

Elections in Serbia: a test for Aleksandar Vučić's system of power

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The early parliamentary and local elections in Serbia (17 December) are a test for the system created by President Aleksandar Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). They are taking place in an atmosphere of strong social polarisation, with a division between opponents and supporters of the ruling camp. There is growing social discontent in the country over the economic situation and fatigue with the long-standing rule of the SNS. The pro-Western opposition is trying to take advantage of the situation, and is running for the first time as a single bloc under a slogan referring to the mass protests that were held across the country in May: 'Serbia Against Violence' (*Srbija Protiv Nasilja*). The current model of economic growth, which has been based on attracting foreign investment in labour-intensive sectors (through subsidies) and large infrastructure projects, is slowly running out of steam. However, an aggressive election campaign based on President Vučić's personal popularity, extensive clientelist networks and control of the media will probably guarantee the ruling party another victory, particularly as the ruling group are also discreetly supported by elements in the EU and the US, which fear destabilisation in the country in the event of a change of power.

The position of those in power will probably be weakened as a result of the elections, but they will not be forced out of office. As a result of the vote, they will probably play a 'wait and see' game over the next year in order to survive until the US elections. Vučić hopes that Donald Trump's victory will allow him to significantly strengthen Serbia's position at the expense of its regional neighbours, and ultimately consolidate the authoritarian system.

Early elections to the 250-seat unicameral parliament, the parliamentary assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, and local elections in the capital Belgrade and 65 municipalities will be held on 17 December. The elections were called to rebuild the legitimacy of the current governing elites following the mass public protests that erupted in May 2023 in response to the mass shootings at a school in Belgrade and the town of Mladenovac.¹

¹ M. Szpala, 'Serbia: mass protests in the shadow of tragedies', OSW, 25 May 2023, osw.waw.pl.

This will be the fourth early parliamentary elections since the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), led by current President Aleksandar Vučić, took power in 2012. The SNS is now in control at all levels of government: at the central level, the regional level, and in local authorities in all municipalities. Since 2012, SNS politicians have also held the office of president: Tomislav Nikolić from 2012 to 2017, and Aleksandar Vučić since 2017.

This period has seen a regression in the rule of law and adherence to democratic standards, as reflected in Serbia's increasingly poor performance in the democracy rankings. In the Nations in Transit ranking, Serbia was downgraded from partially consolidated democracy to hybrid regime.² Serbia saw a similar decline in the Bertelsmann's Transformation Index: in 2012 it was classified as a democracy in the process of consolidation (with a score of 8.05 on a 10-point scale), but in 2022 it was considered a flawed democracy (score of 6.25).³ A similar regression was noted for media freedom. In Reporters Without Borders' media freedom ranking Serbia fell from 54th (2014) to 91st (2022) out of 180 countries surveyed.⁴

An inflexible electoral system

A peculiarity of Serbian law is that it provides for a single electoral district that covers the whole country. This reinforces the centralisation of the country, and parliamentary seats are usually obtained by people who are not known to anyone (it is the party leaders who arrange the lists). Politicians are not interested in building their own recognition among voters or addressing their concerns effectively. The parties usually do not have extensive local structures, and if they exist at all they serve to discipline and control voters (as in the case of the SNS). This tends to foster parties based on chieftaincy and clientelism. Individual MPs are more loyal to leaders and parties than to their voters, and numerous regions of Serbia have no representatives in parliament.

The SNS's rule has been characterised by a consolidation of the power system based on clientelist mechanisms – 800,000 people (12% of the total population) currently belong to the party – the subordination of state institutions to the party's interests, the restriction of media freedom, the marginalisation of political opponents, the erosion of the rule of law and the criminalisation of political and economic life. These processes, combined with the country's relatively good economic situation and an active foreign policy based on the principle of multi-vectorialism (here, the declarative desire for integration with the EU while maintaining close relations with China and Russia), have so far translated into sustained high support for SNS governments and a series of electoral victories.

” **Clientelist mechanisms and state capture, coupled with a good economic situation and an assertive foreign policy, have so far translated into a series of electoral victories for the SNS.**

Since taking power in 2012, the SNS has governed in a coalition with the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) led by the current head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Ivica Dačić, and United Serbia (JS), with the support of Hungarian, Bosnian or Croat minority parties. According to polls from October and November, the SNS currently enjoys support from 39% to 45% and the SPS from 7% to 11%. However, the quality of Serbian opinion polls leaves much to be desired, with respondents often refusing to answer. It is therefore difficult to assess whether these polls fully reflect public support for the respective blocs.

