

Serbia

The 2016 Parliamentary Elections and Beyond

Serbia's voters went to the polls in parliamentary and local elections in April 2016. The government of Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic (Serbian Progressive Party—SNS) called early parliamentary elections two years into a four-year mandate that itself originated with early parliamentary elections in 2014. Turnout was 56%, an upswing from previous votes, but lower than historical averages.

- Disappointment over the economy did not prevent voters from renewing Vucic's mandate to govern. The SNS won nearly 50% of the vote and, after a 100-day hiatus, heads the new government on an agenda of economic and judicial reform tied to European Union accession. The SNS is again in coalition with the Serbian Socialist Party (SPS), which finished a distant second, at 11%.
- Nationalist, anti-EU parties re-emerged as a potent political force with 13% of the vote and will serve as a leading opposition bloc in parliament. The movement's most prominent leader is Vojislav Seselj, head of the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), an indicted war criminal who won a controversial acquittal in 2016 by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY). The nationalist comeback reflects flagging public support for EU integration and suggests growing pro-Kremlin sentiment.
- Divided and disillusioned, mainstream parties that had governed Serbia for the decade following Slobodan Milosevic's removal from power in 2000 suffered dismal losses, barely meeting the 5% parliamentary threshold.
- Protest voters—a relatively new phenomenon in Serbian politics mirroring developments elsewhere in Europe—turned to former SNS minister Sasa Radulovic's *Dosta Je Bilo* (Enough is Enough), which enters parliament with 6% of the vote.
- Local election results mirrored those at the parliamentary level. SNS racked up an impressive number of wins in municipalities across the country, and notably in Vojvodina, which has been held for many years by the Democratic Party. Where the SNS did not prevail, upstart parties and local movements won seats for the first time.
- Important challenges await the new government. The domestic agenda is replete with efforts—some ongoing—to overhaul the judiciary and public administration, continue privatization, reduce government debt, and attract foreign investment. This is coming at a time, following the “Brexit” vote in the U.K., in which public skepticism over Serbia's path toward European Union membership is rising. Serbia's democracy agenda is also full, with reforms needed to shore up independent institutions such as the ombudsman and media, to strengthen the integrity of the electoral system, to achieve meaningful separation of powers between executive and legislative branches of government, and to extend equal rights to citizens belonging to minority groups, including Roma and LGBTI communities. Belgrade's relations with its neighbors are being tested anew, with fresh diplomatic skirmishes with Zagreb, renewed concerns over Bosnia-Herzegovina's political integrity, and a stalemated process in normalization of relations with Kosovo.

2016 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS RESULTS		
Party List/Leaders	Percent	Seats
Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) coalition (Aleksandar Vucic)	48.25%	131
Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) coalition (Ivica Dacic)	10.95%	29
Serbian Radical Party (SRS) (Vojislav Seselj)	8.10%	22
<i>Dosta Je Bilo</i> - "Enough is Enough" (Sasa Radulovic)	6.02%	16
Democratic Party (DS) coalition (Bojan Pajtic)	6.02%	16
<i>Dveri</i> -DSS (Bosko Obradovic, Sanda Raskovic Ivic)	5.02%	13
Social Democratic Party (SDS) coalition (Boris Tadic, Cedomir Jovanovic, Nenad Canak)	5.02%	13
Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (Istvan Pasztor)	1.50%	4
Bosniak Democratic Union (Muamer Zukorlic)	0.86%	2
Party of Democratic Action of Sandzak (Dr. Sulejman Ugljanin)	0.80%	2
Green Party (Goran Cabradi)	0.63%	1
Party for Democratic Action (Ardita Sinani)	0.43%	1
Others	3.86%	0
<i>Invalid ballots</i>	2.86%	
Total	100%	250 ¹

Pre-Election Politics

According to a December 2015 public opinion poll by Ipsos Strategic Marketing, the most pressing issues for voters were high unemployment, poor economic conditions, high levels of corruption, and poverty. Voters were on the lookout for a political option that they believed would result in improvements to their quality of life, and many analysts saw a higher number of undecided voters headed into the campaign than in previous cycles. The polls also showed low levels of citizen trust in public institutions. At just 10 percent, voters' confidence in political parties, the parliament, and the judiciary ranked among the lowest in the region. The one exception was Prime Minister Vucic, who, despite heading state institutions held in low regard, conveyed an image of a reformer and enjoyed a trust rating of more than 50 percent.

Citizen support for EU integration—a long and seemingly lengthening prospect—has been softening and, according to some polling, considerably so, coming in at 45-50%.² Positive opinions of Russia in some polls have risen to as high as 75%. Polling data does not necessarily suggest a tradeoff between the EU and Russia in the minds of citizens, but rather an accommodation of having close political and economic ties with Russia while pressing forward toward European accession as a means to stability and prosperity. However, Europe's low economic growth, the refugee crisis, and terrorism threats are leading more people to question EU membership as conferring stability and prosperity, it not exactly opposing it.

