

## THE MISTERY OF THE SACK

At first sight calm and, for the Balkan's circumstances boring, overall elections in Serbia held on the sixth of May, has got a dramatic finish just before the second round of the presidential elections which are going to be held next week due to the accusations of the presidential candidate and the leader of the opposition Tomislav Nikolić that the governing Democratic Party „stole the elections“. It all began when Nikolić, four days after the finish of the first electoral round appeared at the press conference with the sack full of ballots, claiming that it was found in a container, which is according to him the key evidence of the electoral stealing. That is how the elections for the President of Serbia have got the unexpected direction where the main topic has become a question whether the elections are stolen instead of what the candidates are offering to the voters.

***The accusation of the electoral stealing has got a specific connotation in Serbia compared to the other countries of the parliamentary democracy. If, for example, the candidates that were defeated in France such as Marine Le Pen or Nicolas Sarkozy accused the President of France Francois Hollande for the „votes stealing“ that would sound grotesque and unreal, because such accusations nobody would believe in. In Serbia such accusations are seriously realised because of the past in which there were cases of stealing votes at the elections which were reasons for the demonstrations and protests.***

The first such case happened in November 1996. when the oppositional coalition „Together“ won the biggest cities including the capital Belgrade. The current government disputed those results and abolished the elections at many polls without any adequate reason. The opposition refused to take part in the repeated elections and invited citizens to the demonstrations. Students joined the protests as well as the non-governmental organisations, public persons and respected citizens. The government was refusing to accept the true results for months trying to break the demonstrations by repression. After 88 days of citizens' protests, the current President Slobodan Milošević admitted the winning of the opposition by special law that was adopted by the Serbian Assembly („lex specialis“). This decision was preceded by the mediation of the former Spanish Prime Minister Felipe Gonzales who was invited by the current Serbian government to be a mediator in the negotiations with the opposition. What did Milošević want to achieve with this invitation for the mediation is still not quite clear today. Was he looking for the way out from the problem he was into or did he believe that the Spanish socialist Gonzales would be affected toward his Socialist Party and not the citizens' opposition in which were dominant parties of the right wing? In any case, Felipe Gonzales confirmed that the opposition was right and thus first great crisis about votes stealing in Serbia was overcome. New crisis happened at the elections in the year 2000. when the President Milošević reduced himself his own mandate and scheduled presidential elections counting on the support of the citizens, because the country had just ended the war with NATO about Kosovo. Milošević faced a debacle because he was severely beaten by the Democratic opposition of Serbia's (DOS) candidate Koštunica in the first round. The government wanting to hold the second round at any price took to the votes stealing, meaning the falsification of the records. DOS and its candidate Koštunica refused to take part in the second round of the elections and set up the demonstrations where more than million people took part in.



Gathered citizens occupied state institutions as well as media and police and army refused calls of the current President Milošević to intervene. The consequence was that Milošević's party lost all the government in the country instead of only presidential elections and only 12 years later, after the reforms and personal changes managed to recover from that defeat.

Since the year 2000, now on, in Serbia have been held for four times presidential and parliamentary elections, as well as local elections two times. Not any party has ever had any objections to the regularity of the elections. Because of that, the progressives' accusations of the „stealing the elections „ have specific heaviness. They remind the citizens of times which they had almost forgotten as well as of the events that caused the demonstrations. Besides, the progressives know quite well that the voters of the governing Democratic Party ( DS ) are quite sensitive at the mentioning of the electoral stealing because their party was the victim of the electoral manipulations in the past.

