

## NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE

### April 2022 Elections Assessment

#### Summary

The National Assembly of Serbia has 250 members elected for a four-year term. Members are elected in a single district for the whole country on closed party lists. Seats are divided proportionally according to the widely used D’hondt method. Serbia has a multi-party system that produces coalition governments.

Elections for the national parliament,<sup>1</sup> president, Belgrade City council, and 13 municipal governments were convened on April 3, 2022. The parliamentary elections were early, following President Vucic’s unilateral decision to hold a parliamentary vote within two years of the previous parliamentary election in June 2020, which most opposition parties boycotted. The election process was characterized by [procedural and structural shortcomings](#) that allowed for numerous voting irregularities and hindered the degree to which voters were meaningfully and equitably informed of all political options. Election outcomes have not been disputed by major political contestants or the general public.

The war in Ukraine directly coincided with the campaign period, intensifying debate on Serbia’s close relations with Russia. Campaigns responded differently, impacting their vote shares. Right-wing parties capitalized on an increasingly pro-Kremlin sentiment among the electorate. They were bolstered by a swath of new, young voters as well as Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) voters dissatisfied with what they viewed as President Vucic’s insufficient support for Russia: President Vucic was against sanctioning Russia but supported Ukrainian sovereignty and UN resolutions condemning the war.

#### Parliamentary Election

As the leading vote-getter, SNS will need to form a coalition to form the new government. While SNS maintained a strong plurality in the parliament, capturing 43% of the vote and 120 of 250 seats, it lost its simple majority with a reduction of more than 313,000 votes compared to its 2016 tally (the last parliamentary elections in which the opposition competed).<sup>2</sup> Preliminary data suggests the reduction in SNS votes correlates with the rise of three pro-Kremlin parties/coalitions — NADA, Zavetnici and Dveri — all three of which passed the electoral threshold to enter parliament, the former two for the first time as new formations. The need to form a coalition coupled with its loss of base support to the far-right have created an important inflection point for SNS in determining whether or not it wants to tack harder to the right to recapture votes it lost to pro-Kremlin parties, or consolidate their remaining, more centrist and West-leaning support base.

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<sup>1</sup> The northern region of Vojvodina has its own regional assembly that was not a part of the April 3 elections.

<sup>2</sup> These results are still preliminary based on the latest available data at the time of publication.—still the case?

The 10% increase in voter turnout compared to the 2020 parliamentary elections went primarily to opposition parties, which had sat out the 2020 vote asserting that electoral conditions were not sufficiently democratic to contest. The substantial uptick in turnout among 2020 vote boycotters supported Western-oriented opposition parties and coalitions, such as United for Victory for Serbia and Moramo. First-time and other young voters joined with the right-wing breakoff of SNS voters and voted for the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), increasing its share by 33% from 2020 and putting the three other pro-Kremlin parties over the threshold.

Unlike the United for the Victory of Serbia coalition, led by the Party of Freedom and Justice (SSP), Moramo was effectively excluded both from pro-government news outlets, as well as media controlled by SSP leader Dragan Djilas, requiring them to rely on direct voter contact. With nearly 180,000 votes (more than two of the right-wing parties, Zavetnici and Dveri), Moramo's pickup of 13 seats as a first-time entrant into parliament is a testament to its effective messaging and direct voter outreach.

### **Presidential Election**

With just under 59% turnout, the presidential elections resulted in a decisive win (58.4% of the total vote share) for Vucic as the incumbent, who avoided a second-round run-off in garnering more than 50% in the first round.

The United for Victory for Serbia candidate, Zdravko Ponos, took second place with 18.3%.

The far-right presidential candidates split new voters and those dissatisfied with Vucic's position toward the Kremlin among NADA's Milos Jovanovic (6%), the Dveri's Bosko Obradovic (4.4%), and Zavetnici's Milica Djurdjevic Stamenkovski (4.3%).

### **Belgrade City Election**

For Belgrade City Council, SNS and its political affiliate SPS have a combined 56 out of 110 council seats. However, United for Victory for Serbia, Moramo, and other opposition coalitions alleged voter fraud, resulting in re-voting on April 16 and April 21 at six polling stations. None of the re-votes altered the original seat allocation. Because of pending legal challenges and a lack of formal SNS-SPS coalition, the solidity of SNS's ability to form a Belgrade government is unclear. United for Victory for Serbia has called for a technocratic government leading to repeated elections in Belgrade later this year. This pushback from the opposition prompted a meeting between Djilas and President Vucic to discuss the disputed election results and the possibility of new elections in Belgrade.

