

Serbian presidential elections: The diaspora vote

Serbs will be called to the polls on 2 April 2017 (1 April in certain locations abroad) for the first round of this year's presidential election, with a run-off foreseen for two weeks later. EUROPP has run an online survey to get an insight into the attitudes of a somewhat neglected section of the electorate: the Serbian diaspora. Our respondents have shown widespread rejection of the current government, overwhelmingly opting for new candidates. The answers received were accompanied by a high number of testimonies lamenting barriers to taking part in the voting process. Analysis by EUROPP Editor Tena Prelec. **Update, 3 April:** [read a follow-up to our study, explaining how it fares as compared to the actual results.](#)



A rally in Belgrade, Serbia. Credits: [Ne Davimo Beograd](#).

The vote and the diaspora

Conservative estimates put the number of Serbs living abroad at over 2 million (of which about **670,000** are living in EU countries) – a large contingent, if compared to a population of about 7 million living in Serbia. The voting registration process for the diaspora was announced on 3 March and voters had eight days (until 11 March) to sign up. Polling stations will be opened only in places where at least 100 voters have registered. Postal voting is not allowed, and voters are compelled to cast their ballots in the same place in both rounds, thus making it impossible for those travelling to Serbia for Easter to express their preference in a hypothetical run-off.

The candidates: is the opposition staging a revival?

The Prime Minister and leader of the Serbian Progressive Party, Aleksandar Vučić, decided to **stand for the presidency** after internal polling showed that the outgoing President and co-party member, Tomislav Nikolić, would risk losing the contest. Vučić is the clear frontrunner, with some polls even giving him the victory in the first round.

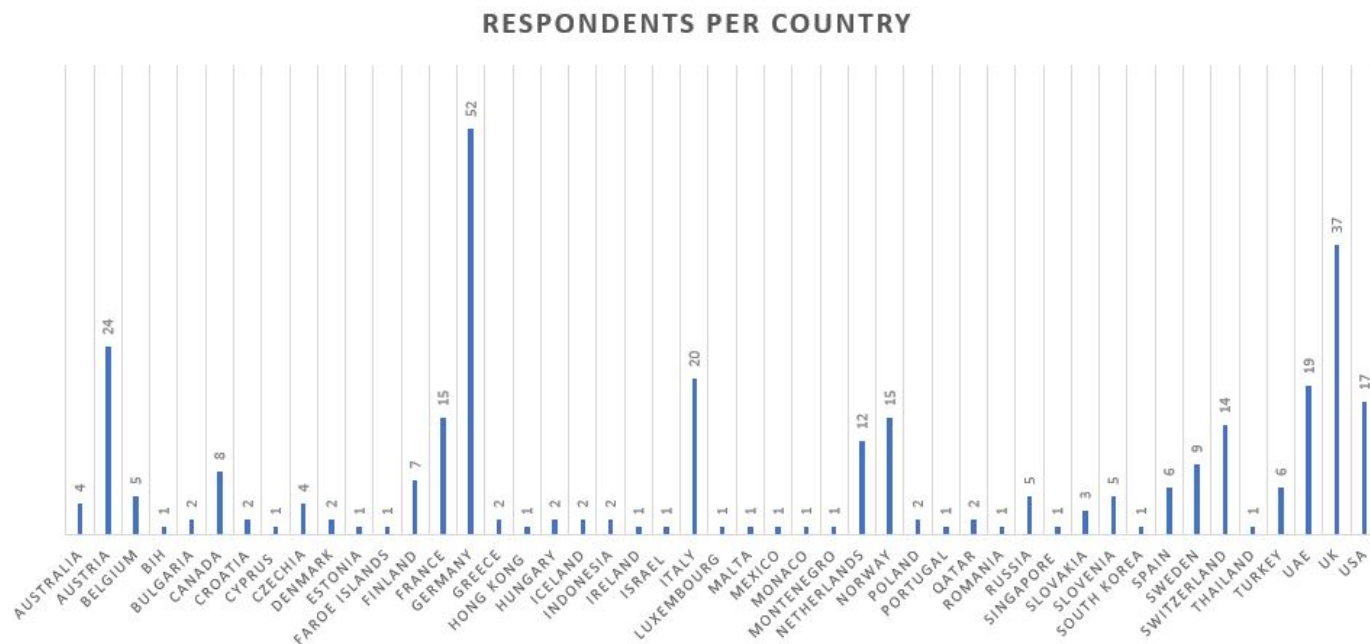
This time, however, new challengers from several strands of the opposition have thrown their hats in the ring: former Ombudsman Saša Janković, former Foreign Minister and UN General Assembly President Vuk Jeremić, comedian Luka Maksimović (running as the spoof candidate

