

ELIAMEP Briefing Notes

31 /2014

May 2014

The March 2014 Parliamentary Elections in Serbia and their Legacy

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The March 2014 snap parliamentary elections in Serbia were called on the initiative of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), the largest party in the Serbian Parliament, less than two years after they formed a government with their main coalition partner, Prime Minister Ivica Dačić's Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS). The Progressives based this decision on the grounds that the government needed a fresh mandate for carrying out the difficult reforms following the country's road towards EU membership - a goal which became more realistic after the EU decided to open accession negotiations with Serbia in January 2014.

However, it was also in the interest of the SNS to capitalise on the increased popular support for the party (which, depending on different opinion polls, amounted between 42 and 45 percent), and translate it into parliamentary seats. The greatest support in the party's history had been secured primarily by virtue of its charismatic leader, Aleksandar Vučić. Formally holding the post of the first Deputy Prime Minister, but in reality acting and perceived as the Prime Minister himself, Vučić has taken most of the credit for Serbia's achievements in the fight against corruption and organized crime, as well as for the historical progress the country has made in regard to its EU integration process. Given the favourable polls and popularity of the SNS leader, the balance of power among the Serbian ruling parties has significantly changed compared to 2012 when the Socialists were so integral to the government's formation that they were able to demand the Prime Minister's office. Thus, the Progressives calculated that holding early parliamentary elections at this moment would most certainly mean bringing the Premiership to their own ranks.

With the opposition in Serbia being weak and disorganized, it was hard to imagine any scenario other than one where the Progressives would win the majority in the parliament and appoint their leader as a new head of the government. This made the results of the March 2014 elections one of the most predictable in recent Serbian political history. What could not be precisely predicted, however, was that these elections would have the capacity to represent a potential milestone for important transformations of the Serbian political landscape.

The Campaign

About 6.7 million voters were eligible to cast their votes at the parliamentary elections held on 16 March 2014 - the tenth election in the history of the post-communist multiparty system in Serbia. Nineteen political parties and coalitions have participated in the elections, with a total of 3,020 candidates vying for 250 seats in Parliament.

Unimaginative slogans and populist paroles were some of the main features of the electoral campaign. Most parties campaigned relying on the charisma and influence of their leaders, rather than on thoroughly defined ideas and programmes. Furthermore, given the lack of ideological differences between the political parties, almost all of them had focused their campaigns on issues related to economic reform, the fight against corruption and support for Serbia's EU integration process. The exceptions were the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS), which remained consistent in advocating for military and political neutrality of Serbia and closer ties with Russia and China, as well as the newly-

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formed list *Dosta je Bilo* (Enough of this) of the former Minister of Economy, Saša Radulović, which primarily criticized the government's economic policies, political party interference in economy and lack of transparency on all levels of government. Finally, as the winner was known in advance, the whole campaign had been reduced in a contest for the second-best party and potential coalition partner to the SNS. Hardly any prominent party, except the Democratic Party (DS) of Dragan Đilas, had openly rejected the possibility of joining forces with the Progressives in the new government, if given such an opportunity. This led to the absence of substantial criticism of government policy and lack of true competition among the political rivals.

Electoral Results

The Serbian Progressive Party, together with its minor coalition partners, the Social Democratic Party of Serbia (SDPS), the Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO), New Serbia (NS) and the Movement of Socialists (PS), won the elections by a landslide, winning 48.35% of the vote which provided them with the absolute majority of 158 seats in the Parliament. The SNS managed to more than double its parliamentary representation from 2012, when the party had secured 73 parliamentary mandates (see Table 1). In addition, the Progressives lack only eight seats of the two-thirds majority needed to change the constitution. Since the introduction of the multiparty system in Serbia, only the Socialists under Slobodan Milošević in 1990, and the nineteen parties' coalition named the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS) in 2000 – which overthrew the Milošević regime – have managed to win an absolute majority in the National Assembly (see Chart 1).

