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Electoral committee at one polling station in Belgrade, December 2023. Elections

Photo: Ana Paunković / FoNet

ELECTIONS IN SERBIA: THE QUESTION OF GEOPOLITICAL AND VALUE ORIENTATION

In the elections of 17 December 2023, the conservative and anti-European right wing triumphed, thus rounding off one stage which has now strictly aligned Serbia with Putin and Orban. Aleksandar Vučić covered all right-wing radical options and returned to the position from which he started his political career in 1990s.

The elections were primarily advocated by the opposition. Vučić agreed to them and called them at the time when he was under

great pressure from the Western community due to the non-implementation of the Ohrid Agreement and the terrorist act in northern Kosovo on 24 September. Surely, he would not have allowed them if he had not secured victory in advance. That is why the elections were a test of electoral engineering and the autocracy's willingness to stay in power by resorting to various machinations and abuses, and not a test of democracy.

Vučić skillfully closed the national space, prevented the unification of several parties on the strongly pro-Russian side and also closed the media for their presentation. At the same time, he published a list of 2000 supporters among the intellectuals and celebrities who ward off the ProGlas campaign – the initiative of 14 independent personalities, known to the public, which was signed by more than 190,000 supporters by the end of the campaign. By monopolizing the media with national frequency, Vučić exploited the topic of Kosovo and the Serbian issue in the region to the maximum. In this way, he marginalized the patriotic presentations of other parties and even kicked some of them out of the race (Dveri, Zavetnici).

The convincing victory of Aleksandar Vučić in the parliamentary elections puts Serbia under the unquestionable dominance of his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). It additionally strengthens the absolute power of Vučić who, not his party, was instrumental in winning the elections, although he is no longer even formally the head of the SNS. Although this was not a presidential election, the list was headed by Vučić. (the list leader).

The outcome of the parliamentary elections will not only set back Serbia still further, but it will also continue to play a destabilizing role in the region. The presence of Milorad Dodik, President of the Republic of Srpska (RS) and Andrija Mandić, Speaker of the Montenegrin Parliament, in the election headquarters of the Serbian Progressive Party during the announcement of the election results was a kind of message that the “Serbian world” is functioning and, at the same time, a demonstration that Vučić is the leader of all Serbs in the region and controls the processes both in Montenegro and in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Vučić also marginalized the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) and Ivica Dačić, a hitherto important coalition partner, and skillfully combined Milošević and Šešelj’s policies. The bringing of Serbs from the Republic of Srpska and their voting primarily at the polling stations in Belgrade, caused the anger of the citizens. According to Vučić, they do not decide on the outcome of the elections, but it is symbolically very important that they are here.¹ He prepared for the elections for months in advance to secure every vote, especially in Belgrade, because he was aware that his opposition was strongest there.

Despite the theft, fraud and abuse of state resources and media monopoly, the opposition coalition Serbia Against Violence won more than 20 percent of the vote, which is the greatest success of an opposition list in the last 11 years, that is, since the SNS and Vučić have been in power. The opposition was much better organized (although not enough) and thanks to that it was able to expose the election theft of SNS, especially in Belgrade.

The biggest surprise of these elections is certainly the movement “We – The Voice of the People”, headed by the well-known Belgrade doctor Branimir Nestorović. He got media space and was a frequent guest on the YouTube Channel where he promoted various conspiracy theories. The movement is pro-Russia oriented and one of its members, Branko Pavlović, clearly explained its commitment. “*We – The Voice of the People*” expose the shackles in which the West economically and financially holds Serbia through the new mechanism of colonialism as a dangerous situation and system that must be dismantled if Serbia does not

1 Politika, “Apsolutna podrška politici Aleksandra Vučića”, 18 November 2023.

want to ‘destroy itself’ or, better said, to disappear”.²

The movement “We – The Voice of the People”, however, can “judge” whether the elections in Belgrade will be repeated. Nestorović has stated on several occasions that he will not make any coalitions and compromises except in the case that “the state is threatened”. As he pointed out, his list is not afraid of the results in Belgrade, which is why they are ready for the rerun of elections.

