



## 2022 Elections in Serbia: The Return of the Opposition?

Election Analysis

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# 2022 Elections in Serbia: The Return of the Opposition?

Vujo Ilić and Gazela Pudar Draško\*

The 2022 elections in Serbia have not produced surprising results, nor led to changes of government at any level, with the ruling Serbian Progressive Party maintaining its dominance of Serbian politics. The elections were, however, important, as a point in which the opposition parties ended the boycott of democratic institutions and returned to the parliament. In this election analysis, we describe the political context of the elections, marked by the long-term democratic backsliding, the Covid-19 pandemic measures, the constitutional referendum, mass environmental protest mobilization, and finally the invasion of Ukraine. We explain the ways in which the institutional framework for holding elections has changed and also what has remained unchanged, and how these circumstances affected the candidates and their campaigns. We provide an overview of opinion polls before election day, as well as results of parliamentary, presidential, and Belgrade city elections, and then discuss the election outcomes. The analysis concludes with an overview of post-election political dynamics and discusses possibilities for the opposition parties after their return to the aforementioned representative bodies.

**Keywords:** Serbia, elections, SNS, opposition, democracy

## Introduction

General elections were held in Serbia in 2022, to elect the President of the Republic, members of the National Assembly, as well as in several city and municipal contests. Shortly after the regular 2020 parliamentary elections, which were boycotted by the opposition, President Aleksandar Vučić announced new elections would be held earlier. The president dissolved the parliament in February 2022, for early parliamentary elections to be held on 3 April 2022, concurrently with the scheduled presidential elections. In addition, local elections were held in fourteen municipalities, including the capital Belgrade.

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The election results confirmed the domination of the Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska napredna stranka*, SNS) at all levels of political life. However, these elections did prove to be an important milestone for the fragmented and powerless Serbian opposition. After the boycott of the 2020 elections, the opposition parties were, except for several MPs from the national minority parties, absent from the National Assembly – a situation unprecedented in post-Milošević Serbia. The elections were a chance for the opposition to capitalize on citizens' increased dissatisfaction over environmental issues and the recent constitutional changes.

In this article we analyse the 2022 elections, beginning with the complex political context in which they took place. For years, Serbia has been in a crisis of political institutions, which peaked after the 2020 election boycott. The events of the past two years, from the pandemic of Covid-19 to the environmental protests, constitutional referendum, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, affected the dynamics of the electoral process and the campaigns. We describe how the institutional framework for conducting elections, which for the past two decades was mostly stable, began to be altered in the last two years, first to a lesser degree, and then in 2022 a complete overhaul of the electoral laws was enacted.

The renewed participation of the opposition in 2022 meant that voters could again choose among a wide selection of candidates from different sides of the ideological spectrum. However, the abuse of public resources and uneven media representation continued to produce an uneven playing field for the candidates - the substantial changes to the legal framework did not fundamentally address these problems. The sudden shift of the public's attention due to the invasion of Ukraine in February, had an asymmetric effect on the candidates and parties, as focus shifted to foreign policy and security issues, which we argue benefited the ruling parties and right-wing opposition, rather than the previously focused upon economic and environmental issues which may have benefited the opposition parties more.

Election Day saw a high turnout, and a tense atmosphere, but overall, it was mostly regular, and the key actors did not contest the election results, as they had in previous elections. However, the post-election speculations about cooperation between some of the opposition parties and the ruling SNS left the public confused. The months-long process of the parliament formation, and the subsequent government formation, added to said confusion. We conclude the analysis with the prospects for Serbia following these critical elections.

### **Political context**

The 2022 elections in Serbia took place in an environment with democratic institutions in ongoing crisis and increasing political polarization. For almost a decade, Serbia could be classified as an illiberal democracy or hybrid regime, characterized by frequent but unfair elections, and democratic institutions captured by the ruling party.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kmezić, Marko and Florian Bieber. 2017. *The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans. An Anatomy of Stabilitocracy and the Limits of EU Democracy Promotion*. BiEPAG; Pudar Draško,

The political landscape since 2012 has been dominated by the SNS, headed by Aleksandar Vučić. In 2017, Vučić won the presidential election in the first round and maintained leadership of the SNS. Authoritarian populism, which he embodies, plays down the importance of democratic institutions and emphasizes the need for an effective intermediary – the President, who acts as the sole problem-solver.

