

Serbia's election merry-go-round: Parliamentary elections 2003



One of Otpor's election posters offering a Serbia 'without crime' and 'without fear'

Executive Summary

The republic of Serbia held early parliamentary elections on 28th December, 2003. The next poll was not officially due until late 2004 however, since the ruling DOS coalition had collapsed and the government lost a vote of no confidence in October 2002 it had become impossible for the parliament to function. On 13th November the acting President of Serbia, Nataša Micić, acknowledged the impasse and called a new election.

Despite hopes for a blossoming of democracy after the fall of the Milošević regime in October 2000, the population of Serbia has proved incapable of achieving stability through the ballot box. Two presidential polls failed in 2002 due to low turnout. A new presidential election held a year later, on 16th November 2003 also failed to produce a winner. Although there were no formal requirements for the size of turnout in the parliamentary poll, there were fears that low participation on 28th December would allow nationalist parties to gain control of the new parliament.

Instability in Serbia had been heightened following the assassination of the prime minister, Zoran Djindjić on 12th March, 2003 after which thousands of suspected criminals were rounded up in the search for those responsible for his murder.¹ A week before the 2003 parliamentary poll a high profile trial of those accused of Djindjić's killing began in Belgrade which served to further underline the fragile state of society in this part of the Balkans. At the same time, the international community was breathing down the neck of the Serbian government, demanding the handing over of more war crimes suspects and making future economic aid depend on cooperation with the ICTY.

Politicians, particularly from the EU, also made it clear that Serbia's future integration into Europe depended on voters making the 'right choice' at the polling stations on 28th December. "I hope you will make the decision to go forward to the future and that future is to be part of the EU, to share the values of the EU" said Javier Solana.² An unnamed diplomat added that the "West would accept any government made of DSS, G17 and SPO-NS".³ In other words, only a vote for the same – or similar – parties to the DOS coalition would be considered legitimate by Brussels and Washington however unpopular they were with the Serbian people.

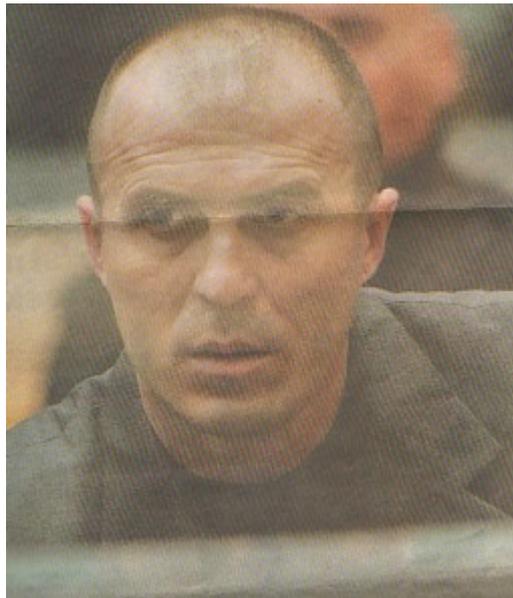
¹ See: The Kirov Murder revisited? Zoran Djindjić's assassination and Serbia's political elite. www.oscewatch.org

² Sasha Grubanovic "Serbia: Going Down to the Bell" www.tol.cz December, 2003

³ *ibid*

BHHRG's monitors observed the voting on 28th December. They came to the conclusion that holding elections has become a way of life for thousands of Serbs who now use polling day as a means of keeping warm and earning a supplement to their miserable incomes or pensions. Parliamentary elections are due for the assembly of the Federation of Serbia and Montenegro (SCG) and yet another presidential election should take place early 2004. Meanwhile, local pundits are already predicting that the new government will not last long and another parliamentary election will have to be held. However, any change in the rules that lead to a reduction in the number of elections would be economically disadvantageous to the more than a third of a million citizens who get an additional €15-20 for participating in one way or another in the election process.

Background to the Election



Zvezdan Jovanovic, presently on trial in Belgrade for Zoran Djindjic's murder

Economic reform: Serbia continues to suffer from severe problems as its government strives to implement the West's familiar package of economic reforms. Output dropped by 3.8% in 2003⁴ and the country is fast approaching a situation where its population has more pensioners than people in jobs.⁵ According to one report, "After three years of rule by DOS, Serbia's industrial centres are today characterized by massive lay offs, bitter labour conflicts and a level of poverty shocking by European standards".⁶ Although Western governments have blamed institutional sclerosis for the failure to accelerate market reforms and privatisation, it is probably true to say that there isn't much of any value left to sell - moribund smoke-stack industries in the 'new Europe' long ago lost their appeal to foreign investors. Kragujevac's car factory employed over 70,000 people in 1989, but now struggles to maintain a workforce of 4,000. Agribusiness is one of the only areas that still holds out the promise of attracting foreign companies to Serbia, particularly in the fertile land of the Vojvodina region.

