



CLASH OF THE TITANS

In an attempt to force early elections Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) opposition leader **Tomislav Nikolic** went on a hunger and thirst strike that lasted for eight days. At the time of the strike, Nikolic's gesture was the most important news in Serbia. Nine days after the strike, no one mentions that it never happened. The fact that the most important news in the country after a few days disappeared completely from the media best illustrates the state in the Serbian society and the media and how both can be manipulated easily. In Serbia, major social problems are not seriously addressed and the government and influential businessmen easily manage to impose their personal issues as important for the whole community, because there is no awareness of the priorities. Reasons why something happened are not discussed, lessons aren't drawn, solutions not found... One gets the impression that for years Serbia has been living in media and public campaigns, while societal reforms are postponed for another time.

Tomislav Nikolic surprised everyone announcing on his party's protest on April 16 that he "**will go on a hunger and thirst strike until early parliamentary elections are called.**" Such closure of the rally, no one expected.

Before the rally, Nikolic and his associates very confidently announced "**an offer that the Government cannot refuse.**" Taking place of early elections in 2011 was a promise of this party to its supporters. Progressive Party (SNS) held the first demonstration in February. At the gathering, party president Tomislav Nikolic announced new protest for April 16 and said he "**doesn't want the ruling coalition to capitulate, but to call early parliamentary elections in the next two months.**" "**If bullies do not choose to listen as usual, you'll find me here in April sitting on the styrofoam not to get a cold. If we were silent a minute, the voice of silence would stir up Serbia. I'm not asking them to go down from power, the election will resolve that. We want to defeat them, we will not scare them into illegality**", said the Serbian opposition leader thus setting the April rally's goal. In the coming months the public speculated how Nikolic will make the incumbents to call elections. His decision to go on hunger and thirst strike not only surprised everyone, but made that struggle personal. Nikolic ended the strike after eight days and progressives failed to fight for early elections. However, the protest clearly left much deeper impact on the political scene in Serbia, the



relationship between the political parties will be completely different and nothing will ever be the same as before April 16. Regular parliamentary and local elections in Serbia must take place by May 6, 2012, which means they will be called no later than March next year. Progressives asked the government to promise to call early elections by mid December this year.

Formally, the problem around which the government and opposition clash is a matter of few months. This confuses many who watch with the Serbian political scene. However, problems between the government and opposition in Serbia are much more serious than the question of whether the elections will be held three months earlier or later, or if they will be part-time or full time.

Serbian Progressive Party was formed in autumn 2008 by the dissolution of the then largest opposition party in Serbia - the ultranationalist **Serbian Radical Party** (SRS), whose president **Vojislav Seselj** who is being trialed for eight years at the International Criminal Tribunal for war crimes committed in former Yugoslavia, in the Dutch capital - the Hague. Shortly before the dissolution of the party, in the snap election in May 2008, triumphed the Coalition for European Serbia

led by Democratic Party (DS) of President Boris Tadic, who won 1,590,200 votes or 38.42 percent and 102 seats out of 250 seats in the National Assembly. In these elections, the radicals (SRS) remained individually the strongest party with a score of 1,219,436 votes, or 29.46 per cent and 78 seats in the National Assembly. In parliamentary elections held a year earlier, 2007. The Radicals won 1,153,453 votes or 28.60 percent and 81 seats. Still, regardless of having won the greatest number of votes, the government was formed by Tadic's Democratic Party and Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) led by former president of the joint state of Serbia and Montenegro and the former Serbian Prime Minister **Vojislav Kostunica**. Something similar happened in the elections held in December 2003, when they won over a million votes and – were left without power.

It has become a rule that SRS because of its extremist policies, despite the large number of supporters and assembling of people dissatisfied with the transition, possesses no capacity to find coalition partners to share power with.

Regardless of individually the highest election score of SRS, in every election in this century, the majority of the Serbian citizens voted for the policy of European integration which is primarily embodied in the Democratic Party,



and several smaller parties like the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) led by **Cedomir Jovanovic** and G17 Plus led by **Mladjan Dinkic**. In the fall of 2008, SRS dissolved and the new party emerged - the Serbian Progressive Party headed by Tomislav Nikolic, who had previously been deputy president of SRS, and Aleksandar Vucic, by then general secretary of SRS. The reason for the split was the decision of Nikolic and Vucic to vote in the Serbian parliament for ratification of the Stabilization and Association Agreement between Serbia and the European Union. The vote for ratification of this agreement would have been a big shift in the SRS politics and the victory of party leaders Nikolic and Vucic, who were in the country as opposed to the president of the party, Seselj, who was and still is in the custody of the Tribunal. Immediately it was clear that the new party took over most of the radicals' voters and infrastructure of the former party. SRS survived, but it lives on the edge of threshold, while the progressives soon became the strongest opposition party.

