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Serbia to choose EU orbit or isolation

By JOHN O'BRENNAN

MAYNOOTH, Ireland — On Saturday, Serbs go to the polls for the first round of a presidential election that may decide the country's future for decades to come.

As Kosovo's new government moves toward a unilateral declaration of independence, Serbs face a stark choice: Retain Kosovo and effectively sever ties with the European Union, or accept the painful reality of Kosovar independence and embrace a new future within the EU.

Serbia's liberal pro-European president, Boris Tadic, remains the favorite to win, but opinion polls suggest that his lead over Tomislav Nikolic of the ultra-nationalist Serbian Radical Party has narrowed to within the margin of error.

Nikolic, whose party's leader, Vojislav Seselj, is currently being tried for war crimes in The Hague, has campaigned on an anti-Western, Euroskeptic and openly chauvinist platform, exploiting the Kosovo issue at every turn and putting Tadic and other pro-Europeans on the defensive. His argument that Kosovo should remain an integral part of Serbia, and that Russia is a more natural (Slavic) ally for the Serbs than perfidious Europe, resonates strongly in a country traumatized by its recent past.

Tadic's real problem lies not with his enemies but with his friends. His coalition partner, Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica, increasingly espouses hardline nationalist rhetoric that is indistinguishable from that of Nikolic and the Radicals. In addition to rehabilitating many Milosevic-era figures and refusing to arrest indicted war criminal Gen. Ratko Mladic, Kostunica often speaks contemptuously of the EU and insists that if the EU recognizes Kosovo's independence, Serbia will turn away from Europe and seek closer relations with Russia.

Under pressure from all sides, Tadic has thus had to maintain the fiction of defending a maximalist position on Kosovo ("no surrender") while striving to maintain and enhance Serbia's relationship with the EU, which he sees as crucial to reversing the terrible legacy of two decades of war and isolation.

Unlike the peaceful secession of Montenegro in 2006, the loss of Kosovo represents a damaging blow to Serbia, given its place in the national consciousness. Kosovo serves as the source of the foundation myth of Serbian statehood and the repository of its cultural and historical lore. It is the spiritual essence of "celestial Serbia," the site of its most important Orthodox churches, and therefore far from being just a piece of territory.

The EU, in this narrative, is merely the latest in a long line of predatory and unscrupulous foreign powers that have assaulted Serbian identity and pride.

From the perspective of the EU (and many liberal Serbs), this narrative has the familiar ring of jingoism, obsessive self-regard, and an enduring attachment to victimhood. Serbia remains stuck in a 19th-century world of nationalism and refuses to recognize the new global realities of economic interdependence, inter-state reciprocity and collectivism — all of which characterize today's EU.

EU officials emphasize that an independent Kosovo will be subject to an unprecedented level of oversight. The EU will effectively "manage" Kosovo's independence through the deployment of a large police force and civilian administration. Moreover, Kosovo's ambition to join the EU in the next decade means that its treatment of the Serb minority will attract very close and intensive scrutiny.

Tadic and other outward-looking Serbs understand the nature of the EU accession process and, in particular, how it acts as a mechanism of conflict resolution and encourages foreign direct investment, enhanced trade, accelerated economic growth and more effective public administration. The EU's eastern enlargement provides conclusive evidence to support this view, and demonstrates how the EU's evolution has also encouraged a fundamental re-conceptualization of sovereignty as something de-territorialized and diffuse rather than static and unchanging.

Thus, although Serbia's loss of sovereignty over Kosovo will undoubtedly be painful in the short term, the long-term gains for the entire Western Balkans region from eventual EU accession are vastly more significant. As a natural regional leader, Serbia can expect to reap the benefits as all states advance toward membership.

The difficulty for Tadic lies in convincing Serbian voters that drawing closer to the EU is infinitely preferable to remaining attached to an outmoded concept of statehood that can only lead to isolation and backwardness.

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