

Pre-Electoral Reshuffle

That in Serbia began preparations for the elections became evident after a debate on the government reshuffle. The idea of reducing the number of ministries in Serbia was proposed by the Deputy Prime Minister and leader of one ruling coalition party - G17 - **Mladjan Dinkic**. However, Dinkic's idea is not the first initiative to reduce the Serbian government. Since it was elected in July 2008, the public and the opposition declared the Government as one of the largest in Europe and there have been several initiatives for its reorganization, which would mean fewer ministers. All these initiatives were unsuccessful because the ruling coalition consists of 17 parties. So broad coalition is also the main reason why the Serbian government has grown to 27 members in the negotiations on its establishing, because most of parties should get the ministerial seats. And when the parties again formed the government and delegated power, it became impossible to convince them that they should reduce a ministerial seat.

This time the idea of reconstruction of the Serbian government has a chance to succeed. It was noticeable immediately from the reactions of government officials to Dinkic's statement. Serbian President Boris Tadic indirectly supported it by announcing that **"after the New Year the ruling coalition parties will analyze the current work of the Serbian Government and consider the possibility of its reorganization"**. But, being the leader of the strongest party in the ruling coalition, the president did not miss the opportunity to criticize the G17's leader statement that **"a possible government reshuffle should not be discussed in the media, because this way the reorganization will not take place"**. **"When an opportunity for the government reconstruction comes, then I will go public as the president of the largest coalition party"**, Tadic said and underlined that such a decision on the government reshuffle will be made by the Democratic Party whose he is president.

The situation in relation to the reconstruction is not the first in which the leader of G17 Dinkic goes public with certain political ideas without previous consultations with other coalition partners. Dinkic is very agile fighter for his political space and, unlike other parties, since the establishment of a new party United Regions of Serbia, he has started an election campaign. He is a very capable and energetic politician and there's impression that others in the Government simply cannot follow his pace.

Only several days before the proposed reconstruction, minister Dinkic demanded that ministers should be increased wages from January 2011 because under an agreement with the IMF Serbia will be allowed unfreeze civil service salaries. President Tadic reacted instantly with stating that **"the ministers will not be increased salaries as long as the crisis lasts"**, only to Dinkic correct his statement: **"first the citizens' salaries need to be increased, and only then the ministers can come on agenda for a raise, for example, in April. Until then, it is necessary that those who are not working well should leave the government"**. Dinkic hasn't given up on his idea to increase ministerial salaries, but only postponed it to April, although it is clear that even then the economic crisis will not be an even of the past.

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In the same way, Dinkic acts in connection with the reorganization. And here, he has the last word. The debate finished with his response to Tadic. **"The radical reorganization of the Government of Serbia should be completed by the end of January or shouldn't be implemented at all, because later it will be pointless"**, said Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Economy and Regional Development Mladjan Dinkic.

He also added that smaller government should number 15 ministries and that personnel changes depend primarily on the initiative of the biggest party in the coalition, that is, the Democratic Party. **“They have formed this government so they should initiate and carry out the reorganization. We are ready for talks, and we see that Tadic is also. Time will show whether there is such readiness among our other partners”**, said the minister. So once again, he reminded the public that the idea of government reshuffle came from him, he set the deadline in which it is to be implemented, determined the number of ministries that should comprise the new government, and shifted responsibility for the success of his initiative to the largest party in the coalition - the Democratic Party. Politically masterful move! Whatever the Democratic Party will do in connection with the reconstruction, everyone will recognize it as Dinkic’s idea.

Other parties in the ruling coalition only witnessed this game and declaratively supported a possible government reshuffle. Whether this support will be valid in January when parties will discuss a decrease of ministerial posts, it yet remains to be seen.

The Serbian government that needs to be reorganized currently counts 27 members. By comparison Hungary has eight members, the Government of Montenegro 23 members, the Government of Macedonia has a prime minister and 21 members, while Bosnia and Herzegovina next to a prime minister has 16 ministers. In Croatia, the number of ministries was reduced after the arrival of the HDZ to power and the government now has 18 members.

However, the biggest problem of the Serbian government is not the number of Ministers. Gallup agency recently reported that only 4.9 percent of Serbian citizens are satisfied with their lives, and that even 78 percent of the population barely makes ends meet. According to the survey, 65 percent of Serbian citizens had no confidence in the government, while only 18 percent of them believe that the Prime Minister Cvetkovic is sufficiently proficient. Gallup’s research shows that 60 percent of people in Serbia think that their standard is deteriorating, 70 percent of respondents stated that their economic situation was much worse this year than last year. Serbia’s citizens have very little confidence in their state institutions. Accordingly, state leadership is

supported by only 22.2 percent of the citizens, while a full trust in the government has only 2.9 percent. The degree of confidence in the justice system is also very low - only 3.4 percent of citizens trust the courts. The results of this survey show that citizens’ discontent with the government is very strong and that it is related to the decline of living standards, unemployment and other economic indicators. Therefore, the ruling coalition in Serbia ought to undertake action in connection with the government that has become too heavy burden with which neither party wants to join in the election race.

