

# Will the Real Tomislav Nikolić Please Stand Up? Serbia's New Chameleonic President

Written by Janine Clark

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JANINE CLARK, JUL 2 2012

As vice president of the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), Tomislav Nikolić, a sullen and serious looking man popularly referred to in Serbia as 'the Undertaker', was always overshadowed by the Party's charismatic and colourful leader, Vojislav Šešelj. This remained the case even after Šešelj was transferred to The Hague in February 2003 to stand trial for crimes against humanity and violations of the laws or customs of war (his trial at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia began in 2007). After Nikolić and Šešelj parted ways in 2008, reportedly due to policy differences on the issue of European Union (EU) membership, Nikolić became a more prominent actor on Serbia's political stage. Having previously served as Serbia's deputy prime minister (1998-1999) and as deputy prime minister of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1999-2000), this veteran politician formed his own political party in 2008. According to its statute, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) is committed to, inter alia, fighting corruption, creating a strong economy and combating unemployment (Serbian Progressive Party 2012a). Such pledges have found deep resonance in a country which, like other transitional states in the former Yugoslavia, is experiencing fundamental economic problems, rising poverty and falling living standards. Angry and disillusioned, this year Serbia's voters finally turned against the Democratic Party (DP) and its leader, Boris Tadić, who has served as the country's president for the last eight years. According to one political analyst,

The voters felt that none of the parties that participated in the "democratic revolution" [in October 2000] against Milošević's regime was up to the challenge. The Democratic Party, as the strongest one, was perceived as a huge failure. There was no real choice. Therefore, some simply boycotted the elections; some opted for a "blank vote". The only voters motivated, eager and angry enough were Nikolić's supporters. And, perhaps, those who just wanted to punish Tadić (Kolak 2012).

This was the context in which Nikolić defeated Tadić during the second round of Serbia's presidential elections on 20 May 2012. Winning 50.21 per cent of the vote, 60-year-old Nikolić will now serve as Serbia's president for the next five years. This article is concerned with the possible implications of Nikolić's election. In particular, can we expect to see fundamental changes in Serbia's foreign policy? Will Nikolić adopt a significantly more hard line position on major foreign policy issues than his moderate predecessor? While the answer to both questions is likely to be yes, it must be a tentative yes because Nikolić is a political chameleon; he has metamorphosed from a nationalist who was fervently opposed to the EU into a centre-right politician who is now professedly committed to leading Serbia into Europe. This in turn raises the critical question of whether this transformation is genuine or simply motivated by political expediency and self-interest. The Croatian writer Slavenka Drakulić maintains that when Nikolić left the SRS, 'he did so only in name – his rhetoric and ideas as an ultra-nationalist remained unchanged' (2012). This article seeks to offer a more nuanced analysis. While Nikolić has not wholly discarded his nationalist self, he has embraced a new pro-Europe self and, as the following examples illustrate, his oscillation between these two identities means that his rhetoric is often contradictory.

### **Nikolić: Nationalist or Peacemaker?**

Nikolić may have distanced himself from Šešelj but he shares the latter's outspokenness, coarseness and propensity

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for making serious political gaffes. Upon taking office, for example, he declared that the massacre of between 7,000 and 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys in the eastern Bosnian town of Srebrenica in July 1995 did not constitute genocide, an assertion which conveniently overlooks the judgements of both the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Speaking on Montenegrin television, Nikolić insisted that: 'There was no genocide in Srebrenica. In Srebrenica, grave war crimes were committed by some Serbs who should be found, prosecuted and punished' (Reuters 2012). Nikolić courted further controversy, this time in Croatia, when he recently claimed that Vukovar – the 'Croatian Stalingrad' which was razed during a three-month siege by the Serb-dominated Yugoslav National Army (JNA) in 1991 – is a 'Serb town' (Geć 2012), and that Croats (who form the majority) have no right to return there (Drakulić 2012). Moreover, in an interview with the German daily newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, he admitted that because Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina are now internationally recognized states, his territorial dreams 'will never be realized' (Radio Free Europe 2012). This was a significant statement that revealed his continued commitment to the nationalist ideal of a 'Greater Serbia'.

Such provocative and insensitive comments have inevitably generated considerable disquiet in the former Yugoslavia, and indeed only one of Serbia's regional neighbours, Montenegro, sent a senior official to attend Nikolić's inauguration. Yet while frequently embracing nationalist rhetoric, Nikolić also seeks to portray himself as a man of peace. In his inaugural speech on 11 June 2012, for example, he declared that in the interests of Serbia he will cooperate with everyone, in the East and in the West, because Serbia has nothing to lose. He further announced that '*Posebno želim da naglasim da ću u regionu voditi politiku mira, stabilnosti i saradnje...Sve razlike i probleme rešavaćemo mirnim i demokratskim sredstvima, dijalogom, pre svega*' ['In particular I want to emphasize that within the region I will lead a politics of peace, stability and cooperation...We will resolve all differences and problems with peaceful and democratic methods, with dialogue, above all'] (Nikolić 2012). As long as Nikolić continues to speak with two voices, however, such words will remain empty and he will struggle to gain the trust of his neighbours. In response to Nikolić's aforementioned interview with a German newspaper, for example, President Ivo Josipović of Croatia underscored that cooperation between Serbia and Croatia will only be possible if Nikolić 'changes his attitude' (Radio Free Europe 2012).