During the last decade, elections have become an almost annual ritual, taking Serbia's political life into a state of almost endless campaigns.<sup>2</sup> Elections are not perceived as an instrument of change for the better, and political actors are often described as “being all the same”.<sup>3</sup> Serbian citizens have low trust in democratic institutions, the latest European Social Survey data shows that 57% of respondents don't trust the parliament, 70% distrust politicians, while 75% distrust the political parties.<sup>4</sup>

The distrust toward institutions and political representatives is associated with declining election turnout.<sup>5</sup> In 2008, the turnout for the parliamentary elections was 61%, while in 2020 it was a record low 49%.<sup>6</sup> The declining turnout is coupled with decreasing quality of the electoral process. OSCE-ODIHR observation missions consistently report numerous irregularities, misuse of public resources, highly unbalanced media presence of the candidates, negative campaigns, as well as pressures on voters.<sup>7</sup>

The crisis of democratic institutions culminated with the 2020 election boycott. The 2016 convocation of the parliament was marked by polarization between the ruling parties and the fragmented opposition, as well as several waves of citizens' protests. Following the 2018 protests, which were triggered by an assault on one of the opposition's leaders, most opposition MPs left the parliament in early 2019. The opposition parties then threatened to escalate the boycott to elections also, citing unfair electoral conditions and limited media freedoms. The attempts to avoid the boycott were unsuccessful. Between 2019 and 2021, several rounds of Inter-Party Dialogue (IPD) were organized and moderated by civil society

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Gazela / Fiket, Irena and Jelena Vasiljević. 2019. Big dreams and small steps: comparative perspectives on the social movement struggle for democracy in Serbia and North Macedonia. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 20(1), 199-219; Kapidžić, Damir. 2020. The rise of illiberal politics in Southeast Europe. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 20(1), 1-17.

<sup>2</sup> Ristić, Irena. 2014. Parliamentary Elections in Serbia 2014: Replay or Reset? *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 1(2), 80-87; Pavlović, Dušan. 2016. Serbian Elections 2016. *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 3(1), 23-58.

<sup>3</sup> Fiket, Irena / Pavlović, Zoran and Gazela Pudar Draško. 2017. *Političke orijentacije građana Srbije: Kartografija nemoći*. Beograd: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 38.

<sup>4</sup> Fiket, Irena and Gazela Pudar Draško. 2021. Possibility of non-institutional political participation within the non-responsive system of Serbia: the impact of (dis)trust and internal political efficiency. *Sociologija* 63(2), 408.

<sup>5</sup> Todosijević, Bojan and Zoran Pavlović. 2017. *Nepoverenje u demokratske institucije i podrška nedemokratskim sistemima vladavine: populistički mehanizam*, in *Populizam*, edited by Lutovac, Zoran. Beograd: Institut društvenih nauka, 67-85; Fiket, Pavlović and Pudar Draško, *Političke orijentacije*.

<sup>6</sup> Jovanović, Milan and Dušan Vučićević. 2020. *Izbori za narodne poslanike Narodne Skupštine Republike Srbije 1990-2020*, in *Kako, koga i zašto smo birali: Izbori u Srbiji 1990-2020. godine*, edited by Jovanović, Milan and Dušan Vučićević. Beograd: Službeni glasnik, Institut za političke studije, 596 & 638.

<sup>7</sup> OSCE-ODIHR. *ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report* (accessed: 15 August 2022), 31.

organizations and members of the European Parliament (EP), however, it did not lead to results that would entice the opposition to participate in the scheduled June 2020 elections.

