



Weekly Briefing

Serbia political briefing:
An Overview of Key Political Events in 2023
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An Overview of Key Political Events in 2023

Summary

Year which Serbia left behind is one of the years to be forgotten. Besides Kosovo and Metohija as unchanging topic, Serbian 2023 key political events can be summarized as the unprecedented bloodsheds committed in May, protests against violence, which followed the previous tragic events, extorted elections and twisted electoral process.

Kosovo and Metohija in 2023

With the mediation of the European Union, Belgrade and Priština supported the so-called Franco-German plan in Brussels (the official name “Agreement on the road to normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo”) at the end of February 2023.¹ The backbone of the proposal was based on the model of the agreement between the two Germanys from 1972, thanks to which both countries received wider international recognition and membership in the United Nations. After being exposed to serious accusations on the domestic scene that by accepting that plan he opened the way to the acceptance of Kosovo's independence, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić repeatedly insisted that he did not sign the agreement. Nevertheless, it was announced from Brussels that both Vučić and the Prime Minister of Kosovo, Aljbin Kurti, accepted the document and that from the point of view of the Vienna Convention on Contract Law, the acceptance of the agreement can be equated with the act of signing. After a new meeting in Ohrid on March 18, also with the mediation of the EU, European Foreign Minister Josep Borelj emphasized that Brussels will monitor compliance with the agreement, because it is now part of the negotiating framework of Serbia and Kosovo on their way to EU membership, and that non-compliance agreements have consequences.² After the meeting in Ohrid, it was also said that Kosovo and Serbia are fully committed to

¹ “Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue: Agreement on the path to normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia”, European Union External Service, Brussels, 27 February 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-agreement-path-normalisation-between-kosovo-and-serbia_en, accessed on: 29/12/2023.

² Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue: Implementation Annex to the Agreement on the Path to Normalisation of Relations between Kosovo and Serbia, ”, European Union External Service, Brussels, 18 March 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-implementation-annex-agreement-path-normalisation-relations-between_en, accessed on: 29/12/2023.

respect and implement all articles of the Agreement and its Annex, and the EU announced that “they will start the process of changing the criteria for Chapter 35 for Serbia” in order to reflect new obligations arising from the agreement.³ The opposition parties particularly negatively assessed Article 4 of that proposal - on Serbia's obligation not to oppose Kosovo's membership in international organizations.⁴

Another topic related to the Serbian south province was the car plate's issue

And while the situation with car plates in Serbian areas in Kosovo nearly over a year ago, almost produced a conflict, in mid-December this year the re-registration process was carried out almost in complete silence.⁵ As of December 15, by decision of the Government of Kosovo, vehicles with Serbian license plates of cities in Kosovo will no longer be able to cross administrative crossings. It is about plates of seven cities in Kosovo issued by Serbia, which Priština considers illegal. That issue was raised for the first time in September 2021, and the citizens' indignation and tensions in the north of Kosovo were silenced several times by the international community, by postponing the implementation of that decision. The concessions for taking over RKS license plates were valid until March 31, and after that the Kosovo police fined drivers who had license plates issued by Serbia. After Priština's decision that the process of changing license plates in Kosovo and Metohija will start on August 1, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić said that the authorities in Pristina want to cause problems, but there was no official reaction from Belgrade, despite announcements and promises that there is no deadline for re-registration vehicles.

But, it seems that in meantime something changed and made Serbian Government to “adjust” its position. Namely, the Government of Serbia made a decision to enable freedom of

³ Commission staff working document, Serbia 2023 Report, Accompanying the document Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 2023 Communication on EU Enlargement policy, Brussels, 8.11.2023, SWD(2023) 695 Final https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_695_Serbia.pdf, p. 94, accessed on: 29/12/2023.

⁴ “Lideri opozicije u Srbiji o ohridskim pregovorima - od 'važne vesti' do 'pristajanja na ultimatum’”, Radio Slobodna Evropa, 19. mart 2023, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/opozicija-reakcije-ohrid-vucic/32325086.html>, accessed on: 29/12/2023.

