

Comment: Serbia Gets Another Chance

Author: [Daniel Serwer](#)

Newly appointed reform-minded president merits Europeans and American support.

While the Balkans have faded from American headlines, the inauguration last weekend of Boris Tadic as President of Serbia merits attention. Tadic is a vigorous reformer determined to speed reforms and pull Serbia into Europe.

Almost three years after Slobodan Milosevic was sent to be tried for war crimes in The Hague, his legacy appeared at the polls in the person of Tomislav Nikolic, who won a narrow victory in the first round of the presidential elections a month ago. Nikolic was the candidate of the Serbian Radical Party, whose leader is also in The Hague. The Radicals continue to advocate Greater Serbia, to justify crimes against humanity as necessary for the protection of Serbs, and to resist Serbia's entry into NATO, though nominally they favor its entry into the European Union.

Representing a different Serbia, Tadic acknowledges past crimes, respects the territorial integrity of its neighbors, and sees the future not only within Europe but also within NATO. As defense minister for a year until this spring, Tadic undertook military reform and tried to put the army under civilian control. While the Serbian president's powers are limited, Tadic will press for cooperation with the Hague tribunal and early entry of Serbia into NATO's anteroom, the Partnership for Peace programme. This is a Serbian president who merits European and American support.

Tadic faces serious challenges. The current government of Serbia excludes his Democratic Party and gets support instead from Milosevic's Socialists. The Serbian prime minister is Vojislav Kostunica, whose electoral victory in October 2000 led to the fall of Milosevic but whose political platform echoes Nikolic's: a desire to prevent Serbs in neighboring countries from being governed by non-Serbs, refusal in practice to cooperate with the tribunal, and an effort to drive a wedge between Europe, which he likes, and the United States, about which he has doubts.

In order to govern effectively, Tadic will need to end the government's dependence on Socialist support by bringing his own Democratic Party into the majority. This will be a delicate manoeuvre, since Kostunica may resist. New parliamentary elections may be necessary, with an uncertain outcome.

If Tadic succeeds in reorienting the Serbian government in his own, forward-looking direction, he will then need to grasp a third rail of Serbian politics: war criminals. The US has suspended bilateral assistance to Serbia because Belgrade is not cooperating with the tribunal. The EU is holding back on a Stabilization and Association Agreement. Some in Washington and Brussels will argue that it is a mistake to weaken Tadic by insisting too much that war criminals be transferred to The Hague. Why should we hold relations with Serbia hostage because of a few individuals?

The answer is that those individuals not only are accused of committing crimes against humanity and genocide but also continue to hold Serbia hostage by their presence and influence in its army, police and secret services. Nikolic lost the election this time, but he or his ilk may well win elections next time. Previous transfers to The Hague have removed obstacles to reform and improved Serbia's European prospects. Serbia will go farther and faster if the indicted war criminals get their day in court.

If Tadic succeeds in sending them to The Hague, he still faces an even higher voltage issue: Kosovo. Before 2000 a province of Serbia with historical and religious significance for Serbs, Kosovo is now a UN protectorate with an Albanian population that yearns for independence. No Serbian politician can appear "soft" on this issue, or ready to give up sovereignty over Kosovo. Tadic roundly denounces Kosovo Albanians for the mistreatment of Serbs as well as drug trafficking and organised crime.

Kostunica's government has tried to lock in Serbia's approach to Kosovo by passing a unanimous parliamentary statement reasserting sovereignty over the entire territory as well as Belgrade's intention to govern the Kosovo Serbs (but not the Kosovo Albanians). The underlying objective is ethnic separation. This is a goal Albanian extremists share. Since more than half of the Kosovo Serbs still live in areas spread throughout Kosovo that have Albanian majorities, Albanian extremists are tempted to seize as much territory as possible by displacing even more Serbs. This idea lay behind the March ethnic rioting in Kosovo, which targeted Serbs and the UN presence there.

If he wants to avoid further displacement of Serbs and to gain international community support, Tadic should take a more pragmatic and moderate stance. He should seek a negotiated political solution that protects Serbs throughout Kosovo, rejects ethnic separation and acknowledges Albanian rights and aspirations.

The US, even if distracted by Iraq, will have to play a vital role in Kosovo and in Serbia. Only with American political leadership in partnership with the EU will Belgrade and Pristina be able to find a mutually agreeable solution, whatever it may be. That will end, after more than a decade of war and strife, any serious threat of instability in the Balkans.

Daniel Serwer is director of peace and stability operations at the United States Institute of Peace.

Location: Balkans
Macedonia
Albania
Serbia

Focus: Balkans: Regional Reporting & Sustainable
Training

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/comment-serbia-gets-another-chance>