

Executive Summary

- Serbia is expected to hold a parliamentary election on December 17, 2023, to choose the members of its legislative body, the National Assembly. It is likely the leaders of the current ruling coalition, the Srpska Napredna Stranka's (the Serbian Progressive Party or SNS), will obtain approximately 40 percent of the vote—enough to remain the leading political force. It is almost certain that the upcoming elections will be the greatest threat to SNS' rule since it obtained power in 2012.
- The most significant events leading up to the election in terms of domestic policy were three mass shootings in May 2023. The shootings led to over four months of opposition protests and the creation of the Srbija Protiv Nasilja (Serbia Against Violence or SPN) coalition, which is currently SNS' largest political opponent. A strong performance by opposition parties in the upcoming elections could limit President Vučić's overall power and lead to compromises in domestic policies in the near to short term.
- In terms of foreign policy, tensions with Kosovo and Serbia balancing its relationship between the European Union (EU) and Russia have dominated the debate. This is unlikely to shift in the short to medium term. Serbia will highly likely continue carrying out limited EU-access reforms while maintaining strong political links to Russia and China. ZeroFox assesses that Serbia will highly likely continue to use political pressure to protect its ethnic minority in Kosovo and keep the Kosovo state within its sphere of influence.

Introduction

On December 17, 2023, Serbia is expected to hold a parliamentary election to choose the members of its legislative body, the National Assembly. The election will also coincide with local votes in 65 municipalities, including the capital city of Belgrade and the northern autonomous region, Vojvodina. The parliamentary elections were initially scheduled to be held by April 2026, but Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić dissolved the parliament in November 2023 and called for an early election.

Serbia last held elections in 2022, when the public re-elected Vučić and chose the members of the National Assembly. Those elections were originally scheduled to be held in 2024, but Vučić called for snap elections in October 2020. In the 2022 elections Vučić was elected with approximately 60 percent of the vote in favor and a 58 percent turnout rate. The next presidential elections are currently scheduled to be held in April 2027.[1]

Vučić's party, the Serbian Progressive Party or SNS, has been in power since 2012. Despite its longevity, its popularity has been decreasing following months of opposition protests ignited by two mass shootings in May 2023.[2]

Electoral Actors, Ideologies & Polling

Based on previous elections, it is highly likely that the election day will be peaceful with few isolated incidents. However, in the run-up to the elections, it is highly likely that SNS will use tactics or tools such as media or voter pressure to set a more favorable position ahead of the voting.

According to previous Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) final reports on elections, electoral irregularities on election days in Serbia are relatively uncommon. However, in the past, the Serbian government in power at the time has used its control/ownership of the media, ability to pressure public workers, and control of government funds to appease voters in the run-up to elections with success.[3]

Based on the correlation between previous polls and votes, the SNS is likely to obtain approximately 40 percent of the vote. Regardless, it is almost certain that the upcoming elections will pose the greatest threat to the SNS' rule since it came to power in 2012. SNS was formed in 2008 after it split from the far-right Serbian Radical Party (SRS). According to political commentators, the party "made a complete U-turn" in terms of policy[4]; it has since been described as populist[5], neo-liberal[6], and overall "a catch-all party." [7] SNS is the leader of the coalition "Aleksandar Vučić – Srbija ne sme da stane" (Serbia Must Not Stop), which has been polling at nearly 40 percent of the vote.[8] SNS is also currently the highest-polling electoral party, but its numbers are below the 44 percent and 63 percent it obtained in the 2022 and 2018 parliamentary elections, respectively.

In October 2023, multiple opposition parties formed a widely-encompassing coalition known as Serbia Against Violence or SPN. SPN is composed of mainly pro-European parties, commonly known as the civic opposition, that are opposed to the SNS. Ideologically it is a centrist and "big tent" party.[9][10] It was formed out of the Serbia Against Violence protests following the mass shootings in May 2023 and organized by opposition parties. The overall coalition is currently polling at around 25 percent.