Meanwhile, the outgoing government is involved in the rebuilding of Belgrade's international airport with a €40m. loan from the EBRD to "enable the dispatch of a much larger number of passengers".⁷ A new airport is invariably the favourite scam in impoverished countries. As work on the present structure only finished in the late 1970s when the airport handled far more traffic than it does now due to the constant movement of people within the former Yugoslavia it is difficult to see where all the new passengers will come from. Other such

⁴ "Industrial Production in Serbia Drops, While in Montenegro Increases" *Tanjug*, 23rd December, 2003

⁵ "Number of employees smaller than the number of pensioners" www.Blic.co.yu/arhiva/2003-07-17

⁶ Milovan Mracevich "How the DOS bungled it", www.iwpr.net 8th January, 2004

⁷ See www.serbia.sr.gov.yu/news/2003-04

projects are mooted by the EU. On 12th December 2003 a grandiose scheme was unveiled to upgrade the infrastructure in eastern Serbia, but the projected €18.3 will not go far after the EU's ranks of consultants and economic strategists have been paid.⁸

In the past year an explosion of consumer credit has hit Serbia so that in the days before the Orthodox Christmas holiday, shops in Belgrade were doing a roaring trade. The easy availability of credit has also stifled any upturn in domestic productivity. For example, a small imported car can be purchased for c. €100 per month leaving few customers interested in buying a locally-produced, revamped Yugo. However, the situation in a capital city is always misleading and BHHRG's observers who went to smaller towns like Pančevo and Smederevo saw a bleak picture of civic blight with mounting piles of garbage and veritable jungles of graffiti covering broken down apartment buildings.

Although Serbia has been castigated for allowing economic reform to 'stall', unemployment in the country is (officially) over 32% and rising. Even many of those with a job are working on short-time in factories that barely function. Low prices for commodities like wheat have also hit the agricultural sector badly. However, there is still a large administrative apparatus in the country and much of the remaining slack is accounted for by a policy of allowing thousands of young people to remain in study for long periods of time at the country's many universities, thus removing them from the jobless toll. But, this only serves to hide the fact that students in economically valuable subjects like engineering and computer science plan to go abroad once they graduate. It is estimated that a staggering 90% of young people will leave Serbia for countries like Australia and Canada. Judging from a straw poll conducted by BHHRG, this is all too true. The question soon became not 'if' someone was leaving but 'when' and 'to where'.

War Crimes: Economic dislocation is only one of Serbia's problems, albeit the one that most affects ordinary people. The government is under constant pressure to hand over more indictees to the Hague Tribunal with the threat that economic aid will be withheld for non-cooperation. Needless to say, most citizens never see any of the benefits from such 'aid', but it pressurises the political class, acting as both a bargaining chip and a form of bribery. A recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* even suggested that the drum beat from the Hague only served to deliver more Serbian voters into the hands of the 'nationalists' and that a more nuanced approach to war crimes suspects might better further the West's agenda in Serbia.⁹

BHHRG is all too aware that most ordinary Serbs feel they are unfairly singled out for blame in the Balkan wars. There was a small, but heated protest when former JA army colonel, Veselin Slijvančanin, was handed over to the Hague by the authorities in Belgrade but, the much-hyped 'nationalism' tends to manifest itself in a sense of victim hood and self-pity, albeit underpinned by confusion. Most Serbs keep their counsel in silent but weary resentment – a vote for the Radical Party is about as far as their protests go. But, overall trust in politicians is low, which is unsurprising considering how many turncoats and traitors have appeared among the political class in Serbia over the past 10 years while former military heroes have been unmasked as war criminals. There is a conspiracy to explain everything - even a nationalist firebrand like Vojislav Šešelj is suspected of having a 'special relationship' with his captors in the Hague. Otherwise, people say, how would he have managed to telephone Radical party headquarters from his prison cell on the eve of polling day?

However, the criminal gangs and mafia organizations, many of whom were members of the paramilitary groups that fought in Croatia and Bosnia, have not been passive in the face of possible arrest on war crimes charges. Although Milošević has been accused of masterminding the brutal campaigns of ethnic cleansing conducted by groups like Arkan's Tigers, many of the paramilitaries opposed the former president and played a leading role in his downfall. Some observers suspect that the Western powers promoted the rise of criminal structures in the Balkans as part of their strategy to destroy the former Yugoslavia.

⁸ "EU invests €18.3 million in Development in Eastern Serbia" *Tanjug*, 30th December 2003

⁹ "UN tribunal denies aiding nationalist cause" *B92*, 30th December, 2003,
www.b92.net/english/news/index

The ongoing investigations into Montenegrin President Milo Djukanović's involvement in the tobacco mafia and the KLA's links to drug smuggling and prostitution are just the tip of the iceberg.

