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Serbia Needs a Push in the Right Direction

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More than three years after Serbia's reformists overthrew the regime of Slobodan Milosevic, Belgrade appears to be at a crossroads again. The strong showing of the Radical Party in December's parliamentary elections, combined with a fractured reformist vote and increased apathy among citizens, threatens to doom Serbia to an unstable political future and jeopardize its prospects for Euro-Atlantic integration.

The United States Institute of Peace convened its [Balkans Working Group](#) on February 12, 2004, to discuss "Where Is Serbia Headed?" The group analyzed the current political situation in Serbia and the impact of the results of the December 28, 2003 elections on Belgrade's relations with Montenegro, Kosovo, and the international community. The group included distinguished experts on the Balkans and Serbia, as well as government officials, non-governmental organizations, and academics. Institute peace and stability operations director Daniel Serwer chaired the meeting.

The views summarized below reflect the discussion at the meeting; it does not represent a consensus of the working group or formal positions taken by the Institute, which does not advocate specific policies.

The fragile political situation in Serbia has raised concerns...

Following last year's parliamentary elections, the political situation in Serbia appears fragile and has raised concerns in the region as well as with the international community. Political and economic reforms remain unfinished, while in some areas—such as the security sector—they have stalled entirely. Talks on forming a new government revealed a power struggle in its rawest form among reformist parties and gave an early indication of how weak the new government could be. Reformists failed to form a new democratic government on their own and instead had to rely on the support of the unreformed Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), still headed by Slobodan Milosevic. Even if the new government were to include all the members of the former democratic opposition of Serbia, it still would be unlikely to result in an effective coalition. Nor would new elections (which are opposed by most political parties, including the Socialists who barely crossed the five percent threshold needed for parliamentary representation) produce an effective government. To the contrary, new elections would likely result in an anti-democratic backlash, with the Radical Party making even greater gains at the expense of the divided reformers.

The new government has brought together political parties that have few similarities in their programs. Differences are evident with respect to crucial issues such as cooperation with The Hague tribunal, future relations with Montenegro and Kosovo, and the course of privatization. Instead of a government with a common reformist program, the new coalition appears more as a grouping of political parties each with its own agenda. This awkward coalition may be able to achieve little but will likely last for some time, since

both the government parties and the Socialists fear new elections.

... and is likely to get worse in the short term.

With a weak reformist government in place, Serbia's political situation—at least in the short term—is likely to deteriorate. Lack of progress on reforms, on cooperation with The Hague tribunal, and on reconciliation and cooperation with neighboring countries is likely to exacerbate relations with the United States and the European Union. Economic prospects also appear dim. Political wrangling has delayed passing of the budget and Belgrade has failed to seize some opportunities for international financial assistance. Authorities spent over \$3.45 billion last year—almost 20 percent more than the budgeted amount, while repayment of the foreign debt is due to start this year. A quick and efficient privatization process has attracted substantial U.S. investment, but has not resulted in equitable benefits for much of the population. A two-track transition from a communist-style and criminal economy to a free market economy under the rule of law has been rocky and painful.

Serbia appears to have failed to reconcile with its past and is still unsure of its future. This indecision is apparent in its relations with Montenegro and Kosovo, in its lack of cooperation with The Hague tribunal, and divergent views on membership in the EU and NATO. The use of the EU membership as a carrot to influence Serbian behavior has been overplayed. There appears to be little understanding in Serbia of what EU membership entails, beyond liberal visa regimes and unrestricted business.

A cohesive U.S.-EU policy is needed.

While the primary responsibility for reforms rests with Serbia's politicians and its voters, the international community should not stand aside and disengage. An anti-reformist comeback in Serbia would have a devastating impact in the region, particularly in Montenegro and Kosovo, where SPS support for the current government has already raised suspicions. More importantly, reformists in Serbia need to produce results and gain political support for moving forward towards Euro-Atlantic integration. The United States and the European Union can be of great assistance when working together and consistently on the following:

- Ensuring Serbia's pursuance of political and economic reforms;
- Requiring Serbia's full cooperation with the Hague tribunal;
- Encouraging Serbia's constructive and full cooperation in the region;
- Supporting Serbia's civil society and independent media; and
- Assisting Serbia with increased, but targeted, trade, investment, and commerce.

The current political situation in Serbia requires the United States and the European Union to end their business as usual accommodation of Serbia's anti-reform factions and move more aggressively to support democratic forces.

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This USIPeace Briefing was written by [Daniel Serwer](#) and Ylber Bajraktari of the Institute's Office of [Peace and Stability Operations](#). The views expressed here are not necessarily those of the Institute, which does not advocate specific policies.

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