Serbia approached the elections as an EU candidate country, with the first two of 35 negotiating chapters opened. Chapter 32 of the *acquis communautaire* deals with financial controls, while Chapter 35—particular to Serbia's membership bid—concerns Belgrade's normalization of relations with Kosovo. Although Serbia has officially opened Chapter 23, which deals with the judiciary and fundamental rights, and Chapter 24, focused on justice and security reform, negotiations of these chapters have not yet started. As both deal with sensitive reforms, many speculated that Vucic wanted to refresh his mandate before launching into negotiating changes to power structures over which his party currently presides.

¹ Minority parties can secure parliamentary seats with tallies less than the threshold of five percent.

² IPSOS Strategic Marketing Omnibus poll, December 2015. Recent data confirms softening EU accession support, with many moving to an undecided stance.

With the assumption that SNS would lead at the polls, several political parties joined forces to bolster their chances, including a coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SDS), led by former President Boris Tadic; the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which missed the five percent threshold in the 2014 elections; and the League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina (LSV). On the other side of the political spectrum were nationalist parties, including SRS and *Dveri*, with the latter joining with the conservative Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) to score just enough votes to pass the threshold.

As the official, 30-day election campaign ensued, media were abuzz over citizen mistrust of the election process owing to lack of clear party platforms, the dominance of negative campaigning, alleged and in certain instances confirmed party abuse of government resources, and perceived government influence over the media fueled the distrust.

Parliamentary Election Results

Vucic and the SNS-led coalition were the undisputed winners. The coalition managed to obtain a simple majority of parliamentary seats but not necessarily a comfortable majority. It was clear upon the results that the SNS would seek a junior coalition partner and, despite some public sniping after the election between the SNS and SPS, the two eventually signed an agreement to form the incoming government.

In contrast to the 2014 elections, a record seven party lists passed the five percent threshold, three of which enter parliament for the first time – the liberal *Dosta Je Bilo* (“Enough is Enough”), *Dveri*, and the Green Party – an ethnic Slovak minority list.

In analyzing results of the opposition parties and coalitions, SRS and *Dosta Je Bilo* stand out. Galvanizing support among anti-West, pro-Russian voters and bolstered by his ICTY acquittal, Seselj (SRS) re-energized his party to get enough votes to re-enter parliament. Radulovic (*Dosta Je Bilo*) meanwhile appealed to the liberal, intellectual, pro-West constituency, greatly dissatisfied and disappointed with the SNS and by the Democratic Party’s turn in power before it. A former Minister of the Economy appointed by Vucic who then resigned to much fanfare following his efforts to stop questionable privatization schemes, Radulovic formed a protest movement just before elections were called, and nonetheless scored a noteworthy result.

The DSS/*Dveri* coalition alleged vote tampering when the State Election Commission (SEC) delayed publication of preliminary results. The first results showed DSS/*Dveri* failing to pass the parliamentary threshold by a minuscule number of votes. After a re-vote in 15 polling stations, the coalition passed the threshold. Three other opposition formations (DS, SDS-LDP-LSV, and *Dosta Je Bilo*) with diametrically opposed agendas to DSS-*Dveri*, pressed their supporters in the 15 polling stations to vote for DSS-*Dveri* to increase opposition ranks against the SNS. This left many DS supporters disillusioned, insofar as they saw their party’s tactical embrace of nationalists as repugnant.

Five parties won 10 seats for ethnic Albanians, Bosniak, and Hungarian voters. Minority candidates were elected on mainstream party lists as well. No Roma party succeeded in registering to contest the elections.

Vojvodina and Local Election Results

The early parliamentary elections were held concurrently with regular elections for the Vojvodina Provincial Assembly, as well as municipal assemblies and city councils across the country, save for Belgrade and 14 other locales which had had early elections in 2015.

Two trends observed on the national level could also be seen at the local level. The first is that the SNS won in the majority of municipalities. The second is that those not voting for the SNS shopped for alternatives and rewarded new, grassroots entrants.

- The Democratic Party surrendered power in the Vojvodina Assembly to the SNS after more than a dozen years of undisputed rule. Of the 120 mandates in the Vojvodina Assembly, DS won 10, with SNS gaining a majority with 63 seats. The defeat highlighted the political decline of a party that was Serbia's largest a decade ago.
- In Kraljevo (central Serbia), one of two new citizen groups that won was *Lokalni Front* ("Local Front"), which advocated for clean government through street actions and social media. They won seats in the local assembly while more established parties, such as the DS, were removed altogether.
- In Mladenovac (Belgrade region), a citizen movement finished second behind a SNS-led coalition. It started as a parody, but the group received twice the amount of signatures necessary to register. Driving this movement was dissatisfaction with local power brokers in power for more than 30 years. The movement's leader, 24-year-old Luka Maksimovic, presided over a candidate list of young independents.

