

SERBIA'S RULING PARTY ON COURSE TO FORM COUNTRY'S NEXT GOVERNMENT

President's ruling party scores comfortable but controversial victory in Serbia's snap elections

19 December 2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) of incumbent President Aleksandar Vučić has won the country's snap parliamentary elections with 47% of the vote and is set to form the country's next government. Voters went to the polls to on 17th December to decide on the future composition of the National Assembly, the Vojvodina provincial parliament and 65 local assemblies, including the capital Belgrade. The opposition is contesting the results of the Belgrade election, with reports of irregularities coming from both international and domestic election observers.

The pro-European Serbia Against Violence (SPN), SNS' main competitor, which is a coalition born out of the anti-violence protests following the country's first ever mass shootings in May, came second in the election with close to 24% of the vote. The Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), a traditional SNS ally, fell short of expectations, securing only 6.6%.

While the pro-EU opposition ran under a single banner, the right-wing factions failed to unite, resulting in fragmented support and several parties falling below the 3% threshold. Among those that passed the threshold for parliament were the conservative National Democratic Alternative (NADA) coalition and the "We - Voice from the People" (MI) party. Led by Branimir Nestorović, a pulmonologist known for spreading anti-vaccine and conspiracy theories during the COVID-19 pandemic, MI has become the biggest surprise of this snap electoral contest.

In Belgrade, the difference between the main contenders was significantly smaller, with SNS winning around 39% and SPN 34% of the city vote. NADA, MI and SPS also managed to pass the 3% threshold. MI is likely to be the ultimate kingmaker in the race for Belgrade, although Nestorović has announced that his party will be joining neither coalition. Claiming widespread fraud in Belgrade, the opposition is demanding a repeat election, which could see a more consolidated right-wing opposition front and closer international scrutiny in terms of future irregularities. At the time of writing, the country remains in deep political crisis with protests gathering outside the electoral commission each evening and no clear path to resolving the deadlock.



Below, Aretera provides an extensive insight into the aftermath of Serbia's December elections.

POST-ELECTION LANDSCAPE

On 17th December, voters across Serbia went to the polls in a snap electoral contest to elect the 250 members of the country's unicameral parliament, 120 members of the Vojvodina provincial assembly and local assemblies in 65 municipalities, including the capital city of Belgrade.

With 99% of the vote counted, and at a turnout of 58.8%, the populist Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) of President Aleksandar Vučić, in power since 2012, has won the parliamentary election. Winning 46.7% of the vote, SNS is projected to secure 128 of 250 seats in the National Assembly, enough to form a majority. Their main competitor, the pro-European Serbia Against Violence (SPN) coalition, born out of the anti-violence protests following mass shootings in May, came in second with 23.7% of the vote and 65 seats. The SNS's traditional coalition partner, Ivica Dačić's Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), won 6.6% of the vote, almost halving their support compared with the 2022 parliamentary elections and well below the 9% projected by most available polls. Having been in governing coalitions for 25 years, the SPS is considered the biggest underachiever of the 2023 electoral contest.

While the pro-EU opposition united under a single ballot, right-wing parties failed to do so, resulting in scattered votes and several lists failing to reach the 3% threshold. Right-wing parties that did pass the parliamentary threshold include the National Democratic Alternative (NADA) coalition led by Miloš Jovanović's New Democratic Party of Serbia (5.5%) and the We – Voice from the People (MI) party (4.7%). Led by pulmonologist-turned-conspiracy theorist Branimir Nestorović, who gained popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic for his controversial, anti-vaccine positions, MI produced the most surprising election result and most likely benefitted from the right-wing opposition's failure to run on a joint ticket, drawing additional support from voters fatigued by the long-unchanged electoral choices.

THE NEW COMPOSITION OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

Parliamentary Election Results Breakdown			
Party/Alliance	Popular Vote – April 2022 (%)	Popular Vote – December 2023 (%)	Number of MPs
SNS (ruling party, populist)	44.3	46.7	128
SPN (pro-EU, ideologically diverse)	ran separately	23.7	65
SPS (left-wing populist)	11.8	6.6	18
NADA (right-wing coalition)	5.5	5	13
MI (populist, conspiracy theorist)	did not run	4.7	13
SVM (Hungarian minority party)	1.6	1.7	6
SPP (minorities' coalition)	1	0.8	3
SDA (Bosniak minority party)	0.6	0.6	2
Shaip Kamberi (Albanian minority)	0.3	0.4	1
RS (Russian minority party)	did not run	0.3	1
Total			250

(Source: RIK. Turnout: 58.8%. Projections: CeSID/Ipsos. Threshold: 3%, except for minority parties.)

