

The victory of a “pro-Russian” candidate in Serbia a surprise to the West - lulled by its own Balkan PR

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The unexpected victory at the presidential election in Serbia of Tomislav Nikolic, the former leader of the much reviled Radical party, was a surprise to the world, but not to Serbia.

Since Tomislav Nikolic replaced Vojislav Seselj, now on trial for alleged war crimes in the Hague, in 2003 as the head of the Radical party, he has reinvented himself as a moderate supporter of Serbia’s integration into the EU and rebranded this political force as the Progressive party of Serbia. The country desperately wanted normalcy and some kind of international rehabilitation for the much publicized “crimes of Serb nationalism” of the 1990s. These developments did not mean, however, that Serbs forgot about the NATO bombings in 1999 or that NATO was as popular as the EU in Serbia. The Western media simply failed to remind its readers of this sentiment in Serbian society, hence the current feeling of bewilderment. A well-oiled NATO PR machine, which specialized on the Balkans since the wars of 1991-1999 can deceive Westerners - but not the locals.

Instead of concentrating on the problems, the mainstream press in Europe and the United States had been lulling its readers with stories about the imminent victory of the pro-Western incumbent, Boris Tadic, who won elections on a “pro-European” platform during the 2000s. Even Tadic himself seems to have fallen victim to this delusion, opting for an early presidential election this spring.

That move of Tadic, surprisingly, stunned only the Serbs themselves, it did not raise many eyebrows in the West - and for a reason. For decades the subject of the vast majority of Western press reports from Serbia was the obsessive hunt for the so called war criminals. So, when the two main suspects, former Bosnian Serb leaders Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic, were captured, Brussels and Washington completely lost interest in Serbia, leaving it to its own devices. The decision to declare Kosovo an independent country, obviously taken not just in Pristina, but also in the Western capitals, was also expected to be easily “swallowed” by the Serbian public.

Boris Tadic was expected to win, although his only “achievement” was a tentative agreement of the EU this year to start negotiations on Serbia’s membership in the European Union (EU). Now, when predictions of Tadic’s victory failed to materialize, the Western press is about to rush into another extreme, adopting an alarmist stand. Now the New York Times expresses doubts in Serbia’s EU course towards and scares its readers with a perspective of Serbia’s becoming “a province of Russia” - a view attributed by this newspaper to Tomislav Nikolic.

The very tone of the polemic around the Serbian election in the West European and

American press reveals primarily the strength of negative stereotypes about Serbia and Russia and an almost narcissist obsession with one's own practice of "nation building."

"I don't think the general course of Serbian foreign policy will change under Nikolic, he is also for the EU," said Pavel Kandel, senior research fellow at the Institute of Europe, Russian Academy of Sciences. "But voting for Nikolic, the Serbs wanted to send the West a strong message that its projects in the Balkans are failing."

Indeed, what are the results of the "nation building" in the Balkans, forced on Serbia and its neighbors by the US and the EU? Let us look at both history and modernity. This spring for Bosnia-Herzegovina, with its large Serb population, is the time of the 20th anniversary of the saddest events in its history - a series of clashes and attacks that ultimately led to the Bosnian war. The war formally ended in 1995 and Bosnia-Herzegovina became a de facto protectorate of the Western powers - the United States and the European Union. The term of "protectorate" belongs to Nebojsa Popov, a Serbian human rights activist, the founder of the Belgrad-based magazine *Republika*.

17 years after the start of the Bosnian experiment, even Western reports do not declare the project for "artificially multiethnic" Bosnia-Herzegovina a success. A recent survey conducted by the Western-financed Balkan Foundation for Democracy revealed that only 30 percent of Bosnia's citizens trust their "compatriots" from other ethnic groups. The result is much worse that even in the times of Slobodan Milosevic - Bosnian Moslems continue to distrust Catholic Croats and Orthodox Serbs, the mistrust between Serbs and Croats has not in any way decreased.

"It is interesting to note, that Croats and Serbs living in Bosnia are not fans of the Bosnian soccer team, which is formally "theirs," says Pavel Kandel of the Russian Academy of Sciences. "Instead, Serbs are fans of the Belgrade teams and young Croats dream of playing for Zagreb clubs. This is just an indicator of the failure of the experiment, in which several "generations" of West European governor-generals took part."

Ironically, general Wesley Clark, the head of the military intervention against Yugoslavia in 1999, recently came out in the *New York Times* with an article pathetically headlined "*Bosnia Still Needs Fixing.*" How did the Western experts expect the Serbs to react to such articles from a person many accuse of systematically destroying former Yugoslavia? Or to the anti-Serb movie on the war in Bosnia from Angelina Joli, an American who had never set foot to the Balkans, but tries to resolve local moral problems?

The economic development does not inspire much enthusiasm neither. In Serbia, the much publicized "march towards the EU" brought about a situation when Nikolic could win claiming that the country now lives worse than before Tadic came to power in the year 2004. A recent visit by an IMF mission and numerous economic statistics paint a rather gloomy picture for Bosnia too - the country still has to make up for the 75 percent slump in the economy that occurred during the war of 1990s. Once a home to the Sarajevo Olympic Games in 1984, Bosnia never recovered from the war, which became a result of a hasty recognition of its independence from Yugoslavia by Western powers - Germany in the first place.

Politicians from the EU and the US like to blame Serbs for "failing to learn the lessons of history." Meanwhile, the Americans and West Europeans demonstrate a unique ability to

forget their own misdeeds - at least, in the case of the former Yugoslavia.

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