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Serbian Elections 2016

Election Analysis

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Serbian Elections 2016

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Introduction

Elections in Serbia have been held quite often over the past 26 years. Yet, of all elections that have taken place since the introduction of the multiparty system in 1990, the elections held on April 24 2016, were the most confusing. They were held early, but were neither a product of political, nor economic crisis. So why were they necessary?

Theory

Early elections occur either because of political or economic crisis, or as a consequence of political opportunity.¹ In the latter case, a strategically timed election can either improve a cabinet's chance of reelection,² or "reset the clock", thus gaining an extension of an old mandate as if it were a new one.³ The government's wish to call early elections reflect a wish to put off some later elections because they might not win them: hence, early elections always reveal that the government is already weak. Yet, the majority of the voters are not likely to anticipate such a kind of weakness,⁴ and the government is usually able to extend the mandate by getting reelected.⁵

Political science identifies three possible ways for the government to shorten its mandate and provoke early elections: prime-ministerial discretion, constrained dissolution, and presidential discretionary power to dissolve the parliament.⁶ Since Serbia is a semi-presidential system, it would be expected that the president would play a more significant role in the dissolution of the

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¹ Strøm, Kaare and Stephen M. Swindle. 2002. Strategic Parliamentary Dissolution. *The American Political Science Review* 96(3), 575-91.

² Kayser, M.A. 2005. Who Surfs, Who Manipulates? The Determinants of Opportunistic Election Timing and Electorally Motivated Economic Intervention. *American Political Science Review* 99(1), 17-27.

³ Balke, N. S. 1990. The Rational Timing of Parliamentary Elections. *Public Choice* 65(3), 201-16.

⁴ Caplan, Bryan. 2007. *The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies*. Princeton: University Press.

⁵ Blais, A., E. / Gidengil, R. Nadeau and N. Nevitte. 2004. Do (Some) Canadian Voters Punish a Prime Minister for Calling a Snap Election? *Political Studies* 52(6), 307-23; see also Lupia, Arthur and Kaare Strøm. 1995. Coalition Termination and the Strategic Timing of Parliamentary Elections. *American Political Science Review* 89(3), 648-65; Strøm and Swindle, *Strategic Parliamentary Dissolution*.

⁶ Schleiter, Petra and Edward Morgan-Jones. 2009. Constitutional Power and Competing Risks: Monarchs, Presidents, Prime Ministers, and the Termination of East and West European Cabinets. *American Political Science Review* 103(3), 496-512.

parliament.⁷ Actually, under the Serbian constitution, the president is required to approve the premier's request to dissolve the assembly (article 109), but this becomes a powerful tool in the president's hands only if they differ politically from their premier. If they pursue the same policy (or come from the same party), the president will easily accept the premier's request for dismissal. This is what happened on March 3, when President Tomislav Nikolić, on the Premier's request, dismissed the Serbian Assembly and called early elections for April 24.

Previous elections

The last elections took place only two years ago, and were also premature. That time round, Aleksandar Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) won a landslide victory. The SNS-led coalition won 48.3% of the votes, which resulted in 68% of the seats in the Serbian Assembly (158 seats). The SNS itself had obtained an absolute majority in the Assembly, with 131 seats (52%). In contrast, the opposition parties ended up in disarray after the 2014 elections. Former president Boris Tadić split from the Democratic Party (DS) only two months before the election, forming his own New Democratic Party (NDS, later SDS). He received less than 6% of the popular ballot, and the DS itself also won 6%. Other oppositional parties - Serbian Radical Party (SRS), Dveri, the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS), and "Enough is Enough" (DJB) - did not even make it to the Assembly.⁸

Aleksandar Vučić called the 2016 parliamentary elections two years later, claiming he wanted to avoid conflict and have full stability in steering Serbia towards EU membership under a clear four-year mandate.⁹ But it is difficult to see what prevented him from doing so at the moment when the Assembly was dismissed. In addition to a comfortable majority to rule for the next two years (and even to change the constitution), there was no crisis in the cabinet and the Assembly was not blocked. There was no economic crisis, despite risky reform measures (public sector salaries and pensions cut from October 2014, and the labor law of July 2014, which provoked lots of protest from the trade unions). Furthermore, over the past two years, Vučić has exemplified a heavy-handed leadership style by cowering media (both private and public),¹⁰ undermining independent institutions such as the Ombudsman and Commissioner for public importance and personal data protection, and escaping any kind of monitoring for the alleged corruption activities of his cronies and relatives. Although the quality of democracy in Serbia declined in the past year,¹¹ Vučić's cabinet

⁷ Strøm and Swindle, *Strategic Parliamentary Dissolution*.