Electoral Process

Serbia maintains a fully proportional election system. The country serves as one election district. Voters select one political party ballot in exercising their franchise, with the names of candidates listed by order of rank as determined by the parties. The ballot is 'closed' in the sense that voters cannot express preference for individual candidates. Candidates elected to parliament do not represent a defined geographic constituency. Residents of Kosovo wishing to cast a vote in the Serbian elections were permitted to do so under OSCE auspices.

The Center for Research, Transparency, and Accountability (CRTA) engineered a comprehensive election monitoring program dubbed "Citizens on Watch". Other NGOs observed aspects of elections, such as media coverage (BIRODI and Novi Sad Journalist Association), political campaign financing (Transparency Serbia), and freedom of assembly (Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights). The OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) conducted a limited election observation mission.

CRTA long-term observers monitored the pre-election environment, implementation of the legal framework and administration; media coverage, and infractions such as misuse of state resources for partisan campaigning. CRTA's election-day Parallel Vote Tabulation (PVT) drew on a representative random sample of polling stations to collect and present information regarding the regularity of the process, as well as information on election results and voter turnout. CRTA's monitored the State Election Commission's post-election work through to the official announcement of election results.

The pre-election period was marked by a number of irregularities, including counterfeit signatures of up to 15,000 voters by seven competing parties, conflicting positions of the SEC and the Administrative Court on the rights of parties to obtain "ethnic party" status, reports about a criminal group in possession of a voter database, and voter registration administrative practices that were permissive of fraud. Although the SEC carried out activities in accordance with law, it did not adequately respond to all attempts of circumventing legislation and/or irregularities with the submission of candidate lists due to deficient and conflicting provisions of the Law on Political Parties and the Law on Parliamentary Elections, as well as the lack of expert staff.

Political parties complied with election law provisions ensuring mixed-gender candidate lists, such that women and men are placed in electable positions.

There were instances of vote-buying, partisan threats to party supporters, and voter intimidation, particularly among Roma communities and other vulnerable groups. The abuse of public resources mainly involved public sector employees at rallies and other party-related campaign activities. In some cases, public sector employees were reputedly pressured to participate in party events. Serbia's Anti-Corruption Agency and the OSCE/ODIHR observation mission also noted that political parties launched social and humanitarian activities with state resources during the pre-election period.

Based on information collected, CRTA estimated that the election-day procedures and processes were conducted mainly in accordance with the law. On election-day, observers recorded irregularities at four percent of the polling stations. Although widespread, these irregularities could not be characterized as major breaches that could significantly influence the general regularity of the election process. However, they could have affected the results of the re-vote in the 15 polling stations. Observers also noted a high level of citizen mistrust in the election process, reflected in numerous comments shared through social networks and the media, as well as informal interaction between citizens and CRTA observers.

In the post-election period, observers were allowed to be present only at one SEC session after the May 4 revote, during which the SEC approved the final election results and dissolved itself before the expiration deadline for filing electoral complaints.

Election observers did not deem election-day irregularities serious enough to characterize the voting process as unfair, but media bias and abuse of government resources were substantial enough to call into question the fairness of electoral competition. CRTA's election monitoring, along with those of other civic groups, creates a platform to reform the election law and administration to make the process more transparent, equitable, and accountable.

A New Government

The new government was inaugurated almost 100 days after election-day, on August 9, 2016. Vucic has replaced roughly one-third of the outgoing cabinet. Ivica Dacic, Zorana Mihajlovic, and Rasim Ljajic return as deputy prime ministers, respectively, and Dacic remains foreign minister. Jadranka Joksimovic carries on as minister in charge of Serbia's EU integration. Six out of 20 ministers are women, and one, Ana Brnabic, Minister of Public Administration and Local Government, is openly Lesbian—a political first in Serbia and for the Balkans.

Extended SNS rule highlights Vucic's popularity despite public dissatisfaction over political, economic, and social conditions over which he has presided since 2012. Serbia's voters have demonstrated a penchant for bestowing power to one party, if not individual, and governance structures—the election system, fiscal regime, etc.—reinforce the centralization of power. Vucic will be challenged by a resurgent nationalist wing, now arrayed in formal opposition, which will seek to frame political and policy battles in an East vs. West framework that Serbia is reflexively prone to adopt, and which Russia presumably stands ready to exploit.

The degree to which Vucic shows good will to constructive critics in the moderate political opposition, civil society and media, and to independent and regulatory bodies, which appeared lacking in his outgoing government, will say much about Serbia's pursuit of democratic stability and economic prosperity at a time of uncertainty. So too will the actions of these other groups, which must assert themselves into the political process to press for government accountability and transparency and to stem populist-nationalist appeals.

Serbs will return to the polls next spring to vote for president.