Vučić also enjoyed strong support from the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) for his campaign. It is no coincidence that Bishop Irinej, otherwise the main proponent of the pro-Russian line in the Church and the mentor of Patriarch Pofirije, congratulated Vučić on the victory of the “patriotic option” as well as the “success in the mission of preserving Serbdom and Serbia in difficult circumstances” and “the huge challenges and temptations faced by our Fatherland and the Serbian people as a whole”.³

Vučić’s convincing victory will also pose a problem for the West, which still tolerates him, although it trusts him less and less after the armed conflict in Banjska. Although Vučić claims that he is still on the European path, this is not confirmed by his politics, nor by the media he controls. He will still try to balance in a significantly narrower space, because he will certainly not refuse the financial support that was announced at the EU – Western Balkans Summit (in Brussels).

These elections have also shown that Serbia does not have the human potential for a serious opposition party and a leader who is capable of threatening the current government’s monopoly. In view of the fact that the elections were largely won through skillful manipulation, the question is how long this monopoly will last. The SNS, that is, President Vučić destroyed the political dialogue with his destructive policy and constant media campaigns against all political opponents, and effectively returned the country to a one-party system. By controlling the media, he closed the space for critical thinking and disabled society to think critically.

ELECTORAL RESULTS

In the extraordinary elections in 17 December, the list led by Aleksandar Vučić won with 46.9 percent of the vote, while the “Serbia Against Violence” coalition won 23.1 percent. Three more parties passed the electoral threshold – the Socialist Party of Serbia with 6.7 percent, NADA coalition with 5.0 percent and “We – The Voice of the People” with 4.6 percent. The minority lists of the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians with 1.9 percent, Zukorlić and Žigmanov’s United for Justice with 0.7 percent, Party of Democratic Action – Sandžak with 0.6 percent and the Albanian List of Šaip Kamberi with 0.4 percent also entered the Republican Parliament.

Pressures on voters were spread and deepened by various mechanisms, assuming an increasingly harsh character, including numerous allegations pointing to the massive misuse of data on citizens for the sake of political marketing, pressure and bribery of voters. The dehumanizing rhetoric against the opposition leaders in the campaign was

2 Pečat, Mere, 2 December 2023.

3 <https://novimagazin.rs/vesti/311703-predsednistvo-episkop-irinej-cestitao-dragom-prijatelju-vucicu-na-pobedi-otadzbinske-opcije>

also used. In addition to the most influential media, it was also used by the highest state representatives. Moreover, a large number of cases of violence against election actors and citizens was also recorded.⁴

The CRTA observation mission concluded that the drastic abuses of voters' rights, laws and institutions most drastically escalated during the election day in Belgrade. Due to the scope and type of electoral abuses in Belgrade, CRTA concluded that the results of the Belgrade elections do not reflect the freely expressed will of the voters.⁵

All reported irregularities indicate that these elections lack democratic legitimacy.

STILL THE SUCCESS OF THE OPPOSITION

The "Serbia Against Violence" Coalition is the second on the list in terms of the number of votes won, but it is far behind the SNS, especially at the republican level.

However, in Belgrade the Serbia Against Violence Coalition won 34.27 percent of the vote (42 seats), while the SNS won 39.34 percent of the vote (49 seats). Judging by all the reports of the observers, the Serbia Against Violence Coalition probably won in Belgrade which is why it is protesting and demanding repeat of elections.

With these results the opposition imposed itself as the nominally pro-European alternative, but there is still no unifying idea around which cooperation could be continued. If it falls apart, like all previous ones, it will be difficult to expect an alternative to the authoritarian regime of Aleksandar

Vučić. The campaign was in unison, reduced to the criticism of Aleksandar Vučić without the offer that would attract voters. The dissatisfaction of the citizens is huge and if a convincing programme had been presented, the support would certainly have been greater.

The pro-European opposition was united, because all research indicated that this is the only way to achieve significant results, which in the end turned out to be correct. It was born as a reaction to the massacres at the beginning of May at the Vladislav Ribnikar Elementary School in Belgrade and in the vicinity of Mladenovac, when 19 children and young people were killed.

The protests that followed were a kind of reaction not only to these two tragic events, but also to the escalation of verbal and physical violence in society, which mostly passes without any reaction from state institutions. Protests started spontaneously in Belgrade, but also in other cities throughout Serbia. The opposition built its pro-election campaign on that energy, especially in Belgrade where their victory was expected. Since the SNS won very narrowly in Belgrade, everything points to theft.

The opposition disputes the outcome of the elections in Belgrade, claiming that the elections were irregular, as indicated by numerous reports of observation missions, including international and especially local non-governmental organizations, such as CRTA. The protests continue and the question is whether they will escalate like in 1996/97, when Milošević stole local elections. It was also a prelude to his end.

