



# Weekly Briefing

**Serbia Political briefing:**  
**Summary of political development in Serbia in 2017**  
**IIPE**

## China-CEE Institute

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Key political event in Serbia in 2017 was the presidential elections and the key political process was the launch of an “Internal dialog on Kosovo”.

### **Presidential elections**

The elections were held on April 2nd and Aleksandar Vučić won them in the first round, winning 2,012,788 votes (54.34%). The election result confirmed that Aleksandar Vučić is an undisputed leader and person with the most convincing political authority in the country. However, despite the victory, Aleksandar Vučić also faced numerous challenges. First, he did not allow former president Tomislav Nikolić to run on behalf of the ruling party, probably because of the assessment that Nikolić could not triumph in the first round. This left consequences on Vučić - Nikolić relations, which may pose a problem to the ruling party (Serbian Progressive Party) in the upcoming period.

Second, although the opposition is convincingly defeated, two candidates - Saša Janković and Vuk Jeremić - have used the campaign to present themselves as new political leaders. In part, they succeeded, and immediately after the election they formed their own political parties. New opposition forces are emerging on the horizon, which is a challenge for the ruling structure.

Thirdly, in the elections, satiric Luka Maksimović (won third place with 9.43% of the votes) made an unbelievable success, ridiculing both politicians and the political system. This points to the beginning of the crisis of the political system as such. It is an indicator that citizens are tired of the current, classic political parties and that there is plenty of room for alternative ideologies and political movements. Both, the emergence of new opposition leaders and the protest votes of the "against the system" citizens are indicative that Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party will be a much more difficult position in the next election comparing to this one. It should also be highlighted that these elections were followed by street protests from April 3rd to May 31st. They were led by representatives of the non-governmental sector, challenging the results and

arguing that the conditions in which the elections were held were not regular. The protests themselves did not leave long-term consequences, but they have showed that the public in Serbia is polarizing ("for" and "against" Vučić), which is not good neither for political nor for overall stability in the country.

### **Launch of an “Internal dialog on Kosovo”**

After the presidential election, Aleksandar Vučić visited Washington (July 18th), talked with US Vice President Michael Pens and, after returning to Serbia, launched the so-called "internal dialogue on Kosovo". This political process marked the year 2017 on the internal political level, as it is a process that will influence the answers on a number of other issues.

Symptomatically, the president of Serbia announced the launch of a dialogue in a private, daily, expressively pro-Western orientated newspaper, using a number of theses that could be interpreted as announcements of Belgrade's new concessions on Kosovo. In fact, in 2007, during the negotiations on the future status of Kosovo under the auspices of the UN Secretary General, German diplomat Wolfgang Ischinger presented a plan according to which Serbia and Kosovo should establish relations as did Western and Eastern Germany during the Cold War (the so-called Ischinger Plan). In praxis it meant that Serbia does not need to formally recognize Kosovo, but that it will not oppose Kosovo's membership in the UN and other international organizations. That way the status of the Republic of Kosovo in international relations would be in fact legalized and legitimized (according to western experts, it is hard to expect that Russia would veto the entrance of Kosovo in the UN unless Serbia directly requests). This is the position of the United States and the leading European countries, and the whole process of Serbia's EU integration is conditioned by this move.

The EU Commission announced for the February 2018 the opening of the “accelerated path” for Serbia's entrance in the EU and in a close relation with this issue is the adoption of the Ischinger Plan by the end of the next year.

According to the announcements of the EU officials, this "accelerated path" would mean accepting Serbia into full membership by 2025.

The organization of the "Internal Dialogue on Kosovo" was also meant to be directed at considering this goal. However, as early as August and September, numerous negative responses were made on President Vučić theses by intellectuals and experts from various fields. The prevailing view is that Serbia should not make any further concessions, but that it should demand the respect of the agreements that have been signed so far. The Serbian Orthodox Church and some academics of the Serbian Academy of Sciences were in the forefront of this position. Therefore, the ruling structures tried to offer two alternative solutions to the Ischinger plan. First, the head of Serbian diplomacy presented a proposal on the division of Kosovo (to join the north of Kosovo to Serbia and to recognize the rest as an independent state), and then there was a confused proposal from Professor Vladan Kutlešić about the real union of Serbia and Kosovo. Both proposals were publicly praised by Aleksandar Vučić, giving the impression that both proposals were in line with his thoughts on reaching a compromise with Kosovo Albanians.

However, both proposals were smoothly rejected by Albanians as well as by the US and EU representatives. Namely, during one cycle of negotiations on seeking a solution for the status of Kosovo, led by Martti Ahtisaari, in 2006, principles were set for seeking "solutions" that Western countries strictly adhere to: there is no division of Kosovo, no return to the status of 1999 and no joining of Kosovo to another country (meaning Albania). There are no indications that this attitude can be changed, so the mentioned proposals from Belgrade were not even seriously considered. Consequently, the "internal dialogue on Kosovo" was a failed attempt, a process that could only serve to legitimize Ischinger's plan in the Serbian public and nothing more than that. This is why many US and EU officials welcomed the launch of this process. The expectation of Western countries is that this process will end in 2018 in a way that Serbia will give its consent for Kosovo to join all international institutions (one of the leaders of

Kosovo Albanians, Bexhet Pacolli said that they do not expect a formal recognition from Serbia, it is enough that Serbia does not interfere).

In return, Serbia should get an "accelerated path to the EU". However, as already mentioned, such a result is unacceptable to numerous individuals, political parties (the parliamentary political parties Dveri and the Democratic Party of Serbia have officially opposed this and the rest of the opposition is boycotting the "internal dialogue") and other significant institutions. Also, according to the public opinion surveys in December 2017, citizens would not support it: 38% is for joining Serbia in the EU, 35% against, and the rest are undecided. On the one side this is a big downfall of trust in the EU, but on the other side this downfall would be even greater if posed in a form of a direct question: Are you for the full EU membership if this would mean giving up on Kosovo?

Also, it is noticeable that there is a direct relation to the growing trust in Russia and support to deeper and more comprehensive cooperation with China with a decline of confidence in the EU. In public discourse, in 2017, it was increasingly indicated that the real alternative to EU membership was a firmer cooperation with Russia (based on numerous bilateral agreements) and with China (within the framework of the One Belt One Way initiative) and that Serbia should not accept Ischinger's plan and the consequences it would bring. The first direct consequence is the Kosovo's express entry into NATO. Namely, once Kosovo becomes a member of the UN, nothing will stand in its way to join NATO. In such circumstances, military neutrality can no longer be defended, as geopolitical circumstances would dramatically change for Serbia. That is, Serbia itself would have been forced to join NATO. This would contribute to the long-term disruption of relations with Russia and, quite surely, with China, the only major powers in the multipolar order that have unambiguously demonstrated that they have the intention to politically support Serbia.

Basically, the positions articulated in the "internal dialogue" will determine stands on all other questions: attitude towards the EU, NATO, Russia and China,

regional politics, etc. As the weeks after the elections shown that Serbian society entered the period of polarization in relation to the President Vučić, another polarization, regarding “solving of Kosovo issue” is becoming more and more obvious – to defenders and opponents of further backdown regarding Kosovo. This process will certainly be transmitted in 2018 and will equally mark this next year as it did the previous one.