FOOTNOTES

[1] [hXXps://www.poliglobe.com/region/171](https://www.poliglobe.com/region/171)

[2]

[hXXps://www.reuters.com/world/europe/serbias-vucic-dissolves-parliament-sets-snap-vote-dec-17-2023-11-01/](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/serbias-vucic-dissolves-parliament-sets-snap-vote-dec-17-2023-11-01/)

[3] [hXXps://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/0/0/524385_0.pdf](https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/0/0/524385_0.pdf)

[4] [hXXps://www.core.ac.uk/download/pdf/35304879.pdf](https://www.core.ac.uk/download/pdf/35304879.pdf)

[5]

[hXXps://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/28/world/europe/new-serb-leader-stakes-fears-of-return-to-nationalism.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/28/world/europe/new-serb-leader-stakes-fears-of-return-to-nationalism.html)

[6]

[6] [hXXps://search.worldcat.org/title/1003200383](https://search.worldcat.org/title/1003200383)

[7] [hXXps://www.fpn.bg.ac.rs/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/rider-za-pips-sa-isptnim-pitanjima.pdf](https://www.fpn.bg.ac.rs/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/rider-za-pips-sa-isptnim-pitanjima.pdf)

[8] [hXXp://www.nspm.rs/istrazivanja-javnog-mnjenja/predizborna-srbija.html?alphabet=1](https://www.nspm.rs/istrazivanja-javnog-mnjenja/predizborna-srbija.html?alphabet=1)

[9] [hXXps://www.reuters.com/world/europe/serbias-vucic-dissolves-parliament-sets-snap-vote-dec-17-2023-11-01/](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/serbias-vucic-dissolves-parliament-sets-snap-vote-dec-17-2023-11-01/)

[10] [hXXps://www.politico.eu/article/united-opposition-pose-test-serbia-election-aleksandar-vucic/](https://www.politico.eu/article/united-opposition-pose-test-serbia-election-aleksandar-vucic/)

Other electoral actors are the coalition between the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) and United Serbia (JS) polling at a 9 percent; the National Democratic Alternative (NADA) coalition polling at around 6 percent; the National Gathering coalition polling at near 6 percent; Narodna Stranka polling at near 3 percent; and other smaller parties polling at a combined 10 percent.[11]

Parties across Serbia’s political landscape can be divided between opposition and those that have traditionally supported the SNS government. SPN is the main opponent of SNS’ rule in these elections. The SPS/JS coalition has always either supported or been in government with the SNS. The parties that comprise the NADA coalition have historically opposed the SNS government, as have the parties composing the National Gathering coalition and Narodna Stranka. As per the latest polls, the SNS government is projected to have approximately 49 percent of the vote versus near 41 percent for the opposition.[12]

Domestic Policy Developments

ZeroFox assesses as likely that a strong performance of opposition parties in the upcoming elections could limit Vučić’s overall power and lead to compromises in domestic policies in the near to short term.

The most significant events in terms of domestic policy leading up to the elections were the three mass shootings in May 2023. Although Serbia has strict laws on armament, it is among the leading countries in terms of the number of weapons per capita.[13] The shootings led to over four months of opposition protests and the creation of the current largest political opponent of the SNS party, the SPN coalition.

Since Aleksandar Vučić came into power in 2012 as a deputy prime minister (and was subsequently elected prime minister in 2014 and president in 2017), observers have claimed that Serbia has suffered from democratic backsliding into authoritarianism, followed by a decline in media freedom and civil liberties.[14][15] As such, the protests that followed the shootings also have an element of innate opposition against the direction of the country.

Foreign Policy Developments

Serbia’s foreign policy is unlikely to change significantly in the short to medium term, barring a very unlikely regime change that purges Vučić. Serbia will very likely continue carrying out limited EU-access reforms while maintaining strong political links to Russia and China. ZeroFox assesses that Serbia will highly likely continue to use political pressure to protect its ethnic minority in Kosovo and keep the Kosovo state within its sphere of influence.