It is the major reason why the Government reorganization has a chance to succeed this time. The ruling coalition is aware of the unpopularity of the government and it is therefore necessary to do something in the second half of the mandate to change the image of the government in public. The government reorganization, which involves the departure of some ministers who will be sacrificed in the public as the culprits for poor and unpopularity, could be one possibility that the ruling coalition is planning to choose. This kind of reconstruction will not bring fundamental changes and the effect of this move will be short-lived, but politics is the art of possible. Presently, the ruling coalition has hardly strength for more radical moves.

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A more radical move with a longer effect would be the departure of Prime Minister **Mirko Cvetkovic**. None of the Democratic Party coalition partners demanded this, nor will do so. It’s a decision that Democratic Party will have to make itself, namely, its President Boris Tadic. The position of Prime Minister Cvetkovic is also one of the government’s problems and one of the reasons why it is unpopular.

This was confirmed in the debate on the reorganization of his cabinet participated by everyone from the government, the opposition, experts, except the prime minister. But, how it can be different, when the deputies of his government are coalition leaders directly connected with the leader of the largest coalition party and the President of the Republic? Mirko Cvetkovic is not even official of the Democratic Party and therefore does not participate in decision-making. That is why he's only witnessing the debate on government reshuffle and waiting for political parties to notify him on what they agreed. After nearly two and a half years of the government, it showed that its president cannot have the authority if he has no political authority over members of his cabinet. Citizens understood that well and therefore do not trust the government even though they can hardly complain on the Prime Minister Cvetkovic individually.

The question of the Prime Minister was initially launched by the leader of the opposition pro-European Liberal-Democratic Party **Cedomir Jovanovic**. **“Reorganization of the incumbent government will be meaningless if we do not get the new prime minister as evidence that the ruling coalition is ready for a new policy”**, said Jovanovic. The Liberals' leader warned the ruling coalition to **“the idea of government reshuffle must be the result of the ruling parties' need to put more makeup before the elections expected next year”**. His idea of Prime Minister change Cedomir Jovanovic explained in an interview for a daily newspaper with the words **“it's impossible to maintain the old policy and have a new government at the same time”**, adding that therefore **“every story on government reshuffle is irresponsible with Mirko Cvetkovic on its head.”** **“We are deeply in problems, and we have no prime minister. The point is that the man is in a situation he did not wish, and it is impossible to have a good prime minister if, especially in our local circumstances, he is not driven by extraordinary political energy and ability to make a cut in tough situations. Cvetkovic does not even show the ambition to do so”**, said Jovanovic.

A new Government with new Prime Minister would give a chance to the ruling coalition to try to change the situation to their advantage over the remaining eighteen months of the mandate, that is, to bring a new energy and new political ideas into political life.

Serbian citizens support the reduction of the Government. According to research conducted by Factor Plus agency, almost two thirds of the citizens of Serbia, namely 61 percent, support the government consisting of 10 to 15 departments. However, this stance can be primarily interpreted as the citizens' dissatisfaction with the government. Regardless of having new or old prime minister, it does not imply the government will be more efficient if having fewer ministers. To reduce the number of ministers, many departments need to be connected, as in Hungary. There is a Ministry of Natural Resources that is responsible for education, science, health, sports, youth and social issues. Ministry for National Development covers the areas of infrastructure, energy and European funds and the Ministry of Internal Affairs is responsible for the local government.

However, in a “super-ministry”, at the head of each department there will be minister's assistant, who will have under him secretary of state and entire administration of the former independent ministry. It can be expected that part of the responsibilities of formerly independent ministries will be transferred to government agencies whose work is hidden from the eyes of the public. Therefore, a smaller number of ministers does not imply less government administration, as it does not suppose that the state would be more efficient. A smaller number of ministers is a good marketing move by which authority is demonstrating to citizens that it wants to save and that's all. However, all this is far from the real needs of Serbia to significantly reduce the state apparatus and public spending.

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The problem of Serbia is not the number of governmental departments. Nobody would have noticed if we had fifty departments but if the government solved the problems of citizens. So anyone who believes that the problem of public discontent with the government can be solved by reducing the number of ministers or just a change of prime minister - is wrong.

Citizens are dissatisfied with the government because they are not coping with the challenges of crisis, because of fall of living standard, inflation, unemployment... Of course, not only Cvetkovic's government is guilty of all the problems. Since the democratic changes, in the last ten years, Serbia hasn't been solving important problems, but their solution has been delayed due to foreign aid, income from direct foreign investments and income from privatization. Now, when there are no grants, no investments, no privatization, the bill needs to be paid. Because of this reason Cvetkovic's government, apart from their bills, also pays the bills of their predecessors. Serbia's problems are systemic, starting from the disproportion between production and consumption, savings and investment, imports and exports, employment and unemployment, employees and retirees, administrators and the private sector, center and periphery, the number of births and deaths. It's high time the Serbian political elite said how all these problems will be solved. Otherwise, this bill will be paid by the next Serbian government that will come after Cvetkovic's.