Now many of these mafia cum paramilitary types sense that their former friends want them out of the way. They see that members of the Milošević regime who defected to the West's camp, men like Jovica Stanišić, Nebojša Pavković and Sretan Lukić, have all been indicted by the ICTY and, therefore, betrayed. The main suspect in Djindjić's murder, former paramilitary leader, Milorad Lukić (Legija) did not stay around in Belgrade for long after the killing and the failure to find the whereabouts of both Radovan Karadžić and General Mladić mean that not everyone is prepared to go quietly the Hague.

Despite the constant drumbeat demanding that they should face up to their past, Serbs could be forgiven for harbouring cynical feelings about the Hague Tribunal. It is difficult to determine the logic that governs the issuing of indictments. For example, how is it that Vuk Drašković who led a paramilitary formation during the Croatian war has evaded prosecution? Even more bizarre was the announcement made in late 2003 that a battalion of Red Berets was being trained under US auspices to serve in Afghanistan.¹⁰ Its commander, General Goran Radosavljević, who led the brigade during the Kosovo campaign, is under investigation in New York for the murder of three Albanian-Americans during the war.

Djindjić Trial: In the week before the election, the trial began in Belgrade of the 21 leading suspects in the assassination plot to murder Zoran Djindjić – a further 15 will be tried at the same time *in absentia*. Although c. 11,000 people were initially arrested in the crackdown that followed the prime minister's murder, only 100 people were kept in custody pending trial. Zvezdan Jovanović a former deputy commander of the *Jedinicu za Specijalne operacije* (JSO), the Red Berets, and a member of the Zemun gang confessed to pulling the trigger, according to the procurators. His confession was read to the court on 25th December, despite protests from his defence counsel.

Already, there has been criticism of the procedures leading up to the trial as well as its conduct from human rights groups in Belgrade. Aleksandar Cvejić, legal advisor to the UN Commissioner for Human Rights said that the trial was "flawed" because of the "apparent meddling of politics".¹¹ Other critics alleged that the pre-trial investigation had been "politicised".¹² On 27th December, 2003 BHHRG interviewed Mirko Tripković, a lawyer for one of the main suspects, Dušan Krsmanović, about the inquiry and his client's case. Like other lawyers in the trial Mr. Tripković said that his client had been abused (withdrawal of food, torture) while in police custody and prevented from meeting both his family and lawyers in the weeks after his arrest. The defendants' lawyers have also complained about the withholding of relevant documents from the defence team. On 26th December the trial was suddenly halted and no date given for when proceedings would resume.

Mr. Tripković also pointed out that in a development not unlike that taking place at the Hague the status of 'protected witnesses' had been introduced whereby some of the accused could receive lesser sentences for cooperating with the prosecution. Although this might appear to be an example of the normal system of plea bargaining favoured in countries like the United States, in fact these witnesses are given no assurances of the kind of sentences they will likely receive. The implication being that if they do not adequately 'sing for their supper' they will not be rewarded for their cooperation.

Perhaps the most egregious aspect of the whole affair - in fact of the whole criminal justice system in Serbia - is the cavalier attitude of the press in its reporting of this and other trials. It seems that the mainstream media as well as Serbia's lively 'yellow press' participate in what many regard as contempt of court. One commentator observed that "although the information

¹⁰ Ian Bruce "Serb ethnic cleansing brigade in training for Afghan mission", *Scottish Herald*, 9th January 2004

¹¹ Dusan Stojanovic "Serbian PM's Assassin is Defiant" AP, 25th December, 2003

¹² Dragana Nikolic-Solomon, "Serbia: Trial of Djindjić Assassins Under Scrutiny" www.iwpr.net 18th December, 2003

gathered in the investigation is an official secret and it is a crime to publish it, statements made by many of the indicted have appeared in the press".¹³ One newspaper, *The Balkan*, reproduced the statements of 4 of the leading suspects in the Djindjić case (including Krsmanović) before they were introduced into evidence in court. Although the immediate families of the accused had no previous knowledge of these facts, they were broadcast in the press. On 21st December, more fog was generated over the proceedings when Radio B92 revealed that Zoran Djindjić's bodyguard, Milan Veruović, heard 3 shots fired at the time of the murder which, he claimed, came from two different directions and pointed to the involvement of a third sniper in the assassination. *NIN* magazine produced photographs that claimed to show that the bullets could not have been fired from the same direction.¹⁴ The official inquiry had determined that only two shots were fired – by Jovanović.