⁵ “Danas ističe rok za preregistraciju vozila na RKS tablice”, RTV Mir, 15. decembar 2023, <https://www.rtvmir.com/index.php/vesti/politika/5819-danas-istice-rok-za-preregistraciju-vozila-na-rks-tablice.html>, accessed on: 29/12/2023.

movement for all vehicles from Kosovo and Metohija no matter to car plates starting from Januarz 1, 2024.⁶

The director of the Office for Kosovo and Metohija, Petar Petković, explained that such decision was 2011 Agreement on freedom of movement outcome. He emphasized that a disclaimer will be posted at all border and administrative crossings: “Allowing all vehicles registered by the temporary institutions of self-government in Priština to participate in traffic on the roads is done exclusively for practical reasons, in order to facilitate the position of individuals and enable their freedom of movement and cannot be interpreted as recognition of the unilaterally declared independence of the so-called Kosovo, it does not prejudice determining the final status and cannot be interpreted as Belgrade's consent to deviate from the rights guaranteed by United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244”.⁷

Serbian opposition criticized the decision on the freedom of movement of vehicles with RKS car plates. The President of the National Movement of Serbia and the holder of the “Serbia against Violence” list, Miroslav Aleksić, told that the decision of the Government of Serbia to enable free movement of all vehicles from Kosovo from January 1st is proof that the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, is “ready to do anything in order to preserve his power”.⁸

“While on the streets of Belgrade they are beating students who are peacefully protesting against election theft and demanding the annulment of the stolen elections, they are leaving the Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija at the mercy of their coalition partner Aljbin Kurti”, Aleksić said in a written statement. He added that it should be remembered that because of those same plates, the Serbs from Kosovo and Metohija blocked the roads, left the institutions in Kosovo, boycotted the elections and handed all the institutions over to the Albanians.⁹

⁶ “Vlada Srbije donela odluku: Od 1. januara dozvoljeno kretanje vozilima sa kosovskim tablicama, šta to znači?”, *Euractiv*, 26.12. 2023, <https://euractiv.mondo.rs/politika/a5435/Dozvoljeno-kretanje-u-Srbiji-vozilima-sa-kosovskim-tablicama.html>, accessed on: 29/12/2023.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ “Opozicija kritikovala odluku Vlade Srbije o slobodi kretanja vozila sa RKS tablicama”, *Kosovo online*, 26. decembar 2023, <https://www.kosovo-online.com/vesti/politika/opozicija-kritikovala-odluku-vlade-srbije-o-slobodi-kretanja-vozila-sa-rks-tablicama>, accessed on: 29/12/2023.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

Two massacres in two days

On May 3rd, the seventh grade student of the “Vladislav Ribnikar” Belgrade elementary school killed nine students, his classmates, and a security guard, committing, according to the undivided opinion of the Serbian public, the most terrible peacetime crime in the country.¹⁰

According to the results of the investigation, the boy who killed his schoolmates and friends carefully planned the crime, and the public was further horrified by the fact that his father had taught the juvenile murderer to shoot air and firearms in a Belgrade shooting range for a whole year before the crime, and that, as if it were a regular sports activity, no one reported it to the police or any other competent authority.

The investigation also established that the parents of the boy who committed the crime did not adequately store weapons and ammunition, which allowed him to get to them without major problems.

Still disturbed about the elementary school massacre, only a day after Serbian people faced with another one. Not far from Belgrade, in villages Orašje and Dubona near Mladenovac, one of the Belgrade municipalities, a twenty-one-year-old man killed eight young people and wounded thirteen.¹¹ Age of these victims was from 15 to 25.

These two crimes, made Serbian people to organize and to rise against the system which failed in preventing violence and with its inactivity led to such tragic consequences. Serbia against Violence emerged as an escalation of many years long dissatisfaction of people with political “elite” which became blind to everyday cases of low morale and arrogant behavior, nepotism, corruption, crime, double standard policy... By its inaction, so called elite turned Serbian society into unstable and to further decline prone environment. Considering that, it is not difficult to understand why wide Serbian population supported Serbia against Violence. The wave of civil protests “Serbia against violence” lasted from May 8 to the end of October and from which citizens demanded the resignation of government representatives, because “the system failed”.¹²

¹⁰ “Ubistvo u školi “Vladislav Ribnikar”:Hronologija tragedije”, Vreme, 03/05/2023, <https://www.vreme.com/vesti/ubistvo-u-skoli-vladislav-ribnikar-hronologija-tragedije/>, accessed on: 29/12/2023.

¹¹ “Uroš Blažić priznao ubistva u Malom Orašju i Duboni”, Politika, 07/05/2023, <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/551220/Uros-Blazic-priznao-ubistva-u-Malom-Orasju-i-Duboni>, accessed on: 26/12/2023.

