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Serbian Elections: No Problem Solved, New Opportunities in Sight

The May 11, 2008 elections – considered by a majority of parties involved, other stakeholders and observers at home and abroad to be of decisive importance for Serbia's future development - did not bring much of a change to the complicated political theatre. What is euphorically termed "historic victory of a European Serbia" is only partially true: the two parties that openly advocate Serbia's accession to Europe¹ managed to attract 43.9%² of the vote, whereas the opposite camp – **Koštunica's Democratic Party of Serbia** (DSS), **Šešelj's Serbian Radical Party** (SRS) and **Milošević's Socialist Party of Serbia** (SPS) received 48.3%, which indicates that Serbia's body political is split almost symmetrically. This outcome brings the political landscape in the country to a stalemate that becomes especially conspicuous when possibilities to form a viable government are analyzed.

This however, does not minimize the paramount importance of DS's relative victory. It is in this context that the EU decision to offer the *Stabilization and Association Agreement* (SAA) for signature despite Serbia's failure to deliver on outstanding obligations – most notably full cooperation with The Hague *War Crimes Tribunal* (ICTY) – can represent a turning point: situating the political Serbia in a European context opens up new opportunities President **Tadić** can not afford to miss. However, his hands are tied: largely due to the fact that DS, LDP and minorities do not have 126 seats, and partly because of

Distribution of the vote (*Ostali* stands for: *Other parties*):

¹ The *Liberal Democratic Party* (LDP) is the only parliamentary party that unequivocally stands for Europe as a coherent value system rather than a mere instrument of improving the population's living standards. On the other hand, despite its coquetting with Serb nationalist policies (catchword: Kosovo) and their proponents in the *Academy of Sciences and Arts* (SANU) and other xenophobic circles, as well as its prominent leaders' involvement in numerous corruption scandals, the *Democratic Party* (DS) still represents a kingpin of the European idea in Serbia.

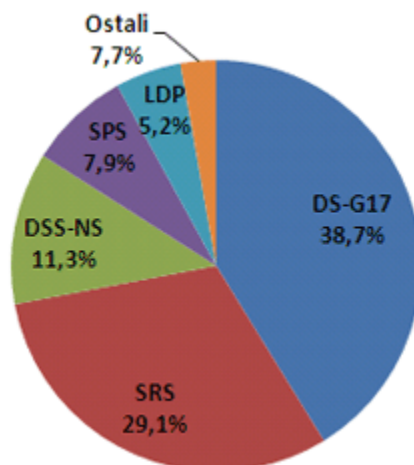
² Votes given to ethnic minorities' parties (around 120,000 or about 3%) could also be added to this score.





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his personal animosity towards the LDP and its leader **Čedomir Jovanović, Tadić** is forced to look for partners elsewhere. Already during the election campaign there were rumors (or, better: *educated guesses*) to the effect that DS and SPS had embarked on exploratory talks about what it would take to win the guardians of **Milošević's** legacy to join such a coalition. One of demanded (and allegedly granted) concessions: DS's pledge to mobilize "sister parties" support for SPS' admission to the *Socialist International*. As far as political (and programmatic) compromises the DS will have to enter in order to accommodate the Socialists' augmented appetite is bound to be fairly long, "laundering" the **Milošević** heirs' past representing a problem no more: it was President **Tadić** himself who recently called the SPS "a modern and dynamic party".

What appears to be a sensation – *Serbian Radical Party's* defeat and its lagging behind the DS by almost 10 percentage points – is a result of a shift in the so-called "transition losers" segment of the electorate: much of the electorate in the lower strata of the population (pensioners, the jobless) shifted from SRS to SPS, apparently the second winner in this election.

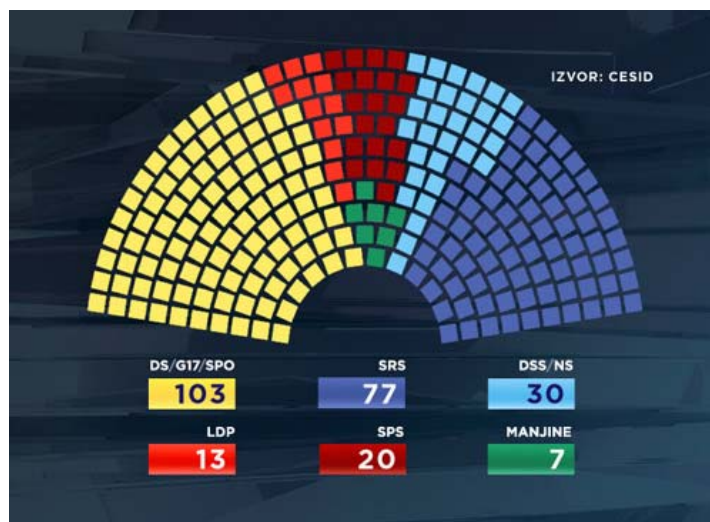
Distribution of mandates (Parliament has 250 seats) (*Manjine* stands for *Ethnic minorities*):





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What Serbia and the rest of the world is looking at is a high probability of long negotiations on a new coalition government: whereas the scope of choices remains fairly narrow – either the DS cuts a deal with the Socialists or with **Koštunica's** DSS³, or the latter two form a government with SRS – complicated negotiations (and bargaining combined with pressure and blackmail) on that government's priorities can bear fruit that could easily turn into a liability rather than an asset. In an absence of clear-cut policies on key issues (European integration; cooperation with ICTY; sincere commitment instead of the hitherto lip service to combating corruption and crime; and a prudent policy of appeasement on Kosovo *in lieu* of the present "patriotic" hysteria), it is to be feared that Serbia's accumulated problems will only reproduce themselves at a higher level.

³ It is not to be excluded that former coalition partners and present sworn enemies attempt to breathe new life into their coalition which ruled Serbia from May 2007 until March 2008.





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Outlook:

The outcome of the parliamentary election⁴, and especially the eroded influence of extreme rightist Radicals, opens up a new – maybe the last – opportunity for Serbia to embark on a project of serious and sincere modernization. Whether this opportunity will be taken advantage of depends solely on the level of maturity of the country's political (and intellectual) elites. Should they continue to substitute civic responsibility with loyalty to obsolete myths, Serbia will fall prey to her own inability to come to terms with the modern world.

⁴ The fact that provincial election in Vojvodina and local elections throughout Serbia are not dealt with in this paper does not imply that they are of lesser significance – on the contrary. They are omitted only for the sake of promptness in reacting to the parliamentary election – itself a blueprint to be followed at other administrative-territorial levels.

