

Parliamentary Elections in Serbia – Clear Victory for the Serbian President

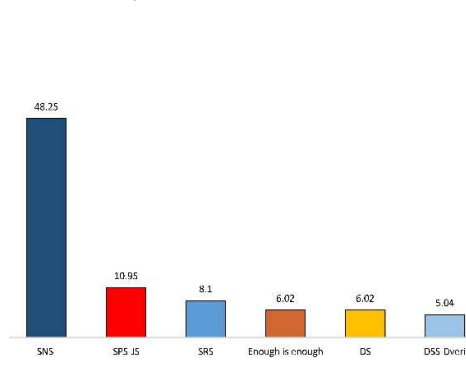
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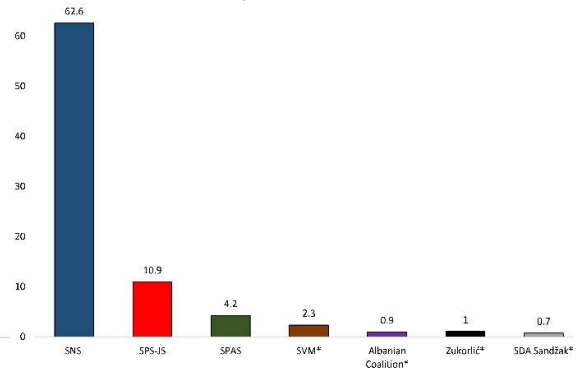
Cementing
governmental
power

The Serbian Parliamentary elections on June 21st, 2020 have brought a clear victory to the Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, who had however overridden the Serbian constitution by dominating the previous election campaigns with his omnipresence. In fact, the winning party, the Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska Napredna Stranka, SNS) has formed an additional list named “Aleksandar Vučić – for our children”, although Vučić by law is not allowed to candidate at all. With 62.6% the SNS will expectedly form the next government together with its previous junior partner, the Socialist Party of Serbia (Socijalistička Partija Srbije, SPS) under Ivica Dačić that gained 10.9% together with its pre-electoral coalition partner United Serbia (Jedinstvena Srbija, JS) under Dragan Marković Palma. Apart from the minority parties that do not have to pass the census, another party will be with 4.2% represented in the parliament. It is the one of the former water polo player Aleksandar Šapić, Victory for Serbia (Pobeda za Srbiju, SPAS), who is explicitly interested in joining the government. In such a case, the parliament would not include any opposition anymore, while the Serbian government at any rate will be able to cement its power. What is not certain for now is which SNS politician will be nominated under the auspices of the Serbian President to take over the function of the Prime Minister. Not only presidential or autocratic habits within a parliamentary democracy system appear to be unusual, but also the Serbian Parliamentary elections as such, since they have been the first national in Europe after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Parliamentary Elections Results in Serbia in 2016



Parliamentary Elections Result in Serbia in 2020



*For full names of the parties see p.4

State of
emergency
in Serbia

The postponing of the parliamentary elections, together with the provincial and local ones, from April 26, to June 21, 2020, happened in a previously unimaginable context. Due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, the Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić declared the state of emergency on March 15, 2020, so did the hitherto Prime Minister Ana Brnabić, characterized by unconditional loyalty to the President, and the Speaker of the Assembly, while the Parliamentary Members refused their confirmation until April 29. At the end of this exceptional period, on May 4, the Serbian President declared the new election date. On May 6, it was again him who proclaimed the immediate suspension of the state of emergency, including the end of the – hitherto by the police strictly controlled – curfews and the end of some other restrictions of public life. However, the resentment on the overweening state restrictions in relation to the constitutional framework has not disappeared.

**Constitutional
framework**

It was obvious that the Serbian President and the Serbian government as his mouthpiece exploited the situation to implement some of the harshest socio-political measures in entire Europe. Allegedly, to contain the virus, the SNS led government declared the state of emergency instead of the national protocol for the case of catastrophes. There is a slight but significant difference in the Serbian constitution when it comes to that – it enables the government to govern through decrees, and is restricted to situations, which endanger the survival of the state, such as war or violent uprisings. Another regulation was blatantly ignored with a cynic argumentation: in order to declare the state of emergency, the parliament has to vote for it by majority, the Serbian government decided to bypass this obstacle by assessing that the National Assembly (Narodna Skupština) cannot meet because of health care reasons. In the aftermath of declaring the state of emergency, the parliament was put on leave until the situation would change.



