

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

# TOWARDS A REVIVAL OF DEMOCRACY

Perspectives on the Elections in Serbia

**Group of Authors**  
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On April 3, 2022, Serbian citizens will vote for the national Parliament, the office of President of the Republic, and in Belgrade for the City Council, who will then elect a new Major.



After years of democratic backsliding, lack of political will for the EU-accession process in the Serbian government, and geopolitical confusion, this is an opportunity for a revival of democracy in Serbia.



This collection of short opinion pieces provides a spectrum of the pro-European democratic opposition which highlight the significance, the challenges and the spirit of the historic moment of the 2022 elections in Serbia.



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# INTRODUCTION

After the fall of Slobodan Milosevic in October 2000, Serbia has made progress on its path of Democracy and European Integration. The victory of the Progressive Party SNS in 2012 has been a turning point for Serbia. Several watchdog organizations, like “Freedom House”, have classified Serbia no longer as a democracy, but as a “hybrid regime”. Although Aleksandar Vucic’ success had been built on merging the camps of the Serbian Radical Party with the European-accession-narrative, we have seen too little political will to push forward the necessary reform process for Serbia’s EU accession. Serbian foreign and security policy has been built on a position of balancing between the large geo-political powers. Besides the EU, these are the United States of America, China and Russia. But Russian aggression towards Ukraine, the invasion of Russia into Ukraine and the war we are witnessing, demonstrate how inconsistent this approach is today.

Democratic backsliding, lack of political will for the EU accession process, geopolitical confusion: Serbia needs a revival of democracy. At Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, we believe that this cannot work without an active and leading role of the pro-European democratic opposition in Serbia. After a boycott of the previous elections 2020, these forces are now running in the 2022 elections, they have re-organized and coordinated their strategies.

With this publication, we would like to present a variety of perspectives on the 2022 elections. We have invited activists, scholars, labour unionists, as well as leading politicians to give their assessment of the significance, the challenges involved and the spirit of the historic moment of the 2022 elections in Serbia. The fact that elections take place at the same time for the National Parliament and the office of President of the Republic, as well as for the City Council of Belgrade who will then elect a new Major of the capital, is adding to the urgency of the matter.

We have collected opinions from feminist and civil society activists, perspectives on environmental protection and media freedom, analyses of the party spectrum as well as the ideological background of the present regime. We do not claim that this is an impartial or comprehensive overview of the attitudes in Serbia before the elections. These are voices from our friends and partners as Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Belgrade. This is what we consider part of the pro-European democratic opposition in Serbia. We hope that you will find it interesting and inspiring. More information and analysis about the situation in the Serbian society, economy and political scene as well as about the elections can be found on our webpage: <https://serbia.fes.de>

*Dr. Max Brändle  
Director  
Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Belgrade*

## 1

# THE PARLIAMENTARY AND PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN SERBIA - WHAT ARE OUR OPTIONS?

## Ksenija Markovic



**Ksenija Markovic** is employed at the Institute of Social Sciences as a research fellow. She is currently in the final year of her doctoral studies at the Department of Politicology, Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade.

In her research work she focuses on inter-ethnic relations, public opinion surveys and social

democratic ideas and values. She has published a number of papers in important national and international journals and proceedings of scientific papers. She has participated at national and international conferences focusing on the topics of multiculturalism and the rights and status of national minorities. She works as a programme associate, lecturer and trainer at various political education programmes organised by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation.

Before joining the Institute of Social Sciences, she worked in the non-governmental sector for three years with the Forum for Ethnic Relations NGO in Serbia. She has been the Democratic Party's International Secretary since September 2021. She is also a Democratic Party candidate for member of the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia in the forthcoming elections.

In order to understand the context of the elections soon to be held in Serbia, there are several points we need to make. Serbia belongs to a category of poorly institutionalised party systems. What exactly does that mean? It means that the political parties are poorly rooted in society and there is a general distrust of the institutions. Only a tiny segment of citizens continues to vote for the same party. Instead, citizens vote for individual candidates or if they vote for parties they often change the party they vote for. Many citizens and groups question the legitimacy of the elections and believe that political parties are neither desirable nor necessary. Finally, parties often have a leader-based character and poor resources. All of the above cultivate highly fertile soil for the collapse of democracy.

Serbia has long since lost its status of electoral democracy, the status it painstakingly established in the period 2008 through 2012. Democracy has given way to stabilitocracy.<sup>1</sup> This brings us to another question: How did this erosion of democracy in Serbia come about? The first step was the undermining of already fragile democratic institutions, from the legislative, executive and judicial branches of power all the

way to public administration. Secondly, the emergence of populist and anti-party ideas leading to the political arena being devoid of any values, where everything boils down to the fight for sheer interests or for sheer survival. Thirdly, due to the domination of Aleksandar Vucic and the Serbian Progressive Party, we have seen the party system sliding from moderate pluralism and multipartism into a one-party system. Fourthly, despite all these clear indicators that democracy in Serbia is collapsing and going down a road of no return, the international community, primarily the European Union, continues to support the Aleksandar Vucic regime, thus triggering disappointment and a lack of trust in the European integration process amongst some part of the opposition public opinion, but also a chance that something can be changed. Fifthly, the undermining and abolition of democratic freedoms, coupled with orchestrated media propaganda, marginalise anyone who is not a part of the ruling coalition. Amid such domination, the opposition has responded with party disunity and rifts, which, in turn, have led to a serious ideological and organisational crisis. Instead of rifts over values, the divide along the lines of pro-regime and anti-regime parties is making a comeback to the party system.

It is in such conditions that the elections in Serbia will take place. These are not elections where we are supposed to make a choice between ideologies and programmes, because in these elections we are fighting for democracy! This does not mean that the opposition lack programmes or ideological differences. Still, how can we talk about political programmes at a time when the political arena is devoid of any values and reduced to power relations alone? Serbia stopped being a democracy a long time ago, and this is not just a matter of personal perception, but an objective fact, which a number of scientific and research papers and democratisation indices can attest to. The greatest success of the ruling regime is their rendering the electoral system pointless. Serbia is ruled by fear and distrust.