Despite the fact that the opposition did not win the elections, it had one of the three best results in the history of multipartism in

4 <https://crt.rs/preliminarna-ocena-izbornog-dana/>

5 Ibid.

Serbia, as pointed out by political consultant Dušan Lj. Milenković, because until now those parties never had even twenty percent in total, and now together they are significantly more than that.⁶

Apart from the rerun of elections in Belgrade and Serbia, the “Serbia Against Violence” list also demands the “cleaning” of the electoral register.

However, the pro-European opposition missed the opportunity to raise the relevant issues from the past and challenge Vučić’s policy as a continuation of Milošević’s policy. They did not oppose Vučić’s rhetoric about Kosovo and also claimed that Kosovo is an integral part of Serbia and that they do not support the French-German plan and the Brussels and Ohrid Agreements. They fell into Vučić’s trap about the threatened Serbdom.

CITIZENS’ PROTESTS

The “Serbia Against Violence” coalition declared that the elections were stolen and demands the rerun of elections in Belgrade and at the republican level. As a result, citizens took to the streets, especially in Belgrade, demanding insight into voter lists. At one point, protests in front of the city’s Parliament building ended with a violent police response. In an address to the public, the opposition “Serbia Against Violence” list accused Vučić of sending hooligans to provoke violence.

The “Serbia Against Violence” coalition condemned the attempt to label peaceful

protests as violent, as well as the arrest of a great number of protesters. They especially emphasized that they would never accept the theft that was carried out in an organized manner, because “it is not a question of which party will be in power; it is a question of the survival of Serbia.”⁷

The government promptly responded to the protests by accusing the West of inciting the riots. Vučić thanked those foreign intelligence services which made it clear that they knew what was being prepared and passed this information to our intelligence services, which responded in a timely manner and knew exactly what it was planned.”⁸ He also accused the opposition of attempting to forcefully seize the institution of the Republic of Serbia.”⁹

Allegedly, the first information about it came from the Russian intelligence services. Russian Ambassador Alexander Botso-Kharchenko said that the incitement to riot came from the West.¹⁰ And the spokeswoman of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maria Zakharova, stated that “the West is trying to destabilize the situation in Serbia and that the attempts of the collective West to destabilize the situation in the country using the ‘Maidan’ techniques are evident.”¹¹

6 <https://n1info.rs/vesti/dw-u-srbiji-nista-novo-nastavlja-se-neobuzdana-vlast-sns/>

7 <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/regija/opozicija-optuzila-vucica-da-je-poslao-huligane-na-proteste-kako-bi-isprovocirao-reakciju-policije/231225005>

8 <https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/spasiba-za-sluzbu-vucic-i-brnabic-potvrdili-da-je-bezbednost-srbije-u-rukamarusije/>

9 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-nakon-sednice-nacionalne-bezbednosti-ovaj-akt-je-bio-planiran-uhapseno-35-siledzija/>

10 <https://n1info.rs/vesti/bocan-harcenko-vucic-me-informisao-da-zapad-stoji-iza-nereda-u-beogradu/>

11 https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2023&mm=12&dd=25&nav_category=78&nav_id=2455305

All this indicates that the Russian intelligence services have successfully incorporated themselves into the Serbian ones and have disabled them to perform the tasks entrusted to them under the Constitution and the law. The conclusion is self-evident. As diplomat Srećko Djukić points out, “if there were no Russian services, what would happen to us, who would protect us”.¹²

Russia’s claims about a Western conspiracy are another attempt in a series of other thwarting efforts to get Serbia out of the Russian orbit in turn to Euro-Atlantic integration.

Michael Kirby, the former American Ambassador to Serbia, stated that the rioters appearing during the protest could have been the opponents of the election irregularities, but it is not excluded that they were the agitators infiltrated by the Serbian Progressive Party or Russians.¹³

REACTIONS FROM THE REGION

The region closely followed the elections being aware of how much Serbia affects the regional dynamics and stability, in particular. After the intrusion of the Serbian army into northern Kosovo (Banjska) its attention was redoubled. The election results only increased anxiety and fear that President Vučić would continue to raise tensions and provoke Kosovo, in particular.

Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković stated that the election results in Serbia are

a reflection of reality, but he pointed out that Croatia should work with Serbia on what was agreed upon in a bilateral agreement 20 years ago, namely to guarantee the Croatian minority one seat in the Serbian parliament. “We continue to conduct a dialogue aimed at solving open issues”, the Croatian Prime Minister added.¹⁴ The former Croatian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Davor Ivo Štir, stated that all power in Serbia is in the hands of President Aleksandar Vučić and that it does not matter at all whether he holds the position of President or, according to Putin’s model, he will be transferred to the position of Prime Minister. That is where power is and he centralizes and simply holds all power in his hands”.¹⁵

Reacting to Milorad Dodik’s statements that the reactions from Belgrade were painful for him, Džemal Smajić, a member of the Party for Bosnia and Herzegovina in the House of Peoples of the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina, said that “the wave of evil, which swept over Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s, hit the wall and bounced back to Belgrade where it stated”. As he has emphasized, this wave has now also submerged the democratic will of citizens in Serbia itself, especially in Belgrade. There remains the hope that pro-European Serbia will fight for its rights and, finally, the relations between Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina will be maintained like in the civilized world, like the relations between the two sovereign states, and not through Dodik and others like him.¹⁶

12 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/ana-brnabic-ruske-sluzbe-bezbednosti/>

13 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/majkl-kirbi-za-glas-amerike-mislim-da-u-srbiji-nema-vece-mase-spremne-da-svrgne-vucica-necu-kritikovati-hila/>

14 <https://www.danas.rs/svet/region/plenkovic-rezultati-izbora-u-srbiji-realnost/>

15 <https://n1info.rs/vesti/izbori-2023/bivsi-ministar-spoljnih-poslova-hrvatske-u-srbiji-je-sva-vlast-u-vucicevim-rukama/>

16 <https://www.oslobodjenje.ba/vijesti/bih/dzenan-smajic-talas-zla-se-vratio-u-beograd-ostaje-nada-da-ce-917463>

Šaćir Filandra, a professor at the Faculty of Political Science, believes that Vučić will continue to provoke crises whenever it suits him and will actually put out those fires by himself, given that he alone has the objective political power and controls the entire Serbian political ethnos..¹⁷

The strongest reactions came from Banjaluka because of accusations from the opposition and citizen themselves due to “the imported” voters from the Republic of Srpska. Radovan Kovačević, spokesman for the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) of Milorad Dodik, told the opposition in Serbia that the citizens of the Republic of Srpska and Bosnia and Herzegovina, who voted in the elections never lived in Serbia, but had been living and dying for Serbia for centuries. He especially emphasized that “Nikola Tesla, Ivo Andrić, Petar Lubarda, Mihajlo Pupin, Patriarch Pavle, Meša Selimović, Milutin Milanković, Branko Ćopić, Josif Pančić, Zoran Djindjć, Petar Kočić... were not born in Serbia”¹⁸

The President of the Socialist Party of Srpska, Goran Selak congratulated Vučić and pointed out that “the people of Serbia once again convincingly supported the state-building and nationally responsible policy conducted in Serbia during the last decade. The Republic of Srpska also massively supported such a policy, because the prosperity of Srpska and Serbia and the entire Serbian people can be expected only if we are united and rely on each other.”¹⁹

17 <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/videos/2023/12/18/filandra-nista-bitno-nece-se-mijenjati-u-odnosu-srbije-prema-regiji>

18 <https://n1info.rs/region/reakcije-iz-banjalukezed-na-glasanje-u-beogradu-ne-zivimo-u-srbiji-ali-zivimo-zasrbiju/>

19 Ibid

The reaction of Montenegro, which is under heavy attack from the Belgrade authorities, depended on one's party affiliation – pro-Serbian and pro-Russian, or pro-Montenegrin. President Jakov Milatović's reaction was surprising as he stated that he believes that Mandić (Andrija) “should not be in any election headquarters in Serbia and that this is not a good message.”²⁰ Slaven Radunović, a deputy of the New Serbian Democracy (NSD), has stated that Andrija Mandić has good relations with the Serbian Progressive Party and that he was there “in the role of the NSD President and the role of the friend of Aleksandar Vučić and other people from Serbia with whom he has been cooperating for years.”²¹

It is interesting to note that the URA Civil Movement, whose President Dritan Abazović had close relations with Belgrade and who signed the Basic Agreement between Montenegro and the Serbian Orthodox Church, stated that “the presence of the President of the Montenegrin Assembly at the election headquarters of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) is unacceptable and not statesmanlike; thus, he must apologize both to the deputies and all citizens”. They also hold that the “responsibility for that event lies with Prime Minister Milojko Spajić who is expected from whom the public expects to give a public explanation.”²²

