

Vučić's plebiscite almost slipped on arithmetics

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As largely anticipated, the incumbent Prime Minister of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, secured another four years in power at the snap elections that took place on 24 April. However, the results suggest that Vučić has overplayed his hand with this personal plebiscite: simple arithmetics unmasked his exaggerated hope to wipe out the opposition and consolidate political dominance. This might bode well for political pluralism but voters' preferences and the affixed party options caution against taking Serbia's commitment to European integration for granted.

The elections had been described by the prime minister and international media as a referendum on Serbia's European path, aimed at providing Vučić with a new and solid mandate to carry out tough reforms for the modernisation and EU integration of the country. However, the vote has also been a referendum on the person of the Prime Minister himself and an opportunistic attempt to camouflage the government's weak economic record in pro-European discourse. The unemployment rate is still high at 17.9%, while the 0.74% GDP growth in 2015 has hardly been sufficient to set Serbia on the path of permanent economic recovery after the country experienced three recessions during the post-2008 period.

By calling an election two years before the projected ballot of 2018, Vučić intended to use his high popularity – sustained by his international visibility, a feeble opposition rocked by corruption scandals, the government's control of public and private media, and clientelism – to strengthen his hold on power by reconfirming the absolute majority in parliament of the coalition around his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS).

Although the elections gave the incumbent prime minister control of the Serbian National Assembly for another four years, as a result of the higher turnout (56.34% in comparison with 53.09% in 2014), he actually obtained about the same share of votes – that is, 48.23% – as two years ago (48.35%). Moreover, if in 2014 only two opposition parties (plus Ivica Dačić's Socialist Party of Serbia – SPS) were able to enter the parliament, on 24 April, at least four opposition parties have passed the 5% electoral threshold (it is yet not clear whether the Dveri/DSS has passed). In sum, Vučić's coalition has lost 27 seats. Even if SNS (with its nine minor partners) maintains the absolute majority in the National Assembly, with 131 of the 250 seats, the outcome is far below the government's expectations. It comes as no surprise then that Vučić has asked for a vote recount, since the exclusion from parliament of any of the two opposition parties that were close to the 5% threshold would boost the number of seats for the SNS.

A second startling outcome for Vučić is that the political geometry for the formation of the new government has become more complex. While the SNS-led coalition – Serbia is Winning – came out on top, it only managed to secure a parliamentary majority of six seats above 50%. This puts Vučić in the position of having to look for political allies. The former partner of the SNS in the outgoing coalition, the SPS, might ask for bigger rewards in exchange for its renewal of support for the government. After all, many in the SPS have blamed their alliance with Vučić for the electoral losses that their party has incurred over the past two years, from 14% to 11% (44 to 29 seats). The formation of the new government could thus drag out for a whole month or even until the beginning of June.

A third complication for the new government is that it will have to deal with a much more politically diverse legislature. Practically every significant opposition party, from extreme-left to far-right, succeeded in entering the parliament, exceeding any initial expectations of political pluralism and signalling a widely polarised Serbian society. While their

numbers might not enable them to mount a real challenge to the government, their parliamentary presence is likely to animate public debate.

This is especially plausible given the return of the far-right nationalistic parties into parliament, after a four-year absence. Even if the (predicted) parliamentary comeback of anti-EU and pro-Russia forces might help to strengthen Vučić's image in the eyes of the international community as guarantor of the country's stability, these extremist forces could have fulfilled that role as well, with a much smaller number of supporters. The Radicals secured a little over 8% of the vote, encouraged by the recent acquittal of Vojislav Šešelj at The Hague, while it is still not clear if the nationalist, anti-European, clerical, and anti-gay movement Dveri, in coalition with what is left of ex-President Vojislav Koštunica's Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS), has reached the 5% threshold. However, these two far-right, nationalistic and anti-European parties represent now more than 13% of the Serbian electorate. This could clearly expose the government to anti-European criticism and pro-Russia rhetoric in the reform process.

The Kosovo issue, for example, could be an easy target. Even if SNS and SPS reach an agreement, the new government will not have a two-third majority in the parliament to modify the constitution, something that will have to be done if Belgrade is to proceed in the framework of its EU-sponsored dialogue with Pristina. While on economic issues it is very difficult to present Russia as a viable alternative to the EU, on Kosovo, Moscow still has a grip on the imagination of the general public. Having to find an *ad hoc* two-third majority in the parliament could therefore lead to a tough debate that is likely to re-politicise the so far 'technical approach' followed by Vučić on Kosovo.

Overall, these elections produced less – rather than more – clarity and homogeneity. Prime Minister Vučić, playing the pro-European card, held a plebiscite on his person to consolidate his political dominance. Yet, despite the endorsement received by Vučić from many Western politicians and the European Commission – which often gave the impression that the EU prefers stability and security over progress in democratic consolidation – Serbia's commitment to the European reform agenda is not a given.

The results of the vote reveal a fickle and fragmented Serbian society and political class when it comes to the country's EU orientation. Although there still is public support for Serbia's European perspective and politicians still talk the EU membership talk, the elections ascertained that there is also a growing nationalistic, pro-Russia and anti-EU drive in the country. Vučić has his work cut out to prove his European and democratic credentials against this backdrop. And the EU is well advised to keep a close eye on party-political dynamics in Belgrade and take an active interest in the economic development of the country if it is to avoid that Serbia too slips off the European path, like some of its neighbours.

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