Ljubiša ‘Beli’ Preletacevic), and Enough is Enough leader **Saša Radulović**. Other challengers include Vojislav Šešelj, leader of the nationalist Radical Party, and Boško Obradović, who heads the far right movement ‘Dveri’. The campaign has thus been an exceptionally lively one, with large rallies and the spoof candidate ‘Beli’ gaining very **significant traction** in the last weeks of the campaign. For our early preview of the electoral contest explaining Aleksandar Vučić’s decision to stand, [read here](#).

The survey

We received 322 responses from 47 countries, thus achieving good geographic coverage:

Figure 1. Respondents per country



Source: EUROPP survey, March 2017

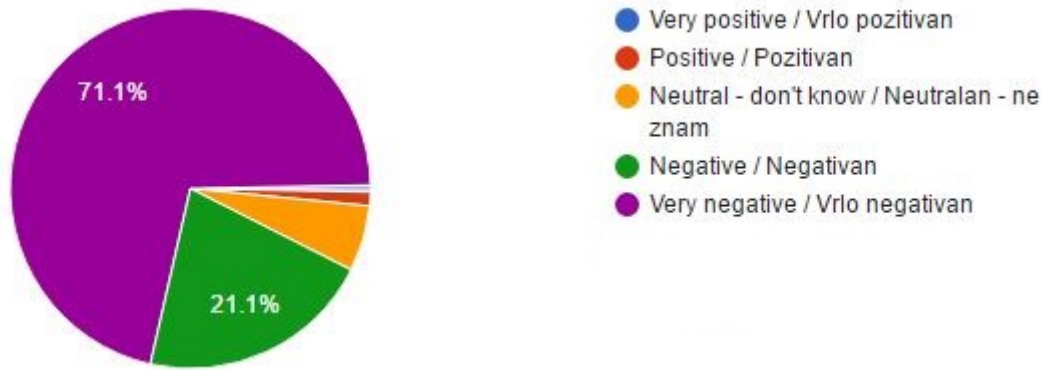
The survey has been shared with individuals and closed diaspora groups, rather than publishing the link more widely. It should be noted that the results obtained have some limitations: starting from an outlet linked to academia, we expect the immediate snowballing effect to have reached higher educated strata; furthermore, we can assume that participation in an online survey is made more likely if an individual is already politically active.

We have therefore attempted to correct for these foreseen biases by pro-actively contacting respondents who are part of more traditional or nationalistic-leaning groups, reaching out to communities linked to the Serbian Church, and even by flagging it up to diaspora groups of the Serbian Progressive Party, all the while avoiding actors linked to the political opposition to disseminate it in their circles. Even so, the results obtained are striking insofar as they highlight a very widespread rejection of the current government and of the Serbian Prime Minister in particular among the diaspora members surveyed.

Rejection of the current government and of Aleksandar Vučić

The most striking response regards the opinion of the current Serbian government: over 70 percent of our respondents chose to tick the ‘very negative’ box.

Figure 2. What is your overall opinion of the Serbian government at present?



Source: EUROPP survey, March 2017

In terms of the voting intentions, our sample gave overwhelming support for the former Ombudsman Saša Janković. We also asked respondents to indicate who they think their friends abroad and those in Serbia are going to vote for – expecting we would get more responses in favour of Aleksandar Vučić, but it was only marginally so: 24 out of 322 respondents think that their acquaintances in Serbia are going to vote for Vučić, 7 that their friends abroad are going to do so, and merely 3 respondents have indicated that they are going to cast their ballots for him themselves. This seems to point to the fact that members of the diaspora are connected with like-minded people at home. 'Beli' comes second in voting intentions, followed by Saša Radulović and Vuk Jeremić: 18.9 per cent (light green section) have indicated that they will not be voting, for most of whom this is an obligated choice – see 'barriers to the vote' section below.

Figure 3. Who will you vote for on 2 April?

