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## 2017 Presidential Elections in Serbia: One Victory “Clean as a Whistle” and One Whistling Crowd

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On 2 April 2017 Serbians chose a new president. Prime minister of Serbia and leader of the Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska Napredna Stranka – SNS*), Aleksandar Vučić, has emerged the victor of the presidential elections, winning 55.08 per cent of the vote and far surpassing the second-place candidate, Saša Janković, who won 16.36 per cent. Vučić became president of Serbia on 31 May 2017, when the five-year mandate of his predecessor, Tomislav Nikolić, officially expired.

Both Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party have been enjoying a consistently high support of the Serbian electorate, which has kept them in power since 2012. Hence, Vučić’s decisive victory in these presidential elections, which was secured already in the first round of voting, has hardly surprised anybody. What came as a surprise, however, were thousands of mostly young people who took to the streets of major Serbian cities to show their dissatisfaction with the electoral results. Describing their peaceful daily marches as a „protest against dictatorship“ of the newly-elected president Aleksandar Vučić, the protestors have been speaking on behalf of all those Serbian citizens who have read the outcome of these elections as a further consolidation of a one-man regime in Serbia and the country’s additional sliding towards an autocratic rule.

### Electoral results

Aleksandar Vučić, a candidate of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and its several coalition partners including Ivica Dačić’s Socialist Party of Serbia (*Socijalistička Partija Srbije – SPS*), won the April 2017 presidential elections already in the first round of voting. Moreover, Vučić avoided a run-off by winning an impressive 55.08 per cent of the vote, which was almost 12 per cent more than all other ten candidates combined. When the preliminary results were announced, Vučić has enthusiastically stated that his victory was “clean as a whistle” [*čista kao suza*], aiming to stress that such an outstanding result cannot be disputed in any possible way.

The SNS’ popularity stems from the fact that, after leaving the right-wing Serbian Radical Party (*Srpska Radikalna Stranka – SRS*) in 2008, its leadership abandoned the nationalistic and anti-European rhetoric and made a profound transformation in its attitude towards the country’s EU integration process, while still keeping close relations with Serbia’s traditional ally Russia. As it was during the SNS rule that the historical improvement of the relations between Serbia and Kosovo has taken place, as well as Serbia’s consequent shift closer to EU membership, the SNS and Aleksandar Vučić have enjoyed support of the respectable EU leaders, most notably the German Chancellor Angela Merkel. At the national level, due to Vučić’s current pro-European orientation, but also his distinguished nationalistic past (Vučić served as minister of information from 1998 to 2000, under infamous Milošević’s rule, and was known for his inflammatory rhetoric during the wars in the former Yugoslavia), he has been able to attract those citizens who positively see the EU, as well as those who place themselves on the right side of the political spectrum. Vučić has also scored significant political points through his personal commitment to fight corruption and organized crime, as well as his success in the sphere of economic policy. However, the more critical voices within the Serbian society have

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repeatedly been stressing that the SNS-led government lacks concrete results with regards to these policies, and that the ruling party's popularity primarily lies in the populist rhetoric its leadership regularly employs. A small percentage of the SNS's loyal electorate has also recognized that Vučić has been paying a lip service to some of his most popular beliefs and promises. This was evident in the April's presidential elections when –although without downplaying Vučić's remarkable victory– the politically diverse coalition which supported Vučić received around 300,000 votes less when compared to the 2016 parliamentary elections. Given the fact that the SNS-led coalition lost 27 parliamentary seats in the 2016 parliamentary elections, this could signal its additional decline in popularity.

One of the factors which contributed to Vučić's landslide victory was the fact that since SNS's rise to power in 2012, the opposition in Serbia has been very weak and fragmented. The parties which belonged to the so-called democratic block which overthrew Milošević's regime in 2000, have been perceived as the main culprit for everything that has not run smoothly in the country, and for this they were punished by its electorate in the 2012 elections. Since then, these parties, as well as their several splinter parties which have meanwhile come into existence, have not been able to consolidate their position and take up the role of a constructive opposition to the Vučić's regime. Thus, these presidential elections did not promise particularly optimistic scenarios for any of the opposition parties. This was one of the main reasons behind their decision not to nominate their own presidential candidate, but to give support to some of those candidates who were running independently, and were enjoying more popularity among the Serbian electorate. Such is the case with the Democratic Party (*Demokratska Stranka – DS*), Liberal Democratic Party (*Liberalno Demokratska Partija – LDP*) and the New Party (*Nova Stranka – NS*) which supported Saša Janković, or the Social Democratic Party (*Socijaldemokratska stranka – SDS*) of the former Serbia's president Boris Tadić, which gave its support to Vuk Jeremić.

