

Parliamentary elections in Serbia 21th June 2020

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State of
emergency
in Serbia

The postponing of the parliamentary elections, together with the provincial and local ones, from April 26, to June 21, 2020, happened in a previously unimaginable context. Due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, the Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić declared the state of emergency on March 15, 2020, so did the Prime Minister Ana Brnabić, characterized by unconditional loyalty to the President, and the Speaker of the Assembly, while the Parliamentary Members refused their confirmation until April 29. At the end of this exceptional period, on May 4, the Serbian President declared the new election date. On May 6, it was again him who proclaimed the immediate suspension of the state of emergency, including the end of the – hitherto by the police strictly controlled – curfews and the end of some other restrictions of public life. However, the resentment on the overweening state restrictions in relation to the constitutional framework has not disappeared.

56,07%
Overall voter turnout in the
2016 elections

19 competing political coalitions

250 members of the parliament
will be elected

Constitutional
framework

It was obvious that the Serbian President and the Serbian government as his mouthpiece exploited the situation to implement some of the harshest socio-political measures in entire Europe. Allegedly, to contain the virus, the SNS (Sprska Napredna Stranka) led government declared the state of emergency instead of the national protocol for the case of catastrophes. There is a slight but significant difference in the Serbian constitution when it comes to that – it enables the government to govern through decrees, and is restricted to situations, which endanger the survival of the state, such as war or violent uprisings. Another regulation was blatantly ignored with a cynic argumentation: in order to declare the state of emergency, the parliament has to vote for it by majority, the Serbian government decided to bypass this obstacle by assessing, that the National Assembly (Narodna Skupština) cannot meet because of health care reasons. In the aftermath of declaring the state of emergency, the parliament was put on leave until the situation would change.

Deep
polarization

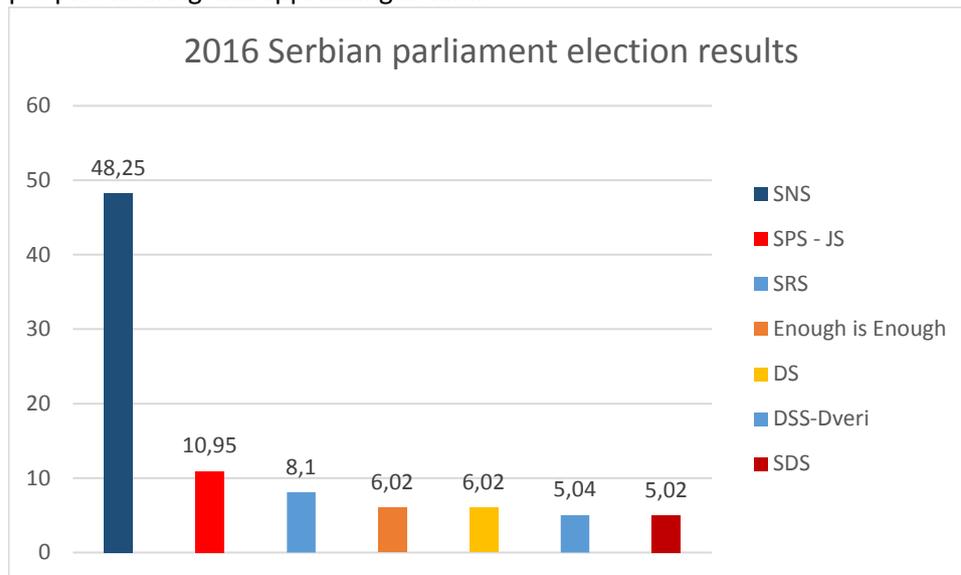
As a result, the global COVID-19 crisis deepened the already existing internal frictions within the Serbian society. The deep political polarization of the approx. 6.7 million officially registered voters has mostly led to the following two factions: unreflected claqueurs of the ruling party or vicious critiques and opponents. The already existing problems in the country fueled the positions of both sides tremendously. While the first group applauded and celebrated the implemented measures by President Vučić and generously ignored the override of the constitution, the other side took advantage from the ambivalence of government statements, the questionable implementation of the curfew and the growing dissatisfaction within the population of the big cities living practically incarcerated in their apartments. The deep division also revolves around the question of a possible election boycott, in a country where the average voter turnout has been for decades just under 53.9%, understood as a sign of system criticism.

Climate of intimidation

The latest controversial debates already started in summer 2019, when almost all opposition parties in Serbia announced to boycott parliamentary elections on all levels to be held in 2020, after already starting with their boycott of the parliament in spring. The reason for their boycott lies in their deep dissatisfaction and belief that fair and free elections are not possible in Serbia anymore. Several months before, in 2018, civil society actors started to demonstrate against the climate of intimidation and political pressure by the government that had pushed the opposition and free media into a state of inactivity. The demonstrations all over Serbia in the beginning of 2019 were the most intense demonstrations since Slobodan Milošević’s overthrow and the democratic change in the year 2000.

