

## Tadic has won, but what was it really about?

by Jovan Teokarevic\*

By a margin of less than three percent, equalling around 100,000 votes, Boris Tadic won a very tight victory in the Serbian presidential elections last night, but with important consequences for his country and the Western Balkan region. Now that we know *who* the Serbian voters have chosen, it would be interesting to find out *what* they thought they were choosing. This is probably the most interesting part of the story, since – in electing the Serbian president for the next five years yesterday – many people were in fact voting for a variety of different things.

### *Europe – for and against?*

Tadic managed to convince his supporters that at stake was the crucial choice between a European future for Serbia (with him) or an anti-European one (with his contender Tomislav Nikolic). Extremely high participation in the elections, with a turnout of more than 67% of voters and in particular a much higher mobilisation of Tadic's supporters in the second round, easily demonstrates that Tadic has found the right formula that turned Nikolic's advantage of 180,000 voters in the first round into his own victory in the second round.

This effective formula, to be sure, is correct for the most part. Tadic is indeed Serbia's best symbol (and best chance) of a pro-European majority of its citizens, while Nikolic mostly symbolises the country's worst decade of the 1990s, with its military conflicts, war crimes, intolerance, isolation and deprivation. Things are more complicated though, for two main reasons. First, judging from a constant 70% popularity rating of the EU option in Serbia, a large proportion of Nikolic's voters (at least one quarter of them) would also like to see Serbia in the European Union one day, but they think Nikolic could take them there in a more honourable way (that is, without losing Kosovo, pride, identity...). Secondly, the 'Kosovo factor' complicated each individual choice yesterday, adding important nuances to both pro- and anti-European positions. Soon enough, when Kosovo declares independence, this will become clearer, and the pro- and anti-European division of Serbia's citizens will appear less clear-cut than it seemed to be during the electoral campaign.

### *Richer against poorer?*

Another way to understand this dramatic division that cuts Serbia into two distinct halves is to take a closer look at Nikolic's voters. Although one should entertain serious doubts about the desire and the capacity of the Serbian Radical Party to undergo HDZ-like changes, it remains true that Nikolic was supported as never before when his ideas became *less* and not *more* radical, and when he at the very end stopped rejecting the EU as Serbia's goal. This all means that within the body of his supporters the number of militant nationalists has decreased, while the number of transition losers has increased. In fact, Nikolic's party is at this moment gathering literally all transition losers in Serbia, and their number is not small, and yes – they have often been brutally neglected by all the post-Milosevic political elites that have ruled Serbia since October 2000.

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\* Jovan Teokarevic is Director of the Belgrade Centre for European Integration.

## *And Kosovo?*

The Kosovo issue, surprisingly, did not dominate the scene during the presidential campaign, for two main reasons. On the one hand, there is a widespread feeling that Serbia – regardless of its president or its government – cannot prevent Kosovo becoming independent. On the other hand, differences between the candidates about the coming independence of Kosovo are not that great – both of them are against an independent Kosovo. Voters were yesterday in fact deciding about the control of the inevitable damage. Tadic's victory means that a majority of Serbia's citizens would like to reduce the costs of losing Kosovo, by not giving up on the European future for Serbia. This does not automatically rule out an internal political crisis after the declaration of Kosovo's independence, but it significantly reduces its spillover effects in the region.