



Weekly Briefing

**Serbia political briefing:
Forecasting Serbia's Internal Politics in 2021:
Dilemmas and Prospects
IIPE**

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Forecasting Serbia's Internal Politics in 2021:

Dilemmas and Prospects

To perform the efficient forecast of political occurrences within a single polity is a tremendously hard effort, and quite often its outcomes are not trustworthy. On another hand, a huge empirical experience recently accumulated within the corps of social sciences is fruitful in deriving views on potential developments with increased accuracy. By deploying a method of near-history occurrences related to a specific presumption, some patterns of what will happen over the course of the incoming year, could be identified. This will be applied to this analysis which seeks to forecast political scene in Serbia for this year and will propose several factors that will influence on what might happen in the next 12 month period.

Identifying the on-sight settings

Eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic has spread across the globe, leaving no single country immune to disease and its consequences. Not only the public health was endangered, but the economic performance of almost all countries was enormously disrupted. In 2020, Serbian political stage was shaken by several major occurrences, such as the parliamentary elections which were held in the midst of pandemic, violent protests, and constant accusations by the opposition parties which deemed anti-COVID-19 governmental measures as “inadequate, disproportionate, late, and illegal”.

Last year's protests, for instance, have erupted as a direct consequence of anger exposed by the part of the public, after Serbian President Mr. Vučić announced that the new lockdown might be re-introduced, in wake of the then incoming second wave of the pandemic. Suspects against the health authorities over the numbers of infected and total deaths caused by the pandemic, in the weeks before the elections, have further contributed, and in the beginning of July, a series of severe and violent antigovernmental protests occurred in Serbia's capital. Despite dominant victory of the leading Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) in the National Assembly, the process of government constitution was unusually slow. At the time the new Government sworn before the Parliament on October 28, Mr. Vučić announced that its mandate will be limited to April 2022 latest, when, according to what he said “the new electoral cycle will be held”. Serbia entered 2021 with a focus to massive immunization process which started

in the middle of January, focusing the eyes of the public towards the next steps the Government will undertake to “normalize” everyday lives of its citizens.

Involving the dependant variables

Based on all-known relevant facts, a total of three variables could be involved into this analysis. The following three will in the most direct sense, affect the internal political stage in Serbia in the coming period: political stability concerns, potential constitutional changes, and Kosovo issue. These issues will be presented and an assessment of their possible manifestation will be provided.

a. With vast cases of turmoil within the last several decades, Serbia can't be classified into a “politically stable” group of countries. Despite numerous democratic practices and enhancement of the conditions that direct political processes towards dialogues, the violent practices could not be rectified over the course of short period, which is why almost each year, Serbia sees some form of severe turmoil in various forms. It especially becomes visible when the elections are on the agenda or any major occurrence over which the domestic public is easily divided. Having this logic in mind, one could derive a conclusion that such a continuation is likely to occur within the scope of this year. However, there are several reasons why it is highly unlikely that major turmoil will occur during this year. First, 2021 is not an electoral year in Serbia at any level, thus, no direct confrontation among the major political actors will occur. On another hand, the opposition parties will keep insisting that electoral process is undermined and unfair, subject to involvement of the EU Parliamentary envoys who will have role of “moderators” within these talks. It could be expected that some rules and procedures for the upcoming regular presidential, and early parliamentary elections might be adjusted to provide the full participation of oppositional parties that boycotted previous year's electoral process. This concern will intensify at the end of the year being that the elections are set to be held in April next year. The second factor which will “secure” the political stability is the looming end of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is expected that major political subjects will lower down tensions that might arise in relation to full lockdown or any other restrictions that might be imposed.

Third, both opposition and parties that form the Government will orient towards the upcoming electoral year of 2022. What opposition asserts is that the electoral process' fairness is below the level imminent to usual democratic practices, which could

bring (again) all the stakeholders to the table to discuss the electoral dynamics. Thus, an assertive rhetoric from both sides, which could create severe turmoil could only be expected next year in the months ahead of elections.

b. In its modern history, Serbia has changed 14 constitutions. In no case, this was the amendment of the previous version, but every single adoption of the constitution presented an entirely new act which regulated political life. The current constitution was adopted after the state union between Serbia and Montenegro ceased to exist in May 2006, leaving the constitutional *vacuum* in Serbia until the newest constitution adopted in November 2006. During the last year, constitutional changes were among the priorities of the internal agenda. In December, the Government has proposed to the National Assembly, constitutional changes that tackle judiciary branch of governance and prosecutors' system, which was the condition Serbia committed to, during the EU accession process. The rationale for constitutional changes posits that according to the 2006 Constitution, the executive and legislative branches are given wide jurisdiction to elect the judiciary officials, which might potentially impede their independence and lead to politicization of their work.

Serbian Government elaborated that legislature and the executive have the ability to control judiciary decisions, which is incompatible with the independence and autonomy of the judiciary; that could consequently undermine the system of separation of powers in Serbia. The Government, therefore, proposed to amend Article 4 so as to "that the relationship between the three branches of governance is based on mutual *verification* and not control". Constitutional amendments in Serbia are changed by at least the two third majority of MPs in the Serbian Parliament, except in rare cases such as the perambulatory changes, or any changes concerning human rights, for which plebiscitary vote is needed. In any case, it is hardly likely that referendum vote will be scheduled for this year, but the conditions set for the EU accession process are going to be fulfilled, which could alleviate tense relations with Brussels.

c. Kosovo issue seems to remain a never-ending story for official Belgrade for more than two decades on, and there is no single reason this "practice" will spill over into the year ahead of us. After the NATO bombing of then FR Yugoslavia, international military and civilian security presence was established in southern Serbian province, under the auspices of the UN, and in line with the relevant UN Security Council resolutions. The process got complicated when in 2008 Kosovo Albanians self-proclaimed their independence, which further worsen regional problems across the Balkans, and created a new security concern for Serbia. Last year, representatives of

both sides met in Washington to discuss prospects for further cooperation which would alleviate tensions and provide peaceful coexistence. The then US President, Mr. Trump sponsored a memorandum which concretized means for deeper cooperation, while the two sides committed themselves not to undertake any campaign for recognition or recognition withdrawal. While it seemed to the domestic public that Kosovo issue might be finally resolved for the midterm period, the USA elected a new administration, which increased anxiety over whether the position of official Washington towards this problem will remain. Constant internal political crises of legitimacy of the institutions within Kosovo and Metohija, along with corruption, and failure of provision of basic services, are setting this issue on the top of internal politics agenda in Serbia. Continuation and the first outcomes of the trials before the Kosovo Specialist Chambers & Specialist Prosecutor's Office in the Hague will be closely monitored by the Serbian authorities, and will also shake domestic debates in political arena.

Easy forecasts for 2021: Will the year of 2021 end as a stalemate of internal politics in Serbia?

All the relevant political actors in Serbia will be focused to finalize massive immunization against the Coronavirus in the first quarter of the year. Being that no major challenges are expected, it is highly likely that the coming period will set a stage for stalemate of internal politics, bringing it to a quite inert status. The most expectable scenario is that the political stability will keep its *status quo* with insignificant changes in the internal dynamics. Out of all identified variables, only developments of how the Kosovo crisis will evolve in 2021, will remain the toughest to predict, as the whole complexity of the process will be dominantly influenced and directed by external (f)actors.