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² N. Burazer, *Serbia: Nations in Transit 2023 Country Report*, Freedom House, freedomhouse.org.

³ *Serbia. Status Index. 2012–2022*, BTI, atlas.bti-project.org.

⁴ *Serbia*, Reporters Without Borders, rsf.org.

There are 6.5 million eligible voters, but according to the latest 2021 census, Serbia has a population of 6.6 million. This puts the turnout figures in serious doubt, especially since the voter register has not been verified for many years, despite calls from international organisations. The final results of the elections will also be affected by electoral manipulation by the ruling parties (for example, by transporting voters to polling stations where victory is uncertain) or adding people to the voter registers (especially in the capital). The ruling party is also organising transports to voting stations for representatives of the Serb minorities in neighbouring Bosnia & Herzegovina, Kosovo and Montenegro, who represent an additional reservoir of votes for the party in power.

The opposition – real, concessionary and ‘phantom’

The main rival to the ruling SNS is the Serbia Against Violence (SPN) list, which brings together more than fifteen centrist and left-wing groups and movements. According to a November poll, it can count on the support of 26% of voters nationally. For the first time since 2012, the opposition has managed to create a joint list which has been endorsed by politicians who are relatively new, and thus untainted by the scandals of the 2000–2012 governments. The core of the list is the Democratic Party, led by Zoran Lutovac (a former advisor to Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić, who was assassinated in 2003); the Freedom and Justice Party (SSP), whose main face is Marinika Tepić; the Green-Left Front (ZLF), formed by young activists from Belgrade (including Radomir Lazović and Biljana Đorđević); the local government and environmental movement Together (Zajedno); and the centrist National Movement of Serbia (NPS) of Miroslav Aleksić.

The common list of the centre-left opposition is united above all by the desire to remove Vučić from power, anti-corruption slogans, demands to rebuild the system

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of public services (especially education and health care) and to strengthen state institutions, especially the judiciary. They are also campaigning on environmental issues and left-wing social demands. In terms of foreign policy, they favour continued integration with the EU, but their policies towards Kosovo and Russia and their attitudes towards the past (e.g. the issue of settling war crimes) strongly divide the groupings that make up the coalition. That raises doubts as to whether it would be able to govern effectively in the event of victory. At present, the coalition is proposing the formation of a technical government, the aim of which would be to rebuild the democratic system in Serbia and to hold the next elections quickly afterwards.

The opposition far-right parties have failed to form a single bloc, although they are united by their scepticism towards the EU and anti-Western rhetoric; they defend Serbia’s integrity in the context of Kosovo and favour Russia). These groups include the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), the National Assembly (Zavetnici, Dveri) and the pro-monarchy National Democratic Alternative (NADA). Support for these parties individually is currently running at around 3–5%, so given the reduced electoral threshold they are likely to get into parliament. They are discreetly supported by those in power who are comfortable with strengthening the anti-EU and radical forces in parliament; compared to them, the SNS and its politicians appear more moderate and can present themselves to Western partners as guarantors that Serbia will remain within the orbit of EU and US influence. In the elections, politicians with a centre-right profile (such as the former foreign minister Vuk Jeremić and the former president Boris Tadić) are also running on separate lists. They, too, are convenient opponents for the ruling party, due to the memory of numerous scandals which happened during their time in power.

The ruling party's chances are favoured by the strong fragmentation of the opposition, as this will disperse the votes of people opposed to the current regime and reinforce the confusion of the electorate. For this reason, in 2020 the current ruling elite decided to lower the electoral threshold from 5% to 3%, which was a factor in further fragmenting the internally conflicted opposition. According to media reports, the ruling party is also helping small parties – called 'phantom' parties in Serbia – to collect the signatures necessary to register electoral lists (10,000 notarised signatures are required to do so, and collecting them is not only a logistical effort but also requires considerable financial resources).⁵ Traditionally, national minority parties are also represented in large numbers in the elections; these include the Union of Hungarians of Vojvodina, which favours the ruling party, and representatives of Bosniaks, Croats and Albanians. Politicians close to the ruling party often take advantage of the preference for minorities (only 3000 signatures are required with no electoral threshold) and register their lists as representing them (as is done with the Russian and Bunjevci minorities).⁶ Consequently, as many as 18 electoral lists have been registered for the upcoming elections (there were 19 in the previous elections in 2022).

