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Domestic Politics and European Integration in Serbia. The Year 2012 and the Paradox of Moderate Nationalism

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Abstract

The local, parliamentary and presidential elections that took place in May 2012 and their outcome raised fears in European capitals when the leader of the main opposition party, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), Tomislav Nikolić managed to win the second round of balloting with a difference of more than two percent (49.54% / 47.31%). However, in the first round of presidential elections the pro-Western candidate, the incumbent President Boris Tadić, had managed to overtake his opponent, even if it was a narrow defeat (25.31% / 25.05%), and the polls, as well as some analysts, indicated a relatively secure victory of president Tadić in the second round. To understand the outcome of the second round, one has to analyze the political climate in Serbia from 2008 to 2012, as well as the changes in the positions of the main actors regarding the main topics of the public agenda.

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The character who has catalyzed the pro-European forces in Serbia over the last ten years has been Boris Tadić. Moreover, the final confrontation in the presidential elections in 2012 was a repetition of the 2008 elections, which in their turn repeated the elections of 2004, with Tadić and Nikolić dividing the electorate almost in half. The race was also very tight in 2008, with Tadić narrowly defeating Nikolić (50.5%). In 2008, more than in 2012, the meaning of the popular vote exceeded what was at stake through the designation of the future president of Serbia

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and represented a barometer of popular support for Serbia's EU accession project.[†] The two political projects, although similar in their general approaches, fueled in fact two trends in the Serbian society. Indeed, both candidates expressed their support for Serbia's EU accession, as well as reiterated their position that Serbia should continue to consider Kosovo a province within the Serbian sovereign state, according to the Constitution in force since 2006.

The differences came from Tadić and Nikolić's divergent views on the conditions of EU accession negotiations, in the context in which Kosovo's declaration of independence, following the failure of negotiations mediated by the UN special Envoy Martti Ahtisaari, was imminent. Indeed, on February 17, 2008, Kosovo's independence was declared, two weeks after the second round of the presidential elections, with most analysts believing that the postponement of this declaration until after the elections was the result of US pressure on Pristina, in an attempt not to inflame even more the ongoing campaign and not to increase the chances of winning of the nationalist leader Nikolić.

Therefore, the issue of Kosovo actually made the difference in the two candidates' approach of the EU accession. For Tadić, Serbia's policy to start accession negotiations should have been based on a pragmatic approach in which the two processes – EU accession and solving the Kosovo problem – could have been achieved together: Serbia in the EU, Kosovo within Serbia.[‡] For Nikolić, solving the issue of Kosovo, according to the Serbian Constitution, should have been a prerequisite from Serbia to begin the EU accession process, otherwise Serbia could have been conditioned along the way by the EU to recognize its independence in exchange for accepting the accession application.

Between the two rounds of balloting, Tadić received explicit support from the EU when, on January 28, 2008, EU gave Serbia a package of political cooperation, including trade and visa liberalization, a pre-agreement to the Stabilization and Association Agreement.

Serbia's political situation is not one that can simply be described by a division between pro and anti-Western world, respectively pro and anti-Russian. During the same period between the two rounds of balloting, Tadić was not only supported by the EU, but he also received a very strong sign of encouragement from Moscow, when he was welcomed there and signed one of the largest privatization contracts in Serbian history. It was the purchase, by direct custody and for a price that some analysts considered to be three to four times lower than that which would have been obtained through an open tender, of 51% of the Oil Industry of Serbia (NIS) by Gazprom for 400 million euros.[§]

Nevertheless, Tadić's victory was hailed by Western governments as a victory of the pro-Western orientation against nationalist forces, and Serbia's endeavour for EU integration therefore received a new impetus. Moreover, Tadić's election in 2008 for a five-year term could have avoided an overlap of parliamentary and presidential elections in 2012, and Tadić could have played a decisive role in the formation of a pro-European government in the post-election period. His resignation and entry into the election campaign alongside the coalition that included his own party (PD), was based on a strategy that proved to be wrong. Indeed, repeating the scenario of the 2004 and 2008 elections would have been possible if Tadić had succeeded to secure his voters through the same discourse of the pro/anti-European cleavage, in which case his direct support in the campaign would have also been transferred to the electoral score of his own party. After a campaign marked by the economic crisis rather than by ideological disputes, the calculation proved wrong not only for Tadić, but also for the Democratic Party which registered a fall of 16 % from 38.4 % in 2008, to 22,11% in 2012 .

Party	Coalition	Leader	%
Serbian Progressive Party (SNS)	Let's put Serbia in motion!	Tomislav Nikolić	24,04

[†] Julie Ray, 'Serbians' Views on EU Membership Key to Vote. Presidential election is seen as a referendum on future path with Europe', available at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/103807/Serbiens-Views-Membership-Key-Vote.aspx>, retrieved on 22.09.2010.

[‡] B92, 'Tadić: Serbia wants both Kosovo and EU', available at http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2008&mm=01&dd=10&nav_id=46814, retrieved on 02.11.2009.

[§] B92, 'Moscow press: Tadić to profit most from energy deal', available at http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2008&mm=01&dd=26&nav_id=47243, retrieved on 03.11.2009.

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