The EU provided funding to build the new court in Belgrade which boasts "high-tech gear, halogen lights, plasma TV screens and a TV studio"¹⁵ and which is being used for the trial. According to Mirko Tripković this was unnecessary as with better technical support the normal judicial structures in Serbia could have handled the case. BHHRG has seen the new tribunal, situated in Belgrade's former military court, which, in itself, must provoke unease, especially among elderly Serbs. Its shiny steel and glass entrance resembles the headquarters of a management consultancy rather than the sober setting for dispensing justice. The reason for the upgrade was probably to provide a suitable venue for future war crimes trials which Serbia is committed to undertake when the Hague Tribunal ceases to issue any fresh indictments at the end of 2004. It seems that Serbs face an indefinite future in which war crimes trials grind on and serve as a constant reminder of their collective guilt.

Territorial integrity: There are also outstanding problems concerning the country's territorial integrity. Many Serbs now accept that they have 'lost' Kosovo and that the province will become independent in the near future. They also sense that the recently created union of Serbia and Montenegro (SCG) is only temporary and that the two last remaining republics in the former Yugoslavia will go their own way sometime soon. It is possible that Serbia will be reduced even further – if for example the province of Vojvodina pressed for independent status while the Albanian community in southern Serbia is a constant source of instability. Soon after the 28th December poll, Orhan Rexhepi, leader of the Albanian Movement for Democratic Process in Preševo said that the outcome of the election (meaning the strong showing for the 'nationalist' party) shows that the Preševo Valley issue needs to be solved as soon as possible. The beginning of 2004 saw the emergence of another shadowy separatist group, the Montenegrin National Army, which demanded regional autonomy for Albanians in Montenegro.¹⁶

Most ordinary Serbs oppose these developments – only small political cliques as well as ultra-liberals - like the G17 Plus party - support independence for Montenegro and Kosovo. However, after more than a decade of decoding the intentions of their international masters, they can see the writing on the wall and feel there is nothing they can do to prevent the further disintegration of their state and the wider federation. Serbia's much-vaunted 'nationalism' is a paper tiger. This is not Iraq.

Political Scene

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ "Dozens on trial for murder of Djindjić" B92, 21st December 2003, www.b92.net/english/news/index

¹⁵ Dragana Nikolic-Solomon: "Serbia: Trial of Djindjić Assassins Under Scrutiny" www.iwpr.net 18th December, 2003

¹⁶ "New Albanian paramilitary group in Montenegro" Beta, www.beta 10th January, 2004



Tomislav Nikolic, leader of the Serbian Radical Party

Political life in Serbia was meant to undergo a renaissance when the opposition won the parliamentary election in December 2000. But, even though most participants in the 18-party Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS) coalition agreed, in principle, about the need for economic reform and integration into Europe, personal rivalry and scandals dogged its period in office. Its majority was reduced when Vojislav Koštunica's party, the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) was expelled from the governing coalition for a time in 2002. The next year, on 12th March 2003, Djindjić's murder rocked the country and led to the declaration of a state of emergency. Later that summer, there was more embarrassment for the DOS when it emerged that a voting scam had taken place in the parliament over the appointment of the governor of the national bank. Two deputies had been voted for in their absence. While all this was going on, the 'yellow press' (and sometimes the mainstream media) regaled readers with scandalous stories about members of parliament like Deputy Prime Minister, Cedomir Jovanović and former Interior Minister, Dušan Mihailović.

In the 1990s, governments were essentially made up of 4 parties – the Socialists (SPS), the Radicals (SRS), the Yugoslav League of Communists (JUL) and the Serbian Renewal Party (SPO). However, all along, the West supported and financed numerous small political parties which, in 2000, they finally persuaded to unite in the first formidable vehicle to put an end to years of Socialist Party domination in the country. At that time, even the DS and DSS were minority organizations and could only count on support in single figures. But, once unleashed it was difficult to put this plethora of small parties back into the box. Several of their leaders held ministerial positions in the 2000-03 governments and, even though there was constant feuding, giving up the perks of office is always difficult. DOS 'unbundled', finally falling apart on 19th November, 2003 but many of these 'micro' parties were revived and went on to fight the 2003 elections alone.

The rules on party financing, still governed by the Political Party Financing Act, a 1997 law, ensured that each of them could claim state funding although several parties stated that they had raised money from their members' subscriptions. As the membership of most small parties was virtually nil, it is difficult to believe that much of the necessary cash for election propaganda could have been raised this way. Nevertheless, several small parties conducted lavish election campaigns prior to the December 2003 vote with numerous posters and expensive TV slots. For example, the Democratic Alliance "saturated the media with the party's advertisements and claimed that its 15,000 members paid 1000 dinars (€15) each towards the costs of the campaign"¹⁷ BHRG's observers were also stunned by Otpor's

¹⁷ "Campaign Cash" Focus, www.b92.net/english/news/index, 24th December, 2003

ubiquitous glossy posters paid for, presumably, by the new party's "membership" even though Otpor failed to surmount the necessary 5% threshold to enter parliament.