'L'état, c'est moi'

According to the Serbian constitution, the powers of the president are very limited, and cover purely representative functions. However, Vučić's full control over party structures, and consequently state institutions, gives him almost total power in the country. He makes all important decisions in the state, having marginalised the formal centres of power such as government and parliament. The identification of the ruling party with its long-standing leader is fostered by electoral campaigns centred around the person of the president, by means including the branding of electoral lists for parliament and municipal councils with his name: in the current elections, his list is named 'Aleksandar Vučić – Serbia Must Not Stop', and in previous elections it was 'Aleksandar Vučić – Together we can do everything'.

The subordination of the individual members and politicians of Vučić's party is served by frequent elections and extending the period taken to form a new government

” Frequent elections not only serve to strengthen the position of the president and mobilise party structures, but also to weaken the opposition, which has little financial resources for campaigns.

(after the previous elections, held on 3 April 2022, the government was formed at the last possible date, 22 October). Politicians therefore have to prove their loyalty to the president all the time, as he decides on their placement on the electoral lists and the composition of the government. Party activists, on the other hand, have to ensure that people who owe the party their job or their access to social welfare do indeed vote for the ruling party. The frequent elections – there have been as many as five in the last decade – are also a tool to weaken the opposition, as they require major financial and organisational efforts, and the opposition has only limited campaign funds and is given very little access to the national media.⁷ This limits its ability to promote new candidates or present its programme to a wider range of voters. The opposition can therefore only rely on direct campaigning, which is based on small meetings and door-to-door canvassing.

Another element in consolidating the ruling camp and strengthening loyalty to Vučić is the guarantee of impunity enjoyed by his associates and allies, as well as strong social polarisation. Although in

⁵ M.R. Milenković, "Neka fantomska lista mogla bi da odlučuje o vlasti u Beogradu: Koliko su izbori već sada pošteni?", *Danas*, 26 November 2023, danas.rs.

⁶ Among others, former minister in the SNS government Rade Basta has registered his electoral list as a minority list.

⁷ Media monitoring during the first campaign period showed that representatives of the government received 81% of the airtime and the opposition 19%. At the same time, 77% of reporting about the opposition had negative overtones. See *Prvi presek dugoročnog posmatranja*, CRTA, crt.rs.

recent years independent journalists and foreign media have covered a number of scandals⁸ in which representatives of the government have been implicated, these have never reached a conclusion in court, and often no charges are ever brought. Loyalty to the leader therefore guarantees protection from the prosecution and courts – which in any case are controlled by those in power. On the other hand, President Vučić treats those who criticise the president or simply draw attention to problems in the state as personal enemies, and he & his power bloc discredit them as opponents of a strong state and traitors to the national interest. In Serbia today, citizens have no space to articulate their demands to those in power. The government treats the public paternalistically, and any attempt at dialogue is met with attacks by the authorities and the pro-government media (even when it concerns such mundane matters as the delineation of settlement roads or paths). Such a narrative has resulted in a strong polarisation of society into supporters (beneficiaries) of the system and the opponents of those in power.

All the most popular media and mainstream television present narratives favourable to the government. Television stations independent of the government (N1, Nova TV) are only available on cable networks, and print media have a very limited distribution network. These titles are also struggling financially, as businesses (even private ones) are reluctant to buy advertising in them. Opposition journalists are ignored by the authorities and denied access to information. Reports from both the ODHIR⁹ and the EU¹⁰ indicate that political parties do not have equal access to the media.

” **Any criticism of the functioning of the state is considered a personal attack on the president and the state itself, and consequently results in aggressive, discrediting media campaigns.**

The decline of a golden era of economic development

Aleksandar Vučić built his popularity primarily on promises of strong economic growth and improved living conditions for the population, especially in contrast to the 2008–12 governments,¹¹ when the economic downturn caused by the global financial crisis hit the material conditions of the Serbian population hard. The first decade of the SNS government actually saw a significant improvement in the economy, driven by the global economic boom, an influx of foreign investment generating new jobs, infrastructure investment and a boom in the construction sector. This translated into an increase in wages and a reduction in unemployment, which fell by more than half (from 24% in 2012 to 9% in 2022).

However, Serbia has been negatively affected by the economic consequences of the COVID-19 epidemic and the Russian-Ukrainian war, with GDP growth rates over the last two years running lower than those in neighbouring countries (only North Macedonia is growing more slowly). The society has been hit very hard by the rise in inflation; in 2023 it was one of the highest in Europe, and is falling significantly more slowly than in the other Balkan countries. In March, the Consumer Price Index (CPI) reached 16.2%, and is expected to run at around 12% for the whole of 2023. Prices of food and electricity and gas for households rose particularly rapidly, hitting the poorer part of society.¹² An influx of migrants from Russia has also significantly raised the prices of real estate and rental

⁸ See R.F. Worth, ‘The President, the Soccer Hooligans and an Underworld ‘House of Horror’’, *The New York Times*, 3 May 2023, [nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com).