**Deep
Polarization**

As a result, the global COVID-19 crisis deepened the already existing internal frictions within the Serbian society. The deep political polarization of the approx. 6.6 million officially registered voters has mostly led to the following two factions: unreflected claqueurs of the ruling party or vicious critiques and opponents. The already existing problems in the country fueled the positions of both sides tremendously. While the first group applauded and celebrated the implemented measures by President Vučić and generously ignored the override of the constitution, the other side took advantage from the ambivalence of government statements, the questionable implementation of the curfew and the growing dissatisfaction within the population of the big cities living practically incarcerated in their apartments. The deep division also revolves around the question of a possible election boycott, in a country where the average voter turnout has been for decades just under 53.9%, understood as a sign of system criticism.

**Climate of
intimidation**

The latest controversial debates already started in summer 2019, when almost all opposition parties in Serbia announced to boycott parliamentary elections on all levels to be held in 2020, after already starting with their boycott of the parliament in spring. The reason for their boycott lies in their deep dissatisfaction and belief that fair and free elections are not possible in Serbia anymore. Several months before, in 2018, civil society actors started to demonstrate against the climate of intimidation and political pressure by the government that had pushed the opposition and free media into a state of inactivity. The demonstrations all over Serbia in the beginning of 2019 were the most intense demonstrations since Slobodan Milošević's overthrow and the democratic change in the year 2000.

**Revival of the
1990s**

The situation right now though, reminds very much of the desolate political situation during the 90's of the last century – in some aspects even worse. Backlashes on free media, a massive pro-government propaganda machinery based on both media and social media, intimidation of public sector employees to rally for the ruling SNS, and obstructions to the rule of law in some delicate cases against party officials simply illustrate "stabilocratic" structures in Serbia. Stabilocracy defines the political strategy, or system of pretending state stability, while in fact legal institutions and the rule of law are weakened and destabilized. In that sense, dystopian

visions of Serbia's future came up after the Serbian President's speech in front of countless screens on May 16, showing people cheering and applauding at him.

Geopolitical Interests

Despite many attempts, even by the European Union, to moderate between the government and the opposition, the boycott is still ongoing. The EU however has lost its glance and opened up a vacuum related to the long-year stagnation of Serbia's accession process that on the other side facilitated the influence of other global players such as Russia and China. As a result, the ruling party SNS tries to "walk on both sides", and to maintain close ties to both the EU and Russia, as well as to the People's Republic of China. Its coalition partner, the SPS under Ivica Dačić, shows no sympathy for an EU accession, but seeks closer ties to China. Their current foreign political positions can be also related to the fact that both Vučić and Dačić were important protagonists of the former Milošević regime, not only during the time of the NATO bombing in 1999, that has generally led to public skepticism regarding the NATO accession of Serbia's neighbours.

Alliance for Serbia

The deeply divided opposition in Serbia is currently rallied among two major groups, one that has been hitherto represented in the parliament but boycotted the 2020 elections, and a second one that is relatively new, first boycotted but finally participated in the elections without passing the necessary threshold. The first one is the Alliance for Serbia (SZS), founded in 2018 by the major opposition parties such as the liberal Democratic Party (Demokratska Stranka, DS), the social-democratic Party for Freedom and Justice (Stranka Slobode i Pravde, SSP), the conservative People's Party (Narodna Stranka, NS) and the nationalist-conservative Dveri ("Doors") in order to join forces and to overcome the splintering from the past. This new founded Alliance for Serbia seeks to prevent a shift into political marginalization and vanishing of an effective opposition. Except of their only common goal – the removal of the current governing coalition –, they are not able to overcome political differences and remain very heterogenic and even antagonistic towards each other.

