

## **Comment: No Sign of Serbia's Adenauer**

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What Serbia needs is a break from the past, as happened in post-1945 Germany. But right now it looks more like the chaos of the Weimar Republic.

“What we need right now is a charismatic leader with real vision,” one young man in his twenties told me after the results of the first round of Serbia’s presidential election came in. “Unfortunately such a person does not exist on the Serbian political stage.”

That summed up the dilemma facing many voters when it came to choosing which of the uninspiring candidates for the job of head of state they preferred.

On the one hand there are great expectations, and on the other there is a realisation that there is no chance of the candidates fulfilling them.

One sign of the poor health of Serbia’s new democracy is that when discussing their preference for the moderate candidate Boris Tadic, many people told me that “at least he is not a criminal”.

In other words, the mere fact of not having been convicted of theft, fraud or bribery has in Serbia become a qualification for holding the highest office in the land.

Even in a smoothly-run Scandinavian country where heads of state need do little except smile and wave, that kind of negative qualification – not being a killer, or not being a thief – would hardly guarantee a successful term in office.

The problem is that a country with Serbia’s long list of economic and political problems – near-bankruptcy and a lack of direction or any discernible strategy – needs much more than a non-criminal at the top right now.

What it needs, if not a Peter the Great, is at the very least a kind of Balkan Konrad Adenauer.

The first post-war leader of West Germany did much more than help clear away the debris of Allied bombing and lay the path for the “economic miracle” of the Fifties.

Adenauer’s strong moral purpose and his absolute rejection of all aspects of the Nazi legacy helped engineer Germany’s spiritual rebirth after two decades in which every patriotic value had been twisted, distorted and abused.

Closing the door on nationalist values that had dominated German society for decades but ended in catastrophe, he placed his country at the heart of an entirely fresh project – building a new, democratic and peaceful Europe on the ruins of the past.

The break with that recent, and rotten, past was symbolised in the extraordinary decision to move the capital to a small town on the banks of the Rhine, Bonn.

Pity the nation that fails to make the same surgical break with values that have demonstrably led nowhere – or only to mass graves.

Serbia, as everyone outside – if not inside – the country can see, is now paying a high price for the compromised and half-hearted character of its revolution.

More than ever, it seems that the true comparison between Serbia in 2000 is not with the new Germany of 1945, but the half-new state of 1918, when the monarchy was overturned by the feeble, intimidated democrats of the Weimar Republic.

Like the self-styled democrats of modern Serbia, the German democrats of the Twenties and Thirties were a feuding and quarrelsome bunch. More frightened of accusations of treason from the far right than anything else, they tended to talk about their principles in a whisper – and then only preferably to a foreign audience.

When not forming endless temporary and shifting coalitions, they scratched and fought like kittens in a sack – oblivious of the approaching danger until the Nazi steamroller flattened them all at once.

By the time they were squashed, so the history books tell us, most Germans were relieved to see them gone, so great was the popular yearning for stability – and so discredited the whole idea of democracy.

It took a man of Adenauer's moral stature and strength of will to replant the idea –and he did it so successfully that more than 50 years on, German democracy has never faltered.

But Serbia has no such statesman in view, either in the ranks of its would-be presidents, or among the entire political elite.

As one Serbian analyst told me, the political class is “a disaster”. Where, he wondered, is the equivalent even of Croatia's Ivo Sanader, who has at least united his country around the project of joining the European Union by the end of the decade.

The answer would seem to be nowhere.

It remains a mystery what even the “moderate” candidate in the current election would do about Kosovo, or the economy, or war crimes suspects.

No wonder the analyst I spoke to was not holding his breath for a Tadic victory, even if he did think it preferable to a win by an ultra-nationalist like Tomislav Nikolic.

His dark diagnosis was that Serbs faces a pretty poor set of choices – a “no-win” – or “lose-lose” – election, if you like.

The “choice”, such as it is, lies between instant excommunication from Europe and the United States under Nikolic – and more of the now familiar recipe of compromise and confusion under Tadic.

No wonder that many Serbs prefer the simple clarity of Nikolic's message to that of his opponent. On the one side, all is clarity – on the other – mainly fog. No wonder, too, that many people will not bother to vote at all.

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