The 2020 elections were postponed due to the Covid-19 outbreak, but soon after the State of Emergency was lifted, the ruling party restored its campaigning activities to full capacity.<sup>8</sup> The parliamentary opposition parties: Democratic Party (*Demokratska stranka*, DS), the People's Party (*Narodna stranka*, NS), the Party for Freedom and Justice (*Stranka slobode i pravde*, SSP), the Serbian Movement Dveri (*Srpski pokret Dveri*), the Social Democratic Party (*Socijaldemokratska stranka*, SDS), as well as non-parliamentary Do not let Belgrade drown (*Ne davimo Beograd*, which later formed the *Moramo* coalition) boycotted the 2020 parliamentary elections. All the parties that participated in the elections failed to pass the 3% electoral threshold. The parties belonging to the ruling coalition: the SNS, the Socialist Party of Serbia (*Socijalistička partija Srbije*, SPS), and the Serbian Patriotic Party (*Srpski patriotski savez*, SPAS, later merged with SNS), received 231 of the 250 parliamentary seats, while four parties representing national minorities received the remaining nineteen seats.

The IPD process mediated by members of the EP continued, resulting in the adoption of some measures in September 2021. A second dialogue, without EP mediation, held in parallel under the auspices of the Speaker of the Parliament, led to an agreement with some of the opposition parties in October 2021. These two political deals were partially translated to the new set of electoral laws, which were adopted in February 2022, just two months before the election day. Although most opposition parties expressed dissatisfaction with the outcomes of the new rounds of the IPD, they decided to participate in the 2022 elections.

The decision of the opposition parties to participate in the 2022 elections should be seen in the light of the increased mobilization of the political and social movements in the lead-up to the voting day.<sup>9</sup> In 2021 a series of environmental protests were organized across Serbia, which later in the year coalesced around the planned investment of Rio Tinto Company in a lithium mine in Western Serbia. When the protests escalated to civil disobedience in the form of road blockades, they posed a challenge to the authority of the ruling party, and the intended legislation was revoked. The environmental issues colored the election campaign of the opposition parties, which had recognized its mobilizing potential.<sup>10</sup>

The environmental protests peaked immediately before another important event, the constitutional referendum scheduled for 16 January 2022, on articles related to the judiciary. The constitutional changes were a long-standing obstacle to the government's EU path.<sup>11</sup> The changes were strongly supported by

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<sup>8</sup> OSCE-ODIHR. *ODIHR Special Election Assessment Mission Final Report* (accessed: 15 August 2022), 4.

<sup>9</sup> Ilić, Vujo. 2022. Parliamentary and Election Boycotts in Hybrid Regimes: Evidence from Southeastern Europe. *Serbian Political Thought* (forthcoming).

<sup>10</sup> Stojanović, Milica. 2021. *Fact-Check: Can Protests Force a Legislative U-Turn in Serbia?* *BIRN*, 08 December 2021 (accessed: 29 August 2022).

<sup>11</sup> Before the referendum, parliament passed the changes to the Law on a Referendum and People's Initiative, abolishing the 50% turnout requirement for the validity of referendums.

the government and attracted public attention, but being a complex constitutional issue, left doubts about the level of understanding citizens had regarding the changes.<sup>12</sup> The opposition was divided about the involvement in the referendum, with some parties actively involved campaigning against the proposed constitutional changes. These were eventually passed, after obtaining a 59.6% majority, however, with a turnout barely over 30%.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine directed the media attention away from all other issues. The war came as a hot potato for Serbian political actors, including the ruling party, considering pro-Russian sentiments of the Serbian population. Major parties initially refrained from giving clear statements on the war, while generally condemning violence and emphasizing Serbian neutrality, however, the ruling party soon adapted and reframed their campaign toward security. The right-wing parties: *Dveri* (the Doorway), *Zavetnici* (the Oathkeepers), and NADA (National Democratic Alternative, *Nacionalno demokratska alternativa*), relied heavily on pro-Russian sentiments, while *Moramo* (We Must), a left-green coalition, clearly condemned the invasion.<sup>13</sup> The issue of Serbian position toward the war, especially whether Serbia should join EU sanctions against Russia, continued to dominate the campaign, even if some of the candidates tried to focus more on domestic issues.

