

(The National Interest, June 1, 2012)

Unresolved tensions in Serbia threaten the Balkans' fragile stability.



This week, nationalist Tomislav Nikolic was installed as the new president of Serbia. EU and U.S. officials had hoped for the election of a leader who would ultimately move forward on the Kosovo issue, especially in light of Serbia's potential accession to the EU. Whether such a leading politician can be found in Belgrade is questionable. But Nikolic is certainly not the West's cup of tea.

Strong EU and U.S. support could not save former president Boris Tadic after he poorly managed the economy and led a party popularly perceived as corrupt. Instead, the hurly-burly of Serbian politics produced an electoral outcome neither foreseen nor desired by EU foreign-policy chief Lady Ashton. She pulled out all the stops to get Tadic reelected, including getting the Americans to force Kosovo's government to accept a minor, unpopular deal with Serbia on their contentious border problem, which in turn allowed Tadic to begin negotiations on Serbia's EU accession. But disgruntled Serbian voters had other ideas and elected Progressive Party leader Nikolic.

The West had treated Nikolic as something of a leper because of his close collaboration with Hague-Tribunal indicted war criminal Vojislav Seselj and his support of Serbian sovereignty over Kosovo—all despite the fact that he broke with Seselj, established his own political party and has strongly supported Serbia's EU aspirations. His public position on Kosovo is no different than Tadic's on the essential points. The EU may well have to deal with both men, since the election defeat has not necessarily ended Tadic's political career. The parliamentary returns make it possible that the new Serbian government could be a coalition, with or without Nikolic's party and with Tadic's party playing a key role. Tadic could be prime minister and have more power than Nikolic if the president's party is not in the coalition.

But EU accession will not be Serbia's most pressing concern. Rather, the difficult task of preventing further economic deterioration must be the focus of any new government. The Greek debacle and the overall decline of the euro zone are wreaking havoc in the area. The worsening

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economy is the main reason Nikolic made his first visit to Moscow—to get financial assistance from Putin—although Nikolic also made clear his dedication to relations with the EU and to an early visit to Brussels. An invitation for Nikolic to visit Washington also might help smooth things over.

Rising Tensions in the Balkans

However great the new Serbian government's attention to restoring the economy, it still must deal with the Kosovo problem: First, there is the very thorny problem of the future of the Serbs of North Kosovo. Ultimately, there must be a resolution of Kosovo's status before Serbia is admitted to the EU.

The EU has a structural problem—five governments not recognizing Kosovo—making it difficult for Brussels to act vigorously. It is conceivable that may change, but Serb political leaders may believe the EU will do as it did with a divided Cyprus and let Serbia into the EU with the Kosovo-independence issue unresolved. Of course, all this is well down the pike, and much depends on events.

The EU hopes large financial aid and the promise of accession will eventually change the political climate within Serbia, making it possible for the political leadership to somehow tolerate Kosovo's independence. But it's doubtful that any major Serb political leader will accept that reality without at least some form of partition of the North of Kosovo. Not surprisingly, Nikolic—like his predecessor—keeps indicating that he will never recognize Kosovo's independence. But he has also offered the prospect that the Serb people be given a referendum on EU membership and their attachment to Kosovo, which might turn out to be more realistic and different than Serbia's frozen political leadership. That is Brussels's hope in exporting the issue to the future. The EU refuses to play tough with Belgrade's political class, which remains intent on preserving a bad past that has effectively vanished.

Meanwhile, that frequent instigator of change in the Balkans—violence—cannot be precluded. The most immediate problem is in Kosovo's North, where the possibility of real hostilities remains. Much more is required for advancing Serbia-EU negotiations and deepening Kosovo's relations with the EU. Even the agreements worked out before Serbia's elections are hardly being enacted.

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Difficulties in Kosovo stem from basic demographic realities: the population of perhaps thirty thousand Serbs wants no part of Kosovo or any tie to a Pristina that insists on exerting some degree of control. There is no magic wand, and partition of northern Kosovo—also the best option for the bigger independence problem—is unacceptable to the West. Thus, the next focus of EU-led negotiations on the North will be whether a plan for virtual autonomy of the Northern Serbs can be accepted by both parties. The EU will be working hard to buttress the Serbian position—and no longer limited by the recent Serbian election, the process may become explosive.

With these fundamental issues unresolved, the West could be in for another difficult ride in the Balkans. And no mention has been made of the instability in Macedonia and the long political deterioration in Bosnia amidst worsening economic prospects in the region. Nothing can be taken for granted with such continuing ethnic divides. Rightly or wrongly, hard decisions always can be avoided, as the West did at Dayton and at the end of the Kosovo war. Once again, it is the hour of Europe with the Americans tagging along, making the bet that time and money will solve the present difficulties.

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