The coalition formed by the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) together with the Party of United Pensioners of Serbia (PUPS) and the United Serbia (JS) won 13.49% of votes, replicating its achievement from 2012 when it secured 44 seats in the Parliament. Only two more parties other than those representing ethnic minorities were able to surpass the 5% threshold: the Democratic Party (DS) of Dragan Đilas, and the newly-formed New Democratic Party (NDS), led by the former leader of the DS and president of Serbia, Boris Tadić. The problem of the DS lies within its internal organisation and dissolving membership since it became part of the opposition after the 2012 election, which is one of the reasons behind the greatest electoral debacle in the party's history. The support for the Democrats has declined from 22.06% in 2012 to only 6.03% in 2014, which translated into parliamentary mandates, results in a decrease from 67 seats to 19. The conflict between the former leader and honorary president of the DS, Boris Tadić, and the current party leader, Dragan Đilas, culminated in Tadić's exit from the party just before the elections, which further contributed to the weakening of the Democrats. Together with his minor coalition partners, Tadić managed to win 5.7% of the votes and 18 seats in the Parliament.



Some of the most influential parties in Serbian politics with a long-time parliamentary presence, failed to surpass the census. The Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS), United Regions of Serbia (URS) and Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) have won 4.24%, 3.04% and 3.36% of votes respectively. Interestingly, around 20% of the votes went to parties that did not pass the electoral threshold.

1990	2000	2014
SPS - 194	DOS - 176	SNS - 158
SPO - 19	SPS - 37	SPS - 44
DZVM - 8	SRS - 23	DS - 19
DS - 7	SSJ - 14	NDS - 18

Chart 1: The most convincing victories at Serbia's parliamentary elections (in MP seats)

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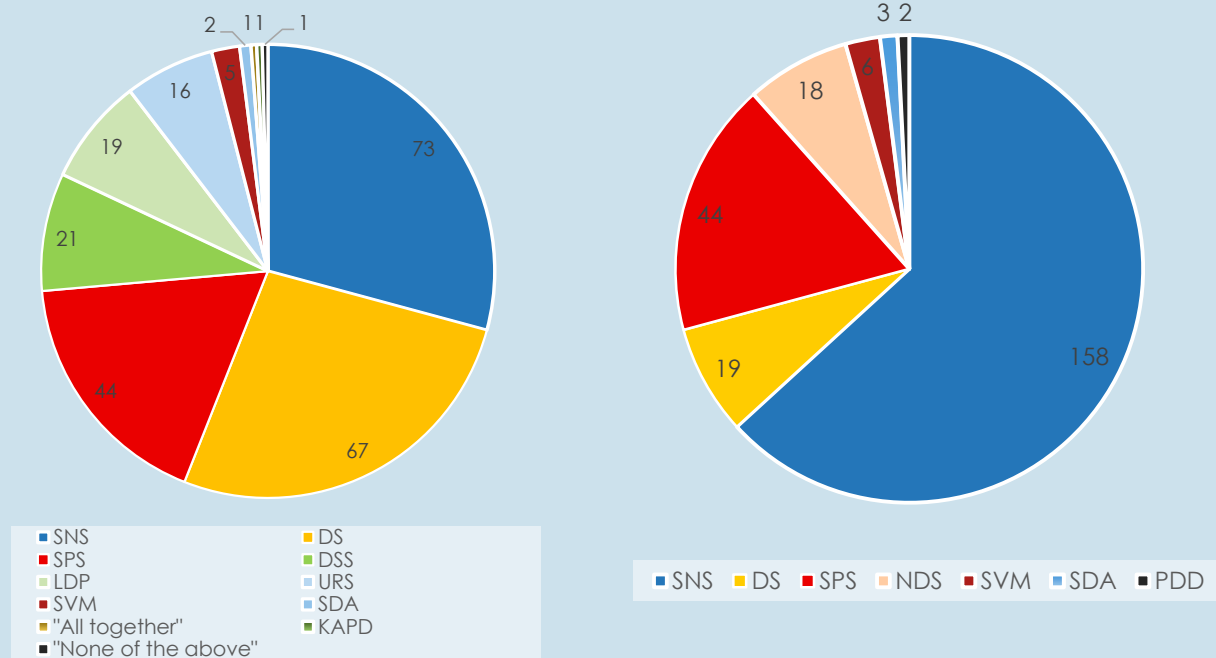
Table 1: The electoral strength of the eight main parties in Serbia (2012 and 2014 elections)