### **Institutional framework**

Until recently, the legal framework that regulates elections in Serbia was mostly stable, and had been for the past twenty years. The 250 members of the parliament are elected for a four-year term, through a proportional system, from a single constituency, on closed candidate lists. To participate in the distribution of seats, the lists have to receive more than 3% of the votes, but the national minorities' lists are exempt from passing this threshold. Also, there is a gender quota for the lists, with two candidates of the less represented gender on the list among every five consecutive candidates. The president is directly elected, for a five-year term, in the first round, if a candidate receives more than 50 percent of the votes, or in the second round, between the two best-placed candidates. The local elections are held under the same proportional representation system. Voters in Belgrade elect 110 members of the city assembly, which then elect the mayor.

The institutional framework went through the largest changes before the 2020 and 2022 elections. The first round of changes, in February 2020, reduced the electoral threshold from 5% to 3%, two months before the scheduled election day. These changes were meant to incentivize opposition parties to break with the election boycott. This change was criticized for violating the electoral practice codified by the Venice Commission, stating that no major changes should be made to the election rules in the year in which the elections are held.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> CeSID. *Peaceful referendum environment, without a meaningful and distinct referendum campaign* (accessed: 21 August 2022).

<sup>13</sup> N1. *Šta stranke i koalicije misle o invaziji Rusije i tome šta Srbija treba da uradi*. N1, 24 February 2022 (accessed: 3 August 2022).

<sup>14</sup> European Commission for Democracy through Law [Venice Commission]. 2002. *Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters, CDL-AD (2002) 23*. Strasbourg, Art.II.2.b.

In 2022, the ruling majority repeated the offense and changed the rules of the game two months before election day. Completely new electoral laws were drafted, as an outcome of the IPD process, and the changes primarily affected the structure of electoral administration by introducing a middle tier, between the Republic Electoral Commission (REC), and the polling boards. The new laws extended the timeframes for dispute resolution, changed limits on political party and campaign funding, as well as media coverage of officials, improved the transparency of polling boards and introduced some temporary measures to allow the non-parliamentary parties that boycotted the elections to participate in the electoral process.<sup>15</sup>

Considering the short timeframe and the scope of the legislative changes there was not enough time for all candidates to adequately adjust, especially to the new tier of electoral administration. On the other hand, these changes did not address the long-standing challenges to the integrity of elections, including OSCE-ODIHR recommendations, regarding the independence and effectiveness of the body that regulates the media, the misuse of state resources in the campaign, and the pressures on voters.<sup>16</sup>

The number of voters was another politically charged issue. All Serbian citizens aged 18 years have the right to vote, except those who lost legal capacity through a court decision. The voter registry is passive, maintained by the Ministry of Public Administration, and based on voters' permanent residence records. There were 6,502 307 registered voters, a 1.25% decrease compared to the 2020 elections, which was expected given the Covid-19 and otherwise strong depopulation trends. As in many other countries in the region, the number of registered voters is higher than the voting age population, estimated to be 5,614 025 on 31 December 2021.<sup>17</sup> The disagreement between these numbers, as well as the lack of transparency of the electoral register, raised questions about electoral manipulation.

The total number of polling stations was 8,267 (a 2% decrease compared to 2020). The elections took place in 8,115 regular polling stations in Serbia, 29 polling stations in penal and detention facilities, and another 77 polling stations open for out-of-country voting in 34 countries. A high number of registered voters abroad (38,876, a threefold increase compared to 2020), indicated the Serbian diaspora's high interest in these elections. Finally, after the government in Pristina refused to allow the voting to take place in Kosovo, which was until 2022 facilitated by the OSCE, 46 special polling stations were also opened for Serbian voters from Kosovo in four municipalities in Serbia.

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<sup>15</sup> Crta. *The most important changes in election laws* (accessed: 15 August 2022).

