

Serbs vote Sunday -- national identity or dissolution

by Andrew Wander via druze - Christian Science Monitor *Saturday, May 10 2008, 9:22am*

international / social/political / other press

Nationalistic debate as Serbia heads to polls

Nis, Serbia; and Zubin Potok, Kosovo - The Serbian Radical Party's election rally in the main square of the southern town of Nis seemed, at first glance, like any other campaign event. Popular music played over the PA system. Badges and hats were sold from makeshift stalls, and families with children listened to the speakers.

But the music was sung by the widow of Arkan, a Serbian paramilitary whose units wreaked havoc in Bosnia and Kosovo during the 1990s. The badges bore the face of Vojislav Seslj, the Radical Party's founder, who is on trial in The Hague for crimes against humanity, and the hats were berets of Chetnik fighters.

The families provided the final proof of how far this ultranationalist party has come in its battle to persuade Serbs that it - not pro-Western parties - offers the country a brighter future.

The polls are being billed as the most important ones since the fall of former President Slobodan Milosevic. But with neither the pro-European Democrats nor the Radical Party expected to score an outright victory, the direction of the country will rest with a handful of power brokers from smaller parties seeking to cement their influence in Serbia's fractured political landscape.

That worries Western leaders, who fear that the need for coalition building could favor an alliance of the Radical Party and the nationalistic DSS Party of Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica. Such an outcome, they argue, could discourage investment in Serbia, scupper the country's EU membership prospects, and orchestrate further trouble in Kosovo.

Split over Kosovo independence

The national election was triggered in March, when Mr. Kostunica pulled out of a fragile governing coalition with President Boris Tadic's pro-European Democrat Party (DS). Mr. Tadic was not prepared, as a gesture of protest against Kosovo's independence, to abandon plans to join the European Union.

Kostunica, meanwhile, refused to contemplate further integration without Kosovo. The result was an acrimonious split and the collapse of the government.

In Nis, the speeches made by Radical leaders were full of signs that the concerns of Western countries that nationalist elements may strengthen were justified. "Kosovo is ours," Radical Party leader Tomislav Nikolic said. "We didn't win it in the lottery. It's Serbian by history. European Union? Yes - but not without Kosovo."

The European Union is so anxious to see a Democrat victory that last week they signed a crucial pre-membership accord, the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with Serbia in an attempt to boost the prospects of the beleaguered pro-Western parties.

But observers warn that because the EU is seen as one of the principal architects of Kosovo's independence, the move could have the opposite effect.

"Tadic is trying to make this election a referendum on the EU - but he hasn't sold the EU to the Serbian population," says James Lyon of the Brussels-based think tank International Crisis Group. "In contrast, Kostunica has successfully defined the SAA as signing away Kosovo."

The tactic seems to have worked. The SAA is seen by many as a betrayal of Serbia. Graffiti in Belgrade denounces Tadic as a traitor, and earlier this week he received death threats. The polls are yet to show the breakthrough for his party that the EU hoped for.

Meanwhile, the nationalist lobby has concentrated on expanding its support base.

Emil Milosavic, an economist from Nis, explains why he supports the Radicals. "They will do the most to protect Serbia," he says. "Kosovo was stolen from Serbia. On top of that, we have a bad economy, a low standard of living, and massive corruption. I would like to see Serbia join the EU, but as an equal partner, and only with Kosovo."

Serbs in Kosovo will vote

Opposition to Kosovo's independence is the only issue that unites all mainstream parties in Serbia. In Kosovo itself, Serbs are planning to defy authorities in Pristina by holding elections on Sunday.

On Wednesday, Kostunica's DSS held a campaign rally in a new sports hall - paid for by the Serbian government - in the northern Kosovo town of Zubin Potok.

"Serbia needs a government whose first concern, not task or obligation, will be to respect the message that echoes through Serbia," Kostunica said, "and which has been accepted by the greater part of the world - and that message is: Kosovo is Serbia."

In a swipe at Tadic, he said those who had signed the SAA had "embarrassed themselves."

But not everyone in Zubin Potok agrees.

"I will vote for Tadic because if he wins, the EU will divide," says Bojan Bozovic, a shop owner and former journalist.

"Half will support Pristina, and half will support Belgrade," he adds. "But if the Radicals win, 95 percent of the EU will support Pristina, and Kosovo will be lost."

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