Also, rather than representing a real threat to Aleksandar Vučić's confident rule, these presidential elections were an opportunity to test the strength of Vučić's opponents and identify a potential leader of the shattered opposition block. Although winning only 16.36 per cent of the vote, the second-place candidate, Saša Janković, seems to have gained the most political capital which could ensure him such leading position in the near future. Janković, who was nominated by a group of citizens "For a Serbia without fear", became recognizable figure to the wider public only a few years ago, due to his frequent confrontations with the ruling coalition while acting as the Ombudsman of the Republic of Serbia. Appreciating his criticism of the government's involvement in various scandals that have shaken the Serbian public, but also having respect for his seemingly flawless career of a human rights activist, one hundred prominent public figures (including Serbia's respected intellectuals, artists and journalists) signed a petition to Janković calling him to run for president. Janković's consequent candidacy and a campaign that concentrated on creating a "dignified citizen of Serbia" who demands the state institutions which "do their job" by respecting democratic rules and principles, has mostly attracted a liberally-minded opposition in Serbia's urban centres. In the Serbian capital of Belgrade Janković achieved his best result (24.10 per cent), while, at the same time, Aleksandar Vučić recorded his worst (44.03 per cent). Even though Janković's main goal –the second round of voting– has not been achieved, this result is certainly a success for an independent candidate whose political message resonated among a relatively narrow circle of voters. The success accomplished in the presidential elections has also stimulated Janković to engage more actively in Serbia's political life. On 21 May, a new political organisation under the name the Movement of Free Citizens was founded in Belgrade, and the former presidential candidate, Saša Janković, was appointed its president.

One of the events which has certainly received the greatest national and foreign attention, was the candidacy of a fictional character, Ljubiša Preletačević Beli. More surprising than his candidacy was his outstanding result of 9.43 per cent (or 344,498 votes) which secured him the high third position. Ljubiša Preletačević Beli is in fact Luka Maksimović, a 25-year old student from Mladenovac and the leader of a parody political party *Sarmu proba nisi* (which literally

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translates as: “You haven’t tasted the sarma” [a kind of stuffed cabbage roll]). The SPN debuted in the 2016 local elections in Mladenovac and won an impressive 20 per cent of the vote, which translated into 12 seats in the municipality council. The character of Ljubiša Preletačević Beli is imagined to satirically represent everything that is wrong with Serbia’s political class; the very last name “Preletačević” roughly translates as “fly over”, but is used in Serbian language to describe a well-established practice of Serbian politicians to switch political parties not for ideological reasons, but rather for their personal gains. Beli’s candidacy attracted mostly young people of diverse ideological convictions, but with one common trait – they all have lost their trust in the political establishment. However, his satirical and humorous approach to politics, expressed primarily through popular social networks on the Internet, has not managed to mobilise a significant part of those Serbian citizens who used to abstain from voting in the previous electoral processes. Contrary to some predictions triggered by Beli’s enormous popularity among the youth, the turnout was lower than in the 2016 parliamentary elections, amounting 54.34 per cent. Also, Beli’s impressive result is nothing but a reason for concern: the fact that almost ten per cent of the Serbian voters preferred a fictional character over ten other presidential candidates, is a clear sign of a deep disillusionment, apathy and resignation in the Serbian society.

Table 1: Results of the 2017 Presidential Elections in Serbia

| Presidential Candidate                                 | Political Party                               | Votes     | Votes (%) |
|--|---|-----------|-----------|
| <b>Aleksandar Vučić</b>                                | Serbian Progressive Party (SNS)               | 2,012,788 | 55.08     |
| <b>Saša Janković</b>                                   | Independent                                   | 597,728   | 16.36     |
| <b>Luka Maksimović<br/>(Ljubiša Preletačević Beli)</b> | Independent                                   | 344,498   | 9.43      |
| <b>Vuk Jeremić</b>                                     | Independent                                   | 206,676   | 5.66      |
| <b>Vojislav Šešelj</b>                                 | Serbian Radical Party (SRS)                   | 163,802   | 4.48      |
| <b>Boško Obradović</b>                                 | Serbian Movement Dveri                        | 83,523    | 2.29      |
| <b>Saša Radulović</b>                                  | Enough is Enough                              | 51,651    | 1.41      |
| <b>Milan Stamatović</b>                                | Independent                                   | 42,193    | 1.15      |
| <b>Nenad Čanak</b>                                     | League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina (LSV) | 41,070    | 1.12      |
| <b>Aleksandar Popović</b>                              | Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS)              | 38,167    | 1.04      |
| <b>Miroslav Parović</b>                                | National Freedom Movement (NSP)               | 11,540    | 0.32      |