Party	Leader	% of votes (2012)	Seats in the Parliament	% of votes (2014)	Seats in the Parliament
Serbian Progressive Party (SNS)	Tomislav Nikolić / Aleksandar Vučić – since September 2012	24.04	73	48.35	158 85 
Democratic Party (DS)	Boris Tadić / Dragan Đilas – since November 2012	22.06	67	6.03	19 48 
Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS)	Ivica Dačić	14.51	44	13.49	44
Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS)	Vojislav Koštunica – resigned after 2014 elections	6.99	21	4.24	-
Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)	Čedomir Jovanović	6.53	19	3.36	-
United Regions of Serbia (URS)	Mladen Dinkić – resigned after 2014 elections	5.51	16	3.04	-
New Democratic Party (NDS)	Boris Tadić	-	-	5.70	18

As the 5% threshold does not apply for political parties representing one of the country's ethnic minorities, which participate in the distribution of parliamentary seats regardless of the number of votes they receive, the future parliament of Serbia will also include three additional parties: Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (SVM) (Hungarian minority; 2.10%, 6 seats), Party of Democratic Action of Sandžak (SDA) (Bosniak minority; 0.98%, 3 seats) and Party for Democratic Action (PDD) (Albanian minority; 0.68%, 2 seats).

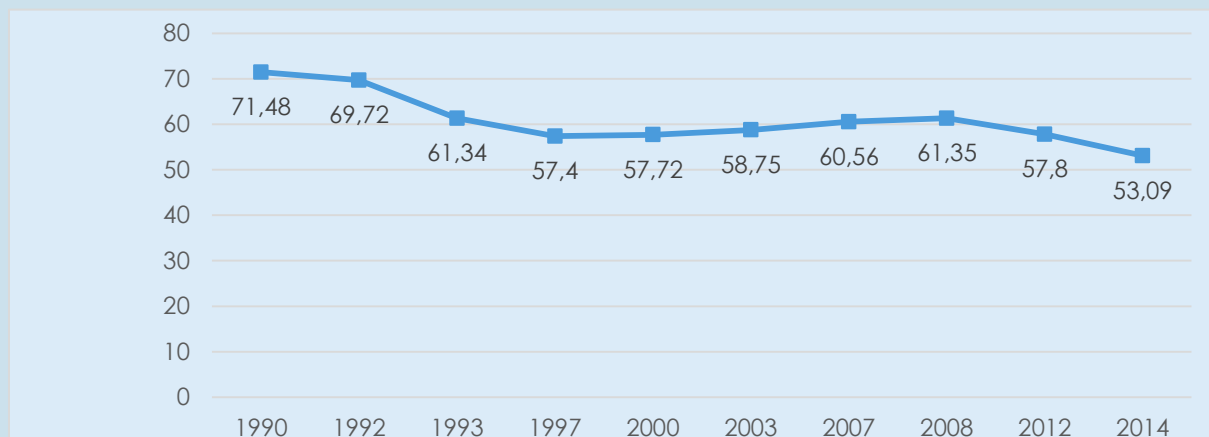
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Chart 2 and 3: Party representation in the Parliament (in seats) in 2012 (left) and 2014 (right)



Finally, the turnout for the March 2014 elections was the lowest since the introduction of the multiparty system in Serbia, amounting to 53.09% (see Chart 4), while the number of invalid ballots was quite high - 114.001 in total (3.17%). The low turnout could be explained by the lack of uncertainty about the outcome of the elections, which created an impression that an individual vote has no power to significantly influence the electoral process, as well as by an overall disappointment with the policies of both the current and the previous government and a lack of motivation for voters to participate in the frequent changes of political power.