A CONTESTED ELECTION IN BELGRADE

Despite a clear SNS win in the national parliamentary contest, the Belgrade city elections proved far tighter than expected and have been marred by allegations of widespread voter fraud. Neither the SNS nor the SPN are able to form a majority on their own, having won around 39% and 34% of the vote respectively. The right-wing opposition coalition NADA came in third with 6%, and the SNS-allied SPS won 4.8%. Between them, the biggest surprise of the elections, Nestorović's MI, has emerged as the kingmaker of the Belgrade city elections. With 5.4% of the vote, the party's seats will be decisive in determining the next city government, however Nestorović has publicly stated that he will not be joining either side in forming a coalition. Although closer to the ruling SNS than the opposition, Nestorović is currently unaligned, while President Vučić has announced that, without his support to form a city majority, there could be a repeat election in Belgrade.

Among the key takeaways from Sunday's vote were growing reports of systematic irregularities, which have shed doubt on the results, particularly in Belgrade. The most alarming of these reports points to a large number of voters organized and bussed in from the Serb-entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republika Srpska, to vote in the Belgrade local election. The opposition claims this was organized by the ruling SNS and includes as many as 40,000 voters, alleging that fictitious Belgrade addresses were given to Republika Srpska citizens to ensure they are 'qualified' to vote.

The opposition SPN is demanding an annulment of the Belgrade election results and has called for protests in front of the Republic Electoral Commission (RIK). In a dramatic turn of events, on Monday evening opposition leaders Marinika Tepić and Miroslav Aleksić entered the electoral commission during protests and announced a hunger strike until the elections are annulled.

Both international and domestic election observers have expressed concern over the irregularity of the contest, with the OSCE ODIHR's preliminary statement saying that the elections were "dominated by the decisive involvement of the President, which together with the ruling party's systemic advantages created unjust conditions". CRTA, a Belgrade-based election observer, concluded that "the election results in Belgrade do not reflect the will of the voters who live there", with reports of numerous instances of foul play. Though such concerns are not uncommon following elections in Serbia, the tone from both domestic and international observers has been considerably harsher than previously.

In a further signal that Serbia's European partners would recognize the irregularities, Germany's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said "Serbia has voted, but OSCE ODIHR reports misuse of public resources, voter intimidation and cases of vote buying. This is unacceptable for a country with EU candidate status¹". As of the date of publishing this memo (19th December), the aftermath of the Belgrade election remains unclear, and will likely unfold in the following days.

WHAT'S NEXT?

In line with Aretera's pre-election forecast², President Vučić's SNS is set to form Serbia's next government. The future Prime Minister is yet to be announced, but the incumbent Ana Brnabić will most likely leave the post, with SNS's recently appointed President Miloš Vučević seen as her possible successor.

¹ See [here](#) for Aretera's key takeaways from the December EU Council & EU-Western Balkans Summit

² See [here](#) for Aretera's pre-election forecast from December 2023

The future of Belgrade, however, hangs on the election aftermath, with attention firmly focused on the international community and the opposition's next move. Meanwhile, Nestorović's MI continues to reject a coalition with both blocs, which gives the authorities substantial reason to hold a new round of elections in Belgrade. Under this scenario, the right-leaning opposition candidates who failed to pass the threshold would get a second chance to consider running on a joint ticket (or rather directing voters towards a single candidate), thus increasing their prospects of forming a sizable bloc that could topple SNS. Should there be another election, increased international attention would lower the chances of further irregularities, while the opposition could use the momentum and claim a small win in this regard.

POLITICAL & POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Yet another government formed by the ruling SNS would see a continuation of their set practices, with heightened sensitivity to foreign policy issues. Since the beginning of Russia's war on Ukraine, international pressure on Serbia has periodically increased, fueled by President Vučić's ongoing balancing act between the West and Russia, as well as the growing political and economic presence of China. Closely linked to this issue is Serbia's ongoing conflict with neighbouring Kosovo, following the 2023 Ohrid Agreement between President Vučić and Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti, which furthered the course of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue. In this regard, the snap election can be considered a chance for political regrouping and personnel changes in anticipation of future Serbian steps toward resolving the Kosovo issue.

A solid showing by the united pro-European parties suggests the distribution of power within the parliament will see a stronger opposition with increased capacity for institutional and political leverage. However, in light of previous election cycles, there is likely to be a prolonged formation of the new government, a standard tactic employed by SNS aimed at buying time between administrations. This, along with the unpredictable aftermath of the Belgrade election, warrants increased attention on political stability and post-electoral developments both in the capital and across Serbia. Businesses operating in the country should thus closely monitor political and policy processes following the December elections, with an added layer of scrutiny regarding legal uncertainties and the generally low respect for the rule of law.

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If you would like to schedule a discussion of this paper, please contact:
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