



Scent of elections

In pre-election year, the impression is that there is only one political issue – the elections. It seems that both, the incumbent power and the opposition, agree that the elections will be scheduled before the regular term. However, the battle is fought over the date, or whether elections will be held several months earlier or later. And of course, about who will be "responsible" for their call in the eyes of the public and thus make initial electoral advantage.

Parliamentary and local elections in Serbia should be held no later than May 11, 2012, and presidential by January 20, 2013. The opposition pleads for early elections immediately, and the largest opposition party, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), scheduled a rally to start on April 16 until early elections are called. But it's just one problem the government is facing, because this year began with strikes and protests of employees, primarily in the public sector, seeking higher wages. Therefore, no one can predict how people will respond to the progressives' call. SNS is presently the most popular political party in the country supported by every third citizen and well organized. This guarantees that progressives will rally together a large number of supporters. However, to have early elections called progressives would need to be joined by trade unions, part of 400 thousand people who lost their jobs, civil societies... Early elections cannot be scheduled by a single political party - only a national movement can.

Are progressives only the most popular political party in the country or a movement that gathers and dissatisfied, unemployed, hungry and people who currently do not have a future – will be evidenced on April 16. From the answer to that question depends how the political crisis will unravel.

To progressives' requests responded the leader of the Democratic Party and Serbian President **Boris Tadic**, who said that **"parliamentary elections should not be run before the Serbia wins EU candidate status and the set date for starting membership talks"**, since **"the elections would surely bring certain political instability, which would reduce our chances and endanger the European Union accession"**. Tadic stressed that **"Serbia has never been closer to the EU"** and warned that **"a new political instability or changes in the strategic concept could distance the country from that goal, which would be a disastrous political and historic failure"**. At first glance it seems that Tadic rejected the progressives' initiative for early elections. However, it is not so, because he announced the conditions under which his party would agree to early elections as their ideal scenario for ordinary or extraordinary elections. A party whose main policy objective is the inclusion of



Serbia in the EU, by winning the EU candidate status and opening negotiations on membership gets election topic, and can hence tell the citizens it fulfilled its basic promise.

Not only two strongest parties - the SNS and the DS – are getting ready for the elections. The smaller coalition partner, the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), headed by Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister **Ivica Dacic**, issued a statement saying that **"there is a possibility that the early parliamentary elections will be held under the request of the Serbian Progressive Party"**.

The leader of the United Regions of Serbia (URS) **Mladjan Dinkic** has already started his election campaign. Dinkic announced the Campaign for the regionalization and decentralization of Serbia within which signatures are collected to demand from the government that much more money made in local communities remains at the disposal of these municipalities. **"Money earned in Priboj, Pozarevac, Novi Sad, as well as money from payroll taxes should be used for the construction of kindergartens, local roads, schools ... and all necessary to the citizens of the towns where the money is earned"** said the minister. According to him, URS recommends that 80 percent of payroll taxes remain in the city in which the tax is collected, the local authorities are immediately returned property seized in 1995, and to implement decentralization. A few days earlier, Mladjan Dinkic in an interview with the daily newspaper "Press" said that the best cooperation he had with Vojislav Kostunica. Thus the minister sent a message that in the future he can collaborate with the current

opposition also. After all, both Dinkic's party and the DSS are members of European People's Party - EPP. If we bear in mind that the strongest opposition party SNS aims to become a member of the association - it is clear that Dinkic's possible cooperation with the current opposition has an ideological basis.

The pro-European opposition Liberal - Democratic Party (LDP) is also ready for the elections. Its leader **Cedomir Jovanovic** said that **"today everyone agrees with old LDP's stance that elections should be held after winning the candidate status, because that's the only way Serbia can get an efficient government capable of modernizing the country"**. Jovanovic has sent a message to the Democratic Party not to monopolize the idea of European integration for themselves, saying that the LDP **"wants the elections as soon as possible after nomination"**, but that he expects **"the authorities not to hide behind the European idea which has become an excuse for every type of incompetency"**. It is this statement that indicates that the DS's plan to win EU candidate status not be easy to implement.

No matter that the latest opinion polls shows that DS is behind the SNS, citizens prefer the DS in terms of "European business" and believe that this party will better solve them.

Since the Government in which the DS is the dominant party is not successful in the economy, maintaining the standard of living, attracting foreign investment and preserving employment -



the issue of European integration is the only campaign promise for which the democrats will be able to say that it's fulfilled. The problem for Democrats is that the opposition and their coalition partners are aware of this. That's why the SNS leader **Tomislav Nikolic** in early March offered the Democrats that his party would **"give up the rally scheduled for April 16 if the government obliged to call early elections as soon as Serbia wins candidate status for EU membership the latest by December this year"**. Offering this arrangement, Nikolic sent a message to the public, especially that which is "European-oriented", he didn't want to jeopardize the process of European integration. Shortly thereafter, Nikolic and his deputy **Aleksandar Vucic** traveled to Brussels, to the EU headquarters, to meet with the European Commissioner for enlargement **Stefan Fule**. So the progressives showed that they wanted to take primacy of "the European story" from the DS. If they succeed, the DS has no chance to win elections, because progressives have an advantage in the other issues that will dominate the election campaign. An additional problem for the DS is that other coalition partners, primarily the United Regions of Serbia (formerly G17) and the Socialist Party of Serbia, will not allow that only the DS acquires political benefit from the success of European integration. These two parties would commit political suicide if they allow the Democratic Party to have the credit for this success. Finally, we shouldn't forget the LDP lead by **Cedomir Jovanovic**, who has supported the Government in the last three years in all matters concerned with European integration. For this party, a matter of Serbia joining the EU is the most

important political goal, something by which they are recognized and it would be politically very naive to cede the DS the benefit of getting the country into Europe.