⁸ Ristić, Irena 2014. Parliamentary Elections in Serbia 2014: Replay or Reset? Elections Analysis. *Contemporary Southeast Europe* 1(2), 80-87.

⁹ Gedošević, L. 2016. *Pala Odluka: Vučić idemo na izbore*. *Blic*, 17. January 2016 (accessed: 10. May 2016).

¹⁰ Freedom House ratings (available [here](#)) for Serbia suggest high ratings and free status for political freedoms (the 2015 Freedom in the World Report), but lower ratings and partly free status for the media freedoms. In fact, in 2015, Serbia was, along with Yemen, Burundi, the Gambia, and Turkey, among the biggest press freedom declines in 2015.

¹¹ See [here](#) Freedom House's Nations in Transit index for 2016.

received constant congratulation for good results from the EU, IMF and WB officials.¹²

Explanations

There are two complementary explanations as to why Vučić called snap elections. The first has to do with local and provincial elections (elections for municipal assemblies and the assembly of Vojvodina). These elections were supposed to be held by mid-May. Most analysts believe that it was the low quality of SNS's local leaders which made Vučić call for early parliamentary elections. If local, provincial, and parliamentary elections took place at the same time, Vučić's voters would be more motivated to go out and support SNS's local leaders.

The second explanation has to do with Vučić's anticipated waning popularity. The 2014 elections took place when it was estimated that Vučić's popularity could not rise any further. When the popular support hit the 50% ceiling, the elections were held to capitalize on this fact. Vučić became the premier and the SNS-controlled majority went from 73 (in 2012) up to 158 seats (in 2014). The 2016 snap elections were held when Vučić believed his popularity was about to fall. When he realized that his days of 50% popularity were numbered and could only go down, it was time for another election to extend his mandate for another four years.

The latter thesis was partly confirmed by the electoral outcome (Table 1). The SNS-led coalition won 86,000 more votes than in 2014, and received an almost identical proportion of the votes. However, it received fewer seats in the Assembly. The number of seats for the SNS-led coalition fell from 158 to 131, and the number of the SNS seats itself fell from 131 to 93.

Table 1. The 2016 electoral results with the difference compared to the 2014 electoral results.¹³

Party	%	diff	votes	diff	seats	diff
SNS-led coalition	48.25	0.1↓	1,823,147	86,227↑	131	27↓
DS-led coalition	6.02	0.01↓	227,589	10,822↑	16	3↓
SPS/JS*	10.95	2.54↓	413,770	70,837↓	29	15↓
SRS	8.10	6.09↑	306,052	233,749↑	22	22↑
DJB	6.02	3.94↑	227,626	152,653↑	16	16↑
Dveri/DSS	5.04	2.07↓	190,530	90,364↓	13	13↑
SDS/LDP/LSV**	5.02	4.9↓	189,564	103,950↓	13	5↓

Source: Author's own work

¹² Several analysts pointed to the fact that the EU policy toward Serbia has turned to praising autocratic tendencies in the Vučić cabinet over the past two years. See Pula, Besnik. 2016. The Budding Autocrats of the Balkans. *Foreign Policy*, 15. April 2016 (accessed: 10. May 2016); see also an interview with Florian Bieber, Rujević, Nemanja. 2016. Evropa Vučiću gleda kroz prste. *Deutsche Welle*, 26. April 2016 (accessed: 10. May 2016); Maza, Christina. 2016. Why the Election in Serbia is no Cause for Rejoicing. *Foreign Policy*, 28. April 2016 (accessed: 10. May 2016).

¹³ In 2014, the coalition SPS/JS ran together with PUPS, which this time ran on the SNS-led coalition ballot; The percentage and vote difference for SDS/LDP/LSV are difficult to calculate exactly because these three parties ran on a separate ballot in 2014, and the LDP ran in coalition with another party, which this time ran separately.

How did this happen? The oppositional parties did not make an impressive showing on these elections - most oppositional parties received between 5-8% (Table 1). Yet, in contrast to the 2014 elections, all oppositional parties managed to clear the threshold. In 2014, four electoral lists did not make it - DSS, Dveri, SRS, and DJB. The total amount of “wasted” votes was around 700,000, which was almost 19% of the total.¹⁴ The SNS-led coalition was the greatest beneficiary of this fact, because it received most of the seats that these parties lost by not passing the 5% threshold. This time around, all of these four lists did make it - each won over 5%, thus entering the Assembly, which automatically lowered the number of seats for the SNS-led coalition.