<sup>16</sup> OSCE-ODIHR, *ODIHR Election Observation*, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia [SORS]. 2022. *Estimates of the population by age and sex (beginning, middle, and end of year)*. Last updated on 07 July 2022.

### Candidates and campaign

The 2022 elections offered Serbian voters a wide range of candidates with different programs, but given the circumstances of the campaign, it is doubtful that all political messages reached the voters, depriving them of the opportunity to make fully informed choices.

Eight candidates ran in the presidential elections, three of which were women. The incumbent Aleksandar Vučić was the candidate for the ruling coalition of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), and the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (*Savez vojvodanskih Mađara*, SVM). Retired general Zdravko Ponoš was a candidate of the centrist coalition United for Victory of Serbia (*Ujedinjeni za pobjedu Srbije*) consisting of the Party for Freedom and Justice (SSP), Democratic Party (DS), the People's Party (NS), and the Movement of Free Citizens (*Pokret slobodnih građana*, PSG), while university professor Biljana Stojković was a candidate of a green-left coalition *Moramo*. The remaining candidates represent the right side of the political spectrum: three right-wing coalitions, Miloš Jovanović (NADA), Boško Obradović (*Dveri*), and Branka Stamenković (Sovereignists, *Suverenisti*), as well as two far-right candidates - Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski (*Zavetnici*) and Miša Vacić (Serbian Right, *Srpska desnica*). In the 2017 elections, there were eleven candidates, all male, and the majority of them were also right-wing.

In the parliamentary elections, nineteen lists ran, with 2,912 candidates. While the ruling coalition members (SNS-SPS) supported Aleksandar Vučić as the presidential candidate, maximizing the chances of the first round victory, they ran separate lists in the parliamentary elections. We can group the opposition lists into two camps. On the one hand, there were three opposition coalitions, which all boycotted the 2020 parliamentary elections (centrist United Serbia, green-left *Moramo*, and former president Tadić's center-left Social Democratic Party coalitions). Out of the three right-wing opposition coalitions in 2022, NADA and the Sovereignists failed to pass the threshold in 2020, and *Dveri* boycotted the 2020 elections. In addition, the far-right *Zavetnici* also had a parliamentary list, while the Serbian Radical Party (*Srpska radikalna stranka*, SRS) submitted a parliamentary list, but supported president Vučić's candidature. Both parties also failed to pass the 3% threshold in 2020.

Eight parliamentary lists were granted national minority status - the Hungarian SVM list, which became a permanent addition to the SNS ruling coalition, two Albanian lists, two Bosniak, one Roma, one Croatian-Ruthenian coalition list, and the nominally Russian-Greek list, led by an extreme right figure, which was approved only after a decision by the Administrative Court. The REC dismissed three lists, which claimed to represent Vlach, Russian, and Slovak communities. In 2020, a similar number of lists were registered (21), however only four lists represented national minorities, compared to eight now, and only two had women as ballot carriers, compared to four in 2022.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Twelve lists registered for Belgrade elections, with 1,102 candidates, mostly mirroring the parties running for the national parliament. This was only half of the 24 lists that registered for the Belgrade elections in 2018, mostly due to a change in the new Law on Local Elections, which increased the required number of certified signatures from 1,100 to 3,000.



Despite the legislative changes from 2020 to 2022, the long-standing practices of abuse of public resources, especially the abuse of public office in the election campaign, have continued. The government used discretionary powers to allocate financial incentives from the state budget to particular groups of citizens, in exchange for expression of political support<sup>19</sup>.

Another aspect of the uneven playing field was the unequal access of the candidates to the media, with the ruling parties having a much larger presence, which they often use to vilify political opponents and critics. Television remains the primary means of political communication in Serbia, followed by the internet and social media. The media sector is strongly polarized, with five major televisions with a national reach, including the public broadcaster, having a pro-government editorial policy, while the privately owned cable outlets, with more critical views of the government, have limited reach.

