

## **Comment: Voters May Rue DOS Defeat**

**Author:** [Stojan Cerovic](#)

The government has failed to meet public expectations, but its performance has not been that bad.

It is likely that the reformist Serbian government will be ousted by a right-wing coalition in the upcoming elections - something many voters may well regret once political passions have subsided.

The track record of the ruling DOS coalition has been good given the international and domestic problems it has faced.

It is true that the Serbian public's high hopes for the years following Milosevic's demise have not been entirely met and that a series of scandals have damaged the government's credibility and left many eager to see a change of leadership.

But should the electorate vote to oust the ruling coalition in parliamentary elections on December 28, it's unlikely to come from the belief that there is a better alternative. And, once voters' desire to punish the administration for its shortcomings has been sated and a right-wing coalition has been ushered in, they may well begin to appreciate what they have given up.

Having formed the government in January 2001, the late prime minister Zoran Djindjic set about the ambitious project of rebuilding Serbia as if it were his life's work. He had been the chief architect of the historical effort to topple Milosevic's regime and he was eager to leave behind the evils of the past and lead Serbia into a bright new future, determined to cover the distance separating his country from Europe and overcome any obstacles that stood in the way.

But the circumstances were difficult. His government was trapped between an electorate that lacked the resolve to make an entirely clean break with the legacy of the Milosevic era and an international community which remained wary of Serbia and refused to embrace it without reservations and preconditions.

This awkward position is perhaps best illustrated by the problems it created for the government in its dealings with the Hague war crimes tribunal.

Djindjic courageously accepted the responsibility of extraditing war crimes suspects to the war crimes court whenever he saw it was unavoidable. But even then he was charged with betraying national interests and conducting a policy of surrender and submission.

From the very beginning, Djindjic's government was facing muted opposition, and subsequently open resistance, over cooperation with the tribunal from the then coalition member Vojislav Kostunica's Democratic Party of Serbia, DSS.

And in the meantime, the international community accused the Serbian government of dodging its obligations.

The change in Serbia's political scene that came with Milosevic's landslide electoral defeat on October 5, 2000 was not the dramatic revolution many hoped it would be. Rather than being free to press ahead as

the victorious conqueror, the new government was forced to carry the heavy burden of the past on its shoulders.

But even under these difficult circumstances, the ruling coalition managed to defuse ethnic tensions in the southern municipalities, improve relations with Serbia's neighbours and with the international community as a whole, and stabilise the economy and press ahead with unpopular but necessary economic reforms.

Djindjic's government succeeded in addressing hyperinflation and rescuing a financial system on the verge of collapse, with the then National Bank governor Mladjan Dinkic briskly liquidating four state-owned banks.

As the national currency exchange rate remained firm and foreign currency reserves soared, the reformed banking system regained the confidence of ordinary citizens. Although there are still problems with the state budget, a newly modernised taxation programme was at least developed.

And the delicate operation of privatising state-owned companies is being carried out transparently and without major incident, with some companies being sold at surprisingly high prices given the current state of Serbia's economy in this early transition period.

Of course many workers have lost their jobs, but that is an inevitable cost in the pursuit of long-term benefits and it is a cost which every other eastern European country has already paid.

This government has also succeeded in gradually regaining the confidence of the international community.

Ethnic tensions in the southern municipalities were successfully defused by deputy prime minister Nebojsa Covic, who met with representatives of the local authorities and dealt with Albanian extremists resolutely but without excessive use of force.

And Djindjic's approach to the difficult and important issue of neighbouring Montenegro was pragmatic, always keeping one eye on the ultimate goal of gaining admission to the European Union. The government did away with Milosevic's policy of threats and blackmail and EU mediation resulted in a loose state union of the two countries.

The government has also done much to normalise relations with other neighbouring states, including former foes Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Under the new administration, Belgrade took the initiative and showed goodwill to overcome the horrors of the region's recent history, despite the fact that Serbia itself was deeply traumatised and weighed down by the misfortunes of hundreds of thousands of refugees.

All of this was achieved with a minimum of criticism from the electorate and from other Serbian parties. Although the policy of improving relations with former enemies wasn't wholeheartedly embraced by the Serbian public, there was no significant resistance to it.

No one in the country dared seriously challenge the government's pro-European policy, and even criticism from war crimes suspect Vojislav Seselj's extreme right-wing Serbian Radical Party, SRS, simply boiled down to the one issue of the authorities' dealings with the Hague.

Serbia still has a long way to go.

There is much that remains to be done in restructuring both the healthcare and justice system but the biggest problem, in terms of Serbia's social institutions, remains the police. Attempts to reform the latter have been limited and crime and corruption amongst officers is still rife.

The declaration of a state of emergency and the launch of a massive crackdown on organised crime, Operation Sabre, in the wake of Djindjic's murder did little to affect this. In fact, the only major success was the dissolution of the Special Operations Unit, the Red Berets, whose members are suspected of having carried out the prime minister's assassination.

A series of recent scandals have also rocked the government and eroded the public's respect for it.

When the EU granted Serbia the right to export its sugar at favourable prices to member states, a deal which would have helped boost the Serbian economy, the provision was abused.

Low quality foreign sugar was imported into Serbia and then sold on to EU states. The EU's preferential treatment of Serbia was subsequently suspended and the government's reputation took a serious knock. The whole affair has yet to be properly investigated and settled.

Accusations also abound that two senior government officials have been involved in corruption and tax evasion, and the administration's reputation sustained a further serious blow with the revelation that the appointment of a new National Bank governor by parliament had involved vote-rigging.

Claims by representatives of the Democratic Party, DS, a member of the ruling coalition, that a particular deputy was present at the parliamentary session were refuted when it came to light that she had in fact been on holiday in Turkey at the time.

Although party vice president Boris Tadic admitted that mistakes had been made and tried to argue that the government hadn't needed a majority vote to pass the decision anyway, neither this, nor a series of attempts to purge the party of officials who had been involved in the affair, will be enough to see the DS through unscathed.

But no government is perfect and this one has performed well, given the difficult circumstances under which it has been forced to operate. In fact, Serbia's main trouble is that the biggest reformist and modernising potential is still concentrated in the DS, this being a problem because the most the party can hope for in the wake of the upcoming elections is to take part in a coalition in which someone else will be pulling the strings.

Judging by the current political situation, it seems likely that the formation of a new government will be difficult. Bitter political rivals will be forced to unite in a coalition if any group is to secure the majority needed to take power, and the compromises reached are bound to be insincere and unstable.

It is quite likely that Serbia will see a string of short-lived governments and early parliamentary elections in coming years. And, besides the fact that this will slow down the process of turning Serbia into a modern, functioning state, it is also uncertain whether the weaknesses that are likely to force the ruling coalition out of power - corruption, abuse of office and failure to deal with crime - will be overcome.

But this is all part of the process of a young democracy taking hold and a people gaining experience in using it - mistakes, belated apologies and regrets, on the part of both party ministers and voters, are all

inevitable features of this development.

Stojan Cerovic is a columnist for the weekly Vreme.

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