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Election Analysis

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Parliamentary Elections in Serbia 2014: Replay or Reset?

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Context of the elections

In January 2014, after two years and hence after only half of the term in office, the government of Serbia, consisting at its core of the Socialist Party of Serbia (*Socijalistička partija Srbije, SPS*) and the Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska napredna stranka, SNS*) announced its suspension and asked for snap elections to be held in March 2014. Despite the fact that the government had a stable majority in the parliament, and was neither exposed to a no-confidence vote nor confronted with an initiative for such, this decision came as no surprise. The official explanation issued by the government was that, after having had achieved a number of crucial steps (start of the EU membership talks, deepening the dialogue with Priština, domestic reforms, fighting organized crime and corruption), the next steps in this direction would require “the highest political support of the citizens of Serbia.”¹ This of course only wrapped the real reasons into an empty phrase. High SNS officials were a bit more concrete in providing explanations. Tomislav Nikolić, the President of Serbia, who was responsible for the call for elections, said that “the Government wants to prove its legitimacy,”² while prior to this the leader of SNS and vice-president of the government, Aleksandar Vučić, explained that “the will of the people should be verified” and that the time has come to disclose what each of the coalition parties has achieved.³ The latter statement especially indicated the existing tensions in the ruling coalition. Contrary to SNS officials, their main coalition partner Prime Minister Ivica Dačić, head of the SPS, was convinced that “Serbia had more important things to care about than elections.”

According to Dačić, someone wanted to deliberately smash the winning team, meaning the government lead by him. As a solution and to avoid elections, he had offered Vučić (without new elections) the position of the prime minister,

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¹ Press release of the Government of Serbia. 2014. *Vlada predložila predsedniku Republike da raspusti parlament*. (accessed: 1. May 2014).

² Pres centar Predsednika Republike Srbije. 2014. *Predsednik Nikolić raspisao izbore za 16.mart*. (accessed: 21. April 2014).

³ N.N. 2014. *Vanredni parlamentarni izbori 2014*. *Vreme*, 25. January 2014. (accessed: 21. April 2014).

since SPS was the smaller coalition partner. But apparently Vučić had refused and wanted elections.⁴ This brings us closer to the real reason behind the decision to suspend a functioning government with a stable majority. They go back to 2012.

When the government was formed in 2012 it was not the strongest party, the SNS, that was leading the game, but Dačić and his SPS, since neither the Democratic Party (*Demokratska stranka*, DS) nor the SNS were able to form a government on their own despite being the two strongest parties. After having ruled in coalition with DS from 2008 to 2012, it seemed that SPS would continue this coalition. But after the run-off in the presidential elections held at the same time, in which the incumbent Boris Tadić (DS) lost to Nikolić, not only did SNS gain greater authority to take over the government, but the SPS also realised that it could maximize its status as the kingmaker and demand the position of the prime minister in a coalition with the weakened DS. And while the DS rejected this request, the SNS, despite being the strongest party and having had 10% more of the votes than the SPS, accepted this same offer from the SPS. The reason was apparent – after almost ten years of having been the leaders of the strongest party at each parliamentary election,⁵ but not being able to create a majority to form a government, the leadership of SNS knew that the coalition with SPS, under any condition, would be the only way to finally get in power.

The government, formed in July 2012, apart from the position of the prime minister from the SPS, was dominated by the SNS and especially by vice-president Vučić. As time passed, he estimated that the popularity of his SNS and his personal popularity were peaking, mostly due to the results of the government's commencement of EU membership talks and the arrest of a number of tycoons. Aware of his rising popularity, he wanted to reshuffle the positions within the government, namely to take over the position of the prime minister. However, Vučić rejected a simple switch of positions within the government. Instead, he wanted snap-elections to capitalize on the popularity of his party and to gain even more support than the SNS achieved in 2012. This stood behind Nikolić's and Vučić's explanations (mentioned above) about the Government wanting to prove its legitimacy and to verify the will of the people. By calling for snap elections, Vučić, with the support of Nikolić, was in fact no longer willing to share the success of the government with his coalition partner, the SPS. As will be shown in the next section, it turned out that the elections were indeed a strategically good move for him and his party.