Revival of the 1990s

The situation right now though, reminds very much of the desolate political situation during the 90’s of the last century – in some aspects even worse. Backlashes on free media, a massive pro-government propaganda machinery based on both media and social media, intimidation of public sector employees to rally for the ruling SNS, and obstructions to the rule of law in some delicate cases against party officials simply illustrate “stabilocratic” structures in Serbia. Stabilocracy defines the political strategy, or system of pretending state stability, while in fact legal institutions and the rule of law are weakened and destabilized. In that sense, dystopian visions of Serbia’s future came up after the Serbian President’s speech in front of countless screens on May 17, showing people cheering and applauding at him.



There are no existing opinion polls for the upcoming elections

Geopolitical interests

Despite many attempts, even by the European Union, to moderate between the government and the opposition, the boycott is still ongoing. The EU however has lost its glance and opened up a vacuum related to the long-year stagnation of Serbia’s accession process that on the other side facilitated the influence of other global players such as Russia and China. As a result, the ruling party SNS tries to “walk on both sides”, and to maintain close ties to both the EU and Russia, as well as to the People’s Republic of China. Its coalition partner, the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) under Ivica Dačić, shows no sympathy for an EU accession, but seeks closer ties to China. Their current foreign political positions can be also related to the fact that both Vučić and Dačić were important protagonists of the former Milošević regime, not only during the time of the NATO bombing in 1999, that has generally led to public skepticism regarding the NATO accession of Serbia’s neighbours.

Two major opposition groups

The deeply divided opposition in Serbia is currently rallied among two major groups, one that is represented in the parliament, and a second that is relatively new and growing but yet not represented in the National Assembly. In 2018 the major opposition parties such as the Democratic Party (DS, liberal), the Party for Freedom and Justice (SSP, social-democratic), the People’s Party (NS,

Alliance for Serbia

conservative) and Dveri (“Doors”, nationalist-conservative) decided to join forces and to overcome the splintering from the past. The new founded Alliance for Serbia (SZS) seeks to prevent a shift into political marginalization and vanishing of an effective opposition. Except of their only common goal – the removal of the current governing coalition –, they are not able to overcome political differences and remain very heterogenic and even antagonistic towards each other.

Movement of Free Citizens

On the other side, a new party emerged in the eve of the protests in 2019 under the leadership of the well-known actor Sergej Trifunović, who tries to assemble people dissatisfied with both the current SNS government and the poor work of the opposition – the Movement of Free Citizens (PSG). Even though the PSG did not organize the protests, but rather came out as a product of these, the PSG enjoys the greatest trust among the protest participants. As a party PSG is centre-left orientated, with a focus on social justice, anti-corruption, environmentalism and participative democracy. Despite its good performance in polls, the party refuses to take part in the forthcoming parliamentary elections on June 21, 2020.

Divide et impera

Currently it is not possible to estimate what the results for the upcoming election will be, mainly because of the boycott and a legal reform. Prime Minister Ana Brnabić (former unaligned, now SNS) declared, that the census for getting mandates in the Serbian parliament will be lowered from 5% to 3% in order to give small parties the possibility to participate in the work of the chamber. This controversial move can rather be seen as an attempt to further split the opposition – similar to the 1990s – than to contribute to “democratization” of the country. Many subsidiary straw man parties were founded over the time by the SNS to hinder the opposition to be efficient; those parties could now enter the parliament and evolve their controversial influence to a maximum.

Boycott

The main question finally might not be about which party will win the coming parliamentary elections, since the ruling parties, above all the SNS, can stage themselves as the most trustworthy parties, not only based on their broad media control, but also due to their popularity in rural areas. It is the question whether or not the election boycott might lead to a less than 50% turnout that would hinder the legal recognition of the election results.

Party ¹	Main Candidate	Political ideology (Affiliation EP)
A Bell not a Party	Čedomir Jovanović	coalition, liberal (ALDE Party associated)
<i>Akademik Muamer Zukorlić</i>	<i>Muamer Zukorlić</i>	<i>minority party</i>
<i>Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians</i>	<i>István Pasztor</i>	<i>minority party (EPP associated)</i>
Broom 2020 - DSS	Boris Koščal	coalition, centre-right
Healthy Serbia – Better Serbia	Milan Stamatović	decentralist, pragmatic
Leviathan – We live for Serbia	Pavle Bihali	Far-right, environmentalism
Movement for the Restoration of the Kingdom of Serbia	Žika Gojković	conservative, monarchist

1 Frontrunner parties are marked with a star dot, minority parties for which no electoral threshold exists are marked in italic

New Communist Party of Yugoslavia		communist
New Party	Zoran Živković	liberal
People's Block/New Serbia	Velimir Ilić	catch-all
SDA Sandžak	<i>Sulejman Ugljanin</i>	<i>minority party</i>
Serbian Party Oathkeepers	Milica Đurđević	conservative, anti-NATO
Serbian Patriotic Alliance	Aleksandar Šapić	conservative
Serbian Progressive Party (SNS)* "Aleksandar Vučić – for our children"	Aleksandar Vučić	national-conservative (EPP associated)
Serbian Radical Party*	Vojislav Šešelj	far-right
Serbian Right	Miša Vacić	extreme right, alt-right
Socialist Party of Serbia* – United Serbia	Ivica Dačić	formally centre-left
United Democratic Serbia	Marko Đurišić	coalition, in general centre-left
Union „Bridge“	Slobodan Perić	topic party, Serbian diaspora
1 of 5 Millions	Valentina Reković	centre-left, liberal, protest party