Serbia has repeatedly told Western powers that it refuses to impose sanctions on Russia as part of its “balancing act” between the former and the latter. The country’s political elite has been following that strategy since long before the Russia-Ukraine conflict. In 2017, then U.S. deputy assistant secretary for European and Eurasian affairs Hoyt Brian Yee warned Serbia that “you cannot sit on two chairs at the same time, especially if they are that far apart.”[16]

ZeroFox Analyst Comment: Serbia’s foreign policy is rooted in that of the state it succeeded, Yugoslavia, which followed a policy of nonalignment during the Cold War. As such, it has not followed the other regional countries that have pursued a strong pro-European route (such as Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, or North Macedonia). Instead, Serbia has chosen to foster stronger relationships with Russia and China. The Serbian public also has a general mistrust of certain Western institutions—especially NATO, for its decision to bomb Yugoslavia in 1999. However, despite its relationship with Russia and China, Serbia’s largest overall trading partner is the EU, with large parts of Serbian diaspora living in the EU for decades and Serbia remaining an EU-candidate country.

On December 11, 2023, Vučić gave an interview wherein he explained his world view of the year ahead. Overall, he hopes that Ukraine’s setbacks, coupled with return of former U.S. President Donald Trump, will provide Serbia with a more favorable geopolitical environment; until then, Serbia must “survive.” Vučić also made a comparison between Serbia and Azerbaijan, praising the latter for its successes in the Nagorno-Karabakh and implying that Azerbaijan should serve as a blueprint for Serbia’s foreign policy: solidify your national position through geoeconomics, wait for new geopolitical circumstances, and “retake what is yours.”[17]

Tensions with Kosovo have been high since July 2022 after ethnic Serbs in Kosovo erected barricades in response to an announcement that citizens of Serbia who entered Kosovo would receive documents for entry and exit. This led to the postponement of a controversial deadline for issuing Kosovar license plates to ethnic Serbs.[18]

ZeroFox Analyst Comment: After the end of the Kosovo War in 1999, a number of ethnic Serbs remained in the territory of what is today known as the Kosovo state. These ethnic Serbs do not recognize the 2008 Kosovar Declaration of Independence and thus claim to live in Serbia.

In December 2022, the license plate issue reignited tensions, causing a walkout of ethnic-Serb public workers. As a result, three ethnic Serb policemen were arrested; this caused protests in northern Kosovo, resulting in further barricades, far-right demonstrations in Belgrade, and small-scale shootings around Kosovo.

FOOTNOTES

[11] [hXXps://www.nspm.rs/istrazivanja-javnog-mnjenja/predizborna-srbija.html?alphabet=1](https://www.nspm.rs/istrazivanja-javnog-mnjenja/predizborna-srbija.html?alphabet=1)
[12] *Ibid.*
[13] [hXXps://wisevoter.com/country-rankings/gun-ownership-by-country/#serbia](https://wisevoter.com/country-rankings/gun-ownership-by-country/#serbia)
[14] [hXXps://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13510347.2020.1758670](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13510347.2020.1758670)
[15] [hXXps://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21599165.2018.1490272](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21599165.2018.1490272)

[16] [hXXps://carnegieeurope.eu/en/2023/01/19/hedging-its-bets-serbia-between-russia-and-eu-pub-88819](https://carnegieeurope.eu/en/2023/01/19/hedging-its-bets-serbia-between-russia-and-eu-pub-88819)
[17] [hXXps://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3682xknBhWo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3682xknBhWo)
[18] [hXXps://rs.n1info.com/vesti/gradjani-srbije-koji-dolaze-na-kosovo-dobice-dokument-za-ulazak-i-izlazak/](https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/gradjani-srbije-koji-dolaze-na-kosovo-dobice-dokument-za-ulazak-i-izlazak/)

As a result, Serbia announced it was considering sending 1,000 troops to Kosovo, citing UN Security Council Resolution 1244.[19] The EU is mediating in the “Agreement on the path to normalization between Kosovo and Serbia,” which is informally known as the Ohrid Agreement and verbally agreed to in March 2023 but has yet to be implemented.

