition could give to other separatist movements. "An imposed settlement of the Kosovo question and seeking to partition Serbia's sovereign territory without its consent is not in the interest of the United States," they wrote.

Rodman added, "A lot of people [in the Bush administration] had been silently muttering about this issue for a good while."

"The policy on Kosovo had been sailing merrily along for a good while, with the State Department just assuring everybody that this was doable," he said. "But I know a lot of people were nervous about it, in Washington and among some of our European allies."



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