As the democratic parties have always marched to the tune of Brussels and Washington, it must be assumed that the West endorsed the participation of numerous small parties in the election. This is strange, as one 'democratic' bloc would have been the best way of drawing support away from the Radicals which all commentators agreed was likely to get the largest percentage of the votes. However, seen from another perspective, the small parties did succeed in lowering the Radicals' final percentage as votes were 'wasted' on smaller parties. 13 out of the 19 party lists did not surmount the 5% barrier for representation in parliament, c. 362,000 votes (about 10% of the total votes cast). Another 49,755 votes were deemed to be invalid (1%).

According to the Election Law, each of the 19 parties contesting the 28th December election had to collect 10,000 signatures in order to run which, in the case of some of the smaller entities, must have been a tall order. In fact, BHHRG doubts that this formality was correctly complied with. According to the election results, the Labour Party of Serbia, JUL and the Alliance of Vojvodina Serbs all garnered less votes on polling day than signatures they had collected for their registration.

Many of the 19 added the party leader's name to their official title, a practice that can be traced back to the 2000 parliamentary election when Vojislav Koštunica's name fronted the DOS party list in order to entice people into voting for the opposition. However, such personalizing of a political party is distinctly 'un-European' (and un-American). For example, it is hard to envisage parties like Britain's Labour Party becoming 'Labour Party – Tony Blair' or Germany's Social Democrats changing to 'Social Democrats – Gerhard Schroeder'.

What, then, is the reason for personalising the party lists in Serbia – something that only started in 2000? No doubt, naming Vojislav Šešelj and Slobodan Milošević (leaders respectively of the Radicals and SPS) was a gesture of defiance towards the Hague Tribunal. As for the DSS, Mr. Koštunica continues to be the trademark for honesty and a safe pair of hands. The Democratic Party pushed the country's former prime minister, Zoran Živković, and the Deputy Prime Minister Jovanović, down the party list and featured Serbia's defence minister, Boris Tadić, as its 'big name'. Both Živković and Jovanović had been fingered for corruption and mafia ties during the period of the previous government.

But, the 'name game', so to speak, was also an implicit admission that many of the parties had titles which were almost interchangeable and indistinguishable with memberships, as many Serbs joked, that could fit into a minivan.

G17 Plus – Miroslav Labus
Serbian Radical Party (SRS) – Vojislav Šešelj
Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) – Vojislav Koštunica
Democratic Alternative – Nebojša Čović
Democratic Party (DP) – Boris Tadić
Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO) – Vuk Drašković-Velimir Ilić
Otpor
For National Unity – Prof. Borislav Pelević and Marijan Rističević
Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) – Slobodan Milošević
Independent Serbia – Dr. Vladimir Batić
Defence and Justice – Vuk Obradović
Together for Tolerance – Čanak, Kaša, Ljajić
Liberals of Serbia – Dušan Mihajlović
Reformists-Social; Democratic Parties of Vojvodina - Isakov
Socialist National Party – Nebojša Pavković
Economic Force of Serbia – Branko Dragas
Labour Party of Serbia – Dragan Milovanović
Union of Vojvodina Serbs – Dušan Salatić
Yugoslav United Left

Most of these parties (including the Radicals) embraced a liberal economic reform agenda, the most 'free market' among the 19 was the G17 Plus made up of Belgrade economists followed by the Democratic Party. Several of the smaller parties were also led by former ministers in the DOS government, for example, Nebojša Čović (former President of the Coordination Centre for Kosovo and Metohija), Vladimir Batić (former Minister of Justice) and Dušan Mihailović (one-time Minister of the Interior). Four others were led by - or contained - people indicted by the Hague Tribunal. Vojislav Šešelj topped the Radical Party list while Milošević led the Socialists. Former Yugoslav army chief, Nebojša Pavkovic, created the rather inappropriately named, Socialist National Party and Sretan Lukić was on the party list for the Liberals of Serbia - both have been indicted by the ICTY, but are still at liberty.

There was outrage from abroad – in fact, it was the main criticism of the poll by the OSCE - over the inclusion of 'war criminals' on the party lists even though none of them have yet been convicted of any crime. However, in the case of Milošević and Šešelj it turned out to be an empty gesture as the Radicals and SPS both announced that seats will not be kept vacant for the two party leaders now incarcerated in the Hague.

Finally, maverick politician Vuk Drašković's SPO returned to the political fold and teamed up with another former DOS member and leader of the small New Serbia party, Velimir Ilić, to contest the election. Their main pitch for power was the restoration of Serbia's monarchy a "sure sign to Brussels and Washington that Serbia is fully on the road into the family of European democracies" according to Vuk.¹⁸ Ilić once boasted that "we got martial arts experts and professional boxers to join us" on the celebrated 'march on Belgrade' from Čačak - where Ilić was the mayor – and which set off the October 2000 'revolution'.¹⁹ In 2001 Ilić showed a further propensity for the violent settling of scores when he came under fire for attacking other MPs in the parliamentary chamber. To most observers, kick-boxing and attacking a country's elected representatives are strange hobbies for a monarchist.