Election results

In the election campaign, all parties apart from the minor Democratic Party of Serbia (*Demokratska stranka Srbije*, DSS), the Serbian Radical Party (*Srpska radikalna stranka*, SRS) and the right-wing movements such as Dveri and Obraz, which called for an end to EU integration and instead for close ties to Russia, had programmes that were almost the same. Namely, all were for firm

⁴ Milenković, R. Mirjana. 2014. *Srbija je imala preča posla od izbora*. *Danas*, 3. February 2014. (accessed: 27. April 2014).

⁵ Only in 2008 second strongest, but even then not defeated by a single party, but by a coalition consisting of six pro-EU parties.

continuation of Serbia's EU integration process and further dialogue with Priština, while defining corruption and unemployment as the biggest problems that Serbia is facing. Even their proposed solutions for all the problems were very much alike in terms of content, in terms of missing authenticity and in terms of lacking persuasiveness. Fighting corruption, bringing more foreign investments, conducting reforms and cutting state spending were just a few among many proposed remedies, which might seem effective at first sight, but which in fact remained empty, non-elaborated and common place. Above all, they lacked credibility since during at least the last four years all of these parties were in power for some time and in the position to apply these solutions, but apparently with little success.

The clear and absolute winner of the elections was the SNS.⁶ Not only did it once again become the strongest party, but it also received the majority of the parliament seats, something that has happened in Serbia only once since 1989, at the first parliamentary elections in 1990.⁷ The SPS was able to keep the same number of seats, while the DS lost dramatically, especially if not taking into account the seats of the New Democratic Party (*Nova demokratska stranka*, NDS), which split from DS under the leadership of Boris Tadić shortly before the elections. Apart from these four parties, only three more national minority parties, for which the threshold rule does not apply, succeeded in getting into the parliament.

Table 1: Results of the Parliamentary Elections in Serbia, 16. March 2014

Name of Party/Coalition	Number of votes	Percentage	Seats in Parliament
SNS / SDPS / NS / SPO / SP	1 736 920	48.35	158
SPS / PUPS ⁸ / US ⁹	484 607	13.49	44
DS	216 634	6.03	19
NDS / LSV ¹⁰	204 767	5.70	18
DSS	152 436	4.24	0
Dveri	128 458	3.58	0
LDP	120 879	3.36	0
URS ¹¹	109 167	3.04	0
SVM ¹²	75 294	2.10	6
Dosta je bilo	74 973	2.09	0
SRS	72 303	2.01	0
SDA Sandžak ¹³	35 157	0.98	3
SDA ¹⁴	24 301	0.68	2
Third Serbia	16 206	0.45	0

⁶ The SNS formed a coalition prior to the elections with the following parties: Social Democratic Party of Serbia (*Socijaldemokratska partija Srbije*, SDPS), New Serbia (*Nova Srbija*, NS), Serbian Renewal Movement (*Srpski pokret obnove*, SPO) and Socialists' Movement (*Pokret socijalista*, PS).

⁷ SPS led by Slobodan Milošević received 46.1% and 194 (of 250) seats in the parliament.

⁸ Party of the United Pensioners of Serbia (*Partija ujedinjenih penzionera Srbije*).

⁹ United Serbia (*Ujedinjena Srbija*).

¹⁰ League of Social-Democrats of Vojvodina (*Liga socijaldemokrata Vojvodine*).

¹¹ United Regions of Serbia (*Ujedinjeni regioni Srbije*).

¹² Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (*Savez vojvođanskih Mađara*).

¹³ Party of Democratic Action Sandžak (*Stranka demokratske akcije Sandžak*).

¹⁴ Party of Democratic Action (*Stranka demokratske akcije*).

RP ¹⁵	6547	0.18	0
CP ¹⁶	6388	0.18	0
PF ¹⁷	4514	0.13	0
List of national minorities	3983	0.11	0
Coalition of Citizens	3182	0.09	0
Total	3 271 949	96.88	250

Source: Republic Electoral Commission - Republic of Serbia¹⁸

Compared with the elections two years previously, the SNS has doubled its votes (24% to 48%), while the DS (together with the NDS) got only half (22% to 11,70% [6.03+5.70]). As mentioned above, the SPS received the same support, while the DSS, LDP and URS did not pass the threshold and will not have representatives in the parliament for the first time since 2000. Also, the SRS continues to lose support and influence.

