

ELECTION DAY IN SERBIA

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In a consolidated Western democracy analysts and journalists would have had a field day with presidential, parliamentary, provincial, and local elections on one and the same Sunday. They would have written the background for the Monday paper on Saturday, using the polls as a giveaway for the upcoming expression of the will of the people. Give or take a few percent, the polls usually match the final vote count and even politicians nowadays begin explaining victory or defeat on the basis of exit polls and extrapolations, minutes after the polling stations have closed their doors. In the following hours colorful computer graphs would have offered the public a dissection of the vote by region, generation, education and inter-party profit and loss accounts.

Whereas, in recent years, Western elections have seen an increasing undecided segment of the electorate making up its mind only when the red pencil is in hand, real polling-booth surprises have been rare since Truman's "Dewey Wins". In the new democracies of East Central Europe, however, the party landscape has been as volatile as the electorates. Most of them lacked a loyal constituency and a consolidated programmatic profile. Each round of elections sends shock waves through the party landscape. The realignment of established, high-profile politicians and the subsequent merger, split or creation of parties in the months prior to election day leave the analysts gasping and guessing. Partisan polls, moreover, were often used to sway the opinion of the electorate, many of them as much at a loss as the analysts.

Recent elections have seen a marked reduction of this volatility in most EU accession states, justifying guarded optimism on the consolidation of democracy in these countries. The Southeast European countries of Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania have been less successful in this respect, with the near-collapse of state authority in Tirana and Sofia in 1996/1997 as a fresh memory.

And yet, compared to the intricacies and risks of last Sunday's elections in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), even these countries seem to be well beyond the point of no return in democratization. The fact that having local, provincial, parliamentary,

and presidential elections as well as a boycott in one part (Montenegro) and *de facto* non-sovereignty over another part of the state (Kosovo) as a package is probably unique in world electoral history.

Elections Day

On Saturday, no-one dared to predict what the situation would be like on Monday: Most of the polls, eyed with suspicion or incredulity by many a Western observer, gave the opposition candidate for the presidency, Vojislav Koštunica, a 20 per cent lead over incumbent Slobodan Milošević (44 and 23 per cent respectively).

Poll for the Presidential Elections

	1 st round (09/24) with 4 candidates		projected 2 nd round (10/08) with 2 candidates	
	18/08	09/15	18/08	09/15
Tomislav Nikolic (SRS)	7%	7%		
Slobodan Milošević (SPS)	25%	23%	31%	28%
Vojislav Mihajlovic (SPO)	4%	4%		
Vojislav Koštunica (DOS)	39%	44%	52%	56%
No Vote	5%	3%		
Undecided	16%	18%	17%	17%

Poll by Penn, Schoen, and Berland Ass. for the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs. On election day, the 20% gap was confirmed by CeSID parallel counts, giving Koštunica 56% and Milošević 34% (09/25, 8 PM)

Similarly, even with a wider margin of error, the DOS 18-party opposition block seemed certain of victory in the Yugoslav parliamentary elections, had the elections been free and fair

Poll for the Parliamentary Elections

	18/08	08/25	09/01	09/15
DOS - Democratic Opposition of Serbia	39%	39%	40%	42%

SPS/JUL - Socialist Party of Serbia & Yugoslavian Left	25%	24%	24%	22%
SRS – Serbian Radical Party	9%	9%	8%	8%
SPO – Serbian Renewal Movement	6%	5%	5%	3%
Other	2%	2%	2%	2%
No Vote	3%	3%	4%	3%
Undecided	16%	17%	17%	17%

Poll by Penn, Schoen, and Berland Ass. for the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs.

The polls on the parallel elections for the Yugoslav parliament closely correspond to those of the key ballot, the presidential election. In the polls quoted above, the percentages for Koštunica and the vote the DOS were almost identical and the same applies to Milošević and the ruling SPS/JUL coalition. Evidently, these were the elections of DOS versus SPS/JUL polarization. It is noteworthy, that both Seselj's extremist right-wing party SRS and its presidential candidate Nikolic and the moderate nationalists of Draskovic's SPO and its candidate Mihajlovic became sidelined by this polarization, although parliamentary and presidential percentages matched up for them too.

And the Winner Is ...

Eventually, the results of “super-Sunday” as presented by the regime were quite different.

First of all, the population of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia were asked to select a new president for the Federation. Stunned by the landslide, he waited until Wednesday before he let the Federal Election Commission announce the result. As many reports have it, they never even bothered to count and more likely offered the 40-48 split to the opposition block as a bargaining chip.