The question is how to fight for democracy under conditions that are anything but democratic! Why is the opposition taking part in the elections? Because we must fight, we have no other choice! Because citizens expect us to take responsibility! We are fighting for the right to elect, without fear or blackmail! We are fighting to restore power to the institutions! We are defending our dignity and the freedom our ancestors fought for! We are fighting for hope and justice! We want to see changes coming through the institutions rather than happening on the streets! Finally, we are fighting to bring values and ideology back to the political arena! There can be no democracy without elections, and there can be no social democracy without democracy!

<sup>1</sup> Using the terminology of Giovanni Sartori, Serbia today can be categorised as a hegemonic party system.

## 2 NEW ELECTIONS, OLD MEDIA MANIPULATION Slobodan Cvejić



**Slobodan Cvejić** is a full professor at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade. He has published several dozen academic publications for Serbian and international publishers. Professor Cvejić has 20 years of experience in local and international public policy development and policy research. He has cooperated with numerous national, foreign and international governmental and non-governmental organizations.

Current political rule in Serbia is characterized as soft-authoritarian and populist by many analysts. Supported, or at least tolerated by many influential Western politicians and institutions it is also often characterized as a stabilitocracy (or stabilocracy).

One of main instruments of Vucic's soft-authoritarian rule is wide and oppressive control over the media. Clever, well-managed and occasionally brutal, media manipulation serves to homogenize the majority of citizens in Serbia around the central political figure of president Vucic and whatever goals and values he promotes. Such manipulation is extremely important because his political program encompasses ideological values and political goals from a wide political spectrum, from left to extreme right. Additionally, one of his main ruling techniques is a quick switch between different topics and priorities in order to adjust to the prevailing regional and global political situation. Since this provokes frustration among political subjects, including his voters but also his subordinated collaborators, it is extremely important to (try to) normalize such ideological chaos by intensive propaganda.

This propaganda occurs in electronic and printed media and on social networks. With a low level of general digital literacy in Serbia, his control over all TV stations producing licensed national coverage is of crucial importance. Since Serbia has ratified and adopted all media policy instruments (institutions and public policy documents) common in the EU, it is important for Vucic's authoritarian rule to have control over the main regulatory bodies in the media field, too. Being a soft autocrat, he does not reject these laws and institutions. Instead, he manipulates institutions which are, in turn, break-

ing the law. This way TV stations with national coverage can freely jeopardize the professional principles and ethics of journalism, neglect objective information and discriminate political opponents. Reaction from the regulatory body for electronic media is usually manipulative (small or no sanctions, vague and inconsistent legal interpretations, and so on). Such behavior is strongly highlighted during electoral campaigns, which has been documented by several independent organizations.

The idea of the coming presidential and parliamentary elections is not, of course, to bring another political garniture to public broadcasting companies and regulatory bodies who will manoeuvre for another political option, but to strengthen democratic values and professional principles. This should contribute to fairer and constructive political competition on the one hand and to the promotion of democratic and participatory values, on the other. It is of the utmost importance to reset the regulatory body for electronic media (REM) to its statutory and legal principles. Since REM Council members are proposed and elected through a democratic procedure, their capacity to establish independent and legally founded procedures in the protection of media freedom will depend on the democratic capacity of the stakeholders who propose them and of the parliament members who entitle them. And here we come to a rather pessimistic expectation from the coming elections based on recent experience with changes to the regulatory body. Namely, the agreement to replace five (absolute majority) members of the REM Council was a supreme achievement of European Parliament facilitators in negotiations between the ruling regime and opposition in Serbia in 2020. However, in the end this did not lead to any improvement in the work of REM since most of the newly-elected members did not fight for the strengthening of REM's independence and professionalism. This signals that prevailing paternalistic and clientelistic political culture among the majority of Serbian voters will be hard to change in short term.

## 3

## THE 2022 ELECTIONS – PARLIAMENT AS A DEMOCRATIC CHAT ROOM AND A POWER-RESTRICTING INSTITUTION

### Boban Stojanovic



**Boban Stojanovic** is a political scientist and a PhD candidate at the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade. He is a researcher with more than 30 completed research projects and more than 35 publications and scientific papers published in various journals and proceedings of papers.

The elections in Serbia scheduled for 3 April, 2022 will again be held under unequal electoral conditions, which is the reason why over the past 10 years Serbia has been categorized among those countries with the highest rise in authoritarianism and democratic decline, leading to its being characterized as a hybrid regime (a type of political regime with democratic institutions in place, but where the regime has huge leverage through abuse of the media and other resources, as well as through abuse of force and state institutions), and as a partially free state (according to Freedom House and V-Dem Institute reports). All of this led to the boycott of elections by the opposition in 2020 and resulted in an almost one-party parliament, which has only shed further light on the problems of authoritarianism and decline in democracy and freedoms in Serbia.

On 3 April all political actors will participate in the elections under conditions they have accepted as givens, i.e. the only conditions in which electoral battle can be fought in Serbia, since the regime will not give up the mechanisms with which it rules the country, nor is there any apparent external mechanism of pressure on the undemocratic type of political regime in Serbia (the failed negotiations between the regime and the opposition under the auspices of the European Parliament). The only pressure on the regime in Serbia is from people taking to the streets, as we saw happening in late November and early December last year, when people blocked major roads and thus managed to restrict the power of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and President Aleksandar Vucic. This pressure resulted in a disputed bill being withdrawn from parliamentary procedure and another being referred for expeditious amendment. During the

course of these several days we saw how parliamentary procedures for passing laws (did not work) worked.

It is in this very direction, i.e. in the mending of the work of parliament and its process of passing laws, that we see potential improvements through the April 3 elections - by bringing the struggle back to the institutions among which parliament (the National Assembly) is certainly the most important. In democracies power is restricted through institutions, rules and procedures and the return of the opposition (and thus the will of the people) to these institutions. Only thus can we expect that citizens will no longer have to resort to restricting power by taking to the streets. Parliament could again become a chat room, a forum for clashing political views and visions, and a venue for fighting essential political battles. Even though the ruling party has for the past 10 years done everything to throw this very kind of politics out of parliament, it seems that now they find it more important to make sure the political struggle is brought back to the institutions, since they too will suffer a political defeat pursued on the streets.