Table 2: Parliamentary Elections in Serbia - Votes, Percentages and Seats

Name of Party / Coalition	Number of votes		Percentages		Seats in Parliament	
	2012	2014	2012	2014	2012	2014
SPS	940 659	1 736 920	24.04	48.35	73	158
DS	863 294	216 634+ 204 767 ¹⁹	22.06	6.03+ 5.70	67	19+18
SPS / PUPS / JS	567 689	484 607	14.51	13.49	44	44
DSS	273 532	152 436	6.99	4.24	21	0
LDP	255 546	120 879	6.53	3.36	19	0
URS	215 666	109 167	5.51	3.04	16	0
SVM	68 323	75 294	1.75	2.09	5	6
SRS	180 558	72 303	4.61	2.01	0	0
SDA Sandžak	27 708	35 157	0.71	0.98	2	3
SDA	13 384	24 301	0.40	0.68	1	2
None of the offered answers	22 905	/	0.59	/	1	/
All Together (Minorities)	24 993	/	0.64	/	1	/
Voter turnout	3 912 904	3 592 375	57.80	53.09	250	250

Source: Republic Electoral Commission - Republic of Serbia²⁰

What is notable is the result of the civic movement *Dosta je bilo-Restart*, led by Saša Radulović, the former Minister of Economy, who entered the government in the summer of 2013 with Vučić's invitation. Back then, Radulović was supposed to be in

¹⁵ Russian Party (*Ruska partija*).

¹⁶ Montenegrin Party (*Crnogorska partija*).

¹⁷ Patriotic Front (*Patriotska fronta*).

¹⁸ *Republic Electoral Commission – Republic of Serbia*, 2014. (accessed: 1. May 2014).

¹⁹ Shortly before the 2014 elections, Boris Tadić, the former president of the party and of Serbia, left the Democratic Party with a number of its members and formed the New Democratic Party.

²⁰ *Republic Electoral Commission - Republic of Serbia*, 2014. (accessed: 1. May 2014).

charge of initiating and developing necessary economic reform. However, after proposing his strategy and being eager to stick to his agenda for the reforms, he apparently started to lose Vučić's and Dačić's support. They both feared that these measures would be unpopular and mostly hit the SNS and SPS electorate, but also the financial sources of their parties. Their following confrontation led to Radulović's resignation shortly before the call for snap elections was announced. He then formed a civic movement and managed to attract the attention of nearly 75.000 voters despite being heavily attacked by the SNS-controlled media and the fact that there were only a few weeks left. With a very small budget and a humble campaign, which focused mostly on web-channels, Radulović got more votes than LDP in the city of Belgrade and more votes than NDS and LDP in some city districts of Belgrade.²¹

Consequences of the Elections

In his first reaction to the elections, the leader of the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians, Ištvan Pastor, described the clear victory of the party coalition gathered around SNS as a "political tsunami,"²² which then became a common dictum among other politicians too. However, considering that a tsunami is one of the biggest natural disasters and catastrophes, this expression in the context of the election results in Serbia is rather exaggerated. While the tremendous success of SNS is for sure striking, as is the fact that a party won the majority of the seats in the Serbian Skupština for the first time after 1990, it is neither such a catastrophe, nor something that came as surprise. It is also not completely unexplainable. Rather, there are two very plausible explanations for this success.

