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The Impact of Tomislav Nikolić's Election on Serbia's Foreign Policy and EU Ascension Hopes

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This was Tomislav Nikolić's, the newly elected president of Serbia, third shot at the presidency. Both in his first attempt in 2004, and in his second one in 2008, he was defeated in the run-off poll by Boris Tadić. After the first round of the presidential election in May 2012 it seemed like he would lose once again. But, surprisingly or not, he did not and for the first time after the fall of Slobodan Milošević in October 2000, the office of the President of Serbia, and as an indirect consequence, the office of the Prime Minister as well, will be occupied by former high party officials of the Milošević regime.

Until 2008 Nikolić was a member and vice-president of the Serbian Radical Party (SRP), whose president Vojislav Šešelj has been on trial at the International Crime Tribunal for Yugoslavia (ICTY) since 2003. The SRP was known not just for being Milošević's close ally during the 1990s, but also for its extreme nationalistic policies after 2000, including a strong opposition to Serbia's EU integration, favouring at the same time a political and economic orientation towards Russia. Furthermore, not only did Nikolić's party support Milošević's regime and the war during the 1990s, but he himself also participated as a volunteer in the war in Croatia, enlisting himself as a member of the Serbian nationalist Chetnik-movement. Until 2008 Nikolić refused to admit Ratko Mladić and Radovan Karadžić were war criminals, while he also considered the genocide of Srebrenica a fiction of the French secret service. Nikolić's foreign policy before 2008 is evident when as candidate for presidency he opted for Serbia to become a province of Russia. However, although the SRP headed by Nikolić was since 2003 always the first or second strongest party in Serbian parliamentary elections, the party was nevertheless never in the position to form the government. Consequently, Nikolić developed an image of a constant loser.

A (Rhetorical) Turn?

But by the end of 2008 Nikolić parted ways with Šešelj and stepped out from SRP. He formed a new party, the Serbian Progressive Party (SPP) and distanced himself from the program of his former party and its nationalistic party president. Moreover, he significantly changed his rhetoric, arguing for Serbia's EU integration and for the extradition of indicted Serbs to the ICTY, which was the only remain condition for Serbia's EU candidacy. Although with this new rhetoric Nikolić risked to losing significant support from conservative voters, he and his new party succeeded to take over the majority of the former SRP voters and, as a new conservative party, to win not only the presidential but also the parliamentary elections in May 2012.

This (rhetorical) turn by Nikolić needs to be kept in mind when analyzing the future of Serbian foreign policy and EU integration: on one hand as a warning, and on the other as an indicator that Serbia's foreign policy will neither necessarily undergo a radical change from trends between 2000 and 2012, nor, what is more important, will it necessarily return to a nationalistic anti-EU policy from the 1990s. Let us first discuss why his turn should not be taken for granted and should hence be seen as a warning.

Russia or EU?

Although during the election night Tomislav Nikolić stated that Serbia will remain committed to its EU integration, in

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the interviews and statements he gave in the days preceding and following the elections, he confirmed the suspicions towards his pro-European attitude by people in Serbia and in the EU. In these statements he called Srebrenica not a genocide, but a terrible crime, and he declared that he considered the Croatian city of Vukovar a Serbian city, whilst also justifying the wars from the 1990s in a very pseudo naïve way, saying that it was a legitimate dream of the Serbs to continue living in one country and to use all means to make this dream come true (Interview given in May 2012 to the German Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung). Apart from his statements regarding the recent past, he soon took some illustrative actions that might indicate a shift in Serbia's foreign policy. Namely, his first trip after his election (but still before his inauguration) was to Moscow where he met Vladimir Putin. Furthermore, although he meanwhile resigned as party president, Nikolić has an interest and will to indirectly support a government with which the SPP would participate. Such a government would most probably opt for closer ties to Russia than a government led by the Democratic Party and former president Boris Tadić would. These are all proofs that since 2008 Nikolić underwent only a rhetorical turn and that the scepticism towards him in neighbouring countries, but also in Brussels, are not without foundation. Hence, it is not out of question that Serbia under Nikolić might drift away from the EU path and significantly slow down EU integration.

However, there are also indicators that this will not be the case. Nikolić takes office in the worst possible moment for Serbia since 2000. The official unemployment rate in Serbia is 25%, the economic crisis is severe, the European Union is very critical and strict towards new members, and particularly critical towards Serbia's Kosovo policy, which is an obstacle for Serbia's EU integration. Nikolić, and a possible government led by his party in coalition with the Socialist Party of Serbia, will not be able to overcome the crisis without making unpopular economic and social reforms, cutting down state expenses, reducing the number of employees in the public sector and most of all without attracting new fresh investments to Serbia. At the same time, in order to get economic help, on the political level this coalition will not be able to avoid concessions towards Kosovo. Having in mind that during the last decade the biggest investment in Serbia came from the EU and the United States, and that the EU through its diverse funds for social and economic development remains by far the biggest donor in Serbia, it is obvious that Serbia's exit strategy is directly related to good relations with the EU and further EU integration. Consequently, it would be politically very costly for Nikolić and a government led by his party to isolate Serbia, to bind it closer to Russia, to distance it from the EU, and not to improve good relations with the region, since that would deepen the economic crisis, create new discontents in Serbia, and provoke social revolts by his voters. Therefore the chances are not slight, that the overall economic situation on one hand, and the EU as the only actor which could provide a financial solution for the crisis on the other, will pressure Nikolić to carry out not only a rhetorical, but also a substantial turn when it comes to his EU commitment.

In other words, the possibility that Serbia under Nikolić and a government led by his party will change the foreign policy and stop Serbia's EU integration is in theory present, but his interest in continuing with EU integration is as big as the interest of previous governments. Only the motivation would be different: while the former president Tadić and the governments since 2000 led by the Democratic Party aimed for EU integration and good neighbour relations due to their own ideology and values, Nikolić would not do that out of belief or conviction, but simply out of political pragmatism. However, if he instead turns against the EU, and sticks to policies which will worsen the economic situation and deepen the bad living standard and conditions of voters in Serbia, chances for his re-election will be close to zero and hence not in his interest.

Finally, Serbian foreign policy from 2012 onwards will, disregarding the direction Nikolić and the new Serbian government will eventually take, also depend on one external criterion, namely the European Union. As the first and second wave of EU enlargement in 2004 and 2007 have shown, the process of EU integration has its own dynamics, in which the commitment of the candidate countries is as important as the commitment and willingness of the EU to integrate new candidates. In the past four years the scepticism and readiness among the EU, especially among the so called "old" members, to integrate new members has radically decreased. EU enlargement fatigue has become commonplace, while it has also become obvious that missing incentives from the EU usually slow down the pace of the reforms necessary for EU integration. In this regard, even if nothing changes in Serbia's foreign policy under Nikolić and a SPP government, the hopes for a definite and as fast as possible EU integration will remain vague and, to a not irrelevant extent, dependent on the developments within the EU itself.

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Irena Ristić is a political scientist, historian, and Researcher at the Institute of Social Sciences, Belgrade, Serbia.