

Briefing on

General Elections in Serbia

April 3, 2022

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SNS PARTY
election winner

58,7 %
voter turnout

120 out of 250
seats in the National
Assembly for SNS party

What elections

General elections were held in Serbia on April 3, 2022 to elect the members of the National Assembly, and the President of the Republic. In addition to the general elections, local elections were held in 14 municipalities, including the capital Belgrade. Shortly after the 2020 parliamentary elections, President Aleksandar Vučić announced that early parliamentary elections would take place in 2022. The president dissolved the parliament in February, for early parliamentary elections to be held on April 3 2022, concurrently with the presidential elections. Following that, in line with the schedule, the speaker of the parliament called the presidential elections. On the same day, local elections were held in cities and municipalities across Serbia, including scheduled elections in Belgrade.

The president is directly elected for a term of five years, from a single nationwide constituency. If no candidate receives more than 50 percent of the cast votes, a second round between the two best placed candidates is held within 15 days. The 250 members of the National Assembly are elected for a term of four years, in a proportional system, with closed candidate lists, also from a single nationwide constituency. In order to participate in the distribution of mandates, the candidate lists have to receive more than 3% of the

votes, while the lists representing national minorities are exempt from this threshold. The law requires that two candidates of the less represented gender are represented on the candidate lists among every five consecutive candidates. The local elections are held under the same proportional representation system. Voters in Belgrade have elected 110 members of the assembly, which in turn elects the mayor.

Political context

The elections took place in an environment of ongoing crisis of democratic institutions and an increasing political polarization. Since 2012, the political landscape has been dominated by the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), headed by Aleksandar Vučić. Vučić served first as a First Deputy Prime Minister from 2012 to 2014, and then as a Prime Minister from 2014 to 2017. In 2017, he won the presidential election in the first round, and maintained the leadership of the SNS.

The 2016 convocation of the National Assembly was marked by polarization between the ruling parties and the fragmented opposition, as well as several waves of citizens' protests. Following the 2018-2019 protests, which were triggered by a physical assault

on one of oppositions' leaders, most opposition MPs left the parliament in early 2019. The opposition parties later decided to boycott the scheduled elections, citing unfair electoral conditions and limited media freedom. This resulted in a record low turnout for parliamentary elections in Serbia in 2020 (49%).

From 2019 to 2021, there was an ongoing inter-party dialogue (IPD) process between the government and opposition. The IPD was first facilitated in 2019 by the civil society organizations, then by the members of the European Parliament (EP), however it did not lead to results that would entice the opposition to participate in the June 2020 elections.

The parliamentary opposition parties: Democratic Party (DS), the People's Party (NS), the Party for Freedom and Justice (SSP), the Serbian Movement Dveri, and the Social Democratic Party (SDS), as well as non-parliamentary Do not let Belgrade drown (which later formed the Moramo coalition) boycotted the 2020 parliamentary elections, and the other opposition parties failed to pass the 3% electoral threshold. The parties belonging to the ruling coalition: the SNS, the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), the Serbian Patriotic Party (SPAS, later merged with SNS), received 231 of the 250 parliamentary mandates, while four parties representing national minorities received the remaining 19 seats.

The inter-party dialogue process mediated by members of the EP continued, resulting in the adoption of a number of measures in September 2021, while a second dialogue, without foreign mediation, held in parallel under the auspices of the speaker of the parliament, led to an agreement with some of the opposition parties in October 2021. Although most opposition parties expressed dissatisfaction with the outcomes of the dialogue, they decided to participate in the 2022 elections. Some opposition parties were actively involved in the referendum held on January 16, campaigning against the proposed constitutional changes related to the appointment of judges and prosecutors, which were eventually passed, after obtaining a 59.6% majority, with a small, barely over 30% turnout.

