

Serbian presidential election 2017: Can Vučić pull a Putin-Medvedev?

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Serbia's ruling party, the SNS, has announced that their candidate at this spring's presidential election will be none other than the Prime Minister himself – Aleksandar Vučić. Will this bold move allow the SNS to keep their hold on power? [Tena Prelec](#) outlines the scenarios, taking stock of the controversies that have accompanied Serbian politics over the past year.



The presidential election due to take place in Serbia this spring promises to be a significant affair. Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić had already stated that if his preferred candidate does not win, he will step down from his post. In recent times, the choice of politicising and personalising a ballot has backfired for three European PMs – [David Cameron](#), [Matteo Renzi](#) and [Boyko Borisov](#) – so it will be interesting to see whether Vučić can pull this one off.

So high are the stakes that Vučić has eventually decided to stand himself, as [announced](#) by the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) on 14 February. This means that the ruling party will not back the current President Tomislav Nikolić in his bid for re-election. The choice has allegedly come on the back of public opinion research which has even involved showing three different electoral spots, with different candidates, and seeing how respondents reacted.

Why is the PM so preoccupied with keeping control over the institutions, given the relatively wide majority he enjoys? In part, this is to be attributed to his style of governing: he adopts an undeniably top-down, controlling approach. And yet, dismissing these concerns as the caprices of an ego-maniac would obscure significant internecine developments that have occurred within Vučić's block.

Rumours hinting at internal fractions within the ruling coalition seem to have found confirmation in the fact that it took almost four months for Vučić to form a government after [last year's election](#). The PM himself had stated that he 'can't form a government with backstabbers' (presumably hinting at the Socialist Party of Serbia – SPS), that 'the long wait is not just a whim, there are serious problems', and that 'the government might be formed by someone else in case he fails', thus feeding rumours that [external pressures](#) – perhaps from Russia or from the West – were determining the spheres of influence. Either way, there is little doubt that at least two internal factions that are fighting over posts and resources are giving the PM a hard time in keeping the desired control.

On the other hand, keeping a constant atmosphere of tension plays favourably in convincing voters that Serbia needs a strong hand. Speaking of the upcoming presidential election, the PM has [depicted the country's situation](#) in stark terms, as a choice of the path Serbia will take in the future. Politically, the intention here is certainly to present himself (once again) as the only candidate who can keep Serbia firmly on the road towards European integration. In the past, he has been able to obtain the trust of western leaders and of the EU institutions, and there is no real sign of this support faltering for now.



Aleksandar Vučić. Credits: [Zoran Žestić](#) / Tanjug (CC BY-SA 4.0)

Indeed, Vučić has been skilled in ensuring that his mix of credentials (a nationalist turned European reformist) make him ideally placed to carve a large middle ground encompassing citizens with a positive vision of the EU and those who place themselves on the right of the political spectrum, who prefer a 'strong leader' and are partial to nationalistic rhetoric.

As for the challengers, among the first to announce their candidature was Vuk Jeremić, a former Minister of Foreign Affairs who is said to have had his eyes set on the presidential ballot for a while, recently running a solid race for the post of UN Secretary General with the likely knowledge that his chances of getting through were rather low, but laying the ground for a new contest. A Cambridge and Harvard graduate and an anti-Milošević dissident in his early days in politics, Jeremić describes himself as 'fervently pro-European', but is also a figure capable of garnering some enthusiasm from nationalist-minded Serbs due to his [strenuous commitment](#) to keep Kosovo part of Serbia while he was at the Foreign Ministry.

More recently, Serbia's Ombudsman Saša Janković announced his already expected candidature after handing in the official resignation from his post. Janković stated that he is [standing for President](#) to 'return meaning to that institution, ensuring that it serves all citizens, and not only one man'. He is expected to elicit support from the liberally-minded opposition in urban centres and has [received the backing](#) of the Democratic Party (DS). It is however yet unclear – though at this point unlikely – whether another opposition candidate, Miroslava Milenović of Enough is Enough, will stand as well. Jeremić, Janković and (potentially) Milenović would be competing for the vote of broadly similar portions of the electorate.

And then there is Vojislav Šešelj, the head of the ultra-nationalist Radical Party who has only recently been [acquitted by the ICTY](#), where he was tried on nine counts of crimes against humanity and war crimes. Šešelj, who very publicly rooted for Donald Trump in the run up to the US elections, is expected to attract a sizeable share of the vote (about 10 percent) in the first round in case he will throw his hat in the ring. Finally, Boško Obradović, leader of the far-right party Dveri, has also announced he will stand.

The presidential election – a two-round affair – foreseen for the spring is therefore bound to be another testing ground for the ruling coalition and for the opposition alike. Currently, polls give Vučić near-certainty of victory, perhaps even in the first round. A question remains, however, as to whether Vučić's appeal will be enough in a

hypothetical second round, as opposition voters would in that case certainly unite around either Jeremić or Janković, should one of them reach second place.

Serbia's voters, and especially those from the country's capital, are not unanimous in their affection for the PM. His party had already lost some ground at the [parliamentary elections last April](#), after which scandals involving alleged vote-rigging and the illegal demolition of houses in the centre of Belgrade triggered widespread demonstrations and fed civil society's discontent towards the government. It is also worth noting that the mayor of Belgrade, Siniša Mali, a member of the ruling party and close Vučić ally, is once again at the centre of corruption allegations – this time being directly [accused by his ex wife](#). However, while the ruling party's appeal might have started to falter in urban centres, Vučić's party remains strong in the countryside. Big shifts in power look unlikely for now.

If Vučić manages to change roles in power, in a reverse version of what Putin did in Russia in 2012, we don't know as yet who might be the present-day Medvedev to replace him as Prime Minister. Another open question is whether new parliamentary elections will accompany the presidential ballot – a possibility that has already been raised by the PM. It would be the 16th time Serbian citizens have been asked to vote for their parliament since 1990: another year, another electoral drama.

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