FRY Presidential Elections 2000: Polls, Official Results and Parallel Counts

	NDI IA Polls (09/15)*	Federal Election Commission (09/27)	CeSID parallel counts (09/26, 11 am)
Nikolic	9.0%	5.10%	5.61%

	NDI IA Polls (09/15)*	Federal Election Commission (09/27)	CeSID parallel counts (09/26, 11 am)
Milošević	29.5%	40.23%	33.51%
Mihajlović	5.1%	2.59%	3.05%
Koštica	56.4%	48.22%	56.93%
Vidojković (indep.)	-	0.80%	0.91%

* recalculated on the basis of the estimated turn-out.

Thus, with the pre-election polls and the parallel counts matching and making Koštica the new president without a run-off, the official result for him is 8 percent lower, leaving him 1.78 percent short of an absolute majority. With the electoral law in hand, the Federal Election Commission therefore called for a second round on October 8th.

Riding the wave of enthusiasm in the population, the united opposition has decided not to get bogged down in the dilemma between condemning the obvious fraud of the first round and the campaign for an even better result in the second round. So far, DOS leaders have unanimously rejected the 40/48 deal.

Officially, the FRY has 7,861,327 voters listed, 7,417,197 of them in Serbia (including Kosovo) and 444,130 in Montenegro. Their second task was to elect the Federal Assembly. The Assembly has two chambers: The Council of Citizens has 138 members, 60 members elected for a four year term in single seat-constituencies and 78 members by proportional representation, 108 members elected from Serbia and 30 members elected from Montenegro.

FRY Parliamentary Elections, 2000 (Council of Citizens, seats)

	1996 FRY Elections	Federal Election Commission (09/27)
DOS	(Zajedno) 22	59
SPS/JUL	(+ND) 64	44
SRS	16	0
DPS	(Montenegro) 20	(boycott)
SNP	-	(split from DPS) 28

	1996 FRY Elections	Federal Election Commission (09/27)
Others	16	0

The Vojvodina election on Sunday may have been less vital than the two FRY elections, but as Vojvodina has the same status as Kosovo, an autonomous republic within the Serbian Republic, its results deserve some attention (yet none have been published so far). Like Kosovo, Vojvodina lost most of its autonomy when Milošević came to

More upcoming Balkan elections: Apart from a possible second round in the FRY presidential elections, the Western Balkans are preparing for a whole range of elections, each of them a key factor in the (de)stabilization of the region:

1. Local elections in Albania on October 1
2. Parliamentary elections in Slovenia on October 15
3. Municipal elections in Kosovo on October 28
4. Elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina on November 11
5. Presidential elections in Romania on November 26

power in 1989, and the newly elected Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina has hardly any prerogatives left. Unlike the Albanians in Kosovo, the Hungarians in Vojvodina account for only a minority of the province's population and ethnic discrimination has been much less pronounced than in Kosovo. According to some reports, ruthless Belgrade requisitioning of grain from Vojvodina at low prices and the orchestrated inflow of Serb refugees from Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo changed the subdued mood and political passivity of the Hungarian peasants. This made whether the Hungarians would tend to vote for ethnic and/or regional Hungarian parties or support the Democratic opposition a key question. Not unlike the opposition in Belgrade, the Hungarians in Novi Sad were typically weakened by founding no less than six Hungarian parties.

Similarly, in view of the overall polarization, the results of the municipal elections are bound to mirror the trends of the presidential elections, although the published results (not yet available) are more likely to mirror the inclinations of the election commission. Serious police interference in the election process and other proactive fraud attempts has been reported from key opposition cities.

Explaining Milošević's Strengths and Weaknesses

Finally accepting the opposition's demand for early elections as he did in July was a gamble with high stakes for Milošević, although he had obviously expected another easy sparring round with the opposition, watched by the outside world with puzzlement and outrage.

Typically, the six key pillars of his power were:

1. Serb nationalism,
2. derailed economic transformation,
3. his personal charisma and authoritarianism
4. the impotence and disunity of the opposition,
5. repression of political opposition and free media,
6. and electoral fraud.

Thus, his resort to repression of political opposition and free media before and to massive electoral fraud during and after the elections may be construed as weakness, an erosion of the other four pillars.

In the weeks preceding the all-deciding Sunday, he seemed to be getting nervous about the all-or-nothing chance he had taken. When he resorted to intensified propaganda, harassment of free media and opposition parties, including the leaders of the intractable student movement Otpor, optimists read this as a sign of weakness and uncertainty. "He's finished!" an Otpor activist exclaimed in an interview. Yet, it was by no means the full might the Yugoslav police state could have mustered and the elections were not postponed or canceled.