¹² In other words, Movement Serbia against Violence was widely accepted as a tool to transfer ordinary’s people annoyance to the Government. The best illustration is the fact that protest, held on May 19th , gathered between

Every Saturday, citizens walked in silence, and although the political parties of the opposition were technically the organizers, they insisted on civic activism, the role of students, actors, many of whom appeared on the pages of tabloids as opponents of the regime.

On May 7, the Minister of Education Branko Ružić resigned¹³, while the Government of Serbia refused to fulfill any of the demands of the protest, which concerned the confiscation of the national frequency of Pink and Happy television stations, the change of the editorial policy of Radio Television of Serbia (RTS), the replacement of the Minister of Police Bratislav Gašić and the director of Military Intelligence Agency (BIA) Aleksandar Vulin¹⁴.

What Government did in act of responding to two massacres was introducing the action of handing over the illegal weapons without any legal consequences.¹⁵ The action officially started on May 8th and by the deadline, June 30th, 108 883 weapons and mine and explosive devices were handed over. Of that number, 82 398 were weapons. This includes legal and illegal weapons that remained in family households after the death of the owner and 26,485 pieces of mine and explosive devices. Additionally, 4 243 139 pieces of ammunition were also handed over.¹⁶

The wave of protests, which lasted for six months, made it possible to start talking about new elections already in the middle of the year, only one year after previous were held. Namely, when it became clear that the demands of the protesters would not be fulfilled, the opposition demanded elections, expecting to win them and then be able to introduce all demanded changes. The ruling party, Serbian Progressive Party, since May without Aleksandar Vučić as its president¹⁷, accepted that request and announced elections for December 17. The weekend

55 000 and 60 000 people. "Godina protesta: Lista 20 najvećih skupova u Srbiji u 2023. godini", Nikola Kojić, N1, 1. januar 2024, <https://n1info.rs/vesti/godina-protesta-lista-20-najvecih-skupova-u-srbiji-u-2023-godini/>, accessed on: 03/01/2024.

¹³ "Ministar Ružić dao neopozivu ostavku", *Danas*, 7. maja 2023, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/ruzic-dao-ostavku/>, accessed on: 26/12/2023.

¹⁴ Vulin resigned at the end of the year, after he was included into the United States of America list of sanctioned persons.

¹⁵ "Akcija MUP-a do juna: Predaja oružja bez konsekvenci (video)", *Insajder*, 9. maj 2023, <https://insajder.net teme/akcija-mup-a-do-juna-predaja-oruzja-bez-konsekvenci-video>,

¹⁶ "Do isteka roka predato 108.883 komada oružja", RTS, 1. jula 2023, <https://www.rts.rs/lat/vesti/drustvo/5223856/oruzje-predaja-istekao-rok.html>, accessed on: 26/12/2023.

¹⁷ The President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, resigned from the position of President of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) on May 27. Miloš Vučević, the former vice-president of the party and Minister of Defense, was elected in his place. Vučić had talked about leaving the party leadership before, on several occasions, but it never happened. The opposition and part of the public criticized him for being the president of the state and the party at the same time, saying that this violates the Constitution. The main objections were that the president of the state should be the president of all citizens, as well as that he should express national unity, which is not possible from the position of party president. Although he is no longer at the head of the SNS, Vučić was the holder of

protests, which until then were attended by several hundred to a few thousand people, were suspended at the beginning of November due to, as explained, the provisions of the pre-election campaign for the December elections.

In the extraordinary elections held on December 17, the list of the Serbian Progressive Party won the most votes with 46.71 percent, followed by the list of the opposition “Serbia Against Violence” with 23.58 percent.

Ivica Dačić's Socialists got 6.57 percent of the votes; the NADA coalition got 5.03 percent of the votes, while the biggest surprise was the list “Mi – glas iz naroda” (“We – the voice of the people) led by controversial Dr. Branimir Nestorović, known for “advising” citizens to go shopping in Milan during the Covid-19 pandemic. He was supported by 4.69 percent of voters. Nestorović's list will also prove to be a tip in the balance for the formation of the government in Belgrade, after the opposition's allegations of “shameless theft” of votes and demands for the annulment of the entire election process in the capital. According to current projections, from this list there will be 13 deputies in the new convocation of the Serbian Parliament, and not only directly decide who will have the majority in Belgrade.

The voting held on December 17 was also marked by numerous irregularities, which, in addition to the opposition, mostly pro-European parties, were pointed out by domestic and international observation missions.

