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"Serbia turns West" said the headlines. But a closer reading of the electoral arithmetic could equally well have supported a headline "Serbia looks East". In truth the reality is that Serbia is deeply divided as to which way to turn: whether to embrace a (Western) European future or to turn its back on that future as a result of perceived Western perfidy in conniving at the removal of Kosovo from Serbia.

So the cheers in Western capitals at the outcome of last week's elections in Serbia have grown more muted as the realisation sinks in that, although President Boris Tadic's pro-European Democratic Party (DS) emerged as the largest single party in Parliament, edging out the ultra-nationalist Radicals from that position with something to spare, it may not nevertheless form the government. The pro-European and nationalist parties, more or less split the vote between them.

Critical to the formation of a new government, paradoxically, will be the position taken by the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), a party born from the ashes of the League of Communists in Serbia but moulded by its founder, Slobodan Milošević, in his own image, and directed to fanning nationalist flames in the Yugoslavia of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

It is bizarre indeed to read the US ambassador in Belgrade's exhortation to this party to join the coalition of pro-European parties. Ambassador Cameron Munter is on record as saying that the SPS, in a coalition with pro-European parties, could contribute to Serbia's European future and that the SPS could play a very positive role in such a government. More important even than the encouragement of the US Ambassador will be the prospect of power. The DS have apparently offered four Cabinet seats to the SPS if they join, including that of the Minister for Kosovo, the ultimate poisoned chalice. The SPS's leader, Ivica Dacic, travelled to Russia last weekend, which does not augur well for those hoping to see the SPS comply with the US Ambassador's plea.

One of the legacies of outgoing Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica has been to set the bar impossibly high for any Serb politician wishing to forget about Kosovo and move on. In this respect, the US and EU completely failed to anticipate the extent to which Kostunica has managed to sensitise and indeed radicalise political and public opinion in Serbia. No politician

A nation that is still divided over Europe

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can seriously expect to tiptoe away from Kosovo. Whatever government emerges from the post election bargaining will have to defend Serb interests in Kosovo and to encourage what has already emerged as a form of de facto partition there.

The writ of the government in the Kosovo capital of Pristina does not run north of the Ibar river (where about 40 per cent of the Serbs live) in an area which is immediately contiguous to the rest of Serbia . Were the government in Pristina to succeed in forcing their institutions on the Serb minority, this would almost certainly result in a mass exodus of the remaining Serbs from Kosovo and the end of the international community's cherished hopes for a multi-ethnic Kosovo.

The major EU players and US have only themselves to blame for failing to read the situation correctly and believing that a pro-western government could be brought to terms with the loss of Kosovo by the prospect of EU membership. This is wishful thinking on a grand scale. They should instead turn their attention to a form of partition, perhaps on the Bosnian model and in the longer term to de-dramatise borders, so that with Serbia and Kosovo within the European Union the significance of these borders can be minimised. Travelling over much of continental European Union these days is to experience Ernest Bevin's dream "to go down to Victoria station, get a railway ticket and go where the hell I like without a passport or anything else".

There was a recent past when the whole of the former Yugoslavia had that quality: you could travel from Slovenia in the north to Macedonia and Kosovo in the south without ever producing a passport. Now that single space is composed of seven states and seven sets of border crossing posts, including Kosovo. Only when Bevin's dream is realised again in the Balkans will that region enjoy real stability.

Without a permanent settlement which does not leave the key regional player, Serbia, with a sense of grievance and loss, the present piecemeal solutions cobbled out of the former Yugoslavia reminds us still more of another of Bevin's quotes: "If you open Pandora's box, you never know what Trojan 'orses will jump out". No countries for old men.

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