In truth, BHHRG's representatives have never encountered any enthusiasm for reviving the monarchy in Serbia. It is "an idea favoured by between 7% - 15% of voters" according to local opinion polls²⁰ Many Serbs would welcome the reincarnation of Tito, but not the Karajordjević dynasty. However, some people tried to convince the Group that there were villages in central Serbia inhabited by unreconstructed Chetniks where the population's most pressing concern was to have a king in Belgrade.

It was generally acknowledged that the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) would win the most votes, but, due to the proportional voting system, it would still lack a majority to govern alone. Tomislav Nikolić who took over the leadership of the SRS after Šešelj's departure to the Hague. He gained the highest number of votes in the presidential election in November - 46.9%, however, the result was voided due to a low turnout (37%). The possibility of a victory for the Radicals on 28th December caused much consternation abroad due to the party's nationalist agenda. However, the nightmare scenario was always unlikely to succeed as a coalition of 'reform-minded' parties including the DSS, DS, G17 Plus and even Drašković's SPO would be likely to attract enough support to form a government. All the reformers stated that they would refuse to cooperate with the Radicals.

BHHRG interviewed Tomas Nikolić in the Radical Party's Zemun headquarters. This meeting represented a break with former tradition as Mr. Šešelj had always refused to meet people from the West. In fact, the Group's attempts to talk to anyone in the party during previous election campaigns had failed. Although the party had been in previous coalition governments with the Socialists during the Milošević era, Mr. Nikolić was quick to point out that the SPS had falsified previous elections, particularly in Kosovo, and that the Radicals did not necessarily need to form any future coalition with that party as generally assumed. In the

¹⁸ Zoran Radosavljevic "Interview – Serbia needs a king, opposition politician says" *Reuters*, 22nd December, 2003

¹⁹ Carlotta Gall "How Small Town Turned Out for Kostunica at a key Time", *New York Times*, 9th

²⁰ "Elections: Serbia to Choose Sunday Between Past and Future" *Southeast European Times* www.balkantimes.com, 23rd December, 2003

week following the poll, Koštunica himself seemed to weaken on the question of having the Radicals on board.

Mr. Nikolić was convinced that the November 2003 presidential election had been conducted fairly and that the low figures given for the turnout that led to his failure to win were accurate. He pointed to the fact that the party had its representatives on the election commissions and 8600 observers in all the polling stations who would pick up any fraud. He seemed unconcerned by the fact that, even then, pressure from the international community would prevent the Radicals from getting anywhere near the levers of power; he seemed more amused than anything else by Javier Solana's veiled threats to the Serbs to vote for 'reform and a future in Europe'.

Nikolić acknowledged that it was "obvious that Serbs have committed war crimes" - a rather curious admission as the party is formally opposed to the Hague Tribunal and committed to helping Serb indictees with their defence. And, although the Radicals are concerned by the dire economic situation in the country and want trade to be evenly balanced between east and west, they support, according to Nikolić, complete economic liberalization and the need to protect foreign investments.

Some Serbs suspect that the Radical Party likes to be in opposition and does not really want to govern at all. There was much in Mr. Nikolić's manner that confirmed this theory. BHHRG also wondered if much of the hostility shown by the international community to the Radicals wasn't posturing. The party's main offence is a commitment to a 'greater Serbia' but in terms not unlike Hungary's status law. In reality, there is nothing very much the Radicals or any other Serbian organization can do for the disparate groups of Serbs now living in other ex-Yugoslav republics, including Bosnia. There is no appetite nor the wherewithal for any more military adventures - the Serbian army has seen its numbers cut and its officers remain fearful of more indictments from the Hague. Meanwhile, the international community is set on further diminishing the Serbian state by according independence to Kosovo and then Montenegro. The Radicals have also failed to promote the granting of citizenship - and therefore the right to vote - to the hundreds of thousands of Serb refugees from Croatia and Bosnia who now reside in Serbia proper.

Conduct of the Poll



The polling station scrum: just a few of the election workers and party observers gather for the count in Polling Station No. 11, Belgrade

The OSCE congratulated the Serbian authorities for the efficient organization of the election²¹ and the domestic election observer group, CeSID, said it was the best election conducted in Serbia. However, BHHRG's observers found many organizational aspects of the vote unsatisfactory. For example, too many polling stations were situated in small rooms and the election authorities had failed to provide proper voting booths. People had to vote at a table behind makeshift cardboard panels that offered little secrecy of the ballot. Ballot secrecy is also compromised by the transparent ballot box through which it is possible to see how people voted as the paper used for the ballots is very thin.