Chart 4: Parliamentary Elections in Serbia - Turnout (1990-2014)



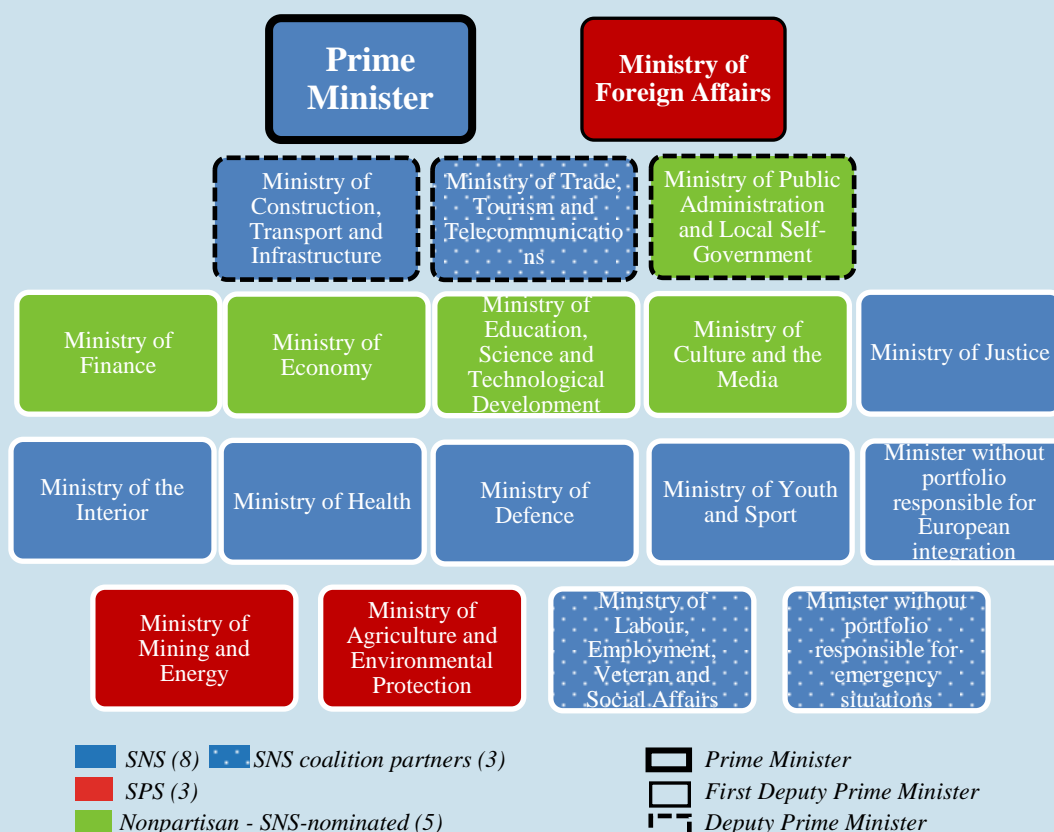
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The new Government of Serbia

Despite securing an absolute majority in parliament, the SNS decided to offer a governmental partnership to the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (SVM), and its former coalition partner, the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS). The minor SVM has chosen not to take a ministerial seat, opting for the positions of the state secretaries instead. Thus, the new Serbian government was formed on 27 April with Aleksandar Vučić appointed Prime Minister, and consisting of 16 ministries and two ministers without portfolio. Eleven ministers are from the ranks of the Progressives and their pre-election coalition partners, three from SPS, and five are non-partisan, nominated by the SNS (see Chart 5). Former Prime Minister and leader of the Socialists, Ivica Dačić, was appointed the First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Aleksandar Vučić emphasised that by including some other parties in the government, his party is seeking a wider national consensus on carrying out intense socio-economic reforms. In fact, Vučić is well-aware of the consequences that implementation of the painful economic and fiscal reforms could produce, and he seems to prefer to share the responsibility for unpopular measures with coalition partners. Also, as the Socialists are currently the second-strongest political party in Serbia, by having them on his side, PM Vučić hopes to reduce serious opposition in the parliament to the minimum. Nevertheless, despite the coalition and nonpartisan character of the government, the SNS - and its leader in particular - is certainly the one holding the strings in the executive branch.