Kosovo carefully followed the Serbian elections, especially because it was the topic advocated by Vučić and others, as well as because of the Albanian minority that won one seat in the Parliament in these elections. However, Vučić's decision to allow vehicles with Albanian licence plates to pass

20 <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/andrija-mandic-srbija-izbori-milatovic/7402697.html>

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

through Serbia was Belgrade's attempt to take an initiative and put pressure on Prime Minister Kurti to establish the community of Serbian municipalities. Prime Minister Kurti answered that the Kosovo Government would make a decision to allow the full freedom of movement for vehicles with Serbian licence plates through Kosovo only when the border police documents and confirms that Serbia carries out its decision without obstacles and unhindered.²³

INTERNATIONAL REACTIONS

The International Observation Mission had 361 observers from 45 countries, of which 251 were experts sent by the ODIHR. It consisted of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), members of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) and European Parliament.

Observers stated that the legal framework for democratic elections was fulfilled. But, as mentioned in their statement, there are numerous problems that need to be solved. They pointed to the abuse of public resources, the absence of a boundary between the performance of a public function and campaign activities, intimidation and pressure on voters, as well as vote buying.²⁴ They also pointed out that the frequency of early elections during the past years affects the confidence in democratic institutions and strengthens the culture of "extraordinary

elections", brings about unequal conditions and the political instrumentalization of the election cycle.²⁵ The Head of the Observation Mission of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, Stefan Schennach, clearly stated that the elections were not fair, but fraudulent, and that he believes that the victory in Belgrade stolen from the opposition.

²⁶

They pointed to the lack of measures to prevent the abuse of public office and resources, while the line between official duties and campaign activities was blurred. The competent Serbian authorities are called upon to make credible reports in irregularities.²⁷

US State Department Spokesman Matthew Miller stated that the United States call on Serbia to work together with the OSCE in order to resolve the issue of irregularities reported by the OSCE and other international observers. "the violence against election officials, journalists and accredited observers – of which we have seen reports – is not acceptable."²⁸

US Senators Jeanne Shaheen and Pit Ricketts also called on the relevant institutions in Serbia to urgently consider whether the elections should be repeated in certain areas and that the elections in Serbia were a chance for the country to show further commitment to democracy and free and fair elections.²⁹

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ <https://www.dw.com/sr/%C5%A1enah-za-dw-pobeda-u-beogradu-ukradena-je-opoziciji/video-67765383>

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/sad-pozivamo-srbiju-da-istrazi-navode-o-neregularnostima-na-izborima/7404457.html>

²⁹ <https://n1info.rs/vesti/izbori-2023/americki-senatori-izbori-u-srbiji-ni-slobodni-ni-fer/>

²³ <https://kossev.info/kosovska-vlada-ce-doneti-odluku-o-tablicama-tek-kada-se-uveri-da-bg-u-potpunosti-sprovodi-svoju/>

²⁴ <https://n1info.rs/vesti/izbori-2023/eu-nasilje-na-protestima-u-srbiji-neprihvatljivo-istraziti-izborne-neregularnosti/>

The statement of the US Ambassador in Belgrade, Christopher Hill that the US Government looks forward to the continuation of cooperation with the Serbian Government on the issues of mutual interest,³⁰ should certainly be understood in the context of its priorities, which he defined at the very beginning of his term, namely Kosovo and the neutralization of Russian influence. In view of the fact that the pro-European opposition is not clear about Kosovo, one gets an impression that his assessment that Vučić is the only one who can be effective. Now that the process of replacing licence plates in Kosovo is ending, this assessment is more convincing.