## Kosovo and the EU, Kosovo versus the EU?

Nikolić's rhetoric is most glaringly incongruent on the issues of Kosovo and EU membership. On one hand, Nikolić portrays himself as a politician who is fully supportive of the EU. During a recent visit to Brussels on 14 June 2012, for example, he insisted that '...I'm not even thinking about the possibility of a better future for Serbia and Serbs outside of EU membership' (cited in Milovanović 2012); and in his inaugural speech three days earlier, he opined that for Serbia the '*Evropski put*' ['European road'] is the only way forward (Nikolić 2012). Principle 5 of his Party's Programme, moreover, states that 'Serbia's goal of entering the European Union should not be doubted...' (Serbian Progressive Party 2012b). There is, nevertheless, an important caveat; principle 5 further stipulates that '...Serbia can enter the EU only as a sovereign state, with Kosovo and Metohija as its integral part' (Serbian Progressive Party 2012b).

In reality, Kosovo is no longer an integral part of Serbia; this former autonomous province became an international protectorate in 1999, following the NATO intervention and bombing; and in February 2008, Kosovo controversially declared independence. Serbia, however, still refuses to recognize Kosovo's independence and Nikolić can be expected to be more intransigent and dogmatic on the issue than Tadić, his predecessor. In his inaugural speech on 11 June, for example, Nikolić averred that '*Štitiću Ustav, poštovaću i čuvaću teritorijalni integritet Srbije...*' ['I will protect the Constitution, respect and guard the territorial integrity of Serbia...']. He further added that he would bring the country's political forces together to create a strong and unified policy vis-à-vis '*našem Kosovu i Metohiji*' ['our Kosovo and Metohija'] (Nikolić 2012). The first of the ten principles set out in his Party's programme, moreover, declares that the Serbian Progressive Party is committed to 'protecting the territorial integrity of the Republic of Serbia', that it will 'not accept any attempt to disintegrate parts of Serbia's territory' and that it will 'protect both the state and its national interests in every inch of the territory in an uncompromising way' (Serbian Progressive Party 2012b).

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Since Nikolić's goals in respect of Kosovo and the EU are clearly incompatible, he will inevitably have to sacrifice one for the sake of the other. Yet while the president of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy, is emphatic that Serbia's relations with Kosovo must undergo 'further normalization' in order for EU negotiations to begin (cited in Vogel 2012), it is difficult to imagine that Nikolić will forsake Kosovo, the 'Serbian Jerusalem' (Pappas 2005: 198). Ultimately, therefore, despite Nikolić's new pro-Europe persona, we can expect his policies to impede rather than to facilitate Serbia's journey towards EU membership. As Drakulić notes, 'At his inauguration, he said that if Serbia had to choose between the EU and the recognition of Kosovo, it had better forget the EU – thus jeopardizing EU membership' (2012).

## A Man with a Russian Heart

Finally, although Nikolić has endorsed a pro-European platform, he has also made no secret of his desire to build stronger relations with Russia. Claiming that 'it is in my heart and no one can take Russia away from me' (Al Jazeera 2012), Nikolić has disclosed that his foreign policy will be 'both Russia and the EU' (Biserko and Glaurdić 2012). His Party – whose programme (principle 5) declares that '...Serbia should develop close ties with the Russian Federation, China, India and other political and economic powers in the world...' (Serbian Progressive Party 2012b) – has signed an Agreement of Cooperation with Russia's 'United Russia' party, and Nikolić attended the latter's party congress in Moscow on 26 May 2012.

In conclusion, it remains to be seen whether and how Nikolić will resolve the various contradictions in his rhetoric and policies. Will he continue to oscillate between his nationalist and pro-Europe identities or will he ultimately jettison one in favour of the other? How will all of this affect Serbia's foreign policy trajectory? At this stage we can only speculate and ask that the real Tomislav Nikolić to please stand up.

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**Janine Natalya Clark** is a lecturer in the Politics department at the University of Sheffield, UK. She has been conducting fieldwork in the former Yugoslavia since 2002 and wrote her PhD on the Milošević regime. Her main research interests are ethnic conflict, post-conflict societies, transitional justice, war crimes and genocide, and she has published in a wide range of peer-reviewed journals. They include the *Journal of Genocide Research*, the *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, *Europe-Asia Studies*, *Human Rights Quarterly* (forthcoming) and the *International Journal of Transitional Justice* (forthcoming).

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