

# Presidential election in Serbia – Unfair but square

JELENA MILIĆ

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The March 2017 presidential election in Serbia further consolidated Aleksander Vučić's grip on power within the country. There is no doubt that he will continue to proclaim himself as a champion of Serbia's EU integration. However, in reality, he is an autocrat, at best.

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The Serbian presidential election won by Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić was deemed unfair by many observers, who claimed there were some serious breaches of election rules. It was square, however, in the sense that it should leave no illusions to Serbs and the international community as who currently rules the country. Vučić's self-described "catch all" Serbian Progressive Party and their ten coalition partners, led by the Serbian Socialist Party, have an overwhelming majority in Serbia today. The coalition is so broad that it is made up of people who support and promote figures like Veselin Šljivančanin (the convicted war criminal), colleagues who use lobbying services of the former German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, confidantes of Vladimir Putin and self-proclaimed allies of Angela Merkel. Here, anything goes.

The European Union and United States seem to understand the current situation in Serbia and they are preparing themselves to deal with certain contingencies. This seems to be unsettling and revealing at the same time. However it is not anything new; it has been known for some time already that Vučić plays the role of a Serbian Janus – the god of duplicity.

## Born-again democrat

Vučić claims to be the leader of Serbia's alleged EU integration and is the key person to deliver on NATO's interests in the region, while at the same time "playing nice" with Russia. In reality, he is, at best, an autocrat. It is too often forgotten that Vučić was a prominent figure and one of the architects of Slobodan Milošević's regime, infamously known for its war crimes. Despite this, the West and many genuine progressive figures in Serbia have attempted to grant him the status as a re-born democrat. Yet the Brussels-led agreement on Kosovo has hit a dead end, the macro financial stability of the country is on shaky ground, the situation of refugees and migration flows is dubious from a human rights perspective and Serbia's ad hoc contribution to the war on terrorism has a huge blind spot for anything coming from Russia (or anything going from Serbia to Ukraine). Moreover, the position of prosecutor for war crimes in Serbia has now been vacant for more than 18 months. Transitional justice is reduced to shotgun reconciliation photo-ops. The entire region of the Western Balkans remains fertile ground for the politicisation of ethnicity, poor governance, corruption and many other systemic errors.

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At the same time, part of the so-called Serbian democratic opposition – a wide spectre from the extreme-right party Dveri, the hard-core nationalist Vuk Jeremić, to the soft nationalist Saša Janković – a former ombudsperson who won approximately 16 per cent in the presidential election – have failed to offer any meaningful progressive alternative to Vučić and the "hypocritical"

EU – as they put it. The Janković campaign was packed with vague statements on the significance of the rule of law, devoid of regional or global context. The current constitution was offered in the place of any real political platform.

The trend of new parties and movements in Serbia, which are basically poor copy and paste versions of Vučić (like Janković), is upsetting. Coalitions of single-issue movements do not have well-developed, comprehensive programmes that can address 21st century challenges. This is best illustrated by the emerging students' nationalist-left movements which have popped up quite recently. They appear to be recycled Jeremić and Janković supporters and despite their hype in some prominent Serbian and regional web portals and the mainstream media in the West, these movements will most certainly be short-lived. In fact, they waste energy and credibility by making weak claims about electoral fraud and the general

unfairness of “Serbian dictatorship and global capital”. At the same time, their supporters failed to cover all the polling places and provide good election oversight due to a lack of infrastructure and procedural knowledge. It is too little, too late; too retro and too leftist for mainstream Serbia. One can only wonder if they have ever heard of the Dutch Greens or D66.

Nenad Čanak, the leader of the Vojvodina province League of Social Democrats and its candidate in the presidential election, addressed many relevant issues ranging from Russia to decentralisation and NATO. However, he failed to put them into a cohesive campaign format –which is a shame and should serve as a lesson for liberal Serbians. His chaotic campaign missed several opportunities and in the end resulted in a miserable 1.13 per cent of the official vote.