***The problem with the accusations of the progressives lies in a fact that they did not prove their accusations, i.e. they did not convince the public that they are right. Showing the ballots in front of the cameras looks quite effective and as a proof but beside that the progressives did not offer anything else that could confirm their statements that there were electoral manipulations present. There are no statements of the witnesses, video records from the poll where could be seen irregular activities or retrieves and not signed the records. It is the greatest problem they have because if they want to convince the citizens that there was an electoral stealing it is not enough that one or several political parties that are directly interested as participants in the electoral process talk about that. The citizens are going to believe that there really were electoral manipulations if those who they have trust in , such as analysts, intellectuals , well-known persons, non-governmental organisations or students talk about that. Otherwise, they will not be ready to support the protests what is exactly happening to this party. On protests that are being organized by them daily in all bigger cities in Serbia only the supporters of Nikolić's party were taking part in.***

The question is what the progressives want to achieve by soliciting the theme of the electoral stealing just before the second electoral round? The fact is that it is a way to motivate their voters but also the other voters of the right wing. It is easier for them to convince the voters of the other parties to come out to the second round of the presidential elections if they present their candidate Nikolić as a victim of the electoral manipulations than if they fulfill the terms of each party respectively for their support. The way it looks like best shows the example of the leader of the second party of the right wing concerning the power in the parliament, Vojislav Koštunica, who addressed a letter just after the elections in which he asked out of him to accept the policy of the political and military neutrality as a term for the support of his party in the second electoral round. This term Nikolić can not accept if he wants to become the President of Serbia. However, after he listened the story of the electoral stealing Koštunica sent a letter to the Republic Electoral Commission in which he asked another new counting of the votes. Thus he directly supported Nikolić and send message to their voters who to support in the second electoral round. Nikolić is , thus with this story of the electoral stealing motivated his voters as well as most of other voters of the right wing ( which were around 16 per cent at these elections. )



The problem with Nikolić's strategy lies in a fact that it mobilises only their own supporters but rejects the moderate voters or those that are indecisive. And without the votes of the moderates it is not possible to become the President. Those voters can not be attracted by radical movements, calling for the demonstrations or the escalating of the political situation. They want their President to guarantee them stability, peace and safety. The street demonstrating candidate for the President can not send them such a message.

***Besides ,the story of the electoral stealing was quite unconvincing and to these voters you have to give more arguments than to your own voters in order to get the support at the extreme situations.***

All in all, it seems that Nikolić has lost those voters what will disable him to endanger Tadić in the second round of the presidential elections. It is paradoxal, behaving this way Nikolić has somehow confirmed claims of the democrates from the first electoral round that he is unpredictable, meaning that it is risky that he leads the country and those politicians never win.

What has made Nikolić decide for this strategy in the second electoral round we will probably never find out. Though, it is not the strategy for the triumph. Candidate who has won just a bit less votes than his opponent in the first round and whose party is the strongest party in the Parliament has had a better choice. He could have ,for example , asked from his voters to confirm his electoral triumph in the first round, to insist on changes he had been promising to the voters and to indirectly send the message to the voters that it is better for the democracy the President to be from another party if the government is going to be formed by Tadić. This strategy could bring Nikolić those voters who do not belong to any party and who decide at the elections as well as probably better result than he is going to gain on Sunday.

This way, Nikolić has chosen radical strategy. And when you decide to accuse the government of stealing the votes than you have chosen for your party to struggle against the government by non-parliamentary means. The logical consequence of such accusations from Nikolić's side would be not to take part in the second round of the elections ( what was the case with the Serbian Democratic Opposition in 1996. And in 2000.)as well as that its delegates do not participate in the work of the Assembly. So, either you have the evidence of the electoral stealing and you are determined in your belief that you will bring this situation clear by the non-parliamentary means or you do not have any proofs and then you take part in the electoral process. Nikolić has chosen a half solution – he accused the government severely but he decided to take part in the electoral race. And half solutions in the politics never bring positive results. By deciding that after the severe accusations he chose to take part in the electoral race Nikolić showed that he does not have clear strategy and that he does not know what he wants. He has sent contradictory and confused messages to his voters and he make them confused and that will reflect on his electoral result in the second round.



