



# Weekly Briefing

**Serbia Political briefing:  
Strengthening the ruling party and difficult negotiations  
between Serbia and Kosovo  
IIPE**

## China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.  
Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin  
Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.  
 +36 1 5858 690  
 [office@china-cee.eu](mailto:office@china-cee.eu)  
 [china-cee.eu](http://china-cee.eu)

## **Strengthening the ruling party and difficult negotiations between Serbia and Kosovo**

The main events in March 2018 on the Serbian political scene were: the elections for the Belgrade City Assembly; all issues related to Kosovo; a public debate on amending the Constitution in the field of justice; new measures in the field of population policy. Activities within the European Integration Process take place on a continuous and regular basis. A brief overview of each of the above issues will include official information and views, opinions of independent experts, some of the foreign comments, and own opinions.

Key words: elections, Kosovo, Constitution, population

The elections for the City Assembly of Belgrade, held on March 4, 2018, brought the following results: The Serbian Progressive Party won 44,99%, the opposition group of Dragan Đilas 18,93%, an independent candidate Šapić 9,01%, and the Socialist Party of Serbia and United Serbia 6,13%. 51.3% of total number of registered voters are participated in the elections. This election result will further strengthen the position of the Serbian Progressive Party on the one hand, but will ensure good cooperation between the state and the City of Belgrade on the other. In addition, these elections led to a complete debacle of three political parties that had significant or dominant influence in the earlier times: Democratic Party, Democratic Party of Serbia, and Serbian Radical Party. It is difficult to predict whether there will be overcompensation in the political scene of Serbia and whether some of these parties will take place at all. At the moment, the entire opposition political bloc in Serbia is divided, fragmented, without an efficient infrastructure network on the ground.

The pre-election campaign process and the course of the elections themselves did not record serious observations. During the pre-election campaign, dominance of the ruling party in the media was visible. This is not a

coincidence but a logical result of the almost complete takeover of media influence by the Serbian Progressive Party. An instrument for the realization of such an impact has already been tried: a control over financial sources for advertising. Still, let's say some of the comments. In addition to the regular remarks coming from the opposition bloc, the elections were also a reason for comments from abroad. One of them referred to the state of democracy in Serbia, and the other to the foreign policy of the European Union. For example, Aleks Eror asks: "How Aleksandar Vucic Became Europe's Favorite Autocrat?", and still writes: "Vucic has established what could best be described as a soft autocracy". Explaining the European Union's attitude towards Serbia and its President, he claims that the normalizing relations between Serbia and Kosovo is Union's top priority in the Balkans. (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/09/how-aleksandar-vucic-became-europes-favorite-autocrat/>) The British go further and say what they did not before: "Some witnesses said the EU's approach to the region had prioritised 'stability over democratic values'". (House of Lords: Select Committee on International Relations, 1st Report of Session 2017–19, *The UK and the future of the Western Balkans*, 10 January 2018, p. 19). It's a little unclear what it's all about, and whose principles are at stake. Is it a moral philosophy or a real foreign policy? In any case, it is useful to listen different opinions. Perhaps the better question would be: to what extent are the people in the candidate countries close to the so-called European values?

Consultations carried out by the President Vučić in the United States during the last decade of March do not give rise to optimism, as well as difficult negotiations with the Kosovo delegation in progress. The unofficial but obvious pressure from the European Union's officials does not ease the position of Serbia. Of course neither the Government nor the ruling party. Obviously, there is no satisfactory solution for Kosovo if there is anyone acceptable at all. Should such developments be expected? It should be remembered that the European Union introduced a new integration condition for the countries of the Western Balkans years ago: the development of good neighborly relations. This is a

logical request for the candidate countries, and we can see the justification for its introduction from the current border dispute between our neighbors Croatia and Slovenia. Now it's time for this condition to be fulfilled. The specific position of Kosovo complicates this task. According to the previous reports, Serbia is required not to prevent the admission of Kosovo to international organizations. In return, Kosovo should facilitate the establishment of the Community of Serb Municipalities in the North of Kosovo, which has not yet been done. These days, the President of Kosovo ordered an expedited work to resolve this issue, so we can conclude that the establishment of the Community of Serb Municipalities is a reserve negotiating tool for the Kosovo government.

For its part, Kosovo is trying to consolidate its international state position. According to the current development of negotiations with Serbia, it can be estimated that their lobbying was successful with the clear support of the United States. At extraordinary session on March 21, 2018, the Assembly of Kosovo has ratified the Agreement on the demarcation with Montenegro. This is one of the European Union visa liberalization requirements for Kosovo citizens. If we try to summarize the results of the previous negotiations between Serbia and Kosovo, we should also mention the role of the Serbian List in the Kosovo Parliament. The Serbian List was formed and function under full control of the Serbian Government. In some cases, it may have a decisive role in the decision-making process in the Kosovo Parliament. The use of the Serbian list by the Serbian Government in the process of negotiations with Kosovo so far has given half the results.

In addition to described difficulties in achieving a satisfactory solution between Serbia and Kosovo, there has been an incident in Kosovska Mitrovica on March 26, 2018. Namely, during the visit of Marko Đurić, Director of the Office for Kosovo and Metohija, to Kosovska Mitrovica, the Kosovo police arrested and deported him using excessive force. Contradictory arguments, complete cooling of relations, the withdrawal of Serbian List representatives from the Government of Kosovo are the results of this unnecessary incident.

Officials of the European Union and the US ambassador in Serbia have called for calm of the situation in order to continue the negotiations. In all likelihood as before, the process of further negotiations will depend on the pressure of the Western powers.

There is a public debate on amending the Constitution in the field of justice. Looking at some of the solutions proposed by the Ministry of Justice as the basis for a public debate, it is not difficult to conclude that they lead to a stronger influence of the Parliament, that is, the ruling majority in the Parliament, in relation to the current solutions. In particular, the main remarks by judges, prosecutors and lawyers suggest that the proposed constitutional amendments will lead to a dominant policy influence on the appointment of judges and prosecutors through a new way of selecting members of the High Judicial Council and the (new) High Council of the Prosecution. Since the independence of the judiciary would be even worse, the consent of the legal profession to the proposals is not expected. Is the harmonization of domestic legislation with *Acquis Communautaire* a way to strengthen political influence in the judiciary, or should it strengthen the independence of the judiciary? Many ask this question. Public debate on amending the Constitution in the field of justice takes place in the shadow of major political events in the country, and there is no doubt that the ruling majority in Parliament can adopt all legal solutions that suit her. The results of the previous legislative activities in the Parliament, and especially the implementation of laws and regulations, do not have their counterpart in the assessments on the rule of law in Serbia. Without exception and for many years, all reviews and reports by international organizations, the European Union, as well as domestic legal associations and experts contain a request for strengthening the independence of the judiciary and the rule of law.

President Vučić announced a series of measures aimed at boosting population growth. The main tools of this policy are financial support to mothers, especially those with more children. Previously, there were similar attempts, some of which were not implemented. Public responses to these announced

measures are different, both from individuals and from social groups. In a situation of low standard of living any help is welcome, but the question remains whether this is sufficient to achieve the desired goal. The experiences of other countries, especially neighboring ones, which face a decline in the population suggest different conclusions. It can also be a useful Russia's experience in the last decade that has succeeded in reversing the negative trend towards a positive population growth. The reaction of many women and their groups to the presidential initiative is negative. This is quite expected because many regulations and laws aimed at ensuring equal treatment of women are not implemented. It is useful to exclude gender aspects in this matter because children do not have only one parent. Numerous experiences tell us that the population growth is stable in countries where there are good conditions for raising children, as well as the prospects of a better life and future.

### **Conclusions**

The most important event on the Serbian political scene this month was the election for Belgrade City Assembly. They resulted in the victory of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party and further strengthening of the political position of President Vučić. For a long time, the issue of Kosovo is one of the most difficult tasks of the Government, and the course of negotiations does not promise much. In this way, the Government is burdened with this issue and the maneuvering process is getting smaller. Due to these events, regular activities in the process of European integration, such as the adoption of laws in Parliament remain less noticeable. Their framework also includes the ongoing public debate on amending the Constitution in the field of justice, which does not promise a coherent solution. The initiative of President Vučić to introduce new measures for encouraging the population growth is supported by the Government and his party, while the opinions of women and women's associations are divided and more often negative.