Chart 5: Government of Serbia (27 April 2014): Distribution of ministries by political parties



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The Legacy of the March 2014 Parliamentary Elections

- *Rise of the pro-EU forces – Decline of the right-wing*

After these elections, Serbia will experience its first National Assembly composed entirely of parties which indisputably advocate Serbia's integration into the European Union. The DS has usually been portrayed as a leading pro-European force, with a consistent ideology and a political vision in accordance with Serbia's European orientation. The same applies for the former leader of the DS, Boris Tadić, who has included such vision in the programme of his new party, the NDS. The SNS, a splinter party of the right-wing Serbian Radical Party (SRS), has adopted a more moderate ideology and made a fundamental transformation with regard to its attitude towards the country's EU integration process. After leaving the SRS in 2008, the Progressives' leadership abandoned the nationalistic and anti-European rhetoric, while during their rule, the historical improvement of Serbia-Kosovo relations and the consequent shift of the country closer to EU membership has taken place. Similarly, the SPS has made a transition from the bearer of Serbian nationalistic politics in the 1990s, to a credible left-wing and pro-European party in recent years, with its leader and Serbia's Prime Minister, Ivica Dačić, playing a decisive role in the Brussels-mediated dialogue with Kosovo.

Understandably, such policy changes have been met with approval in the European Union capitals. During their term in power, the SNS-SPS coalition enjoyed the support of the EU member states. These governments started perceiving the authorities in Serbia - and especially the SNS leader, Aleksandar Vučić - as a force capable of resolving the long-standing Kosovo problem with the least resistance in Serbian society, while simultaneously delivering on reforms necessary for Serbia's EU accession process. Thus, the European Union has welcomed the results of the March parliamentary elections and the appointment of the new government led by the Progressives. EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton was the first to visit Serbia only a day after the new government was formed, sparing no praise for the newly-appointed Prime Minister Vučić, while German Chancellor Angela Merkel invited the SNS leader to visit Berlin, announcing that her government will continue to provide strong support to Serbia for its reforms and European integration path.

On the other side, traditional opponents of the country's EU integration process, such as the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) and the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) have failed to pass the 5% electoral threshold, as support for their politics continued to decrease, from 6.99% in 2012 to 4.24% in 2014, and from 4.61% in 2012 to 2.01% in 2014, respectively. Popular support for Dveri, an extreme-right movement, followed the same trend: from 4.33% in 2012, to 3.58% in 2014. As the nationalistic themes, especially those in relation to Kosovo, have been the central point of the electoral campaign of these parties, the poor results they have achieved might signal the voters' fatigue for a nationalistic agenda and a slight shift in the priorities set. This assumption becomes more credible given the fact that no noteworthy opposition to the intensified government efforts to normalise relations with Kosovo have been recorded in past years, and that the opinion polls have recently shown a constant increase of pro-EU sentiments in Serbian society.

- *Crash of the democratic opposition in Serbia*

With the URS and LDP not in parliament, and the DS being drastically weakened and disjointed, the former democratic opposition to the Milošević regime may be facing one of its most difficult periods. There could be many reasons for this weakening of democratic opposition; to begin with, a greater part of the Serbian electorate perceives these parties - and especially the DS - as the main culprits for everything that has not run smoothly during their long-term

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rule in the country. The voters' dissatisfaction has not necessarily been expressed by giving support to another party, but rather in completely refusing to participate in the polls or by casting invalid ballots, that has been a characteristic of both the 2012 and 2014 parliamentary elections.

Furthermore, since losing power in 2012, the DS, now the most important opposition party, has been struggling to consolidate its position and restore the party's old glory. After Tadić's resignation, Dragan Đilas became the first man of the party in November 2012 and shortly after, in an effort to consolidate power, began to have personal conflicts with some of the most prominent party members, few of which either got expelled or voluntarily left the party. In September 2013, the Democrats suffered further damage by losing power in Serbia's capital, Belgrade, while Đilas was ousted from the Mayoral office. The DS experienced the final blow right before the election in March when its honorary president, Boris Tadić, left the party to form his own, persuading a group of party members to join him. This turbulence in the ranks of the Democrats had greatly influenced their electoral campaign which aimed more to emphasize the weaknesses of former party colleagues, than their own good qualities. All these internal party squabbles have seriously tarnished its reputation, which has not gone unnoticed by the electorate.