In that respect, the observation mission of *Crta* expresses a well-founded suspicion that in the elections on December 17 there was organized migration of voters on a scale that decisively influenced the outcome of the very close elections for the Assembly of Belgrade.¹⁸ It was recorded that voters arrived in an organized manner from various parts of Serbia (e.g. from Pančevo, Valjevo, Čačak, Arandjelovac, Smederevo, Vršac, Novi Sad, etc.), as well as from Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, which strengthens the suspicion that the local elections were strategically called only in a third of the local self-government units in order to enable the temporary relocation of voters. Organized voter migration is a type of electoral engineering that is neither legal nor legitimate. Registering fictitious residences for the purpose of voting in local elections outside one's own city or municipality violates the laws

the list of the coalition gathering around the SNS, for the parliamentary, Belgrade and local elections held on December 17. The opposition also criticized him for acting as if he was still the party president during that campaign.

¹⁸ “Rezultati beogradskih izbora su u prevelikoj meri proizašli iz nelegalnog izbornog inženjeringa “, *Crta*, 22. decembar 2023, <https://crta.rs/rezultati-beogradski-izbori-2023/>, accessed on: 26/12/2023.

that regulate citizens' residence issues, but also endangers the principles of electoral equality and the guaranteed right of citizens to elect local self-government.¹⁹

OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) concluded that the ruling party had a systematic advantage that created unfair conditions in the elections, and that the involvement of the President of Serbia in the campaign was dominant. They pointed out that omnipresence of President Aleksandar Vučić and biased treatment in the media seriously undermines fair conditions in the electoral competition because the president is supposed to be a neutral figure who expresses national unity.²⁰

Andreas Schider, who was also a member of the European Parliament mission that observed the elections in Serbia, said he observed many elections, but the ones held in Serbia were far from any European standards.²¹ He believes that it would be necessary to conduct an international investigation, or at least repeat the elections in Belgrade, but under new conditions. However, he added, in Serbia it is a big problem to conduct an independent and open investigation, because the division in society is deep, and the judicial system and the state media are not independent enough.²²

Accusing the government of electoral theft, primarily in the local elections in Belgrade where thousands of citizens of Republika Srpska (RS) allegedly voted in an organized manner, the pro-European list “Serbia against violence”, less than 24 hours after the polls closed, called on citizens to protest in front of the headquarters of the Republic Election Commission (REC) in the center of Belgrade. The holders of that list, Miroslav Aleksić and Marinika Tepić, started a hunger strike in the premises of the Republic Election Commission (, demanding the annulment of the elections at all levels. After twelve days, they stopped strike due to their health condition. Unfortunately, their goal was not achieved – due to the holiday season, there was no support from the EU neither the pressure to the Government to repeat the elections. Even Serbian opposition decided to pause the protests – the last one was organized on December 30th.

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ “Strani posmatrači: Neregularnosti na izborima, sveprisutnost Vučića podrivala fer uslove”, *Direktno*, 18. decembar 2023, <https://direktno.rs/izbori-2023/503481/odih-strani-posmatraci-izbori-2023.html>, accessed on: 26/12/2023.

²¹ “Posmatrač EP: Nigde nisam video ono što sam video na izborima u Srbiji, ponoviti glasanje u Beogradu”, *N1*, 20. decembar 2023, <https://n1.info.rs/vesti/izbori-2023/posmatrac-ep-nigde-nisam-video-ono-sto-sam-video-na-izborima-u-srbiji-ponoviti-glasanje-u-beogradu/>, accessed on: 26/12/2023.

²² Ibidem.

Conclusion: 2023 – a year that no one wishes to be repeated

Since the dissolution of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, Serbian people from year to year were faced with various and numerous challenges. After the years of open conflict has finally ended, some other challenges came to be addressed. Unfortunately, years and decades which passed cast a long shadow on human nature.

The beginning of 2023 didn't indicate that something unimaginable would happen. What was expected was (unfortunately) usually daily based Kosovo and Metohija issue sparked with regular disagreements between the Government and opposition on early elections, media laws, unstable economy, inconsistent anti-crime and anti-corruption politics, etc. But, May 2023 events pointed to major weaknesses of Serbia today, the state of human and its mental health. People's reaction was expressed in protests against violence which eventually led to new extraordinary elections that could be best described as twisted and awkward due to one man's manifestation of an unlimited desire for power.