

European
Elections monitor

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7 days before
the poll

The outgoing President of the Republic Boris Tadic, favourite in the Serb presidential election. His party (DS) might win the general elections.

On 6th May next the Serbs are being called to ballot in three elections: the 1st round of the presidential (if necessary a second round will take place two weeks later, on 20th May), general elections (renewal of the 250 members of the National Assembly, the only chamber in Parliament) and finally local elections. The electorate of Vojvodina (north of the country) will also be appointing its regional assembly.

This is an electoral venue of the highest importance for 7 million Serb citizens, who will be renewing in just a few days all of their political representatives.

Presidential Election

12 candidates are officially running in the Serb presidential election:

Boris Tadic (Democratic Party, DS), outgoing head of State;

- Tomislav Nikolic, leader of the main opposition party, the Progressive Party (SNS); running for fourth consecutive time for the presidential office

- Cedomir Jovanovic, leader of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP is running for the second time in the presidential election (he won 5.34% of the vote in the first round of the presidential election on 20th January 2008);

- Itsvan Pastor, candidate of the Union of Hungarians of Vojvodina (VMSZ); he is also running for the second time (he won 2.26% of the vote on 20th January 2008);

- Vojislav Kostunica, former Prime Minister (2004-2008) and Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) candidate;

- Ivica Dacic, leader of the Socialist Party (SPS); and outgoing Interior Minister who is running for the second time (he won 4.04% in the first round of the presidential election on 13th June 2004);

- Zoran Stankovic, present Healthcare Minister and former Defence Minister (2005-2007), candidate of the United Regions Party (URS). ;

- Jadranska Seselj (Radical Serb Party, SRS), wife of the party's leader Vojislav Seselj, presently being held in The Hague and waiting for his trial in which he is accused of crimes against humanity and war crimes by the ICTY ;

- Vladan Glisic, independent candidate supported by the far movement Dveri;

- Danica Grujicic, the Social Democratic Alliance candidate;

- Zoran Dragisic, an independent candidate supported by the Movement of Workers and Farmers of Serbia;

- Muamer Zukorlic, mufti of the Islamic Community of Serbia supported by the Coalition of Albanians of the Presevo Vally led by the only Albanian MP in Parliament Riza Halimi;

The decision taken by the outgoing President Boris Tadic on 4th April to convene the presidential election on the same day as the general elections was a wise one, because it enables him to support his party's campaign (DS), which has been struggling in the polls, by means of his own personality and to provide impetus to an electoral campaign that has been a little lifeless to date. *"The presidential election will help the political parties because the charisma of their leaders will raise the turnout rate,"* believes political expert Vladimir Goati. The Democratic Party (DS) should therefore

benefit from this – since the electorate of the main opposition party – the Progressive Party (SNS) are traditionally keen.

Can the Democratic Party retain power?

"These elections are an opportunity to decide if we want to continue the reform process that has earned us acknowledgement on the part of the EU and the Council of Europe and has given us the chance to continue a policy that attracts investors and creates jobs," declared the outgoing head of State.

He repeats to his fellow countrymen that the path chosen by his party is a guarantee for the future of Serbia. *"Any other route is uncertain and would be dangerous for both citizens and State. We do not know where the country would be going if the coalition rallied Tomislav Nikolic (SNS leader), Bogoljub Karic (who leads the Movement of Strength, PSS) and Velja Ilıc (leader of New Serbia, NS) won the elections,"* stresses Boris Tadic. He warned of the way Tomislav Nikolic was developing, who, he recalled, is saying different things at present from what he maintained in the past. *"The question is: what will he say tomorrow?"* asks the outgoing President.

"The Democratic Party has modernised the country to improve the Serbs' lives. We have taken risks at difficult times including the choice of being unpopular. The Progressive Party does not hide the fact that it says things, the sole aim of which is to win the elections;" he emphasised.

"I am expecting Belgrade to start EU membership talks at the end of the year. If Serbia continues along the same path it will certainly join the EU in 2020," repeats Boris Tadic. The head of State said that he ruled out any agreement with the Progressive Party as well as with the Radical Serb Party. *"We are ready to negotiate with all of the other parties,"* he declared.

The Democratic Party is however facing the disenchantment of the Serbs who are experiencing a serious economic crisis even though the country has had positive growth since 2010. GDP growth is slow (0.5% in 2012), unemployment is affecting nearly one quarter of the working population (23.7% in February), 400,000 jobs have been destroyed since the start of

the economic crisis and 7.3 million Serbs are living below the poverty line. In January last the IMF froze part of its aid of 1.3 billion \$, since the country had not succeeded in consolidating its public finances sufficiently. The IMF is asking Serbia to reduce its public deficit to 4.25% of the GDP.

Has the time come for Tomislav Nikolic?

"The people in office do not care about your living conditions," declared the Progressive Party leader as he spoke to the 10,000 Serbs who demonstrated on 26th April last in the centre of Belgrade against economic difficulties and corruption. *"If they were concerned they would have done something to reduce unemployment and to attract investments?"* he added Tomislav Nikolic said that if he was elected as head of the country he would improve the Serbs' daily life by reforming the tax system, by increasing pensions and also by attracting financial investments.

Still a nationalist, but now pro-European and therefore in support of Serbia's integration into the EU, Tomislav Nikolic says however that Belgrade's membership must come after the improvement of living conditions in Serbia. *"Our entry into the EU will not occur before 8 to ten years. But it is now that we have to live. We must find responses to the difficulties we encounter. We cannot just lie down and wait to join Brussels. What will happen if it never happens?"* wonders the Progressive leader.

The latter also likes to recall that Serbia is "a house with two doors" one on the West and one on the East – *"which must both remain open."* In Tomislav Nikolic's opinion Belgrade has to step up its relations with Russia.

It remains that some Serb and European analysts still fear however that once in power the Progressive Party leader will take the country back to the years of war, which are not so far in the past and will entertain tense relations with the countries in the West.

Boris Tadic is the favourite in the presidential election and political analysts say that the Democratic Party should, after the general election, be in a position to hold a parliamentary majority and to form a government coalition.

According to the most recent poll by Faktor Plus at the end of April, Tomislav Nikolic and the outgoing Head of State, Boris Tadic were running neck and neck in the presidential race. The first is due to win 36.1% of the vote and the second 35.7%. Socialist Ivica Dacic is due to come third followed by Liberal Democrat Cedomir Jovanovic and by former Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica. Tomislav Nikolic and Boris Tadic are due to face each other in the second round of voting on 20th May next.

As far as the general elections are concerned the Progressive Party (SNS) is credited with 33.5% of the vote ahead of the Democratic Party (DS) by five points, which is due to win 28.3% of the vote. The Socialist Party (SPS), a member of the present go-

vernment coalition led by Prime Minister Mirko Cvetkovic, (which rallies the Democratic Party, the Party of United Pensioners (PUPS) led by Jovan Krkobabic, G17+ led by Mladjan Dinkic, the United Regions Party (URS), the Social Democratic Party (SDP) led by Rasim Ljajic and Democratic Action of Sandjak (SDA)) is due to come third with 11.8% of the vote and would find itself in the position of kingmaker. The party may achieve, in exchange for its support of the Democratic Party, the post of Prime Minister for its leader Ivica Dacic.

After approximately ten years of democracy in Serbia and two clashes between the two political leaders, Boris Tadic might however find this round slightly more difficult than he had expected.

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