The German Ministry of Foreign Affairs was the harshest in its assessment of the elections, stating that the election irregularities in Serbia, reported by international observation missions, are “unacceptable” for a candidate country for EU membership.³¹

All Western media that followed the elections point to the irregularities, stressing that they do not believe that the election commission will seriously investigate them, nor that the elections will be called into question and that the opposition is left only with street protests, which Vučić will certainly ignore and let them blow out.³²

The Frankfurter allgemeine Zeitung points out that Vučić creates room for manoeuvre by playing a “double game”. On the one hand, Vučić destabilizes Kosovo according

to Moscow’s “taste”, and thus creates trouble for the EU and NATO, while his media spread pro-Russia propaganda. On the other hand, Vučić’s authorities send large quantities of ammunition to Ukraine, because it pays off in terms of foreign policy (and otherwise). Namely, in turn, the West is ready to be more lenient than it would otherwise be in condemning authoritarianism and corruption in Serbia, a country candidate for EU membership, as well as constant provocations towards Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina”.³³

The European Parliament’s special rapporteur for Kosovo, Viola von Cramon, stated that an independent investigation was requested because voters should know what really happened with the 17 December elections.³⁴

The Party of European Socialists strongly supports the European future of Serbia, but it expected, as pointed out in its statement, higher democratic standards from the candidate country that is negotiating its membership in the European Union.³⁵

Due to the criticisms about irregularities, the Western leaders did not congratulate the Serbian Progressive Party and its leader, which is a special message to Vučić and his regime, because the legitimacy of the elections is seriously questioned. This EU members’ attitude will force Serbia to be more specific as to its desire to join the EU or, more precisely, to

30 <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/kristofer-hil-izborima-2023-sad-se-raduju-nastavku-saradnje-sa-vladom-srbije/7fjd7q6>

31 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vesti-srbija-rezultati/32736070.html>

32 <https://www.dw.com/bs/njema%C4%8Dka-%C5%A1tampa-vu%C4%8Di%C4%87-%C4%87e-pustiti-da-se-protesti-izduvaju/a-67766235>

33 <https://www.dw.com/bs/njema%C4%8Dka-%C5%A1tampa-vu%C4%8Di%C4%87-%C4%87e-pustiti-da-se-protesti-izduvaju/a-67766235>

34 https://www.slobodna-bosna.ba/vijest/333854/evropa_i_dalje_zabrinuta_zbog_kradje_izbora_u_srbiji_britanci_uzivo_emitirali_prenos_govornika_na_protestu_u_beogradu.html

35 <https://www.nin.rs/politika/vesti/43161/evropski-socijalisti-traze-punu-istragu-o-izbornim-nepravilnostima-u-srbiji>

stop sitting on two chairs and finally harmonize its foreign policy with the EU.

President Vučić attacked foreign observers who pointed to election irregularities by personally discrediting them with a view to showing them in a bad light. However, Klemen Grošelj, member of the European Parliament, who was the head of the EP Observation Mission, stated that those “discreditations change nothing”. “It is about the report prepared by the ODIHR, the European Parliament and the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly. Nothing will be changed if two or three persons are discredited” and noted that the “European political forces should take a more serious look at all political messages coming from Belgrade. This is important because of the future relationship with Serbia. I know that among EU member states there are different views on this, but I think that it is quite clear what is happening in Serbia now and Brussels is now on the move”.³⁶

RUSSIA AND CHINA ON THE ELECTIONS

Unlike his Western partners, Vučić received praise from Russia, China, Azerbaijan and Turkey, the countries where, in general, the government is not changed in elections. Vučić has repeatedly stated that for him these are friendly and allied countries that want to continue their cooperation with this regime.

Vučić's victory was welcomed by Russia, whose media played a prominent role during the election campaign. It is indicative that Vučić ended the election campaign by

36 <https://www.vijesti.me/svijet/balkan/687447/sef-posmatracke-misije-ep-na-izborima-u-srbiji-eu-mora-da-reaguje-poslije-dogadjaja-na-protestima-u-srbiji>

giving an interview for the Russian portal Sputnik, which was a kind of message to the West. This support also reflects Russia's interest in the region, especially Serbia. In a recent study of the Russian International Affairs Council it is stated that the “outcome of the crisis in Ukraine will also largely decide the future of the Serbian world – its borders and geopolitical orientation of its leading elites.”³⁷

Russian observer Vasilenko stated that their mission did not observe serious irregularities during the holding of parliamentary and local elections in Serbia and that they are taking place in a fair and correct atmosphere.³⁸ Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov stated that Russia “closely monitors and welcomes” the success of the party of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and expects that “the path of further strengthening of friendship and mutually useful cooperation and respect” between the two countries will continue.”³⁹

Sergey Lavrov characterized the opposition's protests as “another attempt to orchestrate an illegal takeover”, emphasizing that this trend is not new and mentioned the “coup d'état in Ukraine in February 2014”, which was inspired by Washington and Brussels.⁴⁰

37 Russian international Affairs Council, No 77/2023, The Prospects for Russian-Serbian Relations Amid Sanctions, Moscow 2023