Whatever the election result may be, parliament could finally start looking like a real parliament again, where the political struggle is pursued, and a place for policy-making (through laws) that impacts the lives of all of us citizens, and whereby executive power is restricted. Somehow we have forgotten that the opposition is essentially an institution and that its existence in parliament and its restricting the work of the government is indeed an institutional mechanism. This could be the first step towards democratic recovery in Serbia.

Of course, in order for parliament to do its job and for laws to be designed in line with the will of the people, Serbia needs to go back to the domain of at least a minimum/electoral democracy. It remains to be seen whether the regime will change in the forthcoming elections or whether the current regime will loosen its authoritarian grip and bring the system back to minimum democratic mode. My only fear is that if the regime does not change and if the current regime fails to loosen its authoritarian grip – will Serbia just keep regressing in terms of democratic benchmarks, will parliament remain just decor in the president's style of ruling, and will the laws merely remain the result of his own will?

## 4

## NEW REALITY AND THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN IN SERBIA

### Natasa Vuckovic



**Natasa Vuckovic** In addition to being a practicing attorney-at-law, Ms Vuckovic has considerable experience in both governmental and non-governmental fields. Active in Serbian civil society as a co-founder and Executive Director of the Belgrade-based Center for Democracy Foundation, she has managed its work

since its establishment in 1994 designing and coordinating its projects, fundraising and developing the Foundation's programmatic portfolio. The Foundation is committed to the development of democracy, EU integration of the Western Balkans and sustainable socio-economic development, implementing projects on local, national, regional and European levels.

Ms Vuckovic is a member of the Programmatic Council of the National Convention on the European Union (NCEU) where she is Chair of the Working Group for Social Policy and Employment (Chapter 19) and of the Working Group on the Berlin Process. She is CDF representative at the Foundation for European Pro-

gressive Studies (FEPS) in Brussels. Since 2020 she has been a member of the Governing Board of the EU based network ALDA - European Association for Local Democracy, Strasbourg, France. She has been a consultant on projects undertaken by GiZ, SDC, SIPRU, the UN Human Rights Team, ReSPA and others.

As a Member of Parliament (2007-2020) representing the Democratic Party, she chaired the Committee on European Integration and sat on the Committee on Foreign Affairs and Committee on Judiciary and Public Administration. A member of the Serbian Standing Delegation in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), she served as Vice President of the Assembly (2012), as well as Chair of the Committee on Rules and Internal Procedures (2013-2015), and as Vice Chair of the Committee on Election of Judges to the European Court of Human Rights (2016). She was also PACE Rapporteur for Turkey (2015-2016).

She has published articles and analysis, has lectured and held trainings at various institutions and organizations including the Regional School for Public Administration (ReSPA), particularly in the field of EU integration of the Western Balkans, the rule of law, human rights, parliamentary procedures, as well as in non-profit management. Since 2020 she has held no political party affiliation.

If the deadline for this brief paper on the importance of the forthcoming elections for civil society were just ten days earlier, prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, this paper would have been different. The most recent events in the east of our continent have created a new reality that will define long term political, economic and social developments both in Europe and Serbia. The war in Europe will shape new priorities and new narratives and will change the focus and behaviour of many actors in the European Union, in the institutions, political parties and businesses alike. This will also have a direct impact on the election campaign in Serbia – it seems imminent that the position of Serbia and the standpoints of the major political parties about this conflict will push the contents of the programmes offered by the political parties to the second plan in media. In a matter of only a few days, the focus of the public and citizens of Serbia has shifted from the launch of the election campaign to the international stage.

Following the boycott of the previous elections and the devastating experience of an almost one-party parliament, and since the opposition participates in this year's elections, the elections are seen as an opportunity, after the dialogue on electoral conditions, to bring Serbia back onto the path of parliamentary democracy through the opposition's participation in the elections, as there can be no real parliament without the opposition.

The local elections in the City of Belgrade have instilled a great hope that, given the major discontent of Belgraders, the City Assembly elections will be a major battle that the opposition stands a chance of winning. This would open up the possibility for a certain 'division' of power between the central and local levels. In case of the opposition victory in Belgrade, the central authorities, where lower prospects of major change are forecast, would be then forced to establish institutional dialogue, coordination and cooperation with new city authorities. This could partly relax the firm and irreconcilably opposed positions between the biggest party and the opposition, and would also mitigate deep polarization which is so harmful for societal development. This would add wind in the opposition's sails and serve as a huge basis for its further development and strengthening.

Finally, what remains are the presidential elections which many deem to be of essential importance as presidential candidates predominantly colour their parties' electoral lists' campaigns and impact the major campaign tone. Since there is no candidate who would be *a priori* recognised as Aleksandar Vucic's rival with chances to win, it appears that the opposition would consider as a success if Vucic is thwarted from winning the elections in the first round since. If that happens, from that moment onwards, anything could change.



In any case, considerable weakening of the power of the Serbian Progressive Party is expected. For the future of democracy in Serbia the opposition needs to establish the second strong pole, opposite of that dominated by the Serbian Progressive Party, and thus be able to balance out the political scene.

The election results will largely depend on the level of compliance with electoral procedures and on how fair and democratic the elections are going to be. The opposition's monitoring of the elections will have a crucial role in this. The credibility of election observers and mutual cooperation among the parties in organising the monitoring and control of the entire electoral process are also important for both creating citizens' trust in the opposition and for reducing voters' fears, especially in the smaller communities.

The opposition, including the parties on the far right of the political spectrum, have selected several main topics for their respective election campaigns – the fight against corruption, environmental protection with a predominant narrative against Rio Tinto's investments, wage increase, and support to farmers. Interestingly enough, labour rights is another topic that features on the programme agendas of several opposition parties. The EU accession process, however, is not at the forefront.

