

The election of losers



On 21 June, Serbia held parliamentary elections. The elections, which were boycotted by many opposition parties, saw the Serbian Progressive Party, led by Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić, win a clear majority. [Florian Bieber](#) writes that while Vučić's victory appears absolute, he must also rank as one of the key losers from the contest: a parliament without an opposition cannot serve as a fig leaf to legitimise the supposedly democratic rule of the President.

One person appears to have won the election. His face was everywhere, his name was on the ballot, though not as a candidate, and the virtual rallies were dominated by him. Aleksandar Vučić is the apparent winner of Serbia's parliamentary election last Sunday. While as President, his official standing is above party politics, it was clear that the victory of Vučić was absolute. His Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) won around 62 percent of the vote and gained 191 of 250 seats in parliament, around 76% of the seats. The large majority opens the door to constitutional changes that would allow the regime, like in Hungary, to tailor the constitution to the needs of the ruling party.

His long-term coalition partner, the Socialists, and their allies gained 10.4% and 32 seats, and the Serbian Patriotic Alliance, the vehicle of New Belgrade Mayor Aleksandar Šapić, gained 11 seats, just passing the 3% threshold with 3.64%. The threshold was lowered from 5% to 3% just weeks before the election in a transparent effort by the ruling SNS to boost the representation of minor parties in parliament to weaken the effects of the opposition boycott.

The remaining 16 seats are held by minority parties, which have a lower threshold. The only opposition in the Serbian parliament are two Albanian MPs from the majority Albanian municipalities of Bujanovac and Preševo, as the minority parties cooperated with the previous governments of the Progressive Party and Šapić also did not run against the government. It is this resounding victory that makes the outcome a defeat for Vučić. A parliament without an opposition cannot serve as a fig leaf to legitimise the supposedly democratic rule of the President. Had more of the 21 running parties and groups entered parliament, such as the different far right and fascist groups or a few scattered democrats and reformists, the Progressive Party could claim that Serbia had a pluralist parliament. Now, it does not and thus reveals the authoritarian nature of the regime.



Aleksandar Vučić, Credit: [Belgrade Security Forum](#) (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

The opposition lost as well. While turnout was probably lower than official numbers, it was according to the independent monitoring NGO CRTA around 48 percent, thus 8 to 9 percent lower than the previous parliamentary elections in 2016. This is a minor drop, that could not be claimed solely by the opposition, but rather also by Covid-19 and voter apathy. Clearly the main effort by the regime has been directed toward pushing up voter participation, as most irregularities CRTA noted focused on pushing up voter numbers and SNS officials appear to have called potential voters on election day to pressure them to vote.

The boycotting opposition has succeeded in delegitimising the opposition parties that participated, such as the Movement of Free Citizens headed by Sergej Trifunović that only gained 1.5% of the vote, or the United Democratic Serbia party that gained less than 0.9%. At the same time the opposition that boycotted is far from united. The once large