At the beginning of the campaign, the ruling coalition focused their campaign on the economy, development, and foreign investments – one of their primary slogans was “Achievements speak for themselves” (*Dela govore*). The United Serbia coalition criticized the government on its economic record – rising inequality, inflation, public debt, and corruption, alleging the ruling party's ties with organized crime. Their promise to voters was “A change from the root” (*Promena iz korena*). The wave of ecological protests that brought environmental protection into the political mainstream, was a cornerstone of coalition *Moramo*'s program. On the other side of the political spectrum, the right-wing opposition challenged the government on Serbia's foreign policy concerning EU integration, wanting closer ties to Russia, and for Serbia to backtrack from relinquishing elements of sovereignty to Kosovo.

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the candidates had to quickly adapt. The SNS shifted its message, Vučić used his almost daily TV appearances to emphasize his role in securing food and energy, and the new coalition slogan became: “Peace. Stability. Vučić.” (*Mir. Stabilnost. Vučić.*) The right-wing opposition mostly sided with Russia, while the center and left opposition responded to the events with statements, but did not alter their campaigns.

In a campaign environment marked by the abuse of public resources and uneven access to media, the results of most pre-electoral polls indicated the dominant position of the ruling SNS-SPS coalition, which was supported by more than half of the decided respondents. The centrist and left opposition coalitions were supported by up to a quarter of the respondents. Right-wing opposition was supported by less than a fifth of respondents, but the support was fragmented into several lists, all close to the 3% threshold (Table 1).

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<sup>19</sup> Citizens aged 16 to 30 received a 100€ aid payment from the state and were promised to receive another payment after the April elections. Pressures on voters were again recorded, especially those employed in the public sector, and from economically and socially vulnerable communities. Crta. *Second Preliminary Long-Term Observation Report* (accessed: 17 August 2022).

Table 1: Selected opinion polls

Parties/lists	Faktor plus, 29.03.	NSPM, 31.03.	Ipsos SM, 31.03.
SNS	54	48	51
United Serbia	13	17.5	14
SPS	10	8	8.5
Moramo	5	7	4.5
NADA	4	3	4
Zavetnici	4	3	3
Sovereignists	3	2.5	3
SDS-Nova	2	2	1
Dveri	2	3	3
SRS	2	2	2
Other - including minority lists	1	4	4

Sources: Mastilović Jasnić, 2022; NSPM, 2022; Ipsos SM, 2022.

Aleksandar Vučić's goal was to repeat the 2017 first round win in the presidential elections, and while the advantage of the incumbent in the national elections was clear, the outcomes of the Belgrade elections were less straightforward. Based on opinion polls, the advantage of the ruling parties was smaller in Belgrade than in the rest of Serbia, and the city was considered a stronghold of the United Serbia and *Moramo* coalitions. However, the outcome of the election was largely dependent on the number of opposition lists that passed the threshold.

### Election results

The elections were held on 3 April 2022 in a tense and sometimes chaotic atmosphere, with several incidents in which the candidates were attacked in front of polling stations. According to the Crta election observation mission, serious irregularities were observed in 5% of polling stations, however, these could not have affected the outcomes of the elections.<sup>20</sup> High turnout was registered in urban areas and especially in Belgrade, where voters formed unusually long queues, both due to unpreparedness of the electoral administration, and the multiple concurrent elections. Voting in Belgrade lasted long after the polling stations closed at 8 PM, and the vote count lasted almost until the morning.

The final results of the Republic Electoral Commission show a 58.5% turnout in general elections. The ruling SNS received fewer votes than expected – 43% and wasn't able to form the majority in the National Assembly by themselves, for the first time since the 2014 elections. Their options were to form the government with the minority lists MPs or with their junior partner SPS, which did better than projected in the polls. The centrist and green-left opposition lists gained slightly fewer votes than expected, and the right-wing opposition fared somewhat better than the polls projected. This was largely attributed to the

<sup>20</sup> Crta. *Preliminary Report on Observing the Election Day* (accessed: 22 August 2022).

changing circumstances of the campaign after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. However, not all right-wing lists passed the electoral threshold, only three lists did. Right-wing parties will have 35 seats in the parliament, while the two centrist and green-left lists will together have a fifth of the seats (51) in the parliament (Table 2).