38 <https://www.tanjug.rs/izbori-2023/vesti/65167/ruski-posmatrac-nije-bilo-nepravilnosti-tokom-izbora-u-srbiji/vest>

39 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/kremlj-srbija-izbori-putin/32735431.html>

40 <https://www.slobodna-bosna.ba/vijest/333970/taj-trend-nije-nov-lavrov-optuzio-zapad-za-pokusaj-da-organizuje-nelegalno-preuzimanje-vlasti-u-srbiji.html>

The election results especially suit Russia, because it is making efforts to stop Serbia on its way to the European Union. That is why Alexander Dugin sent his support to Vučić through his Telegram channel. He wrote that “the same people who sent Milošević, Kradžić and all heroes of unconquered Serbia to The Hague want to overthrow Vučić. I believe that the traitors who want to hand over Kosovo to the enemy should be mercilessly exterminated”. He goes on to write that Vučić may not be an angel, but great Serbia is above all else. “The Serbian order must be established. Where are your bombs, Chetniks? Where is the spirit of Draža Mihailović?” He ended the text with: “We Russians are wholeheartedly with the Serbian people. There is only a little left. Russia

will get stronger and will be able to come to your aid. Hold on as long as you can.”

The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs congratulated Serbia on the unhindered holding of parliamentary and local elections, emphasizing its belief that Serbia “will continue to make progress in nation building”. As was stated, China attaches great importance to the advancement of Sino-Serbian relations and looks forward to cooperation with Serbia in strengthening mutual political trust, deepening political cooperation in various fields and advancing comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Serbia at a higher level.⁴¹

41 <https://www.euronews.rs/srbija/politika/108636/peking-cestitao-vucicu-na-pobedi-verujemo-da-ce-srbija-nastaviti-da-napreduje/vest>

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

These elections have also showed that Vučić has been keeping Serbia in the state of constant tension and some kind of emergency for 11 years. Serbia is in constant turmoil without success in its political stabilization and democratization. There is still no critical mass to stand up against Aleksandar Vučić's policy and rule. In addition to controlling the situation in Serbia, Vučić also managed to present himself to the West as the only factor on which they can confidently rely. Serbia has never been further away from the EU and its relationship with Russia is a key test for Serbia's accession to the EU, because this is primarily a question of value.

Although the Western community has criticized the irregularities noted by the international observation mission, it still counts on Aleksandar Vučić. There are three demands that the West insists on: the implementation of the Ohrid Agreement, objective investigation concerning Banjska, including the handover of Milan Radoičić to the Kosovo authorities, as well as the review of allegations related to irregularity of the elections.

Bearing in mind the Western partners' perennial tolerance of President Vučić, including his inconsistency when it comes to commitment to EU membership, the question arises whether the policy of the Western community will continue with the illusion that Serbia will normalize its relations with Kosovo.

In the meantime, Vučić announced the free passage of vehicles with Kosovo licence plates through Serbia, which used to be the reason for tensions and numerous incidents, including armed ones, for a long time. With this gesture he once again perplexed the West because, as is known, in the given geopolitical circumstances, the settlement of the Kosovo issue is its priority, not democracy in Serbia.

By not taking into account the daily statements, not only by Vučić, but also by almost all political actors in Serbia that they will not respect the Ohrid Agreement, the EU and the US risk that Serbia's delay in its implementation will destabilize the region once again.

Although it achieved great success in the elections, the opposition is faced with a great challenge, that is, to finally formulate its programme and its vision of a European Serbia that it advocated for. Its crucial problem is the attitude towards Kosovo. The West has not yet found any opposition force that would guarantee the normalization of relations with Kosovo.

The elections have pointed to the great dissatisfaction of citizens and that is why we should not ignore the suspicion that Vučić's future government can be even more repressive and closer to the models of Orban, Putin and Erdogan.

The Helsinki Committee believes that the Western community, especially the EU, must cooperate to a greater extent with civil society organizations and the pro-European opposition in the future. It is also necessary to seriously insist on the opening of the media space for all media, including those being critical vis-à-vis the authorities, while at the same time observing all European standards.

In order to reduce the negative tendencies coming from Serbia, which still continues to promote Pan-Serbism (Serbian world ideology) and threatens the stability of the Western Balkans, the EU and the US should consolidate the neighbouring countries, primarily by granting Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina NATO membership.