Interestingly current total ballot of radicals and progressives is higher than radicals individually ever had, which only speaks that the progressives, except from having taken over most of the radicals' ballot, got new voters.

Progressives positioned themselves as a moderate right-wing party and immediately made clear they would lead a different policy from the radicals. They adopted European integration policy and the party's leaders have become welcome guests in Moscow, Brussels and Washington. This led to the normalization of the political scene in Serbia and brought general public sympathy to Nikolic and Vucic. Shortly before the SNS formation, the party once led by former Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic, who ruled Serbia from 1990 to 2000 - the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) has adopted the policy of European integration and became part of the ruling coalition. Thus, the widest possible consensus on the policy of European integration was finally reached in Serbia. Difficult and fateful issues, such as whether the country should integrate into Europe or be in self-isolation, were removed from the agenda of Serbian politics. That was good for Serbia, but bad for the ruling Democratic Party, which hence lost its monopoly on the issue of European integration, which was to be proved on its rating in the years to come.

Last several years have been like a fairytale for the progressives. They have taken over the radicals' electorate, the party has been growing every day and getting new supporters, and plus they lost their radical extremist mortgage which prevented them from becoming the majority. Simply, they have become acceptable



to the moderate voters in Serbia, as well as Brussels and Washington, all the while remaining in a position previously occupied by the radicals – they represent citizens who are dissatisfied with the living standard and who are the losers of transition. It seemed that the progressives just need to wait for the elections, meanwhile make sure not to make mistakes, and the power would fall into their hands. There were regular contacts with the top of the Democratic Party, so people in Serbia, but also in the west, started talking about the possible grand coalition of the progressives and democrats that would have certainly two-thirds majority in the Parliament, meaning that it would have the power to implement necessary political and social reform. Nevertheless, the approaching election spoiled an idyll between progressives and democrats. For both parties it's very important to win the next election because the party with more votes is to give the prime minister. Regardless of the mutual interest in creating a grand coalition, both parties had veiled intentions when they flirted. The democrats wanted to have one strong coalition partner because they are tired of the coalition combinations and blackmail of small parties in the coalition, provided that the DS still has a leading role in the new coalition. From their point of view, the progressives endorsed "their" European policy and it is natural that they should be a junior partner. The progressives, not having access to the

media as an opposition party, wanted to take advantage of good contacts with the democrats in order to build the party's infrastructure, avoid negative campaigning and prepare for elections. From the progressives' point of view, the DS is running the country very poorly, citizens are unhappy with the declining living standard, so that the democrats should be thankful for staying in power by co-operating with them. Thus, the conflict was inevitable.

Almost certainly there were some sort of previous negotiations between the progressives and democrats on the date of early elections. Have they reached any agreement is a mystery for now. From the reactions of both sides during Nikolic's strike, clearly the both feel cheated.

Whatever happened in the talks behind-the-scenes, the chances to reach an agreement on early elections were minimal. The reason for this is simple – the progressives and democrats have different interests. Snap election, if not a consequence of a great triumph, is always a defeat for the government and an advantage for the opposition. The ruling coalition in Serbia has no significant success or an important social event behind them to justify the calling of early elections. On the contrary, the economic situation in Serbia is very difficult, the living standard is lower and lower, and



unemployment is on the rise, like prices and inflation. All this affects the rating of the ruling party. Therefore, snap elections in such a situation would mean a defeat and the government would enter the election race disabled. There's one year left till the election and the DS needs some kind of visible success to boost their chances. The DS's decision will depend on the assessment whether the power will manage to achieve a great success by March next year. If the DS estimates that it's possible, the election may take place earlier. If the top of DS estimates is that it is currently impossible to expect any significant positive change in society - will be waiting for spring next year when elections must be held. Tadic has already announced that he expects Serbia to become a candidate for membership in the European Union (EU) during the fall of the 2011th year and it could be the main pre-election trump the DS in the absence of other successes, especially in the economy.