Milošević – being a superb tactician rather than a strategist of genius – as a matter of fact had some aces up his sleeve and played some surprising trump cards in the last weeks, preparing the ground for the massive electoral fraud. Actually, the best optimistic Western observers had not hoped for a victory of the opposition, but rather Milošević utterly discrediting himself by blatantly falsifying the results. US analysts in particular expected the electoral fraud to mobilize the outrage of the population and deprive the dictator of his democratic cloak.

In the past months and weeks the more and more frequent occurrence of heavy-handed repression, so far rather uncommon for the Milošević regime, was hailed as a sign of weakness and

vulnerability on Milošević's part, as it probably was. Opposition media outlets were raided, SPS leader Draskovic survived an attempt on his life, presidential candidate Koštunica and some others were harassed, their offices ransacked.

Preliminary reports suggest that Milošević's toolbox for electoral fraud contained two generic tools this time, known to all less democratically-minded rulers, and two instruments he has patented. Despite the polls it has to be acknowledged that Milošević – being a superb tactician rather than a strategist of genius – indeed seemed to have dealt himself a deck with nothing but aces in the short term, but actually turned some of his presumed bad cards into trumps.

Party control – Evidently, representatives of the ruling SPS/JUL coalition control the entire voting process including: the preparation of the voters' lists, the screening of the candidates, the supervision at the polling stations, the admission of observers to the actual counting of the ballots. A wide range of irregularities has been reported, usually declared groundless by the Central Electoral Committee. Life-long citizens were not on the list; people were forced to vote in public, in full view of the committee; opposition monitors were turned down; in some stations voters of the youngest age group—those born in 1980 and 1979—were all rejected; etc, etc.

Ballot fraud – In the absence of cross-party supervision over the electoral campaigning and neutral (international) election monitors, and certified voters' lists fraud in the counting of the ballots at all levels has to be taken for granted. Even OSCE observer missions to other, more democratic countries have found it extremely hard to follow the entire counting process from the voting booth in the province to the end result proclaimed by the Central Electoral Committee in the capital. At this crucial point in the electoral process, Milošević will certainly have “found” additional votes.

Montenegrin ballots – Milošević's recent change of the federal constitution left President Djukanovic and the Montenegrins no other option but to boycott the elections as a whole. In retrospect, this may even have been Milošević's primary intention all along. In the end, pro-Milošević citizens of Montenegro voted in a chaotic and irregular fashion in private homes, shops, etc. Despite the official boycott, the Montenegrin government decided not to interfere. Thus, according to

polls on the eve of the elections, in Montenegro only a third of the electorate intended to vote (85 per cent in Serbia). These Serb Montenegrins, however, could tilt the balance only slightly in favor of Milošević as they constitute some 2 percent of the FRY electorate. The makeshift voting in Montenegro, however, offered excellent chances for further fraud.

Kosovar ballots – Milošević's move to have polling stations in Kosovo was a publicity stunt and a good one. It took the Western powers by surprise and forced them to comply, as they formally endorse FRY sovereignty over Kosovo. The Serbians going to vote, of course, also has a potential for inter-ethnic violence, again embarrassing KFOR and UNMIK as well as a countless options for fraud, considering the chaotic, irregular procedure of voting in the province.

The massive fraud this time seems to resolve at least part of the enigma of Serbian elections that has haunted Western observers and politicians for years. Despite the fact that Serbia was economically ruined and politically isolated by Milošević's lost wars in Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo, he seemed to need very little from the dictatorial toolbox to win elections previously.

For lack of a better explanation this was often blamed on the legendary disunity of the democratic opposition. Had not Tito already noted that three Yugoslavs are quite capable of creating three factions? Indeed, as long as the two opposition blocks – the Alliance for Change led by Zoran Djindjic and his Democratic Party, and the Serbian Renewal Movement of Vuk Draskovic (SPS) – cooperated for the 1996 local elections, Milošević was in trouble and had to bring out some more tools from the toolbox to restore his dominance.

Often, the ingrained nationalism and victim's mentality of Serbs served as a second factor explaining dictator Milošević's going through the motions of democracy with relative quiescence. This experience taught (in particular American) transitologists a lesson, as they had assumed that a series of free and fair elections on all political levels was not just a necessary, but nearly a sufficient condition for democracy after communism. To cover this deficiency of democratization theory, Milošević was and is often depicted as an evil politician of superhuman ingenuity and cunning.