The system whereby a member of parliament was chosen was less than transparent (something also noticed by the OSCE) as there was no hierarchy of choice on the party lists. In theory, the last person on the list could get the best position and vice versa, if the party bigwigs decided it that way. So, voters could not be certain that any of the candidates on the list that they might support would make it into parliament. For instance, both Dr. Šešelj and Mr. Milošević, whose names stood at the head of their respective party lists have not been allocated seats in the new parliament.

However, the most unsatisfactory aspect of the conduct of this election was the rule allowing all the parties contesting the election to have two representatives present in the polling station acting, according to the law, as members of an extended electoral commission. With 19 lists and a rule which allowed observers to have proxies, it meant that 38 'observers' could be present in each polling station, on top of which, there were always 3 permanent members of an electoral commission with their 3 deputies. In every polling station visited BHHRG encountered ranks of observers often crammed into small rooms filled with cigarette smoke. It was often the case that they were unable to see what was going on in the general scrum. When questioned, many also had to consult the permanent commission members to find out which party they were meant to be representing.

On 27th December, BHHRG had visited Otpor's offices in central Belgrade where large numbers of, mainly elderly, women were collecting their instructions for the following day's polling station 'observation'. BHHRG concluded that c. 400,000 people were employed in this way on 28th December. They also learnt that each one was paid the equivalent of €15 – the total cost of the election was €13 m. The presidential election in November had cost the Serbian state €11m. In a country with widespread unemployment, this albeit small financial incentive was enough to attract large numbers of people to volunteer to monitor the poll. BHHRG was also told that many people will have been glad to sit in a warm place for a few hours.

Mr. Nikolić told BHHRG that Radical Party observers would be able to properly monitor the conduct of the poll. But, afterwards, it was difficult for BHHRG to share his confidence. At the count at Belgrade, Polling Station No. 11, BHHRG noted that none of the observers kept a parallel tally of the votes cast, only noting their own candidate's score (if at all), and their approach to the whole proceedings was, to put it mildly, relaxed. Many were seated, chatting, in an annexe where they couldn't see what was going on in the main area of the polling station itself. On the basis of their day's observation, it was difficult for BHHRG to conclude that the parties would spend any time deliberating later in the day at their headquarters over their observers findings. There was also an unusual development at Belgrade No. 11 where the Socialist Party came fourth with 80 votes (i.e. c. 15%), apparently a total anomaly in this polling station which was centred in the heart of 'reformed' Belgrade. This relatively strong showing for the SPS was not reflected in the rest of the country where the party did worse than it had expected. Was the central Belgrade result just an anomaly, or had the results been massaged somewhere in the collation process? Such suspicions cannot be proven but the haphazard observation by party representatives suggests that few follow-up checks on individual results were likely.

Turnout was considered to be critical and the pro-reform media had pressed home the fact that a poor turnout would benefit the Radicals and Socialist Party. In the morning of the 28th

²¹ See election observation report at www.osce.org/odihr/

December, BHHRG's observers in Belgrade and Pančevo saw relatively high levels of voter activity but, by the early afternoon fewer people were turning out to vote. By 17.00 pm, there was obvious concern that less than 50% might cast their ballots as commission chairmen (all members of the Democratic Party) assured BHHRG that enough people would vote by 20.00 when the poll closed. For example, only two out of four polling stations in Smederevo reported that over 50% had voted by 18.00. The chairwoman at another place predicted that 50% would vote by the close of polls, while the fourth said it wouldn't be possible. While in Smederevo, representatives from the local radio station told BHHRG's observers (at 18.00) that turnout in that region was between 40% and 50%. As in previous elections (2000 in particular) supporters of the reform parties probably made a late push to get their supporters out.

BHHRG asked whether there had been a media 'blackout' of certain parties like the Radicals during the campaign period, but people said that all parties had been accorded the legal period for their broadcasts. Nevertheless, the opposition – meaning both the Radicals and the left parties - is at a disadvantage when it comes to the media. The once-powerful Socialist Party has next-to-no access to the mainstream press and television. However, although the party has suffered from a lack of the foreign funds so abundantly available to the reformists, there is a complete absence of enterprise and initiative on the SPS's part in finding ways to address a domestic constituency. Party representatives sit and play with their worry beads unwilling to listen to any suggestions or ideas as to how they might remedy their situation which, in the age of the internet and mass communications, need not be totally hopeless.

As all the major TV, radio and newspaper outlets supported the 'reform' parties in the election campaign media commentators also tended to be from the 'reform' stable. BHHRG caught up with an early evening discussion programme on TV Studio B the day after the poll. Three 'experts' from the (Western-backed) CeSID organization, the Strategic Monitoring polling data company (which includes G17 among its customers) and someone Serbs call a 'politolog' conducted a stiff, dreary discussion about whether eeny, meeny or miney would join with mo in the new government coalition. Western-orientated Serbs used to complain about the dull state of Serb television in Milošević's time but, a viewing of programmes like this that seemed to have sprung intact from Mr. Brezhnev's media dungeon, show that no improvement whatsoever in slickness and professionalism has taken place in the last three years.