Legal framework

The elections are primarily regulated by the Law on the Election of the President, the Law on Election of Members of the Parliament, the Law on Local Elections, and the decisions and instructions of the Republic Electoral Commission (REC). The election-related legal framework was mostly stable for almost twenty years, with notable changes being introduced prior to the 2020 elections, most notably the electoral threshold was reduced from 5% to 3%, and was significantly revised on February 8, 2022, less than two months before the election day.

The 2022 legislative changes primarily affected the structure of electoral administration, by introducing a middle tier – local electoral commissions, between the Republic Electoral Commission, and the polling boards. In addition, the timeframes for dispute resolution were extended, some limitations were put on political party and campaign funding, media coverage of officials in the campaign was further regulated, and transparency of polling board documents was increased. In addition, several temporary measures were introduced to allow non-parliamentary parties that boycotted the elections to participate in the electoral process.

The scope of this intervention, in such a short timeframe, did not allow all electoral actors time to adequately prepare/adjust, especially to the critical changes in electoral administration. However, these changes also did not address the long-standing challenges to the integrity of the elections, including long-standing ODIHR recommendations, regarding the independence and effectiveness of the body that regulates the media, the misuse of state resources in the campaign, and the pressures on voters.

Candidates

The Republic Electoral Commission approved eight presidential candidates, three of which are women, based on certified signatures from at least 10,000 voters. The incumbent Aleksandar Vučić is the candidate of the ruling coalition of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), the Socialist Party of Serbia

(SPS) and the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (SVM). Retired general Zdravko Ponoš runs for the centrist United Serbia coalition of opposition parties – the Party for Freedom and Justice (SSP), Democratic Party (DS), the People's Party (NS), and the Movement of Free Citizens (PSG), and university professor Biljana Stojković is a candidate of the green-left alliance Moramo. The remaining candidates represent the right side of the political spectrum: three candidates represent right-wing coalitions, Miloš Jovanović (NADA), Boško Obradović (Patriotic block - Dveri), and Branka Stamenković (Sovereignists coalition), as well as two far right candidates - Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski (Oathkeepers) and Miša Vacić (Serbian Right). In comparison, the 2017 elections had 11 candidates, all male, and the majority were also right-wing.

There were 19 registered parliamentary lists with 2912 candidates in total. For the parliamentary elections, lists also had to collect certified signatures from at least 10,000 voters, except national minority lists that had to collect 5,000 based on the new legislation. Unlike the presidential elections, the ruling coalition (SNS-SPS) ran with separate lists in the parliamentary elections. There were three opposition coalitions that boycotted the 2020 elections (centrist United Serbia, green-left alliance Moramo, and former president Tadić's center-left Social Democratic Party coalition). Out of the three right wing opposition coalitions in 2022, NADA and Sovereignists have failed to pass the threshold in 2020, and Dveri boycotted the 2020 elections. Besides the presidential candidate, the far right Oathkeepers also had a parliamentary list, while the Serbian Radical Party submitted the parliamentary list, but supported president Vučić's candidature. Both parties failed to pass the 3% threshold in 2020.

Eight lists were granted national minority status – the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians, which is a part of the ruling coalition with SNS, two Albanian lists, two Bosniak, one Roma, one Croatian-Ruthenian coalition list, and the disputed Russian-Greek list, fronted by an extreme right figure, which was initially dismissed by the Republic Electoral Commission, and later upheld

by the Administrative Court. The REC dismissed three lists claiming to represent Vlach, Russian, and Slovak communities. In 2020, a similar number of lists were registered (21), however back then only four lists represented national minorities, compared to eight now, and only two had women as ballot carriers, compared to four.

In addition, 12 lists were registered for Belgrade Assembly elections with a total of 1102 candidates, mostly mirroring the majority parties running for the National Assembly elections. This was only a half of the 24 lists that were registered for the Belgrade elections in 2018, mostly due to a change in the Law on Local Elections, which increased the required number of certified signatures in Belgrade specifically from 1,100 to 3,000.