### **Electoral Process**

The period since the 2020 parliamentary elections, when part of the opposition boycotted elections due to unfair electoral conditions, was marked by two inter-party dialogue processes: one facilitated by the European Parliament and the other presided over by Speaker of the Parliament, Ivica Dacic, without mediation by foreign actors. As a result of these efforts, a number of important reforms of electoral administration, electoral dispute resolution, political party and campaign

financing, and campaign coverage in media were adopted through amendments of the electoral legal framework on February 4, 2022.

Observer reports by [Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability \(CRTA\)](#), [European Network for Election Monitoring Organizations \(ENEMO\)](#), and [Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe / Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights \(OSCE/ODIHR\)](#) identified violations during the pre-election campaign, including widespread abuse of state resources; allegations of voter buying and pressure on voters, especially on public sector employees and minority groups; dominant and biased reporting on ruling parties; and alleged forgery of the voters' signatures in the candidacy process. The issue of accuracy of the voter registry was also [raised by the opposition](#). There were multiple reports about citizens receiving the invitations to vote for people who do not reside at those addresses, or voters arriving at polling stations with invitations addressed to deceased persons. Without strong evidence of manipulation, such claims undermine public trust and confidence in elections and in democracy.

Media analysis conducted by independent observers revealed quantitatively disproportional coverage of the ruling coalition in the media, and qualitative bias in positive to neutral reporting on governing parties in comparison to mostly neutral or negative coverage of opposition parties. According to CRTA, the presence of government representatives on TV channels with a national frequency decreased from 85% of the total time dedicated to political actors, which was documented prior to the official start of the campaign, to 64%, while opposition parties' media presence increased from 15 to 36%. However, the ruling parties were dominant in the regular news programs (75%).<sup>3</sup>

The political situation, higher turnout, and polling predictions indicating a number of parties at or near the threshold to enter parliament produced a tense atmosphere on election day. This tension escalated into occasional reports of physical violence, including a physical assault of the leader of the opposition Movement of Free Citizens (PSG), Pavle Grbovic, by men whom he confronted alleging their illegal possession of copies of the voter registry.<sup>4</sup> CRTA noted that such incidents grew in comparison to previous election cycles but did not impact the outcomes of the elections. Numerous observation missions underlined that, overall, the election administration carried out its duties efficiently and within legal deadlines.

Despite reports of voting irregularities, and media inequality, the election results are not being challenged by any major political contestant from anywhere on the spectrum.

## **Serbia After the Election**

Serbia is at a tipping point. The election results have tightened the political path for President Vucic and his SNS party to govern. The SNS decision on which government coalition to form will have much to say about the geopolitical direction that Serbia takes as Russia's invasion against Ukraine continues.

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<sup>3</sup> CRTA, Election campaign in worse conditions than 2020, <https://crtars/en/election-campaign-in-worse-conditions-than-2020/>

<sup>4</sup> N1, *Serbia's Movement of Free Citizens leader attacked near a polling station*, <https://rs.n1info.com/english/news/serbias-movement-of-free-citizens-leader-attacked-in-front-of-a-polling-station/>

Serbia's democratization agenda is also at stake. Myriad rule of law and anti-corruption reforms are pending. Strengthening election processes remains critical as does consideration of the electoral system at the national level, given that Serbia's system of proportional representation deprives citizens of formal representation by members of parliament. Ensuring independence in government media is also critical to building an informed citizenry, as is strengthening entry points for civil society to engage government at all levels in issue advocacy, policymaking, and government monitoring. Supporting ethnic and other minority groups in their meaningful political and civic enfranchisement as citizens is imperative.

Vucic, who has promised to step down as SNS leader after a new government is formed, must empower new party leadership and determine what kind of coalition he will seek to build in forming the new government. SNS's right-wing breakoff, coupled with his own calculated, albeit public Western overtures, may presage a more European-inclined vision for his party and his legacy. With a maximum five-year mandate – potentially less if snap elections are called on or before local elections in 2024 – it is crucial to incentivize multilateral progress on the Dialogue to capitalize on Vucic's willingness to make progress in normalizing relations with Kosovo before his term expires. Progress made on the Dialogue directly correlates with progress made in the fight against Russia's creeping influence in Serbia and the Western Balkans.

The significant jump in pro-Russian, right-wing sentiment was predominantly driven by young voters. This new reality will force a more nuanced approach to youth political participation, including emphasizing the merits of democratic engagement and encouraging peaceful, productive contributions to political and social progress.