It remains to be seen how the war in Ukraine will influence that these topics are in the focus of voters' attention and whether the war would shift their previous, pre-war priorities to other topics. The question raised here is how will Serbia keep its EU integration agenda and defend its European path in a situation where this path may be jeopardized by amid requests to prove just how sincere its European commitment really is. It seems that a few weeks ahead of the elections, the opposition needs to become engaged in this domain as well, i.e. speak about the necessity of Serbia's European path, request debates on current foreign policy issues and take part in these debates and offer solutions to these issues, as all of these topics will determine the country's future.

A major part of civil society is traditionally engaged in the elections in Serbia. First and foremost, civil society organisations have played a major role in advocating dialogue on electoral conditions between the regime and opposition. Monitoring of the election process is a regular activity of civic associations. The fight for more democracy is also a fight for better working environment for civil society and for citizens' involvement in the decision-making processes. This is why coordination with political parties that share the same goal and are participants in the political process is necessary, while the civil society shall preserve its independence.

## 5 RECONQUISTA OF THE INSTITUTIONS Milan Antonijević



**Milan Antonijević** is a human rights lawyer and independent expert currently senior advisor to the Chief Negotiator of Montenegro, dealing with Chapters 23 and 24. Milan is a lawyer by training and has devoted his career to date to human rights protection, the rule of law and European Union integration of the Western Balkans.

He served as the Executive Director of the Open Society Foundation, Serbia from 2018-2021, and from 2010 to 2018 he was the Director of the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights (YU-COM), founded in 1997, where he strongly promoted and advocated for the rule of law and upholding human rights in Serbia and the region of the Western Balkans. With more than 20 years' experience in the non-governmental and public sector and a strong public presence in the Serbian media, Milan has worked extensively with civil society, state institutions, and po-

litical and social partners in Serbia on various projects including for the United Nations, the Council of Europe, the European Union, USAID, the World Bank, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) among others. He has also been a member of various working groups drafting legislation in the area of human rights.

Milan is currently a candidate for independent expert for the Council of Europe Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) and the forthcoming elections. He previously held various positions within professional bodies of the Serbian government, such as member of the Council for Monitoring the Implementation of the Recommendations of the United Nations Mechanism for Human Rights. He has coordinated the National Convention on the European Union for Negotiation Chapter 23 (on the Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) from 2014 to 2019.

Milan holds a law degree from Belgrade Law School and was a Chevening scholar at the Department for Peace Studies, Bradford University, UK, 2009-2010. He is currently studying for a PhD at the Department of Anthropology, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade.

With Serbia having taken a clear stand, along with 140 other countries at the UN on March 2, to address and condemn the aggression of Russia towards Ukraine, one can go back to the topics of the rule of law and the fight against corruption in Serbia with more dedication and calmness.

Lessons learnt, as well as the future of reform, can be seen as the continuation of a long journey that began during the time after the fall of Milosevic on the October 5, 2000<sup>2</sup>, with a steady progress and strategic orientation not questioned by any of the governments that followed Prime Minister Djindjic's and those early steps of democracy taken from 2000-2003.

Even the recent Strategy for National Security, drafted by the Ministry of Defence and adopted by the government, places the EU integration of Serbia as a strategic goal of our country,

thus clearly linking the issues of security and safety with the EU perspective of Serbia.

Building institutions has been a clear engine for change and after the April 3 elections we must go back to every single institution, assess its development, find solutions for rebuilding and attract citizens to be allies in this fight for institutions. Reconquista is not the right word as it has its root in conquering, but if the democratic values and full obedience of high quality legislation is on the minds of those who are conquering them, then reconquista can gain a positive impulse and tone.

Parliament is a topic that I will not deal with here in this pre-election period but I would just like to stress that I started the dialogue between all the political parties in 2019 on the election conditions in Serbia, bringing to the negotiation table political elements that had not spoken to each other for years, where the democratic opposition walked out of the parliament in 2018. There is much to say on attempts to restart parliamentary life in Serbia and enhance election conditions, but I believe this would be more suitable in book form and not a brief op-ed written for the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

<sup>2</sup> There was also a short period when Yugoslavia underwent reform processes at the end of the 1980s just before Milosevic took over power in Serbia, with a small window of opportunity to avoid the conflict and strengthen democracy with the reform-oriented Prime Minister, Ante Markovic, in office from March 1989 to December 1991.

Some institutions have stood the test of the time and governments such as the State Audit Institution which every year submits to the Serbian Parliament a bold picture of procurement and many other deficiencies in our system and budget spending, clearly indicating where the gaps are. We may also add to this positive list the Commissioner for Equality, as well as the Commissioner for Free Access to Information and Data Protection.

On the negative register, however, the Office of the Ombudsman can be placed, having lost its credibility and capacity in recent years, as well as the Anti-Corruption Agency which is in a REM phase - more precisely - in a deep sleep.

Prosecution of the cases that must follow the findings of the State Audit Institution and many other institutions is not visible. This is where recent Constitutional Amendments and the referendum on judicial changes of the Constitution of Serbia must make their stand. It is a positive step, yet the first step in a line to be followed by a series of judicial laws of the fu-

ture parliament, clearly indicating where Serbia will be in a few years' time. If this constitutional reform succeeds, it will rebuild trust in the judiciary and many of the cases investigated only by the free media will be investigated by an independent judiciary.

The April 3 elections could be a turning point for Serbia, as well as for its institutions; to leave aside animosity and go back to the debate on where Serbian society is going, how to revive its democratic capacity written in part in the modern Serbian constitutional acts of the 19th century as well as in brief periods within our 218 years of modern statehood, when Serbia leaned towards the rule of law and democratic values.

The capacity is there as well as the knowledge and the energy. It is up to the politicians to take a stand, create a vision of Serbia in the EU that society can follow and enjoy the benefits of strong institutions, the separation of power, the rule of law and freedoms in total.