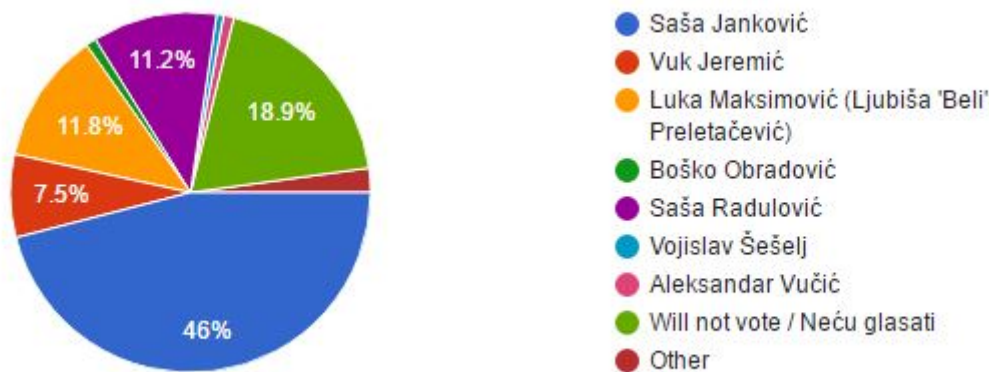


Figure 4. Who do you think most of your family and friends ABROAD will vote for on 2 April?

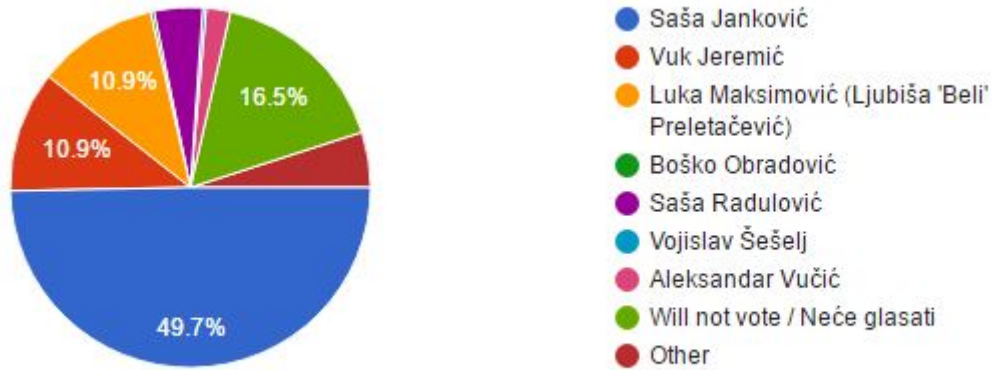
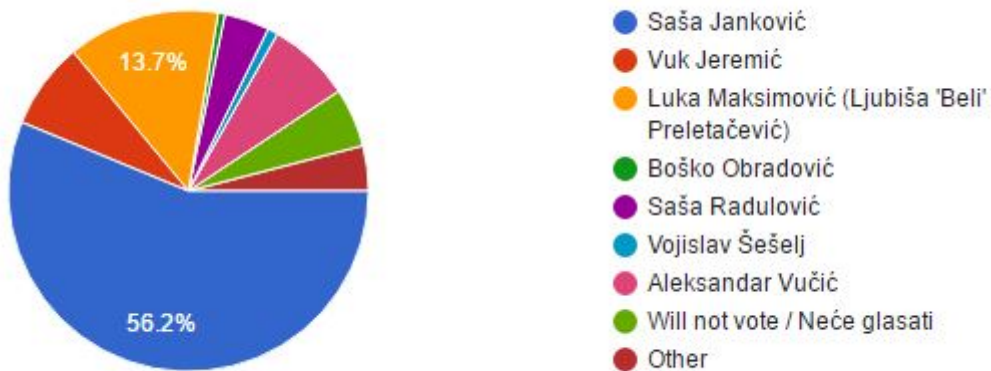


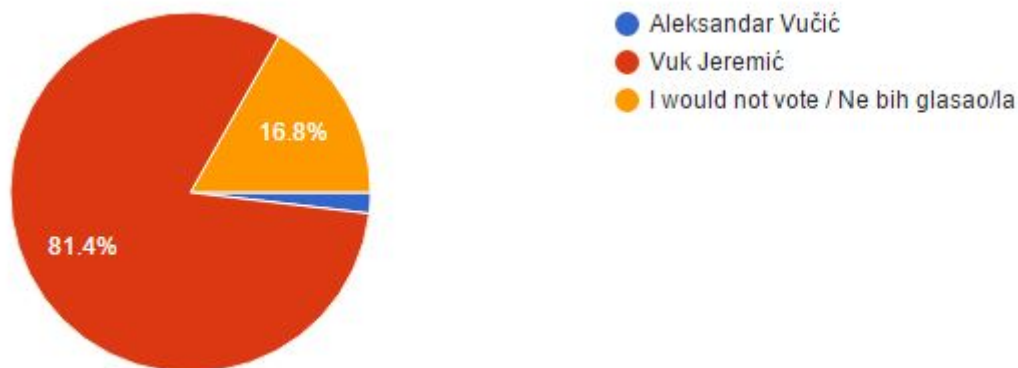
Figure 5. Who do you think most of your family and friends IN SERBIA will vote for on 2 April?