Most oppositional parties performed in these elections much like last time (Table 1). The DS won 6%, and former president’s Tadić SDS (which was on the same ballot with the LDP and LSV) won 6%. Three right-wing parties that did not make it last time got in on this occasion. Dveri and DSS, which ran separately in 2014, made a coalition and cleared the threshold, although they altogether lost some 90,000 votes compared to 2014, when they ran separately. The two biggest winners of these elections, in terms of votes and seats, are the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) and the movement “Enough Is Enough” (DJB). Vojislav Šešelj’s SRS’s popularity rose after the Hague Tribunal acquitted him in March 2016. It received 8.22% of the votes and 22 assembly seats, thus quadrupling its support.

DJB, led by the former minister of economy Saša Radulović, tripled its electoral support (it won 2.09% in 2014). DJB relied on a nascent party structure, door-to-door campaigning, and a strong presence on Facebook and Twitter. It received 6% and, with 16 seats in the Assembly, ended up the fourth strongest parliamentary force ahead of the DS, Tadić’s SDS, LDP, DSS, Dveri, and other smaller parties that have existed over a decade.

In terms of number of seats in the Assembly, the SNS and Aleksandar Vučić are the biggest losers of these elections. Fewer seats for the SNS gives their coalition partners more clout and bargaining power and might weaken Vučić’s next cabinet. Vučić has become especially vulnerable given that the presidential elections will be held in 2017, and the Belgrade elections in 2018. If he loses any of these elections, it could trigger another parliamentary crisis within the next two years.

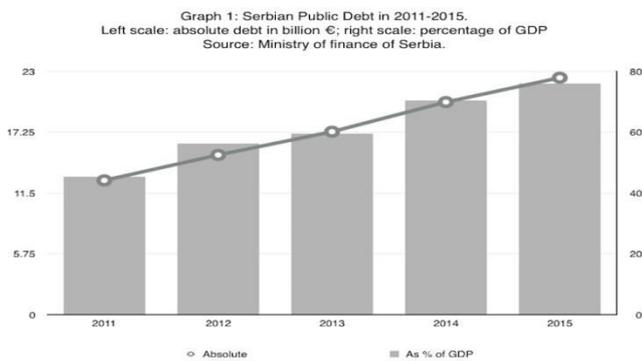
Another source of political instability is economic hardship, which the two Vučić-led cabinets did not manage to ease over the past four years. Despite some economic reform successes, which halved the budget deficit and halted the increase of the unemployment rate (a consequence of the cuts in pensions and public wages and the new labor law), Vučić’s cabinet does not seem to be able to deliver economic growth. The average growth rate in 2012-2015 was -

¹⁴ The Serbian electoral legislation is based on the D’Hondt formula that transforms electoral votes into seats by favoring the largest party. The “wasted” votes (votes that remained below the threshold) are the votes that could transfer into the seats provided the party list made it into the parliament (cleared the threshold). If a party does not make it, it leaves more seats for those who did. This may be critical for the largest party if it wants to have the majority in the assembly.

0.4%. The economy and the public sector, which both present a source of budget deficit and increasing public debt (Graph 1), still await reform measures.

The major critique of Vučić's economic policy came from the the Fiscal Council, an advisory body set up by the Serbian Assembly to monitor the government's fiscal policy, which claimed that, since the inception of the IMF arrangement in February 2015, Vučić's cabinet had fulfilled the economic reform agenda only partially.¹⁵

Table 2.



Source: Ministry of finance of Serbia

The government appears to have sold the Smederevo Steel factory, a loss-making giant from the socialist era, which was one of the greatest structural sources of budget deficit. However, many other public, state or social loss-making companies remain in the government's hands. These firms are net subsidy-receivers and regularly gobble up a significant part of the state budget. Another source of deficit and public debt is the oversized public sector. Although Vučić's cabinet "promised" to the IMF to cut 75,000 jobs in the public sector¹⁶ by the end of 2017, these reforms were only prepared, but have still not been implemented.

Several European newspapers have already started to question Vučić's ability to deliver stability,¹⁷ which was seen as his main advantage by the EU officials. Weakened by the electoral results, a partially efficient economic policy which seems to be unable to stimulate economic growth, and presidential and Belgrade elections in 2017 and 2018, Aleksandar Vučić is facing a challenging two years.

¹⁵ Anđelić, Bojana. 2016. Presede im Kopaonik. Fiskalni savet: Vlada ispunila samo jedan od tri cilja; Ministri: Neće biti da je baš tako. *Blic*, 10. March 2016 (accessed: 10. May 2016).

¹⁶ The public sector includes public administration, state and public companies as well as health and education systems. Today it is estimated to have grown to 700,000 positions. The cut therefore constitutes 1 in 10 jobs.

¹⁷ N.N. 2016. A Pro-Europe Prime Minister Wins a Second Term in Serbia. *The Economist*, 25. April 2016 (accessed: 10. May 2016); Mijnsen, Ivo. 2016. Vucics plumpe Winkelzüge. *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 2. May 2016 (accessed: 11. May 2016).

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