



February 2024

## A CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY IN SERBIA

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*Irregularities during the last elections revealed an alarming escalation of the democratic crisis in Serbia. It not only intensifies the political polarisation in Serbia itself, but it also makes cooperative relations in the Western Balkans and the peaceful settlement of the conflict with the Kosovo Albanians more difficult.*

### Geopolitical aspects and Serbia's regional importance

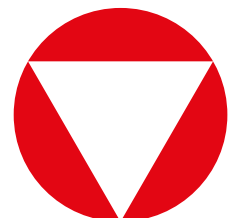
Democratic deficits, weak rule of law and unresolved conflicts are major barriers to the complete normalisation of all regional relations and to the accession of the Western Balkan (WB) states to the European Union (EU). Due to the confrontation with Russia, the six WB states of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia have significantly gained in geopolitical importance for the EU. In the context of Russia's war against Ukraine, the willingness to admit new candidate countries from Southeast Europe to the EU in the medium term has been growing in Brussels – following many years of so-called "enlargement fatigue". However, during the long waiting period, some of the WB states have already veered from the democratic principles of the EU, and the historic momentum for that reason could pass unused.

Serbia, with its 6.7 million inhabitants the most populous country in the WB, plays a key role in this context. Without construc-

tive policies from Belgrade, neither an end to the security crises in the Northern Kosovo nor an end to the separatist policy of *Republika Srpska* (an entity of Bosnia-Herzegovina) can be expected. The political stability of neighbouring Montenegro, a NATO member with the best chances of joining the EU, is also significantly influenced by Belgrade's policy towards the local Serbian population (approx. 29%).

### Crisis symptoms since 2012

According to local civil society groups and most international observers, Serbia abandoned the path of democratic reform either when the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska napredna stranka, SNS*) shared power in 2012 or, at the latest, when it took full power in 2014. The political opposition accuses Serbian president and central power factor Aleksandar Vučić of striving for an autocratic regime. *Freedom House*, the democracy NGO, has ranked Serbia among the WB states with the lowest democratic quality since the clientelist



SNS, which is fully controlled by Vučić, formed the government.

### **Unfair conditions and allegations of manipulations regarding the December elections**

Major shortcomings in the democratic process became apparent in Serbia during the election campaign and in the conduct of the early parliamentary and local elections. As a result of the elections of 17 December, whose sole purpose was to secure power for the SNS, social polarisation in this key WB state has intensified even more. According to the election observer mission of the Serbian NGO CRTA and international election observers, opposition politicians were treated unfairly by government-controlled media during the election campaign.

Individual opposition politicians were derided and discredited on a personal level by Vučić, government politicians, and the media under their control. According to the Serbian opposition, the elections themselves were also characterised by manipulation. According to accusations from the pro-European opposition camp, thousands of citizens from the Bosnian-Herzegovinian entity *Republika Srpska* were bussed to Belgrade. They were supposed to vote for Vučić's ruling party in the local elections in the Serbian capital and thus prevent an important partial victory for the opposition there.

Vučić, who was omnipresent in the election campaign without the presidency being up for election, rejected the allegations of manipulation. According to him, these had been the "cleanest and fairest" elections in Serbia to date. Several members of the European Parliament who were deployed as election observers in Belgrade, however, corroborated the opposition's accusations that there had been numerous "imported" voters, particularly from *Republika Srpska*.

### **Official election result**

According to the official election result, the SNS, which ran in this election as the *Aleksandar Vučić – Serbia must not stand still party (Aleksandar Vučić – Srbija ne sme da stane)*, won a majority in the national parliament as well as in the local elections in Belgrade and in most other municipalities. The *Aleksandar Vučić – Serbia must not stand still party* therefore received 46.75% of the votes in the parliamentary election with a voter turnout of 58.77%. The pro-European opposition alliance *Serbia against Violence (Srbija protiv nasilja)* received 23.66%.

For the particularly contested Belgrade local elections, the election commission announced an election victory with 44.55% of the votes for *Aleksandar Vučić – Serbia must not stand still*. The opposition alliance *Serbia against Violence* received 39.09%. The pro-Western opposition and civil society did not recognise the results of the parliamentary elections and the Belgrade municipal elections. They called for these elections to be repeated within six months in accordance with democratic standards and with clear electoral rolls. President Vučić and the ruling SNS have so far seemed unfazed by the protests of thousands of citizens against the alleged election manipulation but have left open the possibility of at least the local elections in Belgrade being repeated. The government has emphasised that this would not be an admission of electoral manipulation but a possible consequence of the lack of a political majority to form the Belgrade local government.

### **European values vs. support for 'stabilocracies'**

Given the irregularities during the elections, the muted reactions of EU and US representatives were striking. Vladimir Bilčík, the rapporteur responsible for Serbia in the EU Parliament, initially stated

that the elections had gone “smoothly” before calling for irregularities to be clarified after these had been criticised by EU election observers. The US ambassador in Belgrade, Christopher Hill, spoke of the importance of Serbia cooperating with the OSCE on election problems.