That the DS understood that in addition to success in European integration in the next year they will not attain anything positive that would help them get re-elected, and that all parties are trying to heritage that story, evidence the messages sent to public by officials of this party, saying that early elections would "jeopardize the process of winning EU membership candidacy". Well, that is not quite true. Hungary, Czech Republic, Latvia and Slovakia had elections a few months before the Copenhagen European Council, on December 12, 2002, announced that ten countries had completed negotiations for EU accession and would become members of the Union on May 1, 2004. Only two months before the completion of negotiations, Latvia had parliamentary elections on October 5 2000 and two weeks earlier, September 20, 2002, parliamentary elections were held in Slovakia. The Czech Republic had elections five months before the completion of negotiations on June 15, 2002, while the Hungarian parliamentary elections were held at the end of April the same year. On the other hand, it is true that parliamentary elections would, to some extent, paralyze the executive power that needs to complete much work with the European Union.

However, the question is how much the executive power, aware that elections will be held not later than one year, is paralyzed?



For executive officials it is not that much important whether elections will be held or not, because they know they have their jobs no matter who's the government. For them, the more important is if the opposition parties want to change the country's strategic direction. Since there is consensus regarding the European integration, the executive power may without difficulty perform tasks that lie ahead.

The election results depend on whether the early parliamentary elections will be held concurrently with the local. The ruling Democratic Party could decide to call only the early parliamentary elections and leave the local for the regular term - the spring 2012. There could be more reasons for making such a decision. The DS is currently in power in most local governments. The leaders of cities and municipalities, if they are confident their position is not compromised, could more contribute to the campaign by using the national resources of the ruling Democratic Party. Another reason could be Mladjan Dinkic. As his party is made up of strong local leaders, it suits to him that parliamentary and local elections are held at the same time, because local leaders could, campaigning for themselves, bring more votes to Dinkic's party. The third reason could be the SNS. a young party emerged from the ultranationalist Serbian Radical Party (SRS) in autumn 2008. SNS was able to take most of the voters of the former SRS, but also to attract new voters by conciliatory policy towards the European integration. Today the party has about a third of the electorate, but hardly any participation in the government. It has 21 MPs (MPs who left SRS) out

of 250 seats, while it has almost no representatives in local governments.

One of the reasons why SNS wants early elections immediately is to seize a place, from the lowest bodies to the assembly, that belongs to it according to its political power.

The DS counts on massive disappointment of the SNS officials who want to be on power. Or, they fear that, in the event that municipal elections are scheduled the same day as the parliamentary, membership and officials of progressives who are "hungry for power" would be much more motivated than the democrats who hold power. The fact is that in a Belgrade Mayor, Dragan Djilas, and the President of the government of Vojvodina, Bojan Pajtic, are more popular than their party. Djilas and Pajtic are the DS Vice Presidents and if the public votes for them, it is likely that part of citizens will vote for the DS. Without the local elections, the DS runs the risk recording weaker election results in both Belgrade and Vojvodina.

The Serbian president's mandate expires in January 2013 and the DS can improve its election result if presidential elections are run simultaneously with parliamentary elections. In that case, the election campaign would be turned into a competition between incumbent President Boris Tadic and his eternal rival, Tomislav Nikolic, leader of progressives. In this campaign, much less talk would be spent on life issues, and much more on strategic issues such as the European Union, NATO and relations with Russia. This means that the DS



could push from the campaign unpopular issues such as the standard of living, unemployment, or investments. However, this would be a game on all or nothing, because the winner takes all. In addition, early presidential elections cannot be called if the President Tadic doesn't formally submit resignation. It can be expected that his opponent Nikolic would use this act as initial advantage in the campaign. That is why this scenario is unlikely.

However, Boris Tadic's messages from the DS's main board meeting show that the party was aware that the issue of European integration wouldn't be enough to win elections, or that it was impossible to have referendum on "for and against the EU ", as it had been in the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2008.

The DS chairman said that his party **"didn't meet the expectations of citizens"**. **"We need to explain to citizens why it is not possible to increase salaries"**, said Tadic. **"We are close to the end of the global financial crisis though it is still felt in some countries, and there is no doubt that the economic, political and security circumstances in the entire world are very complex, and therefore we constantly have to make tough decisions to face these challenges"**, said Tadic. Djilas's recent election for the DS's second man shows this party is aware that it needs to show some success in the economic field if they want a new mandate.

The election campaign in Serbia has already begun, but the official start of the race is waited for. It can be argued that the progressives had achieved one goal even prior to the April meeting - early elections are the main topic. While the opposition cannot easily impose any topic, progressives have succeeded in that. When elections will be held depends only on the moment the ruling parties will choose as best. For, as we said at the beginning of the story - who schedules the elections has initial advantage. However, not only the power, but also the opposition expects to call elections after their rally. How much it is important to the power to choose the right moment, not to lose the majority before the elections and not to lose the initiative which could lead to elections scheduled under pressure from the opposition, it is also important to the opposition to exert pressure on the government to have the elections announced as the government lost the majority and was forced on them. In this competition between the government and opposition, the Serbian citizens will wait for somebody to call them to cast a ballot and say what they think about all - the government and opposition.