## 6 FEMALE VOICES FOR THE RETURN OF DEMOCRACY Marija Srdic



**Marija Srdic** is a long-term activist of the women's movement, a journalist and consultant. She is the founder and director of the Centre for Support to Women. She is currently active in the Academy of Women Leadership and the Women's Platform for the Development of Serbia.

For more than a decade now she has been a FES associate on several programmes.

Her specialised fields of interest include: women in the media, the political participation of women, the economic status of women, and women in sports.

In April 2022 the citizens of Serbia will elect their parliamentary representatives for the thirteenth time and the president of the Republic for the twelfth time since the multi-party system was introduced. Moreover, Belgraders will elect new members to the City Council, while voters in twelve more cities and municipalities will elect new members to their respective local assemblies.

Unlike the atmosphere at the 2020 elections, marked by the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and the boycott of the elections by most of the opposition which was unhappy with the electoral conditions, the 2022 electoral campaign is gaining the shape of a 'political match game', which will certainly be very interesting in terms of the 'record' number of women running for president. So far, Milica Djurdjevic Stamenkovski, president of the (ultra right-wing) Serbian Oathkeepers Party; Biljana Stojkovic, a non-partisan figure and a Belgrade University Professor nominated by the "We Must" Green left-wing coalition and Branka Stamenkovic, former president of the "Enough is Enough" Movement and now the candidate for the Sovereignists coalition, have announced they are running for president.

Women also top the most important electoral lists for the April 3 parliamentary elections: the renowned brain surgeon Dr Danica Grujicic heads the list of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party, while the opposition coalition list "United for Serbia's Victory" is headed by the Vice President of the Freedom

and Justice Party and the most popular opposition politician, Marinika Tepic.

Thanks to amendments to the electoral laws (in 2020) and the passing of a new Gender Equality Law (in 2021), all those competing in the elections are obliged to nominate at least 40% of their representatives (actually female representatives) of the less represented gender according to a strictly defined order of appearance on the electoral list.

According to indicators from the most recent Gender Equality Index<sup>3</sup>, Serbia has embarked upon the 2022 elections with progress in the power domain. As compared to the baseline in 2014, an 18.5-point growth has been registered. This result has been achieved due to progress in the political power subdomain, which is based on quotas for the less represented gender in the legislative and executive branches of power, and some other indicators of social power.

In light of these facts, however, several questions are raised: 1) Is women's breakthrough in the political sphere an indicator of an enabling social and political environment? 2) Does an increased number of female representatives in the legislative and executive branches of power imply a stronger representation of women's interests in the decision-making places and more equality? 3) Is greater participation and visibility of female candidates in the election campaign result conducive to an increase in voter turnout (particularly female voter turnout)?

The above questions and facts should not be viewed from a linear perspective, but in the context of current social and political developments, as well as from a historical perspective.

Namely, during the three decades of the pluralist system in Serbia, notably in the period after 2000, we have seen continuous progress in women's political participation and social impact.

In the 1990s women in parliament and executive power used to be a sporadic phenomenon (represented by only a few percent) while, in the elections, female voters in Serbia were

3 [https://socijalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Indeks\\_rodne\\_ravnopravnosti\\_u\\_RS\\_2021.pdf](https://socijalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Indeks_rodne_ravnopravnosti_u_RS_2021.pdf)

often among the abstainers. The 2000 elections marked an end to this regressive path with an unprecedented, massive turnout of women and young voters whose votes for the Democratic Opposition of Serbia enabled the toppling of the Slobodan Milosevic regime and the setting up of the very first democratic government. At the time, of the 250 members of the Serbian parliament, only 26 (about 11%) were women. In the then Cabinet comprising 15 ministers, only two were women. In as much as one-fourth of towns and municipalities, there were no female representatives to the local assemblies.

Putting the issue of women on the government's political agenda has been possible due to the launch of a process of democratisation and Europeanisation of Serbian society and an accelerated institution-building process, but even more so due to the pressure of a numerically strong and relatively homogeneous feminist scene that derived its authority from its engagement during the tumultuous 1990s.

The European integration process and the country's opening up to the world were advantageous for progress in the sphere of equality, so by the time the Serbian Progressive Party came to power in 2012, Serbia virtually already had in place a well-rounded legislative and institutional framework for achieving gender equality. Even though this framework has been endangered and rendered moot to a greater extent in the subsequent process of the deconstruction of institutions and rife authoritarian tendencies, its basic structure has survived to this day.

And now to answer the questions raised:

Quotas are not and cannot be a perfect instrument for the greater participation of women in decision-making, their social influence; and neither are they guarantees that female representatives will represent the interests of women and other vulnerable groups. The most uncomfortable demonstration of this was the last composition of the Serbian parliament, where a numerically strong corps of female MPs was just an obedient segment of the ruling parties' voting and propaganda machine, devoid of any sensitivity to the burning issue of the social and economic status of women.

Still, it is with caution and (why not?) hope that one may perceive the emergence of true and tested female activists and authentic female politicians on the list of candidates (primarily those of the democratic, left-wing and green options linked to women's and environmental movements) as something that can nudge out of abstinence those male and female citizens who have withdrawn from voting because they "had no one to vote for" and give them an impetus to turn out to vote.

Finally, it is impossible not to draw another parallel between the atmosphere ahead of the 2000 elections and today's inglorious circumstances. If, at that time, rebellious women and their votes managed to 'tip the scale' and enable the united opposition to win the elections, it is reasonable to expect that women's votes today will bring about a change in the balance of powers on the political scene, and also the prospect of the collapse of the Aleksandar Vucic regime and Serbia's return to the path of democracy.

## 7

## REGIONAL RELATIONS – SESELJ'S COMEBACK

## Ljuban Panic



**Ljuban Panic**, was born in Vršac, 1985 and is an economist by profession.

He has been active in politics since 2003 and served as President of the Executive Board of the Democratic Party from 2009 to 2013. He was also a member of the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia from 2012 to 2014.

