

# ELIAMEP Briefing Notes

12 / 2012

March 2012

## Serbia's EU candidate status: domestic reactions

by Apostolis Karabairis

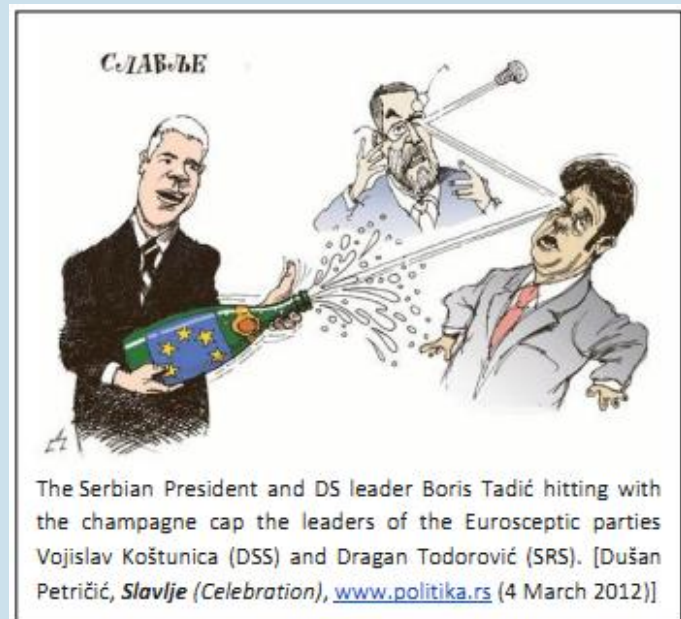
Western Balkans team, ELIAMEP, Greece

March 1st was marked by euphoria in Serbia after the country was granted the candidate status for EU membership at the European Council. More than two years after its formal application, and after the initial rejection in December 2011, Serbia managed to become an official candidate through a course full of intense diplomatic activity and uncertain outcome until the very last moment.

The Serbian President Boris Tadić was in celebratory mood. Understandably so, since the candidacy may prove a last minute success that can save his party from a serious political setback in the forthcoming parliamentary elections. In his official statement Boris Tadić congratulated the citizens and praised them for bearing the burden of the comprehensive reforms that led to this achievement. Boris Tadić linked this success with future positive developments in the Serbian economy by saying that the candidacy opens the door to prosperity and will attract new investment, and hence create new jobs. Besides, he defended his 'both Kosovo and EU' policy: "[This] policy has passed the international test despite all challenges and obstacles, and I am certain that there is no better alternative". His focus on the Kosovo issue and the economy was not coincidental, since, as most analysts agree, in the upcoming election campaign they will be the primary targets of his opponents. The opposition is confident that they can have a comparative advantage on these two key issues because of what they see as poor results of the current government.

Other governmental officials also stressed the positive impact on Serbian economy, but pointed out the purely political meaning of the development, as well. Some officials from Tadić's Democratic Party (DS) spoke about a decision that binds them to a European future and a concrete proof that the European partners' promise for the accession prospect of Serbia is still valid. They also pointed out the need to continue with the same enthusiasm to implement reforms for further integration. Similar was the mood among the minor governmental partners. The Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) assessed that getting the candidate status means that Serbia can join the European family sometime in the foreseeable future and that this has now become a clear strategic goal. Representatives of the United Regions of Serbia (URS) stressed that the EU candidacy has enhanced Serbia's international image.

Unsurprisingly, the views among opposition forces were different. Tomislav Nikolić, the leader of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), which leads in the opinion polls, hailed the Council's decision, but downplayed its importance. He reminded that candidate status is only one of several steps in the long accession process and that it is not a goal by itself but a means to move the process forward. According to many analysts, a governmental failure to deliver on its promise to bring EU candidate status would have been a major boost for Nikolić and his party. Since the candidacy has



## Serbia's EU candidate status: domestic reactions

by Apostolis Karabairis

been achieved, the 'game' is potentially again open and the SNS has to work hard to regain the political advantage.

Čedomir Jovanović, of the opposition Liberal-Democratic Party (LDP), an ardently pro-Western party that even supports Kosovo's independence, was also somewhat skeptical. He unreservedly welcomed the candidate status and called it a great success, but he maintained that the EU candidacy will be meaningful only under the condition that it will put an end to the prevailing dilemma over Serbia's international orientation. In the upcoming elections LDP hopes to make gains out of pro-European citizens who are dissatisfied with what they see as lukewarm pursuit of the country's pro-Western orientation by the Democratic Party-led coalition.