Assuming the polls are actually more reliable than the election results, Milošević rigged (mostly in Kosovo and Montenegro, see

below) hundreds of thousands of votes for himself as president and for his SPS in parliament, resorting to electoral fraud on a unprecedented scale this time and ... with astonishingly little success.

Four out of six pillars mentioned above have indeed changed to his disadvantage:

1. Koštunica being a nationalist himself, who could not be suspected of being a pawn of the West, a national traitor, or in the pay of the CIA, Milošević faced a fight over the Serbian nation and his national program. In fact, the electorate was offered a choice between four nationalist presidential candidates, and Milošević could not pose as the only patriot.
2. Previously, JUL and SRS had managed to attract both the losers and winners of the derailed FRY transition from command-economy to market-economy. The regime stood for both those who feared to lose subsistence once a reform-minded government would come to power and for those who had already become rich on the black market, in nomenclature privatization or by being Milošević cronies. It seems, the losers have become desperate enough to look for an alternative to Milošević and the winners may also reconsider their loyalties.
3. The fact that he lost the elections and in a way admitted his defeat (by not claiming a first round victory) has cast doubt on his aura, leaving him vulnerable and weakened, groping for support and loyalty.
4. The key to his rare miscalculation of early elections was, however, the new DOS 18-party opposition coalition and its unity. More in particular, Djindjić willingness to heed the popularity polls and accept Koštunica as the one and only candidate was crucial. Once he had been endorsed by the 18 parties, his popularity (previously far below Milošević's) began to rise spectacularly.

Additionally, a phenomenon typical of Serbian-type politics is the recently skyrocketing popularity of the "Otpor" (resistance) students movement, representing a non-violent and non-traditional type of mobilization. When mass participation in the regular demonstrations organized by the official opposition parties waned, Otpor managed to reinvigorate the protests. Otpor is a post-modern mobilization movement, but not a political party in the traditional sense. Thus, Otpor has no comprehensive political program – although that fact

alone hardly sets them apart from the main opposition parties – and no fixed leadership or political candidates. This is both its weakness and its strength. Otpor is bound to fail when it becomes a structured political organization competing for political offices, but spontaneity and amorphous leadership structure make Otpor a difficult opponent for the regime's repression toolbox. The Otpor leaders, Belgrade students in their early twenties, indeed constitute a generation different from the opposition leadership, mostly men in their fifties with a university degree from the liberal 1960s.

Scenarios for the Aftermath of the Elections

Logically, with a clear-cut victory of his opponent in the federal elections, Milošević had essentially four options on Monday:

1. get rid of the **victory** by **electoral fraud**. This obviously happened, but the lead of Koštunica was so overwhelming that Milošević waited out the first reactions and then shunned back from the original offensive strategy of simply declaring a first-round victory, no matter what. Going for a second round is merely playing for time.
2. get rid of the **opponent** by political repression. Had Milošević been audacious enough to go for this strategy, he would have declared victory on Monday. Thus, police violence and repression of free media and opposition parties is likely to continue, but not to escalate to full dictatorial rule.
3. get rid of the **federation** by **political restructuring**. Milošević might either claim that his presidency will end in mid-2001 only. (Being sure of victory, he never changed this along with the early elections.) In the remaining time, he might transfer next to all prerogatives from the FRY to the Serbian presidency. Otherwise, he might instigate Montenegro secession, most likely as an inevitable reaction to escalating threats by the FRY Army. Both strategies would leave the victorious Koštunica in a type of situation similar to that of Gorbachev, president without a federation.
4. get rid of **Milošević** by **accepting defeat**. Optimistic opposition leaders expect the Yugoslav dictator to do so in the next days.

Students demonstrations have offered an alternative, suggesting Milošević kills himself.

One tentative conclusion may be drawn despite the ongoing flow of events, figures, and rumors. The elections have substantially weakened Milošević's stance. One of the indicators to look for now in the days and weeks to come is defection from the thus far solid Milošević camp. What will Draskovic and his SPO do, those who have lost severely in both elections. What will Seselj and his SRS do? By sheer number of seats, they might outvote the ruling coalition any time in the Serbian parliament. The same applies to Momir Bulatovic and his pro-Milošević party SNP in Montenegro. The better chances of keeping the federation intact may now be on the Koštunica side, who toured Montenegro in his campaign and spoke with both Djukanovic and the SNP opposition. Eventually, even some of Yugoslavia's potential Russian-style business tycoons may reconsider their loyalties in view of their head start in a real economic transition. Finally, rumors have it that the army and the police forces may not have voted *en block* for Milošević, as any analyst or journalist would have expected, ... last Saturday.

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AICGS, Washington DC

09/27, 6 PM

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