The first one addresses the fact that SNS simply took over the ideology and the party programme of its biggest opponent, DS. By proclaiming Serbia's EU integration its main goal and by not only giving up the extreme nationalistic position towards Kosovo, but also fostering the dialogue with Priština and promising to fight corruption and organized crime, SNS basically offered the same as DS. The DS had apparently lost some credibility in achieving these proclaimed goals after having had direct political control and leading positions continuously from 2000 to 2012.²³ The SNS, on the other hand, had gained credibility since 2012, mostly due to the opening of the EU memberships talks and the achieved settlement with Priština in 2013. Also, apart from theory and ideology, there are three more features the SNS retained from the DS. First is the control and misuse of media for their own purposes (glorifying and exaggerating own achievements and creating a cult of personality, while also discrediting political opponents, relating them to corruption and private and business related scandals and putting pressure on media that criticize the government). Second is the tendency to use clientelism for the control of the state apparatus, while the third and final feature is the tendency to bypass all mechanisms made to secure separation of powers and to provide a system of checks and balances. All of these features are something that the DS introduced in one way or another under the leadership of Boris Tadić, in particular in the period between 2008 and 2012, while Vučić has perfected and radicalized them starting in 2012.

²¹ Pavlović, Dušan. 2014. *Restart – Analiza izbornih rezultata*. (accessed: 13. May 2014).

²² Pastor, Ištvan. 2014. *Očekujem poziv SNS-a na razgovore*. Radio-televizija Srbije, 17. March 2014. (accessed: 10. November 2014).

²³ Apart from the period between 2004 and 2007, the DS has been part of the ruling coalition. Between 2008 and 2012 it was even the leading party and had the position of the prime minister. Also, Boris Tadić, who was the president of DS, was the president of Serbia from 2004 to 2012.

The second, main reason for the success of the SNS goes back to the current weakness and crisis of the DS, but also of all the small parties originating from the former Democratic Opposition of Serbia (*Demokratska opozicija Srbije*, DOS), the broad coalition that defeated Milošević in October 2000. For the first time since 2000, none of the parties or movements, excluding the DS, that were part of DOS gained the trust of the voters and so remained without representatives in the parliament. This weakness and crisis are to a great extent due to their loss of credibility mentioned above, as the voters apparently felt that these parties, most of all DS, have had their chance and responsibility to implement their party programme and to make crucial steps toward Serbia's EU integration. Instead, they had failed or at least did less than the voters had considered as potentially feasible.

With these two explanations in mind, one of the consequences of the election was that it was not the policy and ideology of DS which suffered a defeat, but only the party structure and apparatus carrying it. In other words, it was not able to carry it. At the same time, the victory of SNS cannot be seen as a victory of the parties and the ideology from the 90s because both SNS and SPS not only distanced themselves from the policies of their parties/predecessors in the 90s, but more importantly brought their policies and party programmes – at least in theory – almost completely in accordance with those parties which are considered pro-European and which used to be identified as the successors of DOS.²⁴ So, paradoxically, with the victory of the SNS and the SPS, the ideology of DOS won, not through the parties that constituted the DOS coalition, but rather through their one-time opponents. What consequently remained consistent – and this could be considered a second outcome of these elections – is that in all elections since 2000, at least 50% or more of Serbian citizens continuously gave support to parties which define Serbia's EU integration as their main goal.

The third consequence stands in inverse correlation to the previous. Parties that have openly had an anti-EU policy, that are keen on Serbia having close ties to Russia and finally, that are rejecting any dialogue and negotiations on the status of Kosovo are consistently losing support. Two notable parties with such policies, DSS and SRS (and also the movement Dveri), not only lost popularity compared to the elections in 2012 and 2008, but also did not even pass the threshold in 2014 (SRS for the second time). This can be seen as a rebuff for these policies and ideologies among the voters in Serbia.

A fourth consequence of the elections is that they led to a crystallisation of the party landscape in Serbia, and hence a step forward in the process of democratic consolidation. Apart from the parties of national minorities, only three parties (SNS, SPS, DS) proved to have the capacity to pass the threshold.²⁵ If this tendency continues, it can be a stabilising factor since it ascribes more power to a limited and small number of parties, while at the same time forcing them into more transparency and responsibility without the chance to hide behind a broad coalition when it comes to failures or misuses of power. Relating to this conclusion, these elections showed that the scenar-

²⁴ Ultimately, supporting Serbia's EU-integration and making steps towards a sustainable resolution for Kosovo being the two most important of them.

