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A New Government in Serbia

Some six weeks after the May 11 parliamentary election a new Government for Serbia is appearing on the horizon – the sixth after the October 2000 overthrow of **Milošević's** rule that has infected the entire Balkans with hatred, war and misery.

Aiming to avoid the „unsurmountable“ differences with the outgoing Prime Minister **Vojislav Koštunica**, President of the Republic and of the *Democratic Party* (DS) **Boris Tadić** decided to enter a coalition with the *Socialist Party of Serbia* (SPS) which will occupy an extremely strong position in the new Government in spite of its parliamentary group's modest size: it holds 11¹ out of 250 seats in the *People's Assembly*. SPS President **Ivica Dačić** is to become Deputy Prime Minister in charge of security issues and simultaneously Minister of the Interior – a bespoke post intended to cater to the augmented appetites of **Milošević's** successors. In addition to that, **Slavica Djukić-Dejanović**, a representative of the old SPS guard loyal to **Milošević** until the very end², has become Speaker of Parliament, whereas reliable SPS *cadres* are to occupy 4 to 5 important ministries³ and leading positions in management or supervisory boards of dozens of state-owned companies, utilities, institutions, embassies and media.

It is with generous support from some Western ambassadors in Belgrade and EU dignitaries that **Tadić** launched a debate on „national reconciliation“ already during the preparations for the coalition talks and the major turn in DS's policy that it represents. Having proclaimed the Socialists „the most suitable partner“ and a „dynamic and changing Party“, he was wholeheartedly supported also by a range of so-called „cooperative“

¹ Together with the *United Pensioners' Party* (PUPS) and *United Serbia* (JS) the SPS won a total of 20 seats.

² **Ms. Djukić-Dejanović** was a member of an inner circle group that had made the last-ditch effort to prevent **Milošević's** arrest in his residence during the critical night in April 2001. Prior to that, she was accused of election fraud in her native town in Kragujevac 1996/7 – the case never made it to the court.

³ They include **Petar Škundrić**, who will head either the Education or Energy Ministry – both requiring his expertise as a textiles fiber technology professor – apparently on his merits as first SPS General Secretary (1990-92).





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NGOs⁴, who argue that Serbia should look forward (towards Europe, they say) rather than waste time and energy looking back and dealing with recent past.

The new Government will face the complex and frustrating legacy of its predecessor – the second **Koštunica** Government **Tadić's** Democrats were also a part of – which has created new rather than solved many old problems during its brief tenure:

1. The reform process, effectively stalled after the **Djindjić** assassination in March 2003, should be set in motion again. This refers primarily to the area of privatization: experts argue that more than 45% of all assets in the nation's economy still are owned by the state.
2. How can the tense relationship with the EU – brought about primarily by Serbia's reluctance to effectively cooperate with the ICTY – be relaxed and helpful in accelerating her accession to the European Union?
3. How can the futile and often counter-productive propaganda on Kosovo be substituted by a frank and sincere efforts to address tremendous problems its economy and society – including its Serb community - are facing after independence? The first test: what will be the new Government's attitude (and behavior) in relation to the European EULEX mission aimed at reforming Kosovo judiciary, police and customs?

There are several reasons for (cautious) optimism:

1. There seem to be no obstacles to the ratification of the *Stabilization and Association Agreement* (SAA) with the EU in Serbian Parliament. Granting Serbia a candidate status, however, depends on her readiness to deliver on her obligations when it comes to future cooperation with the ICTY.
2. Europe as a political notion seems to be finally and irrevocably placed on the top of Serbian agenda and legitimized as a watershed in any strategic debate on the future of the country.
3. In addition to its own 128 mandates, the ruling majority can count with 13 votes belonging to the deputies for the *Liberal Democratic Party* (LDP) – a spinn-off of the *DS* after the latter was thoroughly cleansed of numerous activists and leaders who insisted on *DS's* more energetic stance on Kosovo, ICTY and Europe – political goals central to **Djindjić's** vision. *LDP* has pledged to support Government's initiatives and policies aimed at an accelerated harmonization of Serbia's legislation with the *acquis communautaire* and other international standards.

⁴ These include the *Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence* (BFPE), *Center for Policy Studies* (CPA/CPS), the *New Serbian Political Thought* (NSPM) periodical, and a range of "political analysts" whose mission consists of "servicing" the dominant ideology and its proponents: **Slobodan Antić**, **Djordje Vukadinović**, **Milan Nikolić** and many more.





