

## Serb coalition in doubt after Tadic win

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BELGRADE (Reuters) - Serbia's pro-Western president Boris Tadic has won re-election in a contest with nationalist Tomislav Nikolic, but his narrow victory may only have set up a fresh struggle over the country's future course.



***Tomislav Nikolic: confident in narrow defeat***

Analysts say it puts the survival of Serbia's ruling coalition in question as it braces for the secession of Kosovo, the Albanian-dominated province, which has Western backing for a declaration of independence in the next few weeks.

Tadic won Sunday's presidential election by 50.5 percent to around 47.8 percent, according to a partial count by the state electoral commission, which reported many spoiled ballots.

In a 2004 presidential race, Tadic beat Nikolic easily by some 9 percentage points, in what the West saw as a welcome sign that the reactionary nationalism which fuelled war in the 1990s over the breakup of Yugoslavia was steadily weakening.

"There is no winner here," said Dragoljub Zarkovic, editor-in-chief of weekly news magazine Vreme. "Formally, it seems Boris Tadic will be president for the next five years, but in essence the moral winner is Tomislav Nikolic."

Zarkovic saw it as a telling comment on the split in Serbian society that, seven years after ousting former autocrat Slobodan Milosevic, Serbs seemed still equally divided between hardline nationalism and a pragmatic, pro-Western course.

Analysts said the election turned on economic issues and the outcome was the most meager endorsement of post-Milosevic reforms that many Serbs feel have benefited only the few.

### COALITION SHOWDOWN?

The EU saw it as a referendum on how Serbia should react to Kosovo's independence. Tadic says EU membership must remain the top priority. Nikolic advocated turning to Russia.

Slovenia, holding the rotating EU presidency, Slovenia, welcomed Tadic's victory as "support for (Serbia's) European course", without commenting on the narrow margin.

Former U.S. envoy William Montgomery warned in advance of the vote that the West had misread Milosevic's defeat as proof that Serbia had renounced nationalism. It must not make the same mistake by assuming a Nikolic defeat on Sunday would mean smooth sailing for Kosovo's independence, he said.

Serbia's medieval heartland has been run by the United Nations since NATO drove out Serb forces in 1999 to halt ethnic cleansing during a counter-insurgency war in which thousands of civilians -- mainly Albanians -- were killed by Serb forces.

Serbian Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica made coalition ally Tadic look like a junior partner over the past year, driving an uncompromising line on Kosovo with strong backing from Russia as Tadic strove for a balanced approach.

Kostunica wants a hardline response to independence, including diplomatic sanctions against the West, repudiation of the EU and measures to strangle the province economically. A few days ago, he announced he would not support Tadic's re-election.

With Nikolic as head of state, Kostunica would have secured support for a confrontational policy. But Tadic wants Serbs to put their future prosperity ahead of any bitterness they feel over the loss of Kosovo, and pursue an EU future.

The battle over that choice of course must now be fought.

Analysts said the collapse of the coalition could come soon, with Kostunica's refusal to accept a proffered political agreement with the EU and insistence that Serbia actively oppose deployment of a planned EU supervisory mission to Kosovo.

Tadic's Democratic Party "will threaten early parliamentary elections and Kostunica will threaten to form a government with (Nikolic's) Radicals", analyst Djordje Vukadinovic said.

But analysts were split on whether the coalition would fall, triggering a snap election as Kosovo declares its independence.

"Kostunica will no longer be able to decide on everything in this government," political analyst Dragan Bujosevic said. "The president will now have greater influence."

(Editing by Alison Williams)

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