Why the progressives with growing rating show nervousness and seek snap elections? There is a number of reasons. The first is party-related. SNS is currently the largest party in the country with a very large support among the population, with virtually no involvement in the political life of the country. The party was formed after the last elections and is not present in government bodies - neither local self-government nor the Serbian government. For a

large party such as the SNS or DS, it is very unenviable that many party officials are not part of the government. Besides the 21 deputies in the National Assembly who left the SRS and joined the progressives and holding power in two Belgrade municipalities Vozdovac and Zemun, won in early local elections last year – the SNS is out of power. Therefore, it is very important for the SNS to transform its political power into ruling power as soon as possible, and that several thousand of its officials become municipal and city councilors, MPs, municipal, city and republic officials, members of boards of public companies, general managers... Today that is a privilege of only Democrats who are in power, with some interruptions, more than ten years, and in some Belgrade municipalities such as Novi Beograd and Stari Grad almost 17 years! Another reason why SNS seeks early elections is the need to justify the trust of their supporters. Great popularity of SNS is partially caused by the dissatisfaction of citizens with the policy of the DS. These people want changes, which can be brought by early elections. Therefore, the SNS has to insist on early elections in order to partially justify the trust of their voters. When a party has voters' support of over 30 percent of the electorate, most of its voters do not belongs to its "hard core" voters who vote for their party no matter what. Voters who are not ardent party supporters may be lost in the same way they were attracted. It is therefore important



that the SNS has ongoing activities against the government, to demand early elections and thus demonstrate it does everything to make a difference. The third reason is that the current economic situation in Serbia is very bad, and progressives do not wish to risk that the government might achieve some success over the next year and thus improve its chances at the next election, no matter how it seemed impossible.

What the progressives got and what they lost by Nikolic's strike? Their protest, without agreement with the DS on the date of election had no chance to succeed. So the question is whether they believed or they had an agreement with the DS on the date of snap election, or they simply overestimated their power to gather a large number of people? In order to get a snap election not it's not enough that only one party protest in the streets, but a social movement that includes the parties, students, NGOs and trade unions. Making of such movement requires an important social occasion.

An early election, even though wished by most residents, is not sufficient reason for creating a great social movement. For such a thing requires the reason that concerns each voter individually.

Ballot theft in the 1996 and 2000 elections attempted by former president Slobodan Milosevic was a compelling enough reason to bring into the streets hundreds of thousands of people and bring about the downfall of his regime. That's why the progressives' protest was doomed to failure. People clearly differentiate their support they give to a political party from the desire to do something on their own. They simply expected that politicians for whom they voted in elections fight for their rights, and are ready to fight themselves if they are personally affected. Therefore, the SNS was in danger to end their loudly announced demonstrations with only a few thousand people. Such an inglorious end of the demonstration would be a serious blow for the rating of the party. All they needed was something dramatic to escape this situation. Therefore, Nikolic's strike helped the party by sending their supporters home, although they promised to be on the streets until elections are called. Nikolic transformed everything into a personal struggle, said he would "sacrifice" for the people and so successfully switched thesis. No was saying that the protest failed, because his personal drama has become the most important topic. Nikolic saved his party from a negative campaign. During the strike Nikolic became the number one issue in all media, all news broadcasts in the electronic media began with reports about his health, visits by the president and church dignitaries, letters from



Serbian Patriharh Irenaues and European Commissioner for EU Enlargement **Stefan Fule**. The entire country was following Nikolic's drama from hour to hour. A better thing could not have happened to an opposition leader (as say marketing experts – just let them write but make sure that they put accurate name and a good picture). The opposition is rarely able to impose the topic in the media, but Nikolic succeed. Also, do not forget that Nikolic "sacrificed" not seeking anything for himself, and that the Serbian mentality has a sacrifice cult. Finally, with the help of the Serbian Orthodox Church Nikolic was able to find a way to end the strike because of religious reasons. In the end the question remains - has Nikolic won by his strike? It depends from which angle it is viewed.

If we look at Nikolic's request for early elections - certainly he didn't succeed. If we look at the way he came out of a bad situation for the party and provided media promotion - we can say that he hasn't been defeated.