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4. The fact that President **Tadić** – reelected in February 2008 – will stay in office for 4.5 more years should also not be neglected: should he earnestly and sincerely dedicate himself to the modernization and europeanization of Serbia, his authority and influence can be considerably strengthened and thus contribute to the broadening of the thin pro-european majority in Serbian political class and in the society at large.

On the other hand, the fact that the ruling coalition came into being as a result of unthinkable compromises – political rehabilitation of the *SPS* being but one of them - can not be overestimated. Along with coalition partners' hitherto performance and the dominating tendency to utilize their share in the division of power to pursue narrow party or personal interests, there are other reasons for serious concern, too:

1. It is highly probable that the old practice of Government's setup and *modus operandi* as a „confederation of ministries“ will continue. Individual ministries will be subjected to 100% control of parties these ministries are „entrusted“ to, with no system of checks and balances either within the government or between branches of power generally.

2. The new Government embarked on the meanwhile institutionalized system of „division of the capture“: hundreds of powerful, influential or lucrative positions in state-owned or controlled companies, utilities, media or embassies are turned into *sinecures* and assigned to meritorious „soldiers of the Party“ after each election. This represents one of the most important sources of corruption in what has long ago become a highly corrupt and criminalized society.

3. The fact that the new Government will consist of almost thirty members – Prime Minister, one Vice-PM⁵ and three to four Deputy PMs and 24 Ministers - testifies that the formation of the new Government was guided by the necessity to accommodate all the power-hungry members of the coalition.

4. Strategically relevant decisions relating to the economic, financial⁶, security, judicial or educational policies are likely to be watered down and victimized to short-sighted political deals between the coalition parties.

5. President **Tadić** has accumulated enormous power⁷ and is using it to appoint mediocre „experts“ and similar yes-men to important positions in the power structure – an exercise

⁵ Intended for SPS Chairman **Ivica Dačić** - another “token of appreciation” to the Socialists.

⁶ Since the budget is almost empty – another „achievement“ of the „patriotic“ Kosovo policies of the previous Government – the intention has already been announced to fill the gap by means of privatizing state-owned assets, including the sale of the *Oil Industry of Serbia* (NIS) and its monopoly on oil production, import, refining and much of its distribution in Serbia to Russian *Gazprom* at a ridiculously low price.

⁷ He remained DS President after being elected as Head of State and recently requested (and received) his Party's unanimous endorsement as the only person „authorized to conduct the coalition negotiations and decide on personnel issues“, meaning the sole authority in appointing cabinet ministers. It has also been announced that he will sign the Coalition Agreement with other parties when the Government is formed.





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that can be counterproductive: there already are signs of serious dissension within the inner circle and discontent in the rank and file of his Party.

Irrespective of these circumstances, it is certain that these developments will have far-reaching consequences in Serbian politics:

1. The extreme nationalistic and xenophobic block around **Koštica** has been rendered powerless, although it would be an illusion to think that it no longer represents a serious danger.
2. Thanks to President **Tadić** who turned a *necessary evil* into a strategic alliance with the Socialists, **Milošević** heirs have been issued *indulgence* for their criminal policies in the 1990s. It should be noted that they still insist on the rightness of those policies and claim that **Slobodan Milošević** was „kidnapped and unlawfully handed over to the illegal and anti-Serb Tribunal in The Hague“. There seems to be no antidote for all the forms of pressure and blackmail Socialists will surely employ while bargaining with their coalition partner – it will be interesting to see if the Democrats have learned any lessons from the ample experience with **Koštica** in that respect.
3. Just a few days away from a new Government, it was still a secret who will be Prime Minister, what its program will contain, and what its priorities⁸ will include, not to mention initiating a broad debate on the plethora of problems the country suffers from. This is largely due to **Tadić's** arbitrary manner in conducting the post-election procedures: it is often impossible to differentiate whether he speaks in his capacity of head of state, party leader or allmighty commander of all.
4. The paralysis of the previous Government and tug of war around the new one will certainly lead to the loss of yet another year necessary for the reanimation of the economy and a way out of the (self-imposed) isolation Serbia finds itself in.

Outlook:

The lifespan, efficiency and political future of the new Government will depend on the ability and readiness of Serbia's political elite to subordinate its shortsighted interests to the necessity of an accelerated modernization of the society and its inclusion into the community of free and prosperous nations, as well as on EU's incentives (and pressure) to effectively carry out long overdue reforms.

⁸ The much advertised "principles" such as European integration, Serbia's territorial integrity (Kosovo), just social policies etc. represent campaign slogans rather than seriously elaborated corner stones of coherent policies to be pursued.





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