There is an impression that everything he has done since the 6th of May was addressed to his party and his voters only and not to the citizens of Serbia. It seems as if he has already reconciled with the defeat at the presidential elections and now he does not think any more how to preserve his party and his position in it. Someone watching the situation from aside finds it strange that the leader of the party which gained largest number of votes ( 24,01 % ) and 73 mandates out of 250 that are in the Parliament of Serbia needs an justification for the electoral result. However, after the new agreement of the democrates ( public name for the Democratic Party ) and the socialists ( public name for the Socialists Party of Serbia ) it has become quite clear that the progressives can not form the government. This party has since its forming by separation from the ultra-nationalistic Serbian Radical Party ( SRS ) been the most popular party in the country and many surveys were giving it quite an advantage over the democrates, which was often double-digit. Thus great expectations were created in the party. They were not real because such an advantage in the campaign always reduces since the progressives' opponents were convincing the citizens to vote for them too and because the progressives could not manage to create a movement for changes but they took part in the elections alone. These unreal expectations as well as many party officials who joined the party from other parties expecting to become state representatives have created the atmosphere of the defeat!

With the help of the story about the stolen elections Nikolić is trying to bring up demoralized party in order not to experience the debacle in the second electoral round. It should not be forgotten the fact that the Serbian Progressive Party ( SNS ) was founded by the separation from the Serbian Radical Party ( SRS ) but that the profile of people in the Serbian Progressive Party is different from the voters and officials in the ultra-nationalistic and almost military organized Serbian Radical Party. When Nikolić lost the elections as the deputy president of the Serbian Radical Party , in the party nobody had courage to ask him anything except the leader of the party , the Hague defendant Vojislav Šešelj. The situation is different in the Serbian Progressive Party because there are many officials in the party that were not the members of the Serbian Radical Party, there is no military discipline, and by that fact alone they will start asking questions to the management of the party why the party is not governing the country.

The leading democrates were surprised by the progressives' accusations as they were not expecting them. In the first few days the progressives were only satisfied with the candidate of the leading coalition Boris Tadić which was wrong. That exactly was their aim. After a few days, Tadić has returned to his campaign and the other officials of the leading coalition started giving answers to the accusations. It is interesting that the Police and the Prosecution needed a few days from the moment of the accusations to start the investigation. The Prosecution announced that it is affirmed that sacks with ballots the leader of the progressives Nikolić was showing originate from the polls and that the certain presidents of the polls simply did not bring them to the electorate commissions. It remains confusing how is it possible that the republic electoral commission does not know four days after the elections that they are missing a certain number of sacks with the votes? All of that has caused the additional confusion.



If Nikolić found in the stealing of votes the guilty one for his failure in the first electoral round is it realistic to expect similar scenario after the second electoral round? It is probably so, and that is why it is possible to expect problems during the second round of the presidential elections more than it has ever been during the elections in Serbia in all these years. Even if no one wants problems to happen, the tensions are already at the highest level. The additional reason for that is the fact that in the wider electoral commissions are now only left the representatives of the two presidential candidates as well as that the presidents of the electoral commissions in Serbia divided between the two candidates equally. In the electrical atmosphere it is possible to expect the incidents at the polls, the proclaiming of the electoral triumph before the counting of the votes or dissatisfaction with the electoral results. That is exactly why the state should put the additional efforts to secure the safety of the electoral polls, as well as the publicity of the electoral process. The governing Democratic Party has already sent an invitation to the OSCE to send larger number of beholders which is a good step but not enough. The state has to find the additional ways to convince the public in the safety of the electoral process.

Everything that has been happening around the second round of presidential elections has caused harm to the image of the country in the world. That price is Serbia going to pay for a long time on different ways starting from smaller investments to the further breaching of even not that great image. That is exactly why the presidential candidates that are participating in the second electoral round should have the responsibility not only to themselves and their voters but to the country they are swearing to and which presidents they want to be. Serbia is going to face hard political decisions and numerous reforms to provide no matter who is governing the state because they are the conditions for Serbia to survive. Many of those decisions will have to be provided by the government and the opposition altogether.

***If Serbia should split after the elections on two parts which do not communicate and do not cooperate – the country will not have any chances at all. And for the ordinary people it is going to be the fault both of the government and the opposition. In that case it is going to be opened a new space for the extreme political options, left wing and right wing, which has never been the solution. Who does not believe, can only take a look at the situation in Greece.***