



# Weekly Briefing

**Serbia Political briefing:**  
**Political development in Serbia**  
**IIPE**


## China-CEE Institute

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The turn of 2017 and the first month of 2018 brought several challenges to Serbian internal political life, among which the most pressing are Kosovo issue and the upcoming local elections in Belgrade. This paper deals with these two questions.

During the recent several months, Kosovo issue entered a new stage due to three main factors. The first one is political development in Kosovo after the elections in the province, which resulted with peculiar situation. Government in Priština for the first time became dependent on the support from local Serbian parties, who made a decision in favor of supporting Ramush Haradinaj, considered in Serbia a war criminal, as the prime minister. The second factor is increased pressure by the West on Serbia to “normalize” its relations with Kosovo, which besides usual “sticks” for the first time contains a “carrot” - an explicit promise of Serbia’s membership in the European Union until 2025 if it meets some political conditions, among them signing a legally binding agreement with Priština in which it would pledge not to block Kosovo’s membership in international organizations, including the UN. Finally, the third factor is the “internal dialogue” on Kosovo, which President Aleksandar Vučić launched last summer. This dialogue so far included various institutions and individuals from Serbian political, academic, cultural, and even sport life. It is expected to get to conclusion sometime during spring, when President Vučić himself would make his proposal for Kosovo problem solution, after which this could become an official Serbia’s platform.

Combined, these three factors assure that the year 2018 brings a radical change in the dynamic of solving Kosovo problem. So far, there has been one and the same dynamic - Serbia would repeat that it would not recognize unilaterally proclaimed Kosovo’s independence at any price, while at the same time making small concessions to Kosovo Albanians (getting nothing specific in return), and thus decreasing its leverage over the possible solution. Now the

three alternative scenarios become likely. The first one is a situation in which Serbia bows to Western and Albanian pressure and agrees, if not with unconditional explicit recognition of Kosovo independence, then at least with the mentioned pledge not to block Kosovo's membership in the UN. The second one is pushing towards a truly compromise solution under which Albanians and their Western supporters would (for the first time) make some concessions to Serbian side in order to get (at least partially) what they want. And the third scenario becomes likely if neither Serbia, nor Priština agrees to move away from their current positions - an indefinitely frozen conflict under which any meaningful "normalization" dialogue would also be aborted. A brutal murder of Serbian Kosovo politician Oliver Ivanović on January 16 (most likely perpetrated by criminal gangs in North Kosovo, but with political motive, if there is any, still unclear) further amplified the influence of the mentioned factors, and pushed the situation towards the crossroad after which one of the three scenarios comes to the stage.

Let us consider this by analyzing factor by factor. A new leverage of Serbian political parties in Kosovo gathered in "Srpska lista" could certainly contribute to extorting some concessions from Priština, even if it would require flirting with Albanian radical oppositional "Self-determination" movement, thus blackmailing Haradinaj's government. Some of Vučić's public statements on Kosovo in recent months, and especially his comments on previous sessions of "internal dialogue" on Kosovo hint that his own proposal would most likely be based on offering "something" to Priština (which means a concession Serbia has not offered so far, be it the UN membership, or even formal recognition of independence), while demanding "something" in return (which means some "real" concession from Albanian side, at least cession of North Kosovo to Serbia). This prediction is additionally supported by Vučić's mentioning of possible referendum (in his last appearance in a live TV show) on which Serbian voters would decide on his proposal (Serbian constitution requires such referendum if there should be a change of state borders or an abandonment of

the preamble which defines Kosovo as a part of Serbian territory), but it also could easily lead to a third scenario. Nevertheless, external (Western) pressure will probably be a decisive factor, but still it does not guarantee that the first scenario is most likely - Serbia can always refuse Western “carrot” and say no to EU membership if it considers political conditions for this unacceptable.

In consolidated democracies, local elections, even if they are held in the capital and by far the biggest city in the country, can hardly be a national issue of the first degree. However, contemporary Serbia is far from a consolidated democracy. In the last year Freedom House for the first time in many years gave it “3” in terms of political freedom, which means that Serbia (at least politically, because in terms of civil liberties it still hangs to “2”) is not a “free” country anymore, but “partly free”. This NGO has observed a clear autocratic trend present in Serbia during the last several years, since Vučić has become the most powerful politician in the country. Striving to make his power absolute, he cannot afford to allow a political challenge at any level, even the local one. This is why in 2017 he decided to change his prime minister post for presidential one, assessing this would be the easiest way for him to control both posts. This is also why he mobilizes the whole infrastructure of his party to win the upcoming Belgrade elections as more decisively as it is possible. For he learned from the previous Serbian instance of semi-autocratic system during the 90s of the last century that Milošević’s fall from power started already in 1996/7, when he lost elections in Belgrade. There is an informal agreement between him and the opposition over this, because most oppositional parties also consider Belgrade elections “a matter of life and death” and the crossroad after which Vučić’s regime would collapse if defeated. The only difference is that, while Vučić’s supporters are firm, united and directed towards their goal of keeping Serbian capital under sovereign control, the opposition is weak and divided in several bitterly opposed columns, which makes its chances of winning miserable.

This is what all recent polls demonstrate. The only question is whether Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party will win 50+ majority of votes, or several percent less - which would still give it majority of representatives in the city assembly. Even if it fails to acquire 50+ majority, there comes its coalition partner Socialist Party of Serbia, which the same polls say will also get into the assembly with several representatives (otherwise it would not have decided to participate in the elections separately). Nevertheless, it is far from unimportant how big percentage the opposition gets in its expected defeat. Had it managed to unite behind one candidate for a mayor, it could get at least 35-40 percent, which would make a good starting point for some future national elections (Serbian Progressive Party did not get close to this percentage when it came to power in 2012). Divided as it is, its defeat will look far more convincing and humiliating, like it happened in presidential elections, after which Vučić could calmly say he defeated the opposition (represented by its most successful candidate Saša Janković) by 40 percent margin. This role in the upcoming elections will most probably be taken by Dragan Đilas, a former mayor who already twice defeated Aleksandar Vučić in Belgrade elections overwhelmingly, and who is supported by Janković and by Vuk Jeremić (another presidential candidate). However, his result will be certainly be undermined by several percent which will be won by his former Democratic Party and its leader Dragan Šutanovac, due to this party's developed infrastructure, as well as a "marriage of inconvenience" between Enough is Enough movement and Dveri. Other lists have small chances to get into the city assembly at all.

In conclusion, the 2018 brings with it an additional tightening of the grip Aleksandar Vučić has on political power in Serbia, which will be cemented after Belgrade elections, and after which he will have a non-challenged responsibility to make a decision on Kosovo issue, even if he opts for sharing this responsibility with the people via referendum. All in all, this does not make political situation in Serbia unstable. On the contrary, under any of the scenarios, Serbia is likely to retain control over its internal development and remain a

reliable partner to foreign actors interested in this region, even if the price is further erosion of democracy. And even if international situation continues to deteriorate, there is nothing in the current stage of Kosovo issue and internal political struggles in Serbia connected to Belgrade elections, which could make the country suffer from it more than usual. After Donald Trump's National security strategy in which he proclaimed Beijing's investments in East European infrastructure a security threat to the United States, China can be sure that political development in Serbia will not be an asset in Washington's plans to curb Chinese growing economic and political influence in the region.