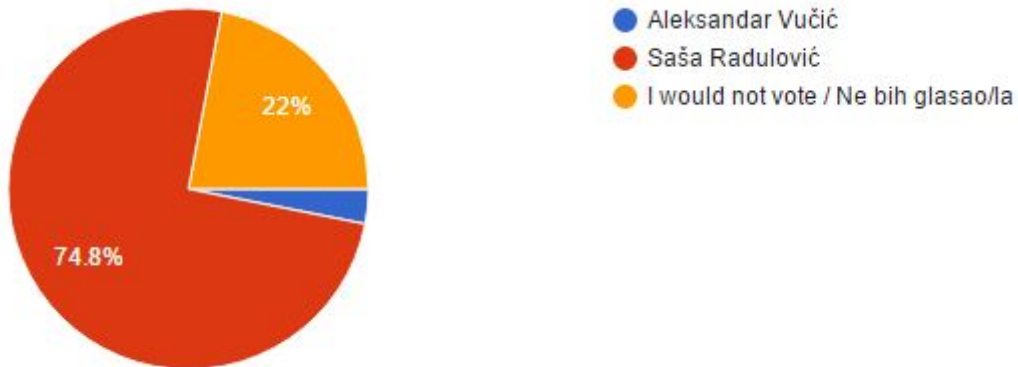
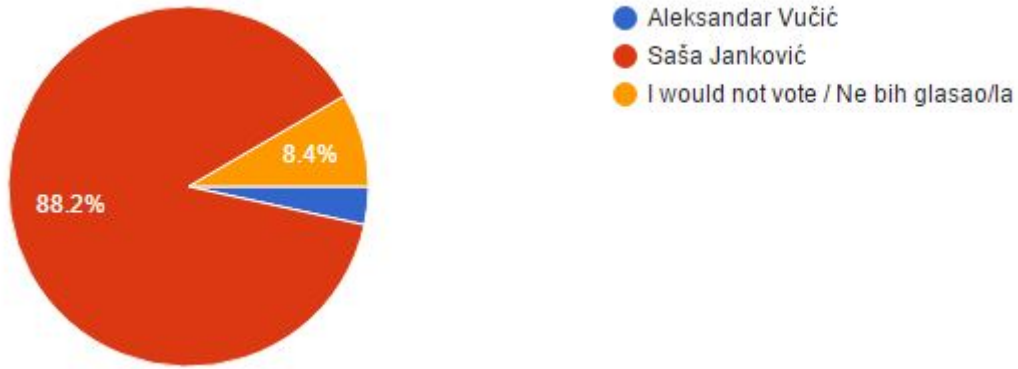


Source: EUROPP survey, March 2017

In case of a run-off, the situation becomes even starker, with our respondents choosing to vote for other candidates over Vučić in all cases except for a highly unlikely tête-à-tête with right-winger Vojislav Šešelj:

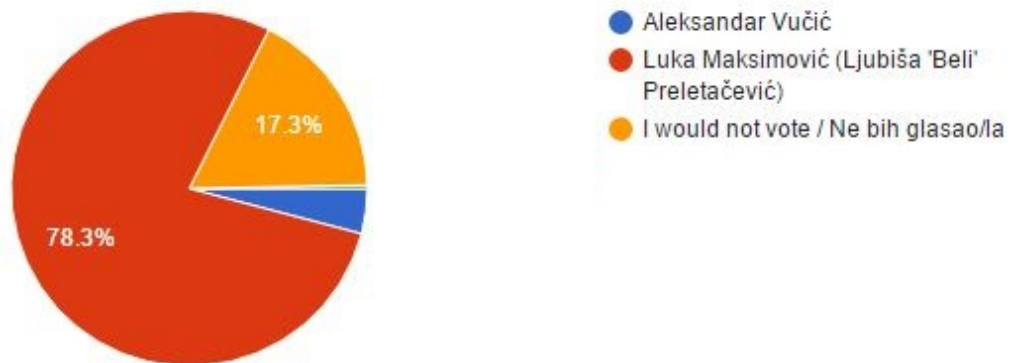
Figure 6. In case of a run-off on 16 April, who would you vote for in each of the following scenarios?