²⁵ Although the smaller parties of their coalition contributed to the overall result, they would not have passed the threshold on their own, so we can consider these small parties as unsustainable except within pre-electoral coalitions.

io of Serbia heading towards a bi-party system²⁶ is not likely anymore, as SPS developed into a strong party with a share of around 15%. Rather, we can talk of the formation of a multiparty system with one dominant party, presupposing that the alternative to SNS, which is right now DS, will be able to recover and reshape itself, possibly by fusing with smaller former DOS parties, and then return to its level of 2012.²⁷

A fifth, rather negative consequence of these elections, deriving indirectly from the one previously mentioned, is, as Florian Bieber correctly argues, that they increased the authoritarian temptation of the governing party.²⁸ The call for early elections was already a sign that the dominant party could not resist this temptation, as this call was a clear caprice of the SNS aiming to capitalise on current popularity and secure their own party's dominance without any use for the Serbian society. In addition, the fact that SNS received the majority of seats in the parliament leads us to the assumption that, without being dependent on a coalition partner, Vučić will have little motivation to self-impose mechanisms that would control him and the power of his party. He will also not have an interest to release the control of the media. The only actors who might thwart his ambition are a recovered and strong opposition and the EU, which could block membership talks if Vučić continues to weaken state institutions and to discredit the opposition through controlled media.

However, an indicator that Vučić and his party are rather cautious and aware that not resisting this temptation might be punished at the next elections is that they decided to govern in coalition with the SPS and to appoint a number of independent experts as ministers despite having a clear majority. There are a number of reasons behind this decision, especially behind the decision to include the SPS in the government. First, the coalition with the SPS has been a functioning and, from the perspective of the SNS, a winning team from 2012 to 2014, so there are grounded expectations that they will continue this way. However, the SNS will claim the success more for itself. Second, by having a coalition partner, the SNS can always share the responsibility for possible failures, and in a well-known scenario even blame the coalition partner for them. Third, had SNS left the SPS in opposition, the SPS could have possibly become the opposition leader and the SNS would have risked losing voters to the SPS, as both parties are predominantly addressing the same social categories of the population. So, the decision to rule in a coalition with the SPS can be seen as a mixture of measurements that should ensure the dominance of the SNS in the coming four years, at the price of having a controlling mechanism embodied in the SPS.

Conclusions

Despite not having many reasons to be over-optimistic about the capacities and intentions of the SNS and its leadership to give up clientelism and to impose mechanisms that would control their power, enhance the rule of law and strengthen state institutions, the success of the SNS at the recent elections does not necessarily need to be seen as an impending catastrophe. By appointing a number of independent and proven experts in the government (e.g. Kori

²⁶ An assumption often emphasized between 2004 and 2012 when SRS/SNS and DS were having the biggest share (around 30%) at the elections, while a number of smaller parties were between 5% and 8%.

²⁷ Zečević, Nikola. 2014. *Perspektive đindžizma. Vrijeme*, 6. April 2014. (accessed: 21. May 2014).

²⁸ Bieber, Florian. 2014. *Die autoritäre Versuchung auf dem Balkan*, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, Nr. 61, 23. (accessed: 10. November 2014).

Udovički, Minister of Public Administration and Local Self-Government, Dušan Vujović, Minister of Economy, Tanja Mišćević, Chief Negotiator to the EU), who are not tied to party interests, the SNS is at least sending a signal for a reset. It is expected that these experts, similar to Saša Radulović in the former government, will propose needed, but probably painful reforms and crucial cuts, regardless of the unpopularity related to such measures. Hence, the success/failure of these ministers can be used as a possible litmus test for the intentions of the government. This could show whether their appointment was a window dressing strategy that will end with a scenario similar to the one with Radulović at the end of the last government or whether their appointment is a serious attempt to reset and improve the functioning of the state. If the former is the case, then Serbia might lose four more precious years and be trapped even deeper by clientelism and unconsolidated democracy in 2018. The only hope which remains in this worst case scenario is that the voters in Serbia will, in accordance with their rational choices in all elections since 2008, most probably not be so patient or so ready to buy excuses. So, if this government does not achieve a tangible, better economic standard of living for the majority of people, the citizens will likely no longer buy populist explanations or provide another chance to SNS, but simply vote for another option. This is, of course, presupposing that an alternative option will arise between now and then.

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