Source: Republic of Serbia, Republic Electoral Commission

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The remaining eight presidential candidates have failed to achieve any significant results, winning 17.47 per cent of the vote in total. Most notably, Vuk Jeremić, a former Serbia’s foreign minister, former chairman of the UN General Assembly, and a second-placed candidate in the recent run for the post of UN Secretary General, has recorded a surprisingly low result, winning only 5.66 per cent of the vote. Similarly, Saša Radulović, the leader of the movement *Dosta je bilo* (Enough is enough) that secured 16 seats in the Serbian parliament in the 2016 elections, ended up winning insignificant 1.41 per cent. The Serbian voters have also soundly rejected the extreme-right presidential candidates. Vojislav Šešelj, the head of the Serbian Radical Party (*Srpska Radikalna Stranka – SRS*), Boško Obradović, the leader of the Serbian Movement Dveri (*Srpski pokret Dveri*) and Aleksandar Popović, the candidate of the Serbian Democratic Party (*Srpska Demokratska Stranka – DSS*), have all recorded a further decrease in their popularity, winning 4.48, 2.29, and 1.04 per cent of the vote, respectively.

### Growing discontent with the government

Only a day after the preliminary results were announced, thousands of mostly young people, organized spontaneously through the social networks on the Internet, took to the streets of major Serbian cities, blowing whistles and chanting slogans against Vučić’s presidential victory. Being completely ignored by the government and downplayed by the government-controlled media, the peaceful daily protests have lost their momentum. Nonetheless, their message remains clear: unlike Serbia’s former prime minister and newly-elected president, Aleksandar Vučić, who perceives his victory “clean as a whistle”, the whistling crowd in the Serbian streets and their supporters and advocates, find Vučić’s victory illegitimate, and his overall rule largely autocratic.

### The campaign

Many believe that the campaign for these elections was fierce, expensive and largely unfair, with hostile media environment and the regime’s abuse of state authority and resources. Given his not very promising ratings, the SNS decided not to back its founder and the previous Serbian president Tomislav Nikolić in his bid for re-election, but to nominate the party’s leader Aleksandar Vučić instead. Vučić “accepted” this nomination despite his continuous denials in the past that such a scenario could be possible, and despite the fact that he already held an important and powerful position of Serbia’s prime minister. Hence, during a short but very intense electoral campaign, Vučić was acting both as a prime minister and as a presidential candidate. While the main Vučić’s opponents were independent candidates, without large party infrastructure and funds, due to his decision to play both of these roles, Vučić was in a position to use the state resources, as well as to absolutely dominate the media space.

Media freedoms have been in decline in Serbia in the recent years. Reporters Without Borders’ latest World Press Freedom [Index](#) recorded that freedom of the press in Serbia has declined ever since Vučić became prime minister in May 2014. The media in Serbia have been working under harsh financial and editorial pressure that very often leads to self-censorship, which was evident during the presidential elections’ campaign. According to Serbia’s Bureau for Social Research (BIRODI) which [monitored](#) the candidates’ media coverage on the six leading mainstream media outlets in Serbia, out of more than 23 hours of programme that was given to all the presidential candidates, Vučić alone was given over 14 hours (six hours as a presidential candidate, and eight as a prime minister), with only 14 minutes used in a negative context. The next most-covered candidate, Vuk Jeremić, has received only one hour and a half of media representation, with as many as 19.5 negative minutes. In printed media, as the [research](#) conducted by the Belgrade-based election watchdog Citizens at Watch (CRTA) has recorded, the situation was similar. Aleksandar Vučić covered 60 per cent of the front pages relating to the elections, while his main opponents, Saša Janković and Vuk Jeremić, appeared

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on 35 and 51 per cent of the cover pages, respectively. At the same time, in a positive or neutral context Vučić was presented in 97 per cent, Janković in 48, and Jeremić in 40 per cent of the cases.

