

Experts react: Aleksandar Vučić wins Serbia's presidential election

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Serbia held a presidential election on 2 April, with Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić projected to have won the contest in the first round. We asked some of our contributors for their response to the election, what the result means for Vučić, and where it leaves the country moving forward.

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Dimitar Bechev: “Vučić's election paves the way to the consolidation of a one-man regime in Serbia”

Vučić's election paves the way to the consolidation of a one-man regime in Serbia. It also turns the clock back to informal presidential rule, as practised under Milošević and later by Boris Tadić, despite the parliamentary model promulgated by successive constitutions. Externally, the new head of state's big selling point will be predictability. To the EU, he promises reasonable relations with ex-Yugoslav neighbours. He may tone down tensions with Croatia, blaming the past crisis on the outgoing President, Tomislav Nikolić, and show good will toward Prishtina. Of course, with the important proviso that the EU turns a blind eye to what is going on inside Serbia in key areas such as the rule of law or media freedom. To Moscow, Vučić means more of the same: a partner they can do business with but certainly not a leader prepared to make a u-turn away from the West and throw Serbia into the arms of the Kremlin. That foreign policy seems to resonate with a majority of Serbian citizens, many of whom might harbour fond memories of Tito's balancing act between East and West.



Whether Vučić matches Broz' longevity in power remains to be seen. Thus far, it is fair to say he outdid both of his erstwhile patrons, Vojislav Šešelj and Nikolić, who are effectively out of politics. Yet the problem is that there is no apparent challenger in the liberal democratic part of the spectrum either. Ljubiša Preletačević Beli's high result is as much a testament to Serbs' famous sense of humour as a sign of apathy, resignation and disenchantment. The sooner a credible alternative emerges to Vučić's dominance over Serbian political life, the better it will be for Serbia as a country and society.

Dimitar Bechev – *Atlantic Council / University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill*

Dimitar Bechev is a Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center and a research fellow at the Center for Slavic, Eurasian, and East European Studies, University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill. He was formerly a Visiting Fellow at LSEE Research on South Eastern Europe (LSE European Institute) and Director of the Sofia Office at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) where he covered Turkey and the Western Balkans.

Eric Gordy: “The election was over before it began”

This election was over before it began, for the same reason that last year's parliamentary elections were. The tight control that the governing party exercises over media, information, employment, and the distribution of benefits means that there is no level playing field and voters are not in a position to freely make an informed choice. Some fault lies with the opposition as well, which has failed both to press the issue of pre-election conditions and to communicate with the parts of the public outside of its own closed circles. The best piece of news to come out of the election is that voters in Serbia have soundly rejected the extreme right.



The satirical candidate Ljubiša Preletačević Beli impressed many observers with a third place finish, but it is not certain what this represents. Beli's satire was superficial and obvious, dedicated to making the point that politicians are self-seeking and vulgar. If Mr Luka Maksimović has any substantive ideas, now would be a useful time to start letting people know what they are, and to really enter the great tradition of Balkan satire.

Eric Gordy – *UCL*

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Sonja Avlijaš and Abel Bojar: “The impact of ‘foreign intervention’ should not be overemphasised”

The opposition has accused Vladimir Putin and Angela Merkel of openly supporting Vučić's candidacy one week before the election. In reality, he had met with both of them in his current capacity as the Prime Minister of Serbia, while concurrently running an election campaign for presidency. This was subsequently interpreted as open support to Vučić's campaign, both by Vučić himself as well as the opposition. Last night, we heard that it is illegal in Germany for the current PM (i.e. Chancellor) to run for president, so Merkel was going against her own country's law. Yet, since the Serbian constitution allows the serving PM to run for presidency, it is not clear why the German law would be relevant in this case.