⁹ *Serbia, Presidential and Early Parliamentary Elections, 3 April 2022: Final Report*, OSCE, 19 August 2022, [osce.org](https://www.osce.org).

¹⁰ *Serbia 2023 Report*, European Commission, 8 November 2023, neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu.

¹¹ At that time the government was run by the so-called democratic opposition, which ousted the autocratic regime of Slobodan Milošević from power in 2000.

¹² *Q2 Trends*, Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2023, stat.gov.rs.

housing in Belgrade and other major cities, and has also increased the prices of services, which has also translated into worsening living conditions.

The costs of the current neglectful economic policy are becoming increasingly apparent. Attracting foreign investors and large infrastructure projects has allowed Vučić not only to reinforce his image as a guarantor of economic development, but also to strengthen clientelist networks by granting their backers lucrative contracts and jobs to his political allies (the employment policy for lower-level positions in factories owned by foreign investors is managed by party structures). At the same time, however, foreign investors have been attracted by the high state subsidies and the exemptions from labour regulations, environmental standards, dust emission standards and expropriation laws, all of which benefit their margins for profit.

The Serbian government's current model of economic development is increasingly being contested by local communities who are directly affected by the foreign investors'

” The economic model has brought improved living conditions to society, but has come at a high cost to the environment and local communities, and is not generating a sustainable basis for growth.

arbitrary actions (expropriations; the pollution of air, water and soil; the lack of respect for workers' rights), both in Belgrade and in smaller centres. Although huge infrastructural investments are being made,¹³ the citizens are beginning to suffer from the poor municipal infrastructure (e.g. water supply, sewerage, public buildings, and the occupation of green spaces for private investments). The opposition also points out that the investments carried out do not create the foundations for the stable growth & development of modern branches of the economy, but only concern labour-intensive sectors requiring low-skilled workers, or merely represent the selling off of national assets such as minerals i.e. copper, which are immediately exported out of the country without being processed. The growing opposition to foreign investments and the strong public perception of recession are having a serious effect on the main pillars upon which Vučić built his popularity. Currently, only 19% of respondents rate the current government positively and 39% rate them badly.¹⁴ Moreover, 47% of respondents believe that the situation in Serbia is going in the wrong direction, compared to 38% in the right direction.¹⁵ Despite these assessments, Vučić remains the most popular politician in Serbia.

The demobilisation game

In recent years social discontent has been growing in Serbia, as manifested in ever bigger anti-government demonstrations (in 2018–9,¹⁶ in 2020,¹⁷ 2021–2,¹⁸ and 2023¹⁹). The authorities have resorted to the strategy of waiting out the successive waves of protests, which so far has proven effective. Even the largest protests, which lasted for months, lost momentum over time. The ineffectiveness of the demonstrations strengthened the feeling of powerlessness in the face of the all-powerful authorities and the lack of influence over the situation in the state. Moreover, any public activity – especially by political parties, but also by NGOs critical of the government's policies – entails high personal costs in Serbia (hate campaigns in the pro-government media, pressure from the secret services) as well as economic risks (individuals can lose jobs, companies – contracts). Moreover, the opposition has been associated with senior politicians from the past, who have often been discredited. Under such

¹³ 'Samo u ovom trenutku, gradi se 502 kilometara puteva', BizPortal, 17 January 2023, bizportal.rs.

¹⁴ Demostat, IIC: Javno mnjenje građana Srbije – omnibus maj 2023, Demostat, demostat.rs.

¹⁵ Stavovi građana Srbije i Beograda, CRTA, October 2023, crta.rs.

¹⁶ M. Szpala, 'Protests in Serbia – playing for a crisis', OSW, 20 March 2019, osw.waw.pl.

¹⁷ *Idem*, 'Serbia: managing public frustration', OSW, 15 July 2020, osw.waw.pl.

¹⁸ 'Protesti, Srbija, ekologija: Drugi vikend blokada puteva, pojedinačni incidenti i poruka Novaka Đokovića', BBC News, 4 December 2021, bbc.com/serbian.