Additionally, most political parties in Serbia - including those belonging to the opposition block - largely derive their popularity from the strong and charismatic personalities of their leaders. However, the opposition leaders have lost their credibility among the Serbian voters. To a great extent they are all seen as a personification of the wrongly-led transitional politics in Serbia during the past decade, with their close associates directly involved in corruption and other scandals. At some instances, overstressed leadership ambitions have prevented joint actions of different opposition parties. In the case of the DS and LDP, dealing with large-scale private businesses while holding public posts has been acknowledged as both politically and morally problematic. Unlike Koštunica of the DSS and Dinkić of the URS, leaders of the two aforementioned parties refused to resign after the historic electoral failure, which only confirms the strong link between the party and its top personnel.

Finally, as in recent years the ideological boundaries between the SNS and the democratic opposition have been almost annulled, these parties failed to offer alternative programmes and fresh ideas to the Serbian electoral body, lacking the necessary opposition profiling. The similar political platforms have not left much room for a substantial criticism towards most of the government policies, while the old arguments regarding the nationalistic past of the Progressives have obviously lost touch with the situation on the ground. Moreover, the NDS and LDP openly flirted with the idea of joining the Progressives in a future government formation which certainly discouraged their most loyal supporters to express their confidence or even participate in the elections.

Therefore, membership attrition, debased reputation of its leaders and absence of alternative political ideas are some of the main problems the democratic opposition in Serbia will need to address in the near future. For those parties which have not managed to secure seats in the parliament, such as the LDP, URS or the political group *Dosta je bilo*, lack of financial support for the parties' activities in the forthcoming period might represent an additional challenge.

- *One-party dominance*

The Progressives came first at the May 2012 parliamentary elections, winning 24.04% of votes, and only 1.98% more than the second-best Democratic Party. Also, they managed to secure their first government term primarily thanks to the fact that the Socialists decided not to join forces with their former partner, DS, but to support the Progressives, getting the post of the Prime Minister in return. Less than two years later, at the March 2014 parliamentary elections, the SNS won 48.35% of votes and far more parliamentary seats than all the other parties together. In contrast, with the exception of the Socialists, all other long-standing and major parties have recorded some of their worst results ever.

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While the SNS victory was never called into question, few would have dared to predict such a remarkable result. A complete dominance of the SNS, while the opposition remains weak and fragmented, raises concerns for the future of democratic consolidation in Serbia.

For less than two years in the government, popular support for the SNS significantly increased primarily due to the SNS leader's personal campaign to the fight against corruption and organized crime - areas which Serbian society considers the most problematic and neglected. However, many argue that the maximised influence of the SNS is less a result of concrete measures implemented in those fields, and more of a populist rhetoric its leadership frequently employs. Such strong support gives the Progressives the right to rule with confidence, possibly for their own benefit, rather than for the good of the country as a whole. Thus, since the party announced early ballot casting as a done deal, and with President Tomislav Nikolić scheduling elections for 16 March, the public has been openly critical of this decision. The SNS tried to justify its move by the country's need for a new government which would, with the widest possible consensus, intensify necessary social and economic reforms. Yet it was hard to overlook the fact that for the SNS holding early elections at this moment means using favourable opinion polls for the party's own gains. Some analysts stressed that these snap elections have represented Vučić's blatant attempt to capitalise on increased popular support for his party and him personally, which goes against the fundamental principles of parliamentary democracy and represents an abuse of the democratic institutions.

The leader of the SNS has also been criticized for controlling the media, which became evident during the campaign for the March elections. Some research studies have suggested that much of the media coverage concentrated on the activities of the SNS and that the main focus of reporting has been the Deputy Prime Minister and the SNS leader himself. Media outlets loyal to Vučić, and especially the tabloid press, have been publicly lynching the opposition, while at the rare instances when Vučić was targeted, he has shown little tolerance for criticism. Despite the fact that the SNS leadership has entered a coalition government with other parties in order to share responsibility for the unpopular measures to come, after the SNS' enormous success at the snap parliamentary elections and the amount of power obtained, Serbia is sliding towards a one-party, or even one person-driven regime, with biased media and without strong institutions to control absolute power by setting necessary checks and balances.

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