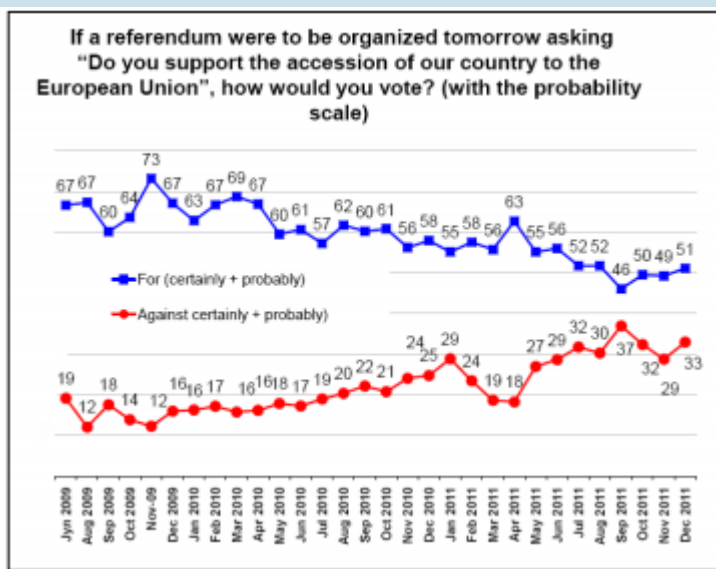
On the opposite side of the political spectrum, the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) and the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) fiercely opposed the candidate status. Koštunica's DSS stressed that the Serbian people have no interest in joining the European Union and reiterated that the country's constitutionally-affirmed international neutrality means also staying out of the EU. On its part, SRS, a traditional opponent of Serbia's accession to the EU, questioned the economic benefits of the candidacy, judging that Serbia had to de facto recognise Kosovo in order to get the candidacy and advocated a closer relationship with Russia.

The mixed reactions of the political parties in Serbia reflect in their own manner the prevailing conditions in Serbian society. As time advances, Serbs become less and less enthusiastic about the idea of joining the EU (see graph,

source: Government of Serbia: *European Integration Office, European Orientation of the Republic of Serbia - Trends: Presentation of public poll results*, January 2012). Many Serbs think that Brussels is constantly asking for the fulfillment of additional conditions that had not been initially foreseen or agreed upon. This is a conviction shared by many citizens in most Western Balkan EU aspirant countries. The prevailing mood is that Europe is constantly raising the bar of conditions demanded from Balkan nations, not least by accepting the incorporation of bilateral disputes in the process. In the case of Serbia, a characteristic example of this was Bucharest's last-minute demands for Serbian concessions to the Vlach/Romanian minority in Serbia.

Moreover, the Serbian public becomes increasingly concerned about what Serbia's accession would mean for its sovereignty claim

over Kosovo. Many realise that for serious progress in its European accession process Serbia will have to de jure or de facto recognise Kosovo or at best to make such generous concessions that would be unpalatable to many Serbs. It is of course true that since the last elections the political scene of the pro-European forces has changed. Especially after the split of the Serbian Radical Party and the formation of Nikolić's SNS, the core of the opposition is nowadays not in principle anti-EU. This has created a wider spectrum of political forces not hostile to European accession. But at the same time, most of these forces are not particularly willing to reform the traditional Serbian policy strategic choices, especially on Kosovo status, which will surely prove the biggest obstacle to access. In the context of these political dynamics, Serbs are called to elect their new government in approximately a month's time with the outcome still uncertain. Will the EU candidate status save the day for the governing Democratic Party?



**Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP)**

Vas. Sofias, 10676 Athens, Greece | Tel. +30 210 7257 110 | Fax +30 210 7257 114 | E-mail [eliamep@eliamep.gr](mailto:eliamep@eliamep.gr)

ELIAMEP offers a forum for debate on international and European issues. Its non-partisan character supports the right to free and well-documented discourse. ELIAMEP publications aim to contribute to scholarly knowledge and to provide policy relevant analyses. As such, they solely represent the views of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the Foundation.

## Serbia's EU candidate status: domestic reactions by Apostolis Karabairis

**Learn more about our work** - Visit our website at [www.eliamep.gr/en](http://www.eliamep.gr/en) and our blog at <http://blogs.eliamep.gr/en>  
Should you wish to **unsubscribe** from our mailing list please send a blank message to [unsubscribe@eliamep.gr](mailto:unsubscribe@eliamep.gr)