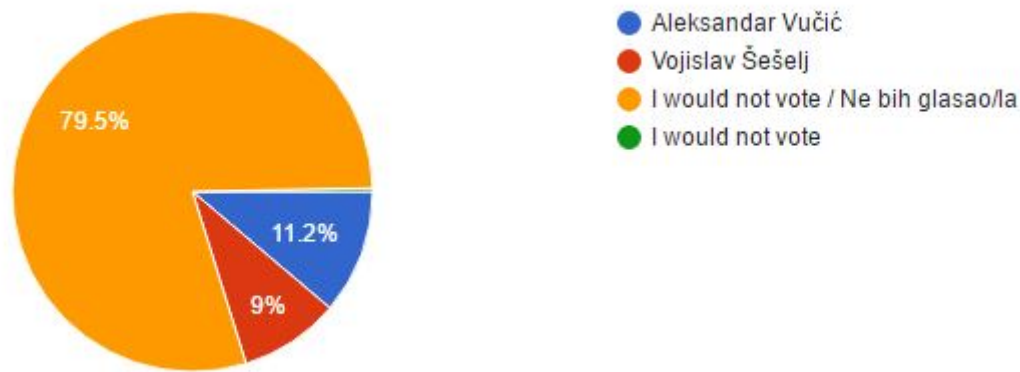




4) Aleksandar Vučić vs Luka Maksimović (Ljubiša 'Beli' Preletačević)

(318 responses)





Source: EUROP survey, March 2017

Few respondents defended Vučić's work:

I started following Serbian politics with the rise of Vučić. He is the only candidate that I can follow because he is discussing relevant issues, economy!!! Everyone else is always involved in some kind of name calling and revolution.

Or expressed mixed opinions:

Vučić gets my points for understanding the importance of both Germany/the West and Russia. One should not be forsaken for the other and a good politician should be able to play both sides. He understands the importance of PR and media for his own gains and the country's image abroad. He is a better politician than all of the other candidates but he has become a modern dictator, oppressing people by controlling the media.

But most of our respondents expressed strong desire for renewal and markedly negative opinions of the government – here are a few:

We need to build a new system. A new society. We do not have time nor strength for the [further] implementation of something which is deviant in substance – the result will always be the same.

There are many of us who would like to come back and invest in Serbia. To do so, we need strong institutions and a State that works. Most of us have left because we felt like second-rate citizens in our own country. Let's start from a radical change of the taxation system and the judiciary.

Dictatorship. The Serbian Third Reich is upon us if we do not bring Vučić down.

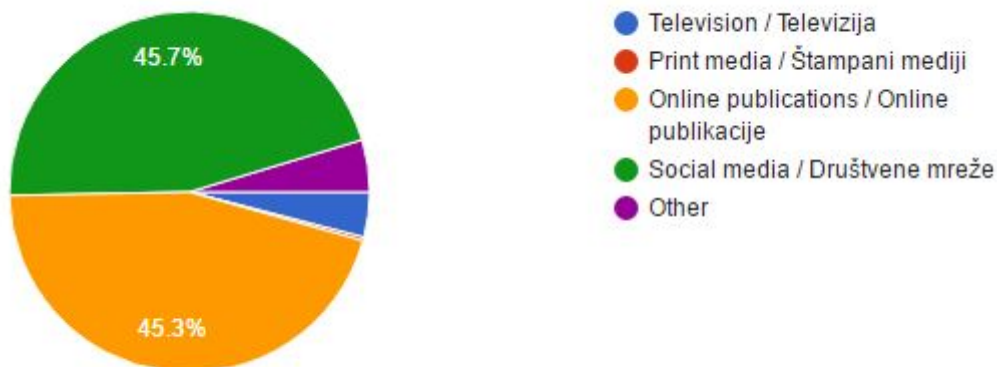
The moment when the current government came to power has been decisive in my decision to leave Serbia. I realised then that I cannot stay in my own country.

Partocracy and autocracy are destroying us.