While it is clear that Vučić used these meetings strategically and subsequently spun them in the media in order to

“demonstrate” Putin’s and Merkel’s support for his campaign, from a diplomatic point of view, it is not clear why Merkel or Putin were expected to publicly denounce these claims. After all, they would risk alienating an important political figure with high voter support, while, based on the polls, none of the other candidates were credible alternatives which stood high chances of beating him in the election. Finally, foreign media has not been very interested in the Serbian election at all, which suggests the very marginal importance that this event had in the European public arena. As the saying goes, damned if you intervene, damned if you don’t. There have been plenty of domestic obstacles to a different election result, so it seems superfluous to overemphasise the impact of ‘foreign intervention’ on the outcome.



Sonja Avlijas – *Sciences Po*

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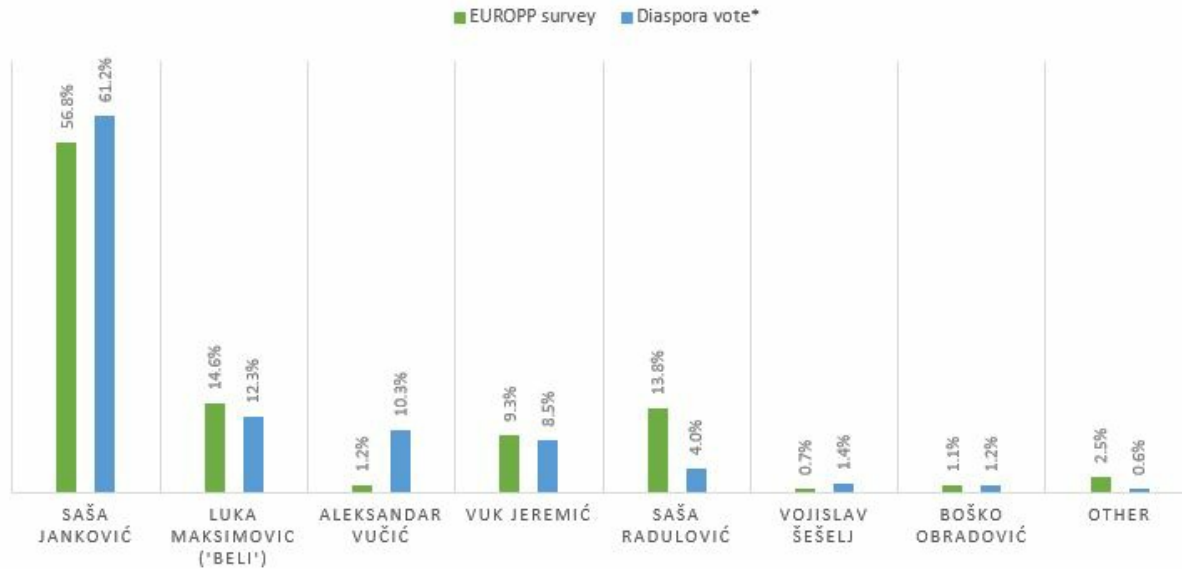
Tena Prelec: “Voters are split between two distinct groups: pro- and anti-Vučić”

Vučić’s victory was a largely pre-announced one. Those following the contest via social media or viewing it from abroad, however, were easily fooled into thinking that a second round was almost inevitable. Although Vučić was polling above 50 per cent, the echo chambers of voters disillusioned with the government kept reassuring them that virtually nobody they knew was going to vote for the PM-turn-president that day. And yet, once again, Vučić dominated the contest.



This points to deep divisions within Serbian society, and at the existence of two groups that hardly have any interaction with one another. It also seems to find confirmation in the [analysis of the diaspora vote](#) that we carried out over the last week of the campaign. Our survey gives an insight into the general trend of the vote among the diaspora, which has been marked by significant barriers preventing people from exercising their right to vote (a reform of the voting procedure for Serbs abroad is urgently needed) and, as the figure below shows, by a strong preference for the former Ombudsman Saša Janković:

SERBIAN DIASPORA VOTE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION 2017



Source: EUROPPE, March 2017; Preliminary results as reported by the embassies of 12 cities: London, New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Beijing, Washington DC, San Francisco, Oslo, The Hague, Stockholm, Helsinki, Berlin. Data compiled by the author.