Voters

All Serbian citizens aged 18 years have the right to vote, except those who lost legal capacity through a court decision. The voter registry is passive, maintained by the Ministry of Public Administration, and based on voters' permanent residence. The Republic Electoral Commission announced a total number of voters is 6,501,689, a decrease of 1.25% compared to 2020 elections, which was expected given the population trends.

As in many other countries in the region, the number of registered voters is higher than the voting age population (VAP), which is officially estimated to be 5,677,935 (December 31, 2020), while the unofficial estimates are even lower. The lack of transparency and accuracy of the electoral register raised the specter of electoral manipulation. Crta 2018 poll shows that 60 percent of the citizens believe that the voter registry is not accurate; and the main concerns involve voter registry containing double entries, entries of deceased persons, and voters living abroad.

The elections took place in 8115 regular polling stations in Serbia, with additional 29 polling stations in penal and detention facilities. Another 77 polling stations were opened for out-of-country voting in Serbian diplomatic representations in 34 countries, for

which a high number of 38,876 voters applied (compared to 13,251 in 2020), indicating Serbian diaspora high interest in these elections. Finally, after the government in Priština refused to allow voting to take place in Kosovo, which was facilitated by the OSCE in previous election cycles, 46 special polling stations were opened for Kosovo Serbs voters in four towns in Serbia, bringing the total number of polling stations to 8267 (compared to 8443 in 2020).

Issues and campaign

The ruling coalition mostly centered their campaign on the economy, especially economic development, and foreign investments. Their primary slogan, typical for the incumbent party, was “achievements speak for themselves”. The United Serbia opposition primarily criticised the government for the flipside of its economic record – rising inequalities, inflation, public debt and corruption, especially alleging the ties with organized crime, promising the voters “a change from the root.” The wave of ecological protests in the last two years have brought environmental protection to the mainstream of politics, which is the basis of coalition Moramo’s program. On the other hand, the right wing opposition challenged the government on Serbia’s foreign policy with regard to the EU integration, they want closer ties to Russia, and Serbia to backtrack from relinquishing elements of sovereignty in Kosovo. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the SNS have shifted their campaign towards promising “peace and stability”, the right-wing opposition has mostly supported Russia, while the center and left opposition only mildly positioned themselves towards this new issue.

The long-standing practices of abuse of public resources, and especially the abuse of public office in election campaigns have continued. The government used discretionary powers to allocate financial incentives from the state budget to particular groups of citizens, in exchange for expression of political support. For example, people aged 16 to 30 received a 100 euros state aid payment and were promised to receive a second payment of 100 euros after the April elections, conditioned on the victory of the ruling coalition. Besides the abuse of public resources and

clientelistic practices, the campaign was also marked by pressures on voters, especially those employed in the public sector, and from economically and socially vulnerable communities.

Television remains the primary means for political information of Serbia, for two thirds of the population, followed by the internet and social media. The media sector is strongly polarized, with five major televisions with nationwide reach, including the public broadcaster, having pro-government editorial policy, while the privately-owned cable outlets, with more critical views, have limited reach. This leads to an unbalanced media environment, where the representatives of the government and the ruling parties have a much larger presence than the opposition, and often use it for vilification of political opponents and other critical voices, including journalists, civil society, and academia.

Opinion polls

Opinion polls have become an increasingly contentious topic in Serbian politics. Some political actors are disputing the validity of different polls, alleging they are skewed to serve particular political interests. However, the results of most pollsters were largely consistent in showing the dominant position of the ruling SNS coalition, which, together with their junior partner SPS, could expect the support of well above the majority of decided respondents. The opposition centrist United Serbia and green-left Moramo coalitions could expect between 20 and 30 percent of the votes. Right-wing opposition was fragmented in several lists, two or three of which projected to likely pass the 3% threshold. Up to 10% of the votes could end up being cast for the lists below the threshold that will not participate in the distribution of seats.

