



Weekly Briefing

Serbia Political briefing:
Political development in Serbia
IIPE

China-CEE Institute

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February 2018 did not brought new important challenges to Serbian internal political life. The most pressing were still Kosovo issue and the local elections in Belgrade at the very beginning of March. This paper deals with these two questions, but Kosovo issues is going to be considered together with some elements of EU enlargement strategy for the Western Balkans. Local elections is going to argued from the media point of view.

There is increased pressure on Serbia to “normalize” its relations with Kosovo, which for the first time contains an explicit promise to Serbia to join European Union until 2025 if it meets certain 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.

As recent developments have shown, the EU is no longer the only actor in the region. Russia will no doubt continue its nefarious soft power actions and attempts to gain influence in the region, even though it ‘doesn’t have a leg to stand on’ in the Western Balkans and makes limited economic investments. Turkey is increasing its investment, using cultural ties and its particular brand of authoritarian rule, and China is also strengthening its hold with the ‘One Belt, One Road’ initiative.

The list of EU initiatives and events relating to the Western Balkan region this year should mark a qualitative change in the EU’s approach towards the region. They include the Strategy Paper, the European Commission’s Communication on Enlargement with individual Country Reports (April 2018), the EU/Western Balkan summit to be hosted by Bulgaria in Sofia (May 2018), and finally, the next ‘Berlin Process’ summit, to be hosted by the UK government. Drawing attention to and supporting all initiatives aimed at reconciliation will help to push back against those who seek to return to the nationalist rhetoric of the past. This is probably one of the biggest challenges

facing the region. Initiatives emerging from the region itself offer the best chance of success in the long term.

While leaders of Kosovo and Serbia anticipate the grand finale, few believe that Serbian and Kosovo leaders can reach an agreement that will resolve bilateral disputes, and establish good neighbourly relations between the two. In the best scenario, governments may agree, but implementation would take years and may fail to resolve disputes. Memories are still very fresh; recent history of negotiations shows that Belgrade and Prishtina can reach agreements on paper but fail to implement them.

Regardless of difficulties and realities, Kosovo has no time to lose. It should seize the opportunity to secure a legally binding agreement that resolves all of its disputes with Serbia. The treaty should include full membership to the UN and other international organisations and a clear path to the EU. Equally important, Kosovo citizens should demand reforms, strengthen institutions, boost economic development and enforce the rule of law. Kosovo should seek to prepare for the status of a candidate country, and the EU should expect it.

Local elections will be held in Belgrade on 4 March. While the opposition claims that this is the most important election since the events of 5 October 2000 and the fall of Slobodan Milosevic, the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) is downplaying the vote's importance, portraying the election as something of an irrelevance when compared with the gravity of other pressing issues such as the country's EU accession and Kosovo-Serbia relations.

Media activities conducted during the election campaign in Serbia showed distinct bias towards the ruling party, Serbian Progressive Party, and its leader Aleksandar Vučić. Election coverage in media was characterized by a large proportion of pseudo events, lack of balance and instrumentalization of crisis situations.

Serbian Progressive Party was the most frequent one in almost every media outlet. Total presence of SPS in public service broadcasting reached 25% (Radio Television of Serbia) and 31% (Radio Television of Vojvodina), which made

their frequency up to three times higher than of any other party. A similar ratio was presented in the commercial media outlets: SPP is the most frequent party in election coverages, from 32% (TV B92) to 65% (KCN). Two TV stations with national coverage devoted special programs to the Vučić. In the same time, opposition parties did not use their (already modest) presence in media for promoting their ideas or programs, but for a confrontation with SPP.

This year's campaign started before the official announcement. It was mostly based on pseudo events and coverages about confrontations between parties, with a lack of analytical approach, creativity, vulnerable groups visibility and tolerance. Monitoring of local media outlets showed the interface of media ownership and the manner of reporting on election campaign.

In conclusion, the 2018 brings with it an additional political power quality for Aleksandar Vučić, which will be solidated after Belgrade elections. Additionally, that means he will have a full mandate to make a decision regarding Kosovo issue, even if he consider yo share this responsibility with the people via referendum. Serbia is likely to retain control over its internal development and remain a reliable partner to foreign actors interested in Western Balkan region. 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.