Luka Maksimović – aka Beli Preletačević, the notorious Mr White Flip-Flopper – won approximately ten per cent of the vote. Maksimović is not a “comedian”, as he is often described by many in the media. What he has done, though, is expose the Vučić regime for what it is: a self-interested, opportunistic, corrupted structure. Clearly, he now faces serious choices if he wants to remain in politics. The 2018 Belgrade mayor election will be a key one to watch – especially if Beli runs. But, again, one can wonder if he too has ever heard of the Dutch Greens or D66.



Photo: Courtesy of European Commission

Newly elected president, Aleksander Vučić (left, still as prime minister), recently hosting a European delegation in Serbia. The way ahead for Vučić and his country is complicated, to say the least.

## Force for reconciliation?

Mid-April this year was a significant period for Serbia in the sense that Vučić's opposition has failed to grasp any momentum or demonstrate basic knowledge of global and regional trends. At the same time, when the *New York Times* ran an editorial about the dangers of Vučić's autocratic trajectory, US Senator John McCain visited Serbia, as well as Slovenia, Croatia, Montenegro and Kosovo, during a Balkan tour. During this trip, McCain labelled Vučić's Serbia as "a force for reconciliation in Eastern Europe". And just a few days later, the German foreign minister, Sigmar Gabriel, praised Serbia as "an anchor of stability" and a country that helps reduce tensions.

However, the Atlantic Council, a prominent bi-partisan think tank based in Washington DC, ran an article by Balkan expert, Dimitar Bechev, depicting what is currently happening in the country. "Whatever happens next," Bechev writes, "the news from Serbia is not good for either the EU or the United States. Vučić can please his partners in the West and deliver on security and regional stability, but his whole career is a testament to the fact that the western project of integrating the Balkans and Eastern Europe is fraught. Political elites know how to talk the talk but rarely walk the walk when it comes to democracy and good governance. Given the EU's support for Vučić, whether tacit or open (Austrian Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz was amongst the first to congratulate Serbia's president-elect), it seems the periphery is changing the EU. European leaders have opted for an alliance of convenience with would-be autocrats rather than genuine reformers. European concerns about stability trumps any aspiration to transform countries and societies. This prospect will not make reformers in Kyiv or Tbilisi happy and certainly provides wind in the Kremlin's sails."

The **opposition** to Vučić has failed to grasp any momentum following the presidential election.

The only missing clue in this description of Vučić's Serbia is the assumption that he is the one who makes all the decisions – thus undermining various institutions, the political opposition, and media. Yet if this was the case, it would not be so bad. But Vučić is not just the local Janus who calls all of the shots. There are several conflicted centres of interests that he does not seem to have control over, despite his claims to the contrary. And the list includes some very dubious and dangerous

elements in Serbia, including Russian influence, war criminals, monopolists, rent a coup d'état (such as in Montenegro), foreign fighters, tycoons, and a growing Chinese presence.

## A way forward?

The way ahead for Serbia is complicated, to say the least. The EU, US and NATO still have some buttons to press that can, at least, force Vučić to show his hand. The EU should open up (and not push under the carpet as it does now) Chapter 31 – which creates the framework for common European security and defence – in the accession negotiation process with Serbia as a litmus test of its commitments to the EU. Such a move would give a more realistic evaluation of Vučić and his undisclosed ties with Russia, as well as his willingness to impose some kind of democratic oversight over the security structures in the state.

Furthermore, NATO, not being obsolete any more, could also press Vučić to address Serbia's recent history with at least several reviews of Kosovo victims and to advance a more realistic view of the causes and consequences of NATO air strikes in 1999. The IMF and EU can demand more clarity on how to fill the gaps in Serbia's budget. Lastly, since it is Vučić who has been elected president, he has the power to dismiss General Ljubiša Diković, the chief of staff of the Serbian Army who is heavily compromised due to his participation in and during the conflicts in Bosnia and Kosovo. Whether or not such moves will be made in the near future remains an open question. 

Jelena Milić is a political analyst and director of the Belgrade-based think tank Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies. She has previously worked as a political analyst and researcher for the International Crisis Group and the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia.