



Weekly Briefing

Serbia political briefing:

2020 in Serbian politics – a different path, the same result

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Abstract

The year 2020 was expected to bring further increase in Aleksandar Vučić's power after the parliamentary elections. This was complicated by coronavirus pandemic, but with careful management, weakness of the opposition and some luck, achieved anyway. At the end of the year, Vučić is looking forward to the third "victory over corona" without parliamentary opposition and at least temporarily relieved from pressure over Kosovo issue.

At the beginning of 2020, common expectations were that it would bring "nothing new under the sun" when it comes to Serbian domestic political scene. Regular parliamentary elections were to be held this year, the most likely result of which would be further strengthening of president Aleksandar Vučić's semi-autocratic populist regime – with, or without the participation of the opposition. With such power, Vučić would be able to resist international pressure over Kosovo issue, and maybe even reach some understanding with the U.S. Trump administration. And all this actually happened – but with significantly different dynamics caused by a completely unexpected global game changer – the coronavirus pandemic.

When a new disease called COVID-19 started to ravage Hubei province in China, most of the rest of the world dismissed this as yet another false alarm of an apocalyptic deadly global pandemic. When in February it became certain that the things have gotten out of control, and the virus started spreading to other continents, including Europe, Serbia behaved in a similar fashion. Both the government and medical experts denied the danger and mocked the fear that started to spread all over the continent. It was not before the World Health Organization declared the pandemic on March 11 that they changed their minds – and when they did, their reaction was fast and furious. Before this, Serbian politics was unfolding by "business as usual" model. The opposition, led by its then strongest force "Alliance for Serbia", was persistent in holding anti-government rallies, but without much impact. Negotiations with Priština were still frozen, but expected to unfreeze soon, once the new Albin Kurti's government removes custom duties on imports from Central Serbia. And the most important thing – at the beginning of March, the elections were announced for April 26, with the electoral threshold lowered from 5 to 3 percent, but with almost certain boycott by most of the "real" opposition. Corona ruined the schedule.

It took only 2-3 weeks to pass from total neglect of the virus threat to some of the harshest measures against it: state of emergency (declared on March 15), night and weekend curfews, complete ban on leaving homes for older than 65, closure of schools and all non-essential services, suspension of public transport, etc; from Vučić's "don't worry, we'll have only tens, not hundreds of infected" when the first case appeared, to "all cemeteries in Belgrade will be small to receive our elders if we let them out of their homes". Of course, the elections were postponed. The opposition at first did not object; on the contrary, they criticized Vučić for not imposing state of emergency earlier. But as the epidemiological curve started to flatten in April and people got more and more annoyed by the isolation, the opposition used the situation to start criticizing the same measures it suggested earlier, even putting into question the legality of the state of emergency, and organizing its supporters to clang pots from their windows as a kind of protest during curfews. The first day the state of emergency and curfews were lifted at the beginning of May, infamous Srđan Nogo – known by hatred against migrants and threats of hanging ruling politicians by lampposts – organized a rally in Belgrade, with a disregard for epidemiological measures. This was followed by several incidents on the National Assembly building entrance, as its sessions were resumed. Meanwhile, the elections were rescheduled for June 21, in the political atmosphere which was not looking good. Vučić did his best to improve it.

He managed to do this by almost complete removal of restrictive measures against corona. Until the beginning of June, everything (except schools and cinemas/theatres) was open again, gathering bans removed, unlimited cross-border travel allowed, while face masks were no more mandatory even in public transport. Mass rallies were held by all political parties, including those which decided to boycott the elections. Crowds were back to football stadiums, a big tennis tournament organized, concerts and similar happenings renewed. All this contributed to significantly relaxed atmosphere ahead of the elections, supporting the government's narrative that "corona was beaten". The medical part of the crisis staff did not differ – leading epidemiologist Dr. Predrag Kon at the beginning of June said that the epidemic was fading and that everyone should completely relax at least until autumn. Such attitude was strange, having in mind that the figures of the infected were still on the rise on a world level, including areas warmer compared to Serbia. Inordinate behaviour soon took its toll - the second wave of the epidemic, that would become twice as big as the first one, started not later than in the middle of June, but this was apparently concealed until the elections were over. When it went public, a point of no return to a new health and political crisis had been already passed.

Constitutional supermajority won by the list “Aleksandar Vučić – For Our Children”, led by the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) positively surprised Vučić. He now got a chance to choose whether his party would form the government alone, or with coalition partners. What surprised him negatively was low turnout (not more than 50 percent overall, only 35 percent in Belgrade) and the fact that even with lowered threshold only two non-national minority lists managed to enter the parliament (Socialist party of Serbia – SPS, and Aleksandar Šapić’s Serbian Patriotic League – SPAS), which meant that the boycott by the “Alliance” had some success in compromising the legitimacy of the elections. But what was far more challenging was the question how to tackle unexpected summer burst of the epidemiological curve. At the beginning of July, Vučić announced new weekend curfew for Belgrade, but soon reneged on this when the people spontaneously gathered to protest in front of the Assembly. Yet, he was lucky – the protests were soon compromised by violence committed by the extremists, while summertime made possible putting the epidemic under control only by mild measures (such as mandatory face masks in closed spaces and gathering restrictions). Before the expected third wave in autumn, Vučić got some time from August to October to handle Kosovo issue and calculate with the new government formation.

After the custom duties were removed in April, negotiations between Belgrade and Priština could be resumed. American Trump administration took over from Brussels the leading role. The trip of the two delegations to Washington planned in July was cancelled, but the one in September took place. Vučić and Kosovo Prime Minister Hoti were received by Trump in the White House and signed two separate political agreements, whose contents were quite surprising. These agreements were more about support for Israel, the role of U.S. firms in economic projects in the region, energy diversification away from Russia and obligation not to buy 5G technology from China, than about resolving Belgrade-Priština dispute. Vučić could still proclaim “victory” in Washington, yet he was immediately attacked by the opposition for taking obligations that could cause damage (such as moving Serbian embassy to Jerusalem) without getting much in return. Additional argument of the critics was that Trump could lose the upcoming presidential elections, which would mean that Vučić “bet on a wrong horse”. Although an absolute favourite at the beginning of the election year, Trump eventually did lose to Joe Biden, due to disastrous handling of corona crisis in the U.S, but should it bother Vučić? Actually no, because he now could get an opportunity to renege on bad obligations, while taking advantage of some other parts of the agreement – such as the moratorium on seeking membership in international organizations by Kosovo. And with traditional Albanian supporter

Biden in the White House, he could hardly be pressured to accept a painful compromise, for now he won't be presented with one.

Trump was not the only world politician harmed by corona pandemic. In August, Belarusian strongman Lukashenko brutally stole the elections, but mass citizens' protests that followed put him in a check-mate situation. The same month, Milo Đukanović's ruling party in Montenegro lost the elections after being in power for even longer time than Lukashenko did. And in November, Republic of Srpska's long-time undisputed leader Milorad Dodik lost the local elections in capital city of Banja Luka to a young oppositionist Draško Stanivuković. However, it seems that the wave of falling autocrats and populists will bypass Vučić, whose political power is for now not even scratched by the ongoing disastrous third wave of corona epidemic. After four-month long "foot-dragging" on the new government formation, this job was eventually done in October. In an obvious attempt to ensure re-election in the upcoming presidential elections in 2022 (early parliamentary elections are also announced), Vučić opted for a "catch-all" government, with both SPS and SPAS on board. What is more surprising and at the same time a proof of a "catch-all" strategy are the names of some new ministers. The only two ministerial posts given to SPS actually went to its officials who were most vocal critics of Vučić for years – Branko Ružić and Novica Tončev (the latter even threatened to block Belgrade-Skopje highway with his supporters during summer, after he won against SNS in his hometown of Surdulica in Southern Serbia). One of the most recognizable faces from the ranks of medical experts, Darija Kisić Tepavčević, became the minister of work. And even Gordana Čomić – who was staunch oppositionist since Vučić came to power, but recently expelled from her Democratic Party – got the ministerial seat. With the now extra-parliamentary opposition left in tatters ("Alliance for Serbia" split soon after the elections), it seems that, when it comes to Serbian domestic politics, the 2020 has – surprisingly, or not – the same conclusion like 2019, 2018, or 2017 had: Vučić is stronger than ever.

Conclusion

In the year 2020 Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić managed to further increase his power by decreasing the opposition influence and successfully handling Kosovo issue; yet, what is especially remarkable, he did this in spite of corona crisis.