Cyber Developments

The result of the election is unlikely to have a significant impact on local cyber operations. Serbia has repeatedly deployed multiple measures that infringe on individual and press freedoms.

In November 2023, multiple digital and human rights watchdogs documented the first case of spyware abuse in Serbia targeting civil society representatives.[20] The independent investigations came after Apple notified iPhone users worldwide that they may have been targeted by “state-sponsored attackers.”[21] The attackers attempted to exploit the iPhone’s HomeKit functionality, a tactic consistent with those previously used by NSO Group’s Pegasus spyware. The two civil society representatives reportedly chose to stay anonymous for security reasons.

Aside from spyware, the Serbian government has allegedly also previously used “troll farms” for propaganda purposes[22] and eavesdropped on the conversations of investigative journalists and their sources, later using this information for a slanderous campaign in Serbian tabloids.[23]

In the context of the upcoming elections, the latest alleged state-sponsored cyber operation involved an attempt to blackmail a member of the SPN with intimate pictures and footage from a stolen laptop. This attack was announced by Vučić on TV Pink, the channel that later published the intimate video, resulting in the withdrawal of the opponent from the electoral race.[24]

FOOTNOTES

[19] <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/petkovi%C4%87-sever-kosova/32168241.html>

[20] <https://www.accessnow.org/spyware-attack-in-serbia/>

[21] <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/10/global-india-apple-notifications-highlight-the-unabated-threat-of-unlawful-targeted-surveillance/>

[22] <https://kosovotwopointzero.com/en/the-real-people-behind-vucics-army-of-bots/>

[23] <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/06/20/not-so-smart-serbia-why-personal-data-is-leaking/>

[24] <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/rem-srbija-tv-pink-postupak/32710165.html>

APPENDIX A: ZeroFox Intelligence Probability Scale

All ZeroFox Intelligence products leverage probabilistic assessment language in analytic judgments. Qualitative statements used in these judgments refer to associated probability ranges, which state the likelihood of the occurrence of an event or development. Ranges are used to avoid a false impression of accuracy. This scale is a standard that aligns how readers should interpret such terms.

Almost No Chance	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Roughly Even Chance	Likely	Very Likely	Almost Certain
1-5%	5-20%	20-45%	45-55%	55-80%	80-95%	95-99%

APPENDIX B: Traffic Light Protocol for Information Dissemination

TLP: RED

HOW IT IS USED

Sources may use TLP: RED when information cannot be effectively acted upon by additional parties and could lead to impacts on a party’s privacy, reputation, or operations if misused.

HOW IT IS SHARED

Recipients may NOT share TLP: RED with any parties outside of the specific exchange, meeting, or conversation in which it is originally disclosed.

TLP: AMBER

HOW IT IS USED

Sources may use TLP: AMBER when information requires support to be effectively acted upon but carries risks to privacy, reputation, or operations if shared outside of the organizations involved.

HOW IT IS SHARED

Recipients may ONLY share TLP: AMBER information with members of their own organization and its clients, but only on a need-to-know basis to protect their organization and its clients and prevent further harm.

Note that TLP: AMBER+STRICT restricts sharing to the organization only.

TLP: GREEN

HOW IT IS USED

Sources may use TLP: GREEN when information is useful for the awareness of all participating organizations, as well as with peers within the broader community or sector.

HOW IT IS SHARED

Recipients may share TLP: GREEN information with peers and partner organizations within their sector or community but not via publicly accessible channels.

TLP: CLEAR

HOW IT IS USED

Sources may use TLP: CLEAR when information carries minimal or no risk of misuse in accordance with applicable rules and procedures for public release.

HOW IT IS SHARED

Recipients may share TLP: CLEAR information without restriction, subject to copyright controls.