In 2018, he was head of election headquarters for the Dragan Djilas list for the City of Belgrade elections and in the same year he became Secretary of the Alliance for Serbia. Also in 2018 he was head of the organizing committee of the 'Stop the Bloodied Shirts' protest. In 2020 he was Chief of Staff at the Alliance for Serbia's elections boycott and in October, 2020 he was elected Secretary General of the Freedom and Justice Party. Through the SZS and the Freedom and Justice Party he worked to establish links with political groups and decision-makers in Brussels.

He lives in Belgrade, father to his daughter Mila, and is engaged in consulting work in the Western Balkans.

Aleksandar Vucic owes his political development and his first rise to power to Vojislav Seselj. Seselj advocates hate and war. He gathered Aleksandar Vucic and his closest associates around the platform of the so-called 'Greater Serbia', i.e. Serbia's territorial expansion at the expense of other countries in the Western Balkans. He was convicted for war crimes in a controversial trial before the ICTY. When it comes to regional relations, Aleksandar Vucic's power has been accompanied by Seselj's comeback – his physical return to Serbia and Aleksandar Vucic's inability to restrain the Seselj in himself. They will appear together in the forthcoming elections in April – Vojislav Seselj, the man who advocates conflicts with the region and the suspension of all integration processes, has publicly stated that he is a candidate supported by Aleksandar Vucic.

Serbia is the biggest country in the Western Balkans with the largest economic and demographic potential in the region. Serbia has compatriots in all the countries of the region. Without Serbia, there can be no successful completion of the integration processes in the Western Balkans. Of all the

countries that aspire to become or have already become members of the EU, Serbia is the most corrupt and the least democratic. International reports characterise Serbia as a "hybrid regime" or an "electoral autocracy". In a number of consecutive resolutions the European Parliament has clearly depicted all the problems Serbia is facing. Serbia is ruled by chaos in all spheres of life. Such a level of corruption, lack of institutions, control of the media, and power concentrated in the hands of one man can only be possible in chaos. As opposed to chaos, there is order, which the united opposition will restore to Serbia. Without order, it will be impossible for us to join the EU. The havoc wreaked by Aleksandar Vucic's style of rule is the biggest legacy of Vojislav Seselj.

The havoc wreaked on regional relations by Vojislav Seselj's ideology within Aleksandar Vucic's regime is enormous. Though everyone is suffering from the damage, the brunt of it is borne by the citizens of Serbia. Rhetorically, the policy of 'Greater Serbia' has been replaced by the 'Serbian world' narrative. The Serbian people live throughout the region and Serbia must act as a protector of their interests, wherever necessary and wherever these interests are jeopardised. However, the ideology of Seselj and Vucic in power does not imply the right of our compatriots to free and democratic association in the countries of the region in order to protect their own rights. Right now, this ideology requires them to submit to the will of Belgrade. In other words, to submit to the will of Aleksandar Vucic with Vojislav Seselj, with whom he is to appear at the elections.

Thus, the democratic changes in Northern Macedonia were described by Serbian media, all of which are controlled by the government, as a coup orchestrated by the West. Northern Macedonia's agreement with Greece regarding its name, its joining NATO, its progress in terms of internal relations with ethnic Albanians, all of this was presented to the people of Serbia as actions that are the result of the coup orchestrated by the West, rather than as a result of the democratic will of the people to change the regime and speed up the integration processes. Cooperation among criminal and politically corrupt circles and their peers in Montenegro is so good that Belgrade has done its utmost to assist the collapse of the very first government of Montenegro not created by Milo Djukanovic. Most Serbs in Montenegro refuse to give up their own identity or submit to the will of Aleksandar Vucic and Vojislav Seselj in Belgrade. This is why Belgrade has as-

sisted in the removal of the Cabinet of Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapic and Montenegrin Parliament Speaker Aleksa Becic. "Telekom Srbija" is a state-owned company that uses huge amounts of money to buy media affection in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The ideology of Vucic and Seselj is such that political and ethnic crises are not being settled by the Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina through their own representatives and institutions, but the two of them are doing it on their behalf. They continue to add fuel to the flames of hostile rhetoric with Croatia in the media. State officials are constantly making comparisons between the Serbian and Croatian armies, putting Croatia in the context of war against Serbia, while completely ignoring Serb representatives in Croatia because of their reluctance to be an extension of the Vucic-Seselj duo. In regional relations, perhaps the most bizarre example is a recent one concerning Romania. I grew up with Romanians; our two nations have strong and sincere ties, which could best be described by a Romanian proverb to the effect that they have two honest friends – the Black Sea and the Serbs. The leader of the united opposition list for the forthcoming elections is our party Vice President Marinika Tepic. Her uncompromising fight against corruption and chaos in Serbia has triggered the friends of Aleksandar Vucic and

Vojislav Seselj to use the opportunity of appearing in the national media to label Romania and the Romanians as the enemies of Serbia. The Romanian Embassy to Serbia and a number of politicians in Brussels, some of whom are from Romania, have responded to this. Serbia's response was insane – no Serbian official appeared at the reception marking 1 December, Romania's Great Union Day. Romania is a country that has supported Serbia regarding the status of Kosovo and Metohija and European integration.

Amid the growing changes in Europe due to the Ukrainian crisis, the key to the stabilisation of our region lies in acceleration along its European path. This region must extricate itself from chaos. As for Serbia, climbing out of the chaos of the regime of Aleksandar Vucic and Vojislav Seselj is key. The Serbia that will emerge after they fall from power will be a state aware of its own national and state interests and all the problems, some of which are geopolitical in nature. The only thing that Serbia ruled by Vucic and Seselj is capable of is deepening the problems in order to enhance personal power. This new Serbia to come will solve these problems as much as necessary to create a stable, secure, strong and safe Balkans.

## 8

## A CRY FOR DEMOCRACY

## Marija Martinic



**Dr Marija Martinic**, PhD, was born in Belgrade in 1972. She obtained a Master's degree from the Department of Political Sociology, Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade, in 2010. She defended her PhD thesis at the same Department in 2016. She has been active in Serbia's civil society for more

than 25 years. She has authored several dozen scientific studies as well as her own books in the field of political sociology. She has been a FES associate, lecturer and trainer for several decades. Dr Martinic is the Director of the Education and Research Centre of the Nezavisnost Trade Union Confederation.