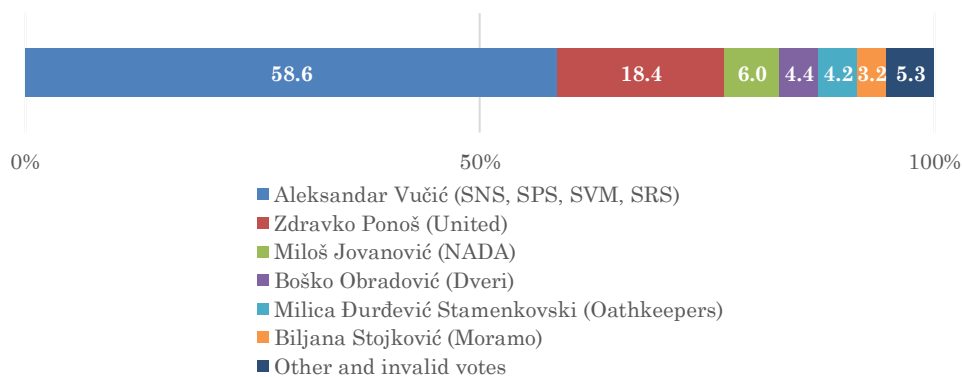
Table 2. Parliamentary elections results

Parliamentary lists (national minority lists in brackets)	Votes (%)	Seats
SNS	43	120
United Serbia	13.7	38
SPS	11.4	31
NADA	5.4	15
Moramo	4.7	13
Dveri	3.8	10
Zavetnici	3.7	10
Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (Hungarian)	1.6	5
Party of Justice and Reconciliation (Bosniak)	0.9	3
Together for Vojvodina (Croatian-Ruthenian)	0.6	2
SDA Sandzak (Bosniak)	0.5	2
The Coalition of the Valley Albanians (Albanian)	0.3	1
Other lists and invalid votes	10.4	0

Source: Republic Electoral Commission [REC]. 2022.

In the presidential elections, Aleksandar Vučić won a convincing 58.6% of the votes cast, securing another five-year term. The distribution of votes for the other candidates was similar to the parliamentary elections. The two centrist and green-left candidates won 21.6% of the votes, while the five right-wing candidates won 17.5% of the votes (Graph 1).

Graph 1. Presidential elections results



Source: Republic Electoral Commission [REC]. 2022.

Unlike the general elections, the Belgrade elections produced a very narrow majority for the ruling coalition (Table 3). The SNS and SPS lists won less than 50% of the votes, which translated to 56 out of 110 seats, and five opposition

parties won 54. The opposition SDS coalition won 2.8% of the votes and did not win any seats. While the opposition parties conceded the general election, due to the narrow majority and the noted irregularities, some opposition actors contested the results of the local elections in Belgrade.<sup>21</sup> On June 20, the city assembly elected Aleksandar Šapić, a former water polo player, as the mayor of Belgrade.

<b>Lists</b>	<b>Votes (%)</b>	<b>Seats</b>
SNS	38	48
United Serbia	21.3	26
Moramo	10.8	13
SPS	7	8
NADA	6.3	7
Zavetnici	3.5	4
Dveri	3.4	4
Other lists and invalid votes	9.7	0

Source: City Electoral Commission [CEC], 2022.

Even though the unofficial election results were known, there was a delay in announcing the final results of the parliamentary elections and the constitution of the parliament, which was caused by a single polling station. Three days after election day, the Coalition of Albanians of the Valley (*Koalicija Albanaca Doline*) submitted a request to annul the vote at the polling station in Veliki Trnovac (Bujanovac municipality). The local election commission confirmed the irregularity but did not annul the election results. This spurred the Coalition of Albanians to appeal to the REC, also unsuccessfully. Finally, they appealed to the Administrative Court which annulled the voting.<sup>22</sup>

After rerunning the election 5 times at the same polling station in Veliki Trnovac, the Albanian coalition eventually won enough votes to secure a parliamentary seat. But for this reason, the REC announced the final results on 5 July, a full 93 days after election day. The parliament was constituted on 1 August, 120 days after the elections, making 30 October the constitutional deadline for the formation of the government.