Even though the polls indicated a clear advantage of the incumbent SNS over the challengers in the parliamentary elections, the outcomes of the presidential and Belgrade elections were less straightforward. SNS candidate Aleksandar Vučić’s goal was to repeat the 2017 first round win, but with expected higher turnout than 2017, that might be more difficult to achieve. Based on opinion polls, the

Belgrade city elections were the most unpredictable. The advantage of the ruling parties was smaller in Belgrade than in the rest of Serbia, and the city is considered a stronghold of the United Serbia and Moramo coalitions. However, the outcome might to a large extent depend on the number of opposition lists to pass the threshold.

Election Results

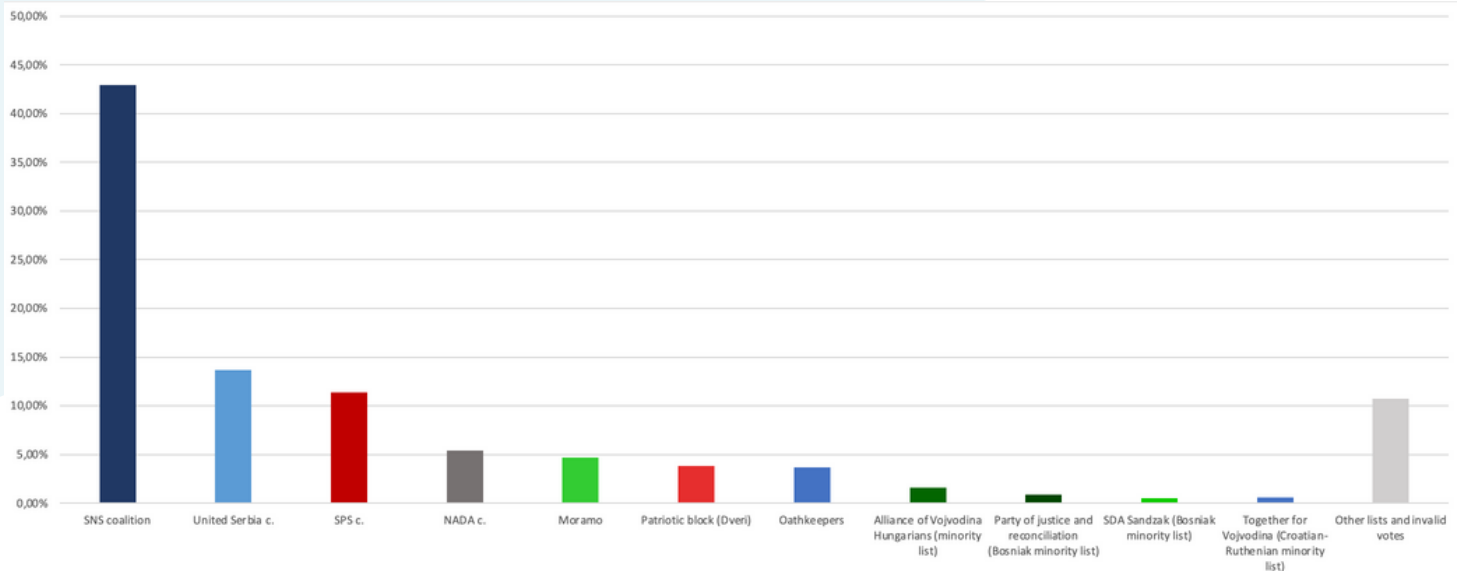
The elections were held on April 3 in a tense atmosphere. Serious irregularities were observed on 5% of the polling stations according to the Crta election observation mission. However, these irregularities could not have affected the outcome of the elections. High turnout was registered in urban areas and Belgrade, where, due to three levels of elections being held concurrently, unusually long queues were formed, the voting lasted along after the polling stations were closed at 8:00 pm, and the vote count lasted almost until the morning.