Brussels and Washington still perceive the current rulers in Belgrade as stability factors, despite their clearly authoritarian tendencies. The EU and the USA want to prevent Serbia from pivoting even more towards Russia and thus continue to tolerate Serbia’s foreign policy balancing act of close relations with Russia and China while at the same time formally continuing EU accession negotiations. Brussels and Washington also appear to continue to rely politically on Vučić when it comes to the issue of normalising relations between Belgrade and Prishtina/Priština. The Western goal of strengthening democracies in the WB seems to be taking a back seat to geopolitical and regional policy goals.

### **Clear demands by the EU Parliament**

In a resolution of 8 February, the EU Parliament made its opinion of the democratic challenges in Serbia very clear. With 461 to 52 votes, the EU Parliament called for an independent international investigation into the Serbian elections. The resolution states that if such a commission identifies manipulations commissioned by the Serbian government and if recommendations pertaining to the prevention of future irregularities are not implemented, EU funding of Serbia should be suspended. Such sanctions would have an impact on the EU candidate country, as it has thus far greatly benefited from EU pre-accession funds. Since 2012, Serbia has received 3.3 billion in non-repayable EU aid.

The Serbian government, in a statement by Prime Minister Ana Brnabić, reacted to the EU Parliament resolution and its pos-

sible consequences by pointing out that it was not binding for the EU Commission. There was also harsh criticism. Defence Minister Miloš Vučević compared the EU Parliament’s call for the establishment of an international commission to investigate possible electoral irregularities to Austro-Hungary’s ultimatum to Serbia following the assassination of the Austrian heir to the throne in Sarajevo in 1914.

### **The Kosovo context**

The current Serbian government’s policy *vis-à-vis* Kosovo and its ‘tactical’ adaptations are closely linked to the government’s relations with the EU Commission. In practice, this means that Belgrade’s calming influence on the areas of northern Kosovo, where there is a Serbian majority, can be relied upon when the Serbian government faces strong criticism from Brussels. This has rarely happened in recent years – despite democratic setbacks. Since the autumn of 2023, however, the criticism from Brussels has increased. The reason, in addition to possible election irregularities, is the still unexplained role Serbia played in the attack on a Kosovar police station in Banjska in northern Kosovo in September 2023, which was carried out by a Serbian paramilitary force. Until the attack, Milan Radoičić, the commander of this force, was deputy chairman of the Belgrade-controlled Kosovo Serb party *Srpska lista*.

Probably to pour some oil on Brussels’ waters troubled by the election and the Banjska attack, the Serbian government declared at the turn of the year that it would recognise the official Kosovar license plates. In 2022/23, the demand by Kosovar authorities that the Serbs in northern Kosovo display these license plates led to massive riots and Serb withdrawals from Kosovo institutions. However, concessions such as in the case of the license plates do not automatically mean that the Serbian government is also pre-

pared to implement the EU plan of February 2023 pertaining to the normalisation of relations with the Kosovo Albanians. Albin Kurti's Kosovo government also sticks to its guns in this regard. Neither is Serbia, under President Vučić, prepared to recognise Kosovo as a state, nor is Kurti willing to accept the association of Kosovo Serb municipalities demanded by Brussels. The security situation in Kosovo therefore remains strained and potentially dangerous and continues to be determined by both sides' political and tactical considerations.

### Derivations

- ❶ The criticism voiced by Serbian civil society and EU observers regarding the conduct of the December elections is a warning sign that in Serbia fair electoral conditions not only no longer exist, but also that the formally correct conduct of elections is now no longer guaranteed.
- ❷ Concerning further EU accession negotiations with Serbia and access to EU funds, the investigation of possible election manipulations (keyword: 'imported voters') as demanded by the EU Parliament should be a prerequisite.
- ❸ Serbia can only be an honest partner for its neighbours in the Western Balkans if it is democratic in an objective and not just a formal sense and focuses on long-term cooperative relations instead of nationalistic projections (keyword: *Serbian world/Srpski svet*).

- ❹ Undemocratic conditions in Serbia and Belgrade's political and tactical instrumentalization of security issues in northern Kosovo are closely related. A true normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia only seems possible if democratic principles are firmly anchored in both states.
- ❺ Against this political background, the security situation in northern Kosovo remains fragile and continues to require the substantial presence of the international stabilisation mission KFOR.

#### Imprint:

Copyright, Production, Publisher: Republic of Austria / MoD, Roßauer Lände 1, 1090 Vienna, Austria

Edited by: National Defence Academy/IFK, Stiftgasse 2a, 1070 Vienna, Austria

Periodical of the National Defence Academy

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Printing: Reproz W 24-XXXX, Stiftgasse 2a, 1070 Vienna, Austria



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