

# A New Party of the Left in Serbia

Thursday 22 October 2020, by [KOSTANIĆ Marko](#), [VELISAVLJEVIĆ Ivan](#) (Date first published: 14 September 2020).

**The Social Democratic Union's 12<sup>th</sup> congress in Belgrade marked its transformation into a new left-wing party—the Party of the Radical Left (PRL).**

**MK: Can you tell us a bit of the backstory behind the new party's founding?**

**IV:** The Social Democratic Union (SDU) changed its leadership five or six years ago and took a few steps towards the left. Its backbone comprised workers of *Jugoremedija* from Zrenjanin and *Prvi Maj* from Pirot, led by Ivan Zlatić, a long-time activist of the Coordination Committee of Workers' Protests, formed in 2009 in Rača (Kragujevac). Those protests soon attracted many workers in Serbia who were opposing privatizations and looting workers and small shareholders. Several of us joined the party's leadership to support the process of transformation into an anti-capitalist, left-wing, workers' party. The SDU participated in the founding of the Common Action for "The Roof Over Our Heads" (combating evictions and the right to housing) and ran in the Belgrade local elections as part of the coalition with "Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own". In 2018 they sent an invitation to the other forces on the Left to join the united parliamentary struggle.

That call included a note of self-criticism by the SDU and a firm decision to continue with its glorious history of anti-war and anti-nationalist politics from the late 1990s... People from the organizations like Levi Summit of Serbia, DiEM25, and student movements in Novi Sad and Belgrade responded to the call. A few of these people entered the leadership of the SDU, and it took them a bit over a year for the fruitful process and the transformation within the party to take place. We held one irregular and one regular congress, there was one pandemic in between, and then it finally happened.

**What are the first steps? How are you going to build your reputation?**

The first step is a continuation of the struggle for workers' rights above all and the right to a roof over your head. This is how we are perceived in public. We have adopted the Declaration on Workers' Rights as a fundamental document of our programme, and soon we will form the Workers' Youth, an autonomous youth body within the party.

We signed and initiated the Declaration on Regional Solidarity with the Levica party from Slovenia, and the Workers' Front and the New Left from Croatia. This regional cooperation of left-wing actors is devoted to fighting chauvinism and the incitement of ethnic hatred while having a firm anti-fascist position. Then there are also environmental issues, health and education, and especially the struggle for women's liberation.

In addition to the programme goals in that area, we are determined to implement those principles within the party. We are probably the only party in Serbia with a majority of women in the collective presidency (three out of five) and whose statute requires an equal number of women and men in governing bodies. In that respect, I expect that the work of our permanent and autonomous committees—the Women's Front, the Workers' Youth, the Committee on Social Affairs, and the Committee on International Cooperation—will lay the foundations of our recognizability.

**What does the choice of the adjective “radical” say about how you see the political scene in Serbia? Why does the Left have to be nominally radical to be recognized as a real Left?**

Because the reality is disastrous, and the Left is denounced. The Left has been denounced because we still associate it with Milošević's/Dačić's SPS party and Vulin's "Socialist Movement", which have long been part of the government that wants to privatize everything while saving money, destroy workers' rights while boosting GDP growth, sell chauvinism as the national interest, and strive to become a part of the EU.

In reality, when you hear that women working in the supermarket are not allowed to sit, factory workers were forced to work during the pandemic without necessary protection against infection, that over 300 workers were illegally fired during one day and had to drop the lawsuit out of fear, that almost every week a worker dies on a construction site and it's covered up, that the minimum wage is not enough to survive, that one quarter of the population lives below the poverty line, that foreign investors are getting land, buildings, and companies for free while subsidies are paid relentlessly, and that the mafia is allowed to plunder the public sector and strategic resources unhindered—when you hear all of this, how should we believe in demands for better capitalism? How should one formulate some kindly voiced demands as the social-democratic Left favours, which will supposedly improve the lives of the powerless people? To say that you are a radical leftist in Serbia means to restore self-respect to the Left. Even if we use the notorious adjective “radical”—why not? This is also a struggle over interpretation. We need to take that on, too.

**Can you draw comparisons with other political actors in the region and in Europe? Did you have any concrete inspiration?**

The people we meet every day, they are our inspiration. The people with whom we fight—who are, after all, our members—those who struggle to make ends meet, live without any rights, furious, powerless, with limited or fictitious working contracts, having temporary jobs, contracted by agencies almost as slaves, poor, living under the threat that one day they will be evicted from their only home, in debt, fired and with no future in Serbia, but with an aspiration to graduate and run away... When we talk about our political inspiration, the parties from the region that signed the Declaration on Regional Solidarity with us are certainly our closest allies.

**Lastly, let me ask one more specific question. After [Vučić's debacle in Washington](#), the Kosovo question continues to dominate the Serbian political scene. Do you have a stance and strategy around this question? Do you think that it should be tactically avoided for now?**

I don't think that this question should be bypassed. However, it would be pretentious to say that we have the answer. Obviously, half of the world does not have it, but we are determined to approach this question free of nationalism. It is obligatory to negotiate over all disputable and complex issues beyond the basic one of Kosovo's status.

We need to pose questions about people's lives under the constant tension of a “frozen conflict”, incitement to hatred and the lack of understanding. The real question for us is, how do we imagine Serbian-Albanian relations in the future, and how do we imagine that future? As the capitalist periphery of cheap labour, where ethnic conflicts smoulder while nationalist elites and their organized criminals on both sides of “administrative crossings” continually profit from it? Or will it be a relationship based on the same starting point—to restore centuries of coexistence and build relationships based on mutual respect and cooperation?

We think that we have a second chance to open a broader social dialogue. But we also believe that

nationalist elites cannot lead this dialogue, nor should it be conducted under the protectorate of NATO, the EU, Russia, or any other great power. That is why we, in addition to the dialogue outside of a nationalist framework and the UN's auspices, primarily favour dialogue within society and not the state, along with NATO's withdrawal from Kosovo.

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**Marko Kostanić**, a member of the editorial board of the Zagreb-based left-wing online portal [Bilten](#), spoke about the party, its prehistory, and its political composition with Ivan Velisavljević.

**Ivan Velisavljević** is a member of the PRL's executive committee, a playwright, and filmmaker.

Translation by **Hana Grgić**.

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