[The government is] criminal, totalitarian, incompetent, immoral, shameless, corrupt, not fit for purpose.

Information: online

The diaspora appears to overwhelmingly draw information on politics from the web, with a conspicuous absence of TV and print media (in contrast to what happens in Serbia). This may partially account for the discrepancy between our results and most of the surveys conducted in Serbia. Media freedom and media access have been **long lamented issues**.



This problem is exemplified by the Serbian Progressive Party's **takeover of the front pages of all major newspapers** on the Thursday before the elections. Television is no less of an issue: media analysis agency Kliping **has found** that an astonishing 51.15 per cent of air time dedicated to the presidential elections has been given to Aleksandar Vučić (the figure increases to 67 per cent if his appearances as prime minister are to be counted).



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Barriers to the vote

Many of our respondents lamented that certain aspects in the way the voting procedure for the diaspora has been organised will make it impossible for them to vote in one (or both) of the rounds. The most widespread problems are the need to vote in the same place in both rounds (with a hypothetical run-off taking place on Easter day) and the scarcity of polling stations, as they have only been opened in cities with at least 100 registered voters. Most respondents have indicated the postal vote as a desirable alternative.

Ugljesa Grušić, a law lecturer at University College London (UK), shared his experience with us:

I will be in Serbia during the first round and in London during the second round of the election. I emailed the embassy to ask whether I could register to vote in London in the run-off. The embassy replied that they received a “notification” from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stating that it is not possible to change the voting location after the first round. I replied to this email quoting Article 23 of the Law on a Single Electoral Roll, the Constitution and the European human rights instruments. I asked them to send me the text of the instruction and to justify their refusal to allow me to exercise my voting right. I received the following reply (my translation): “Unfortunately, we cannot send you the original text of the notification that we received from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, since it is part of official communication between the Ministry and the Embassy, but we posted this information on the website”. Needless to say, I felt infuriated and totally powerless when I saw this reply. I feel that there is nothing I can do about this. Serbia is at the moment a country where the constitution and the laws can be suspended by a “notification” issued by a Government ministry, which notification no one is able to see.

Further testimonies have reached us from throughout the globe.

France:

I live at a 1000km distance from Paris and for me it is unfeasible to go there on voting day. There is the need of at least one more polling station for central-southern France.

Portugal:

I can't vote. It should be possible to vote without it being time-consuming, complicated and costly – the whole process is quite demotivating.

Australia:

I am not allowed to vote because there is a rule that there need to be at least 100 Serbian people registered in Sydney. I think I should still be allowed to vote, regardless of how many people in my city also want to vote, it is my duty as a Serbian citizen.

Austria:

We got a too short, maybe 5 working days, period to register to vote here. There was no notification anywhere.

Singapore:

There is no Serbian embassy in Singapore, we need a place where to vote.

Conclusion

What can we make of these results? First, we should be clear that despite the negative responses we received in relation to Vučić and the government, the current Prime Minister is currently expected to win the contest by a large margin. Several of the latest Serbian polls have Vučić at above 50 per cent support, and anything other than a comfortable victory would be a major surprise – though not an unthinkable one.

But the responses we received suggest that behind the strong levels of support Vučić enjoys, there is nevertheless a great deal of anger toward the PM and the government, both among the diaspora and those in Serbia. Some of this anger no doubt reflects the sample of people who were willing to respond to our survey, however this has also been reflected more widely during the campaign with support for new candidates, including the spoof candidate Ljubiša Preletačević. If Vučić does secure his expected victory in the election, he will have to deal with this potential dissent in office.

And a great deal of anger also exists in relation to the electoral process itself. The frequent complaints we received from the diaspora about obstacles to voting build on concerns that have been raised in relation to previous elections. Moreover, there is a wider preoccupation, evident both in our survey and in **recent discourse** around the election, about irregularities and media bias within Serbia. The size of the electoral roll, insufficient efforts to update registrations and reported **vote coercion** instances are some of the most common complaints and this anger is likely to

persist long after the votes have been counted. While the immediate focus of the election coverage may well be limited to which round of voting Vučić can secure his victory in, this will not be the end of the story. And if the contest does go to a second round, then there may yet be more drama than many have expected.

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Note: This article gives the views of the survey respondents and of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Special thanks for their help in designing the survey, ensuring appropriate dissemination and in conducting this analysis go to: Milica Popović, Bogdan Marković, Slobodan Tomić, Natasha Kocsis and Stuart Brown.

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