Movement of Free Citizens

On the other side, a new party emerged in the eve of the protests in 2019 under the leadership of the well-known actor Sergej Trifunović, who tries to assemble people dissatisfied with both the current SNS government and the poor work of the opposition – the Movement of Free Citizens (Pokret Slobodnih Građana, PSG). Even though the PSG did not organize the protests, but rather came out as a product of these, the PSG seemed to enjoy good trust among the protest participants. As a party PSG is centre-left orientated, with a focus on social justice, anti-corruption, environmentalism and participative democracy. In the beginning of the election campaign, the party leader Sergej Trifunović also joined the elections boycott of the SZS, but changed his mind one week before the election date on June 21, 2020, and started to run for the elections, without success. He and his party were with 1.8% not able to pass the census, although the threshold had been lowered by the government from 5% to 3% in order to officially give small parties the possibility to participate in the work of the chamber. This controversial move can rather be seen as an attempt to further split the opposition – similar to the 1990s – than to contribute to "democratization" of the country. Many subsidiary straw man parties were founded over the time by the SNS to hinder the opposition to be efficient. As such SPAS could profit from the 3% threshold.

Minimal democratic standards

For long time, the main question was not about which party would win the coming parliamentary elections, since the ruling parties, above all the SNS, could evidently stage themselves as the most trustworthy parties, not only based on their broad media control, but also due to their popularity in rural areas. It was the question whether or not the election boycott might had led to a less than 40% or less than 50% turnout to declare the elections as illegitimate. With a turnout of up to 49% the results of the parliamentary elections will still remain valid. However, according to the Belgrade election observation mission CRTA the parliamentary elections has shown minimal democratic standards, while the number of international observers was kept to a minimum due to the global Covid-19 pandemic. There are even assumptions of possible irregularities to increase the number of the voters' turnout. Interestingly the turnout number was at 15.00 about 27%, and at 19.00 about 41.1%.

Pessimistic prospects

Regarding the future of liberal democratic developments, pessimism prevails, since the parliament will not consist of an authentic opposition, after the boycott, or better to say the inherent stance to the call for boycott among the highly diverse opposition. In that sense, the election boycott was evident in Belgrade, Niš and Novi Sad, while people in the rural areas foremost voted for the regime party SNS. The voters' broad support of the government can be understood when taking into account the long country's tradition to vote for ruling elites, the rural and urban divide as well as the poor socio-economic situation of many people in Serbia who are f.i. as state employees, traders or pensioners interrelated with and dependent to the government; whereas at the same time liberal democracy metaphorically speaking exits the country through brain drain. This vicious cycle cements existing power relations and structures, while the political opposition without any international networks and cooperations will remain marginalized.

Online panel discussion

The need for a more clear stance on the EU level relating to problematic autocrat developments in Serbia was also a recommendation during the online panel discussion that was organized by the cooperation partners on June 18th, 2020. (For more information see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pXhlowfygIq>).

Oppositional parties that did not pass the 3% threshold	
Movement for the Restoration of the Kingdom of Serbia: 2.7%	Sovereignists: 2.6%
Broom 2020: 2.4%	Serbian Radical Party: 2.0%
PSG: 1.80%	Oathkeepers: 1.60%
Leviathan: 0.80%	1 of 5 million: 0.70%
LDP: 0.30%	Other small parties: 2.5%

Party ¹	Main Candidate	Political ideology (Affiliation EP)
<i>Akademik Muamer Zukorlić</i>	<i>Muamer Zukorlić</i>	<i>minority party</i>
<i>Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (SVM)</i>	<i>István Pasztor</i>	<i>minority party (EPP)</i>
Broom 2020 - DSS	Boris Koščal	coalition, centre-right
Leviathan – We live for Serbia	Pavle Bihali	far-right, environmentalism
Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)	Čedomir Jovanović	liberal (ALDE)
Movement of Free Citizens	Sergej Trifunović	centre-left
Movement for the Restoration of the Kingdom of Serbia (POKS)	Žika Gojković	conservative, monarchist
<i>SDA Sandžak</i>	<i>Sulejman Ugjanin</i>	<i>minority party</i>
Serbian Party Oathkeepers	Milica Đurđević	conservative, anti-NATO
Serbian Patriotic Alliance (SPAS)	Aleksandar Šapić	conservative
Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) "Aleksandar Vučić – for our children"	Aleksandar Vučić	national-conservative (EPP)
Serbian Radical Party (SRS)	Vojislav Šešelj	far-right
Socialist Party of Serbia – United Serbia	Ivica Dačić	formally centre-left
Sovereignists ("Enough is Enough")	Saša Radulović	conservative, neutrality
1 of 5 Millions	Valentina Reković	centre-left, liberal, protest party

¹ Minority parties for which no electoral threshold exists are marked in italic