

Working class disenfranchised in Serbian elections

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14 May 2012

Serbian citizens voted in simultaneous local, provincial, parliamentary and presidential elections on May 6. As expected, the two major parties—the ruling Democratic Party (DS) and the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS)—won most of the parliamentary seats, and their candidates will advance into the second round to decide the president.

According to final results by the Republican Electoral Commission (RIK), the SNS came first in the parliamentary elections, winning 73 MP seats, or 24 percent of the vote. The DS came second, with 67 MPs, or 22.0 percent, followed by the coalition led by the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), which won 44 MPs, or 14.5 percent. The nationalist Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS), the coalition led by the free-market Liberal Democrats (LDP), and another pro-market party, URS (formerly G17+), got 21, 19 and 16 seats, respectively, winning between 5.5 and 7.0 percent. The remaining 10 of the total 250 parliamentary seats went to several minority and regional lists.

Working class alienation from the political process was reflected in the high abstention rate. Only some 58 percent of around 7 million registered voters bothered to cast their ballot. Of those who did vote, almost 5 percent chose to express their anger with the political establishment by casting invalid votes, many of which contained threats to all politicians and deplored the lack of any credible alternative. There were also allegations of electoral fraud and irregularities such as vote buying, most notably from the SNS, which accused the DS of serious election rigging.

In the election, the DS, which took power in 2008 at the head of a broad coalition of pro-European parties, was largely able to hold its ground. Support had declined for the DS towards the end of the term because of the disastrous economic situation, falling living

standards, and its pro-market policies. Serbian GDP fell 3.5 percent in 2009, growing by only 1.0 and 1.6 percent in 2010 and 2011. The official unemployment rate is close to 25 percent, in large part a result of the criminal privatisations of state-owned companies. The country's economy is plagued by a persistent and large trade deficit, and the currency—the dinar—lost 20 percent against the US dollar last year.

Under these the conditions, DS increasingly moved to the right and sought to win the support of nationalist layers. It sought to do this while at the same time exploiting its status as the preferred political partner of the European Union (EU). The DS claimed it was the only party that could bring Serbia into the EU and declared that the candidacy status awarded to Serbia by the EU in March was its own achievement. The DS also denounced its major rival, the SNS, as unreliable and unpredictable after the party abruptly switched from an anti-EU to a pro-EU stance in 2008. In the election, the DS actually gained 3 seats.

The biggest change from the last parliamentary elections was the complete collapse of the ultra-nationalist Serbian Radical Party (SRS) led by Vojislav Seselj. In all the elections held during the last decade, the SRS was the largest single party to enter parliament but was never able (or willing) to form the government. However, after the last elections in May 2008, disagreements emerged between Seselj—on trial at the International Criminal Tribunal in the Hague since 2003, but still nominally the party chief—and his long-time deputy, Tomislav Nikolic, who wanted to moderate the SRS's nationalist rhetoric and sought rapprochement with the EU.

Not being able to achieve these policies within the SRS, Nikolic and some other influential members broke away from the Radicals in October 2008—taking

21 of Radical MP seats—and formed the SNS. Since then, the SNS has become more openly oriented towards the West, advocating pro-investor policies mixed with populist calls decrying poverty and corruption, while at the same time pandering to the nationalist votes, albeit in a less brutish manner than the SRS.

In this first election since the split with the SRS, the SNS succeeded in winning most of the SRS votes, and was able to benefit to a certain degree from protest votes against the incumbent DS. Meanwhile, the SRS only scored 4.6 percent—short of the necessary 5.0 percent threshold—and lost all of its 57 parliamentary seats.

At the same time, the SNS was unable to seriously dent support for the DS. This was because the SNS advocates virtually indistinguishable policies from the DS and was widely recognised as a party that did not offer any serious alternative.

Recent polls indicated that almost half of all Serbs now oppose joining the EU, which is being discredited by the austerity policies dictated by the financial aristocracy. However, all of the major parties are pro-EU, and the only opposition to the EU is monopolised by the right, which attacks it from the reactionary, nationalist position. As attacks on living standards continue and the major parties become increasingly discredited, there is the danger that, lacking a progressive alternative, anti-EU sentiment will benefit the far right, such as the new Serbian Gates movement, which almost entered parliament even though this was the first time it stood for election.

One of the main beneficiaries of the distrust in the two main parties was the SPS, which came in third, almost doubling the vote of its coalition list with two lesser parties. The successor of the Stalinist League of Communists of Serbia, the Socialist Party was largely discredited by its role in the Balkan wars of the 1990s under their leader Slobodan Milosevic. After Milosevic's death in 2006, Ivica Dacic became the new leader. Dacic tried to distance the party from its past and turn it towards the EU. The SPS-led coalition managed to gain only 7.5 percent in the 2008 elections, but that was enough to form the government with the DS, with the SPS receiving the powerful posts of interior minister and deputy prime minister, both held by Dacic.

The SPS played the populist card in this election, denouncing the widely hated privatisations and calling for social justice, selectively ignoring their own role in government with the DS. Dacic even said he wanted to turn back the clock to the time before October 5, a reference to Western-backed putsch orchestrated by the US and German intelligence agencies and Serbian secret police, which ousted Milosevic in October 2000.

It now appears that the DS and the SPS have agreed to form a government again, perhaps including the Liberal Democrats (LDP), which broke from the DS in 2005. The LDP is a thoroughly opportunist party, combining calls for free-market reforms with attacks on Serbian nationalism from the standpoint of the West. Its unprincipled character is revealed both in its election coalition with the Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO)—a party that seeks transformation of Serbia into a constitutional monarchy—and in its readiness to work with the DS, even though they criticised the party in the election campaign. The LDP is reportedly seeking the post of foreign minister in the new government.

The DS is now concentrating its efforts on gathering support for its presidential candidate, the incumbent Boris Tadic, who beat Nikolic by only 10,000 votes in the first round, each receiving 25 percent. The coalition around the SPS has already agreed to support Tadic. LDP leader Cedomir Jovanovic also announced his support for Tadic.

The utterly undemocratic nature of the elections is revealed by the fact that Tadic will face Nikolic in the presidential run-off for no less than the third time in a row. The two have already vied for the presidency in 2004 and 2008, with Nikolic then running as the Radicals' candidate and losing to Tadic. Polls put Tadic slightly ahead, meaning that he could now serve his third term as Serbian president. This state of affairs was made possible by revisions of the constitution to enable successful candidates to serve more than one term in office.



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