Three days after the voting day, the official vote count was incomplete, as voting at some polling stations had to be repeated due to irregularities. The preliminary results of the Republic Electoral Commission, based on 99% percent of the polling stations, show a 58.7% turnout in general elections. The ruling SNS party received less votes than expected - 42.9% and will not be able to form a majority in the National Assembly by themselves for the first time since 2014 elections, but they might be able to form a government with the minority lists MPs, or with their junior partner SPS that did better than expected. While the centrist and green-left opposition gained less votes than expected, they will together have a fifth of the seats (50) in the parliament. The right-wing opposition fared better than the polls projected, with three lists passing the electoral threshold, having won 35 seats.

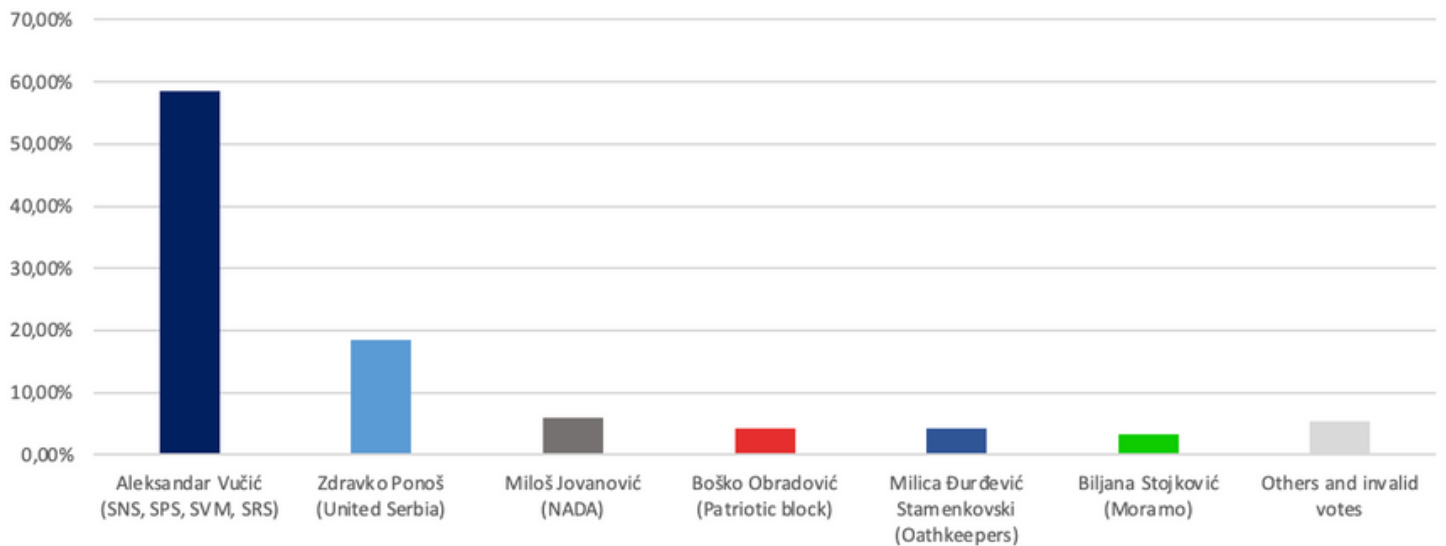
Aleksandar Vučić won a convincing victory with 58.5% of votes in the first round of presidential elections, securing him a new five-year term. The two centrist and green-left candidates have won 21.6% of the votes, while the five right-wing candidates won 17.5%

of the votes. The Belgrade city assembly elections produced a very narrow majority by the current ruling coalition, with the SNS and SPS lists winning 56 out of 110 seats, and five opposition parties won 54 seats, based on the City Electoral Commission count of the 88.6% of polling stations. The opposition SDS-Nova coalition won 2.8% and did not win seats. While the opposition parties mostly conceded the general election, due to the narrow majority and the irregularities at polling stations, the results of the local elections in Belgrade are contested by the opposition actors.

Parliamentary elections results 2022



Presidential elections results 2022



In the framework of a panel discussion series, the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe analyzes parliamentary elections in the countries of Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe. The event is jointly organised with the Political Academy of the Austrian People's Party and the Karl Renner Institute.