Interestingly, when we asked respondents to indicate whom their friends in Serbia were going to vote for, the preference for Janković was even higher than the one indicated in their own voting intentions. The actors from the diaspora thus appear to be connected with like-minded people at home, who are themselves not Vučić supporters.

The election has therefore exposed the increasingly clearer profiling of two distinct groups within Serbian society – one outward facing that is critical of the government, and a more traditional and rural one – interacting very little with one another. The key discriminant may well be the media: while television and print are the main sources of information at home, 91 per cent of our respondents indicated that their preferred channel of information about Serbian politics is the web.

Going forward, the ability of the opposition to bridge this divide and become more visible for the large portion of voters who prefer Vučić's rule is crucial in addressing some of the big obstacles they face. This is obviously easier said than done, considering the [hegemony](#) over the media scene enjoyed by the PM-president. Uniting the various strands of the opposition would be a way to pool resources and make it more difficult for the media to ignore them, but will they be able to set personal ambitions aside? Next year's Belgrade elections, and possible upcoming parliamentary elections, will provide the answer.

Tena Prelec – LSE / University of Sussex

Tena Prelec is an Editor of EUROPPE and a doctoral researcher at the University of Sussex.

Marko Kmezić: “Democracy has barely taken root in Serbia”

You cannot have democratic elections in a non-democratic society, and in this regard Vučić’s convincing victory can hardly be a surprise for anyone. Over the past 25 years, parliamentary democracy has barely taken root in Serbia. Democratic institutions are merely tools for political elites who alternate between posts in executive, legislative and other functions while heavily relying on strong clientelistic chains and methods of more or less open pressure which secures their position in power.



With four presidential elections being decided already after the first round since the introduction of multi-party elections in Serbia, this is becoming something of a rule rather than an exception. In the absence of strong institutions, a free media, and a strong civil society, it is no wonder why elections are essentially becoming a popular plebiscite with a predetermined outcome. This is something that the emerging new Serbian opposition, led by the runner up in the presidential elections – former Ombudsperson, Saša Janković – will have to deal with before the Belgrade and local elections scheduled for 2018.

Equally, the EU needs to sharpen its focus on monitoring Serbia on its path to becoming a stable and prosperous democracy governed by the rule of law. The state of democracy in EU candidate countries should not be short-changed by the EU for other reasons such as cooperative behaviour in handling the migration crisis.

Marko Kmezić – *University of Graz*

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Slobodan Tomić: “The opposition failed to rally around a single contender”

Despite his dominance in the first round, this election has shown that Vučić’s popularity is diminishing. Estimates are that he won slightly less than 2 million votes (we are still waiting for the final, official results). In the 2016 parliamentary election, the coalition that is now supporting Vučić won about 2.3 million votes in total, meaning that Vučić has lost between 200,000 and 300,000 voters in one year alone.



Yet, the opposition did not capitalise on this and failed to drive up turnout, which is critical for bringing Vučić down. The low turnout (about 54.6%) is the result of the failure to unite around a single contender. While not all observers agree that rallying around a single candidate would have produced a better outcome for the opposition, it is important to note that a large portion of anti-regime voters will abstain from voting if the second placed contender is lagging far behind Vučić. This is because such a huge advantage arguably cannot be compensated for in the run-off, hence voting in the first round is a waste of effort. This lesson was learned in 2000, when, after a decade of unsuccessful attempts, the perpetually disunited democratic opposition managed to overthrow Milošević as soon as they rallied around a single candidate (Mr Kostunica won more than 50% against Milošević in the first round, with a turnout of 71.55%).

The front-pages and headlines in the week preceding this presidential election have been dominated by polls suggesting that Vučić will win about 55%, whereas Janković and Jeremić were being given [between 6% and 15%](#). This has had a deterrent effect on many voters beyond the circle of activists and keen followers of politics. Other factors that have contributed to this outcome, which the opposition could not control, include a hostile media environment and abuse of state authority and state resources by the regime. Many share the impression that this was probably the least democratic election since 1990.

Slobodan Tomić – *University College London*

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