### **Where is Serbia after the elections?**

The election results gave both the government and the opposition some reasons to worry, as well as some reasons to be satisfied. Vučić received more votes than ever, but his ruling majority was weakened. Compared to the last presidential elections in 2017, Vučić received around 10% more votes, but the ruling SNS-SPS coalition received fewer votes in the parliamentary elections than in the 2016 elections. On the other side, both centrist/left and right-wing opposition

<sup>21</sup> N1. [Protest in front of Serbian central election commission](#). *N1*, 4 April 2022 (accessed: 13 August 2022).

<sup>22</sup> Crta. [Bujanovac – hronika jednog glasanja u pet činova](#) (accessed: 13 August 2022).

blocks received more votes than in 2016. The opposition parties made the most ground in Belgrade, but not enough to replace the SNS-SPS majority.

The immediate post-election period was marked by the unexpected signs of rapprochement between the leader of the largest oppositional coalition Dragan Đilas and the SNS leader Aleksandar Vučić. In light of the speculated Serbian foreign policy turn away from Russia following the invasion of Ukraine, questions rose about whether Đilas could support a more pro-Western government, and whether new Belgrade elections would be organized, due to the narrow majority. The meeting of the two politicians took place eight days after the elections but drew criticism from other opposition actors, which claimed Đilas has no mandate to negotiate with Vučić.<sup>23</sup> Talk around the new elections fell silent after a few weeks, leaving the public confused, and contributing to the general atmosphere of mistrust of party politics.

As the new parliament was not yet constituted, Vučić's second-term inauguration was organized in front of the old convocation of the parliament on 31 May, which meant the newly elected opposition MPs would not attend it. The new parliament was finally constituted on 1 August, marked by the opening speech by the presiding MP Vladeta Janković from United for Serbia, who used the media attention to criticize the state of democracy in Serbia, unfair elections, captured media, and constrained judiciary.<sup>24</sup> The ruling party MPs characterized this first speech by an opposition MP in the new parliament as an abuse of his presiding position.

As we are writing this election analysis, government formation has been announced for September, with Ana Brnabić in her third term as Prime Minister.<sup>25</sup> This will be the continuation of the SNS-SPS governing coalition, which was first formed in 2012, and the distribution of ministerial posts is still under negotiation.

These elections also brought some potentially positive changes. After an almost four-year absence, the opposition returned to both national and Belgrade assemblies. Opposition parties in hybrid regimes deal with many challenges, and Serbia is no exception, but after years of deinstitutionalization of politics, protests, and boycotts, there is now a new opportunity for the opposition to use democratic institutions to challenge the ruling party. Among the newly elected members of the parliament, there are some first-time MPs, many of whom are experienced civic activists, which promise to bring new energy and raise public awareness around the new political actors and issues that may have the potential to challenge the dominant political elite. This, however, largely depends on their ability to build and maintain sustainable relations with their fellow members of parliament in the opposition, many of whom are experienced party politicians, as well as with other engaged actors in the public sphere that can bring forward and boost the voices of citizens.

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<sup>23</sup> Dragojlo, Sasa. 2022. Suspicion in Serbia after Opposition Leader Meets President. *BIRN*, 12 April 2022 (accessed: 28 August 2022).

<sup>24</sup> Beta. 2022. Serbia Inaugurates 13th Parliament. *Briefing*, 1 August 2022 (accessed: 18 August 2022).

<sup>25</sup> Reuters. 2022. Serbian president nominates Ana Brnabic to serve as PM once again. *Reuters*, 27 August 2022 (accessed: 27 August 2022).

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