The lack of any forceful opposition has meant that organizations like CeSID are not subject to any kind of scrutiny. This NGO is supported by several Western embassies as well as the 'usual suspects' from the stable of American funders: the NDI, IRI and Freedom House. Yet, the people running CeSID's web site could not even be bothered to produce accurate maps and diagrams to illustrate voter turnout on 28th December. According to CeSID's 'map' there was a 59.3% turnout nationwide at the close of the polls but an additional table next to this map showed a 45.5% turnout at 20.00.²² Which is right? In fact, the turnout figures produced by CeSID had not been updated after 17.00. Is it too much for the various Western governments whose taxpayers' money goes to fund organizations like CeSID to demand a better product than this?

Results



²² See: Early Parliamentary Elections 2003, www.cesid.org/english

CeSID's map of the countrywide election turnout: 59.3% on the left, 46% on the right

Parties passing the 5% threshold for representation in parliament:

SRS – 27.61%, DSS – 21.2%, DS – 14.8%, G17 Plus – 11.46%, SPO – 7.66%, SPS – 7.61.

Although the Serbian Radical Party gained the largest percentage of the vote, it didn't do as well as some people had predicted. The Socialist Party also lost support on 28th December. As pointed out by some commentators, the West's concern about the upward surge of 'nationalist parties' is belied by this result – together they gained fewer votes than they had in 2000. However, leaving aside the Serbs supposed natural proclivity to vote for raving nationalist politicians, the dire state of the economy should surely have led to a swing to the left and away from the model of economic reform promoted by parties like the DS and its clones in G 17 Plus. However, taken together 55% of the Serbian electorate continue to support parties which to a greater or lesser extent promised more pain than gain.

In line with the demands of the EU, it was assumed that the leader of the reformist party with the largest share of the votes would form the next government. As this was the DSS, its leader, Vojislav Koštunica "has taken charge of consultations on forming a government".²³ In any normal country, the rules would dictate that the party with the largest share of the votes in an election should, at least, try to form a government. If that fails, the runner up gets to try. However, there was no question of Mr. Nikolić being asked to form a government and no overt sign that Mr. Nikolić himself complained about this oversight.

As this report is written, the four 'reform' parties that surmounted the 5% threshold are still engaged in coalition talks. The main sticking point has been the refusal of the Democratic Party to either join a new government or agree to support a minority coalition made up of the DSS, G 17 and SPO which together would only have a little over 40% of the membership in the new parliament. A new election within the next twelve months is already on the cards.

Conclusion

Even if the Serbs were to elect a strong government, it is difficult to see how it could improve the economic lot of the country's battered population. Like the Iraqis, Serbs have undergone a decade of sanctions, war and, now, 'reform'. But, Serbia has no crown jewels, so to speak, whereas the Iraqis have their oil. This is a country whose industrial and agricultural base has nothing very much to offer in terms of foreign investment to a continent already sated on the relics of the Communist era. Serbia's youth is fleeing and its population is aging. At the same time, there is a near total absence of the kinds of small-scale, high tech businesses which could promote and sustain a new middle class.

While the international community's treatment of Serbia over the past 12 years has been reprehensible, Serbs themselves must shoulder some of the blame for their predicament. Too much faith is put in 'experts' – BHHRG noted that a politician's worth is based on his or her 'expertise' which naturally, means a lot of letters after someone's name, usually denoting excellence in the social sciences. The widespread belief in the politician as egg-head implies a complete lack of understanding about the role of a non-political civil service – the normal home of 'experts' in democratic countries. It also helps to explain why many Serbs go on voting for parties, like G 17 Plus, whose policies are likely to drive them into deeper poverty and despair but who have the magic imprimatur of 'expertise'. BHHRG noted that even the former anti-establishment NGO, Otpor, had wheeled on several bearded professors to add lustre to its first attempt to win parliamentary representation in the 2003 election.

Unfortunately, Serbia's 'experts' have not turned out to be of quite the same calibre as Plato's imaginary guardians. A ubiquitous, dingy provincialism, endemic laziness and penchant for

²³ www.b92.net/english/news/index, 19th January, 2004

serious corruption among the political elite means that there is likely to be no improvement in peoples' lives unless a 'new class' of rulers emerge. Until then, hundreds of thousands can at least look forward to earning a few dinars (tax free) from the election 'merry-go-round' - one of the more unusual by-products of economic reform - which looks set to continue unabated. Elections as a way of life, however, are not the same as living in a normal democracy.