Another problematic issue relates to the ruling coalition’s control over the numerous tabloid media in Serbia through which it has unscrupulously been targeting all its opposing and critical voices. Popular tabloid media under Vučić’s influence have engaged in vilification and demonization of the opposition candidates by raising false or unverified accusations, such as that some of them were conspirators and foreign mercenaries who would not mind dragging the country into a civil war only in order to usurp power. The absurd allegations very often did not spare even the family members of the SNS’ rivals, and sometimes they were coming directly from the ruling party’s headquarters. A scandalous attack on Vuk Jeremić’s wife and a former news anchor, Nataša Jeremić, who was accused of being “a boss of Serbian narco-cartel” is only one of the cases which illustrates such practice. Besides Vučić’s refusal to engage in a public presidential debate with any of his opponents, and in addition to the majority of media being closed for the opposition candidates, their messages could not be articulated in the national parliament either, as the parliament speaker Maja Gojković –who is also a high-ranked member of the ruling party– decided to suspend parliament sessions until after the elections.

During the campaign for these presidential elections, many citizens were being promised certain privileges in exchange for their vote for the ruling coalition’s candidate, and this, rather than a particular candidate’s programme, became the main directive in their voting behaviour. On the other side, a large SNS membership that has already been given various benefits, needed to prove their loyalty not only through casting their vote for the ruling coalition’s candidate, but also through active participation in campaigning on the field, gathering lists of “safe votes”, and trying to persuade undecided voters to vote for Vučić through frequent phone calls and entering people’s homes. While all these practices are by no means new, neither an exclusively Serbian phenomenon, it is worth mentioning that during the latest electoral campaign many Serbian citizens complained about being openly blackmailed or even bullied into supporting Vučić. The pressure imposed directly on the voters, together with media control and suppression of any critical thinking, has not only delegitimized political debate and prevented citizens from freely making an informed choice, but has produced a widespread feeling of uneasiness and fear in the Serbian society.

### *Vučić’s autocratic tendencies*

Both national and foreign observers have repeatedly been speaking of Vučić’s growing autocratic tendencies and Serbia’s sliding towards one-man regime. Since its rise to power in 2012, and subsequent electoral victories in 2014 and 2016, the Serbian Progressive Party has consolidated its power at all levels of government, while Vučić’s top-down, controlling approach has secured him an excessive influence over virtually all spheres of political life, with the addition of police, security services, judiciary and media. This has given him power to keep some well-founded corruption allegations against his close associates ignored, many of the numerous political affairs unresolved, and most of his countless promises unfulfilled. As a consequence, democracy has been backsliding. A 2017 Freedom House [report](#) announced that Serbia’s democracy score has dropped to the lowest level since 2005, with particularly negative developments in electoral process, democratic governance, and media freedom.

Yet, Vučić has managed to keep these developments concealed from a big majority of average Serbian voters. In fact, through producing a constant atmosphere of tension, and through his governance style which resembles a permanent electoral campaign, he has been convincing voters that Serbia needs a strong hand, justifying in this way his monopoly over political institutions and most of the country’s press. In his exceptionally emotional appeals, Vučić has been



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presenting himself as the only politician in Serbia who can keep the country firmly on the road towards European integration, and as the only guarantor of political and economic stability that the average Serbian voters are in a desperate need for. At the same time, whether feeling endangered by the hostile opposition or supposedly antagonistic media, in Vučić’s rhetoric he is the victim that many Serbian citizens can identify with, while his critics are portrayed as the ones who wish to bring chaos and instability in the Serbian society that has already suffered too much. Although president of the Republic of Serbia represents a largely ceremonial post, Vučić’s victory in the April’s presidential elections will only solidify position of the Serbian Progressive Party and, more importantly, it will greatly strengthen his personal power. It is expected that someone loyal to Vučić will succeed him as prime minister, so that the policymaking in Serbia, and virtually all major political decisions, can continue being guided by Vučić himself.

The study published by the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG) has stressed that “stability” is the key word for understanding the EU’s support to the autocrats and would-be-autocrats in the Western Balkans. In spite of state capture, patronage, media control and their rule through informal power structures, such leaders are presumed to be a factor of stability, as long as they can guarantee security and deliver on reforms necessary for their countries’ EU accession process. The EU needs strong men on the ground who will be capable of resolving difficult political issues while producing the least resistance at the domestic level. With regards to Serbia in particular, such policy risks alienating that part of the Serbian society which is the firmest supporter of the EU project, but is also the loudest critic of the current Serbian government. The critical voices within the Serbian society show deep discontent with the direction in which their country goes, and believe that the stance taken by the EU might actually bring instability in the long term, as the situation in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Yugoslavia (FYROM) has recently demonstrated. These citizens were also that “whistling crowd” in the streets of Serbia which opposed one victory “clean as a whistle”. So far, only the sound of one of these whistles is having the European policymakers’ ear.

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