What the ruling Democratic Party won or lost by Nikolic's strike? Democrats have acted in this crisis in the only logical way – they refused to give concessions. If the date of election hadn't been agreed, they couldn't allow it to happen under pressure from the progressives, because it would further aggravate their already

difficult situation. It is interesting that in this crisis, apart from President Tadic, on behalf of the Democratic Party spoke more popular Belgrade Mayor **Dragan Djilas**. The first day of the strike President Tadic visited Nikolic and thus made humane gesture that's good for his image. However, this move, the best in the given situation, was extorted making Tadic to play Nikolic's wanted as the visit turned everything into a personal conflict of the two, and Tadic indirectly and unconsciously recognized Nikolic as his even and the leader of the opposition. In addition, reactions from the DS showed that the situation of opposition leader on hunger strike was not pleasant for them. The Democratic Party in this crisis had clearer messages than ever. On the one hand, party leaders claimed that the government has a stable majority in parliament and that there is no reason for calling early elections, which is true. On the other hand, President Tadic said he was ready to call early elections as soon as Serbia becomes a candidate for membership in the European Union, which is in some way meeting the requirements of the progressives. Tadic's promise makes sense if DS wants to go to early elections, because they can be called only after a large success. However, the question remains why the ruling party calls snap election if the Government is stable and has an MP majority in parliament? It would be logical for a government that believes to be working well and has a majority in the

Assembly to be in power until the end of the term. Also, it sounds illogical that the government announces early elections but only after certain event. Usually, such intention is kept secret. The impression is that the ruling Democratic Party is caught in falling ratings and the developments and is not coping best in this situation. This is supported by the fact that after Nikolic's strike, no one is speaking about him in the media nor the government is trying to deny the what Nikolic did.

When Nikolic's strike was over, the public was most concerned with how all that had happened would affect the rating of the progressives and democrats. However, it is the least important, although the most interesting to the public. Polls show only the current mood of voters that can very easily be changed due to some extraordinary events. Polls are important for monitoring trends and responses of the public to some events. Therefore, it will be interesting to study how the public reacted to Nikolic's strike. It is more important how all that has happened will affect the political scene in Serbia. This impact will be much greater, and the Serbian political scene will not be the same as before.

Nikolic's strike showed that the DS cannot count on the solidarity of the coalition partners.

During the crisis, the DS was only supported by the SRS and LDP - LDP because it has nearly identical electorate and the SRS because they have a personal problem with the progressives. Interestingly the other coalition partners refrained from commenting Nikolic's strike. Nevertheless, the socialist leader (the term used for SPS) **Ivica Dacic** said he **"if I were Tadic, I would call early elections now"**. The silence from G17 leader Mladjan Dinkic is also indicative, as he hadn't supported Tadic's democrats. That might be normal because the same democrats have removed him from the government a month ago, but his party, like Dacic's, are part of the ruling coalition.

These events may worry the DS because they shown that the strength of the DS or SNS coalition capacity after the next election will be in direct proportion to the voting result.

The DS has so far counted on almost certain support of the SPS, LDP, G17 Plus and minorities. Now they realize that they were left to struggle alone with the progressives. One reason for this behavior of small partners lies in the fact that the DS until recently arranged with the SNS about creating a grand coalition and the "two-party system" in Serbia, where there is no room for small parties. Now, when small parties proved important, they have decided to watch "clash of the titans" from the side and



wait for the outcome. Nikolic's strike allowed his party to improve relations with the biggest competitor on the opposition scene Vojislav Kostunica, and the arrival of one of the richest Serbs **Milan Beko** in the hospital showed that the progressives are not without the support of big business.

The political crisis provoked by Nikolic's strike made "grand coalition" between the DS and the SNS almost impossible. Mutual trust of the leaders of these parties is almost destroyed at the joy of small parties who feared of a great marriage between the progressives and democrats.

Immediately after the strike ended, Nikolic said that after **"an ignorant attitude of the ruling coalition,"** towards their demands it was clear that no coalition was possible. Nikolic said that SNS had nothing to do with people who **"ignore their own nation and did nothing to make this people live a bit better, but filled their own pockets."**

Serbia is awaiting a "hot political year" in which the government and the opposition will fight for each ballot using all the trump cards. Will there be early elections or they will be held at regular time, momentarily even the DS doesn't know. All options are open, and the DS will make decisions according to the developments

related to the candidacy for EU membership and possible improvement of economic situation. On the other hand, Nikolic said SNS would daily point to the corruption scandals and privileges of the ruling coalition. Who will be more successful in this battle, the election will show. For Serbia, only one is important – until the election will be suspended all social and economic reform, the problems will not be solved, and the money and promises will be relentlessly consumed. Serious tasks of society and the economy reform will wait a new government, whoever will make it.