It has been three full decades since the democratic forces in Serbia began their unrelenting fight to establish a decent society, rule of law, and a society based on equality and social justice. While the first decade of this period, tainted by ethnic conflicts, economic sanctions and the impoverishment of the general population, was marked by all-encompassing torture by the authoritarian regime of Slobodan Milosevic and without any room for the full protection of fundamental human rights, the democratic institution-building process in the second decade began with the setting up of our very first democratic government in 2000. In a country faced with the consequences of long-term international isolation, this was a slow process that failed to attain a level of genuine protection of the economic and social rights of citizens who shouldered the entire burden of privatisation. And then, in 2012, Serbia took a step backwards.

The last decade has been marked by a collapse of fundamental democratic values and freedoms which we thought no regime would undermine ever again (but obviously we were wrong). Over the past decade Serbia has no longer been a democratic country. There is no separation of powers other than formally and declaratively. In fact, the government exercises both legislative and executive power, while the National Assembly merely automatically verifies government decisions. The judiciary is not independent and, in reality, presidential competences vary depending on the person discharging this office; violations of the Constitutions are met with silence, while the rule of law is still just a dream. The media is strictly controlled, while genuine critical thinking has been banished from public discourse. Corruption is state-owned.

In the last ten years, the ruling regime in Serbia has taken the abuse of democratic mechanisms to a level of caricatural reality. Elections are not democratic and citizens are blackmailed into voting in a certain way in no small number of cases. In a country where most public office holders have had an 'acting' status for years, which is against the law, and where most employees of public and state-owned enterprises have been hired on the basis of cronyism and conditioned into obedience to their party with flexible employment contracts, electoral blackmail is a piece of cake for a well-organised regime.

Throughout the 30-year-long transition period in Serbia, labour rights have suffered. In the first decade of this period this was so because citizens, spearheaded by the then regime, were pushed into war and isolation. In the second decade, this was so because for the young democratic authorities striving to put in place the rule of law in an impoverished society, the policy of attracting foreign direct investment was a far higher priority than were the labour rights of their own citizens. Finally, in the last decade, despite the formal development of social dialogue, the citizens of Serbia were 'promoted' to being precarious and underpaid workers and proof of this is the major population drain from Serbia to more developed countries. The minimum wage is not even sufficient to cover the cost of the minimum consumer shopping basket, whilst half of those employees with average wages are statistically on the breadline. Still, when asked why they are leaving the country, most young people say that level of freedom and democracy is far more important to them than wages.

People crying out for democracy reside in Serbia, i.e. those citizens who clearly see all the mechanisms whereby the current regime is caricaturing the values of freedom, equality and social justice that they still want to believe in. At the same time, the citizens of Serbia have less and less hope that under the current electoral conditions they stand a realistic chance of democratising their captured state.

The forthcoming elections on 3 April need to give them hope that change is possible and that on that path they will have the genuine, rather than just declarative, support of the European Union with whom they share their vision and values.



## 9

## ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION – (MIS)MANAGEMENT OF THE CITY OF BELGRADE

### Stefan Tasic



**Stefan Tasic** was born in Vranje in 1993 and graduated in Political Sciences from the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade. He completed his Master's degree in Germany at the University of Mannheim, focusing on quantitative methods, competitive authoritarianism and democratisation processes. He has worked as an associate of both the Faculty of Political

Sciences and the University of Mannheim and completed additional training in Hamburg in the field of market research. He attended a number of conferences, programmes and seminars in the United States, Belgium, Panama, Spain, the Netherlands and Norway and is engaged in research. He joined the 'Don't Drown Belgrade' movement out of a belief that new people and new policies could best contribute to creating a green, solidarity-based and democratic Belgrade and Serbia. He is currently active in the roles of Election Control Team Coordinator and Deputy Chief of the city election headquarters of the 'Don't Drown Belgrade' movement.

For several years already, Belgrade has held the infamous title of one of the most polluted cities in the world. The continuous neglect of accumulating ecological issues by the city authorities has led to the total devastation of the local environment, producing significant negative consequences for the local population. Based on official World Health Organization reports, on average, over 13,000 people in Serbia prematurely die each year due to the extremely high level of air pollution.

Besides air pollution, the treatment of Belgrade's waste water represents a severe problem. Belgrade is the only European capital that does not have a wastewater treatment system. The waste ends up in rivers, namely, the Danube and Sava, thus producing pollution of these vital natural resources. Moreover, around 10% of the population and 30% of the territories in Belgrade, including rural and urban areas, do not have a sewerage system, which is unacceptable in the 21st century in a country with the status of EU candidate. Belgrade's other significant problems include a lack of green spaces, misuse and conversion of agricultural land, an improper waste management system and almost non-existent recycling system. All these problems are related to non-strategic urbanism tied to the particular interests of economic elites close to Vucic's authoritarian regime.

The leading causes of such ecological issues in Belgrade have existed for a long time, but with the local Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) government and a mayor who is neither willing nor capable of addressing and resolving these issues, the problems have become even more intensified. Large-scale traffic and inadequate infrastructure, a massive system of individual home fireboxes, large corporate pollutants, and the already-mentioned lack of green spaces represent some of the main factors that have caused the depressing ecological situation in Belgrade.

Energy poverty is one of the major problems in energy inefficiency in Belgrade that derives from widespread poverty in Belgrade and Serbia. Many people below certain levels of economic well-being are forced to use harmful fuels as part of their heating system as they do not have resources for higher quality types of fuels.