¹⁹ M. Szpala, 'Serbia: mass protests...', *op. cit.*

conditions, the average Serb not only does not get involved politically, but also avoids speaking out on issues concerning the state, hiding behind a lack of orientation on the topic. Surveys show a high percentage of people refusing to answer such questions (30–40%), and up to 72% of respondents did not respond to the question of whether they were politically active.²⁰

Government propaganda has built its campaign message on discouraging political and civic participation. Instead, it has convinced the public that politicians should not be believed (especially those of the opposition), and built a cult of the individual – the leader Aleksandar Vučić, who will take care of all the country’s problems and ensure stability, security and economic development. This campaign is meant to reinforce the widespread belief among Serbs that their personal vote would make little difference. It was also meant to reinforce the feeling that there is no alternative to Vučić’s rule because the system built by him was too strong and the other politicians were far inferior. As a result, some citizens have either decided on ‘internal emigration’ (living in a narrow circle of friends) or to leave the country.

Ever less security and stability

A major blow to Vučić’s image as a guarantor of peace and security was the two mass shootings in which a total of 19 children and young adults were killed in May this year. Shootings and mysterious disappearances had occurred in Serbia before. However, the general public got the impression that this mainly involved the margins of society. The killings, which occurred as a result of police negligence among other things (i.e. one of the assailants had previously been reported to the police), shook the citizens’ sense of security and highlighted the crisis of the public institutions, which are dominated by clientelist networks. Moreover, the public blames the rise of aggression in society primarily on the pro-government media’s normalisation of violence. According to the survey, 26% of respondents have recently felt fear and anxiety, and 20% anger and a sense of powerlessness.²¹

Increasing blemishes are also appearing on Vučić’s image as a politician who skilfully defends the national interests and rebuilds Serbia’s international standing. In the past, he successfully combined

” Vučić’s power is based on the polarisation of society and the generation of tensions in relations with Serbia’s neighbours, something which increasingly threatens not only the stability of the state, but also of the region.

his declared support for EU integration while deepening cooperation with Russia (which guarantees Serbia political support on the Kosovo issue) and China (which is a source of investment and credit). To the West, he has consistently presented himself as the sole guarantor of Serbia’s pro-Western orientation in the light of growing anti-European and nationalist sentiments in Serbia – which he himself has fuelled. His position has also been strengthened by his close personal ties with politicians such as Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who defended the Serbian leader in the EU and NATO, opposing sanctions and harsh criticism from these institutions. He has also consistently strung the Serbian public along with the promise of regaining control of Kosovo, which declared independence in 2008.

The Serbian government also consolidates its voters by periodically escalating tensions in relations with its neighbours (particularly in Kosovo), moves which are increasingly threatening the stability of the entire region. The event in Kosovo in September 2023, when a group of men with a significant amount of weapons backed by Serbian security structures were detained by Kosovo police (the incident left four people dead, including a Kosovo policeman) demonstrated the limitations of Vučić’s

²⁰ Demostat, *II.C...*, *op. cit.*

²¹ *Stavovi građana...*, *op. cit.*

policies to date.²² While he may work to sabotage the normalisation process with Pristina and destabilise the situation in the country, the nationalist narrative of Kosovo's return to Serbia has aroused expectations in a part of the radical electorate that he cannot fulfil due to international constraints. This latest incident met with a particularly harsh reaction from the West, which forced Vučić to make tactical concessions on the Kosovo issue.

Perspectives

Basing the legitimacy of the ruling camp on the popularity of Vučić himself has so far succeeded. Indeed, he himself enjoys far greater support than the party itself, despite growing scepticism about his rule. Faced with declining support for the SNS, the president has turned the parliamentary elections into a plebiscite on his own approval rating. On several occasions at party rallies, he has threatened to resign if the opposition wins the election.

The authorities are attempting to reinforce the mobilisation of their electorate in the final straight through one-off financial transfers (for pensioners, among others) and by putting pressure on those who owe their employment in the public sector to the SNS. In response, the negative campaign against the opposition portraying it as internally divisive and incapable of governing has also intensified. The media publish material designed to discredit opposition candidates (private recordings of one candidate have been published). Reports that signatures under the lists of the licensed opposition have been falsified are intended to weaken the public's faith in the electoral process itself and discourage them from voting. At the same time, the high level of public frustration and the unification of a significant part of the opposition will make it much more difficult for the ruling party to win these elections than before, and the advantage of the president's party over the opposition may decrease significantly. Much will depend on voter turnout and mobilisation (this is the intention of the Proglas-For Votes pro-turnout campaign, among others). At the same time, even if the SNS's position in parliament is weakened, the clientelist system created by those in power is so deeply rooted in society that it will not really affect the way power is exercised. In any case, those in power are counting on the return of Donald Trump to power in the US next year, in the hope that this will strengthen their international position and consolidate the increasingly authoritarian system of government.

²² M. Szpala, 'Serbia po incydencie w Kosowie – próba ograniczania strat', OSW, 4 October 2023, osw.waw.pl.