However, there are solutions to these problems that can create an environmentally safe place for people and a more ecologically responsible future. Belgrade requires a new approach with the green-left policies that will target ecological issues without compromise and provide a better future for all its residents. Solutions to the accumulated problems include the development of more green spaces and reforestation and the adequate regulation of large corporate pollutants. Additionally, in terms of the traffic and transport system, the new approach should refocus on public transport and provide incentives for using other more renewable ways of transport, such as bicycles. One of the most significant aspects of these changes is conversion to a more energy-efficient and renewable heating system and the cessation of fossil fuel usage. However, this transition should not fall on the backs of poorer residents and so the new local government should provide support and subsidies for all those not financially able to contribute to this reform by themselves. Moreover, building a waste and recycling system and shifting towards a renewable energy market must be priorities. These are some of the necessary policies to address and resolve the ecological issues for which we are all paying a price from day to day. Pollution and ecological problems target everyone regardless of nationality, economic standing or political views. However, this is also a class issue as people with more financial resources have the advantage of receiving healthcare and ensuring other services, such as air purifiers, and, in this sense, decrease the adverse effects deriving from ecological issues. With this in mind, local government is the body that must provide every citizen and future generation with a safe future and the right to live and breathe freely.

## 10

## GOODBYE UNTIL THE NEXT ELECTIONS

## Zoran Stojiljkovic



**Zoran Stojiljkovic** graduated from and completed his Master's degree and PhD at the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade, where he now works as a professor.

In addition to more than 150 articles and monographs, nine of his books have been published: *The Dictionary of Democracy* (1998), *The Parties System of Serbia* (2008), *Conflict and/or Social Dialogue* (2008), *Serbia in the Labyrinth of Transition* (2011), *The State and Corruption* (2013), *All Faces of the Opposition* (2015), *Citizens and Servants* (2016), *Serbia Seeks a Leader* (2017) and *Potentials for Changes* (2019).

Stojiljkovic is also the author of two thirds of the texts in *Political Sociology of Contemporary Society* (2014), used as a textbook at his Faculty. According to subject, these scientific papers belong to the political sociology of contemporary society, theory of the modern state, parties and party systems, corruption and anti-corruption strategies, as well as the analysis of social dialogue, trade unions and civil society - the scientific disciplines in which Stojiljkovic participates at the Faculty of Political Sciences.

In addition to his academic work and trade union engagement Zoran Stojiljkovic was also a member of the Anti-Corruption Agency Board for two mandates.

Every political travel guide to Serbia contains a key sentence describing Serbia as the only post-war country and nation (Serbs and the Republic of Srpska entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina) in the region not placed under the NATO umbrella of Serbia's Euro-Atlantic integration, whose internal obstacle is a lack of readiness to recognize the independence of Kosovo, not even in the form of a comprehensive normalization agreement, and whose memories of NATO bombing in 1999 are still vivid.

A revived model of the Serbian world, apart from a legitimate concern for the rights of their compatriots in sovereign neighbouring countries, is a product of fiction and a source of frustration for its advocates and critics alike. In this respect, the Serbian Orthodox Church is viewed as a factor due to its role of guardian of the Kosovo tradition and the myth of Serbian Orthodox unity, as well as disenchantment with Western democracy – its lost nature of family and the Christian tradition of great fathers Nikolaj Velimirovic, Justin Popovic, and their successors.

Meanwhile, the attraction and certainty of EU integration is growing weaker amongst deeply divided citizens and the elite alike, and is coupled with strategic, energy and foreign policy related attachment to Russia and China. Thus, both the economy and the development strategy are directly

linked to influences coming from various foreign destinations. In times of rising confrontation among big powers, already dependent small countries get cornered.

The opposition's promises of a return to democratic normality are not enough to serve as an adhesive tool of integration without a credible, more successful and more socially just economic and social model visible to citizens. The Serbian electorate is primarily prone to demagoguery, as it believes that "democracy is not something one can put on bread". Apart from a brief, romantic episode between citizens, the authorities and the democratic West in 2000, a clear, democratic and pro-European position has never enjoyed majority support.

Consequently, the expectations of the actors in the elections scheduled for April this year are tied to strategies and available resources. Vucic has included in his coalition bloc everyone who can be included and will keep under control all the resources of power - jobs, money and publicity - right up until the eve of the elections. The chances of the fragmented opposition depend on their power of mobilisation and the viability of their mutual non-aggression pact, monitoring of the elections and the number of electoral columns none of which would fall below the threshold for winning parliament seats.

Following the elections in April, only limited normalisation effects will be possible. The situation is certainly going to be slightly better because hardly anything can be worse than a parliament without opposition, clientelism and captured institutions.

This situation is untenable in the long run if we want equal and fair elections, let alone a new development model and an accountable leadership. Specifically, we could benefit from an emergence and parliamentary status of a Green Left coalition that will drag Serbia out of the political backwater and bring it back on track.

To all appearances, the April elections will not bring about a denouement but will further increase social and political polarisation especially if they lead to the opposition's 'winning' in Belgrade and creating cracks in the regime. In hybrid regimes changes are possible only through a strategy that combines a risky walk through the captured institutions with well-designed protests, which would in turn broaden the institutional framework. Serbia is certainly not a synonym for democracy, but neither is Belarus or Kazakhstan for that matter. There are no clean, 'textbook' solutions, not least without the networking of active and well-informed citizens. After spring, summer and autumn have been and gone, we will see just how much the overly made up face of the economy and (renewed) promises of an about-turn in the fight against corruption and crime actually match the reality. Unless the war in Ukraine takes us back to square one again.





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# TOWARDS A REVIVAL OF DEMOCRACY

## Perspectives on the Elections in Serbia



The elections in Serbia on April 3, 2022, provide an opportunity for a revival of democracy in Serbia. Serbian citizens are not only called to vote for the national Parliament, but also to elect the President of the Republic. In Belgrade, elections for the City Council will take place, who will then elect a new Major.



Presently the Progressive Party SNS of President Aleksandar Vucic controls all levels of power in Serbia. While it might be exaggerated to expect a loss of power for the SNS, these elections present a serious challenge for the present regime. The opposition has regrouped and coordinated its strategies and – after a boycott in the previous parliamentary and local elections 2020 – is running in the elections on all levels.



This collection of short opinion-pieces from activists, scholars, labour unionists, as well as leading politicians provides opinions from feminist and civil society perspectives, contributions on environmental protection and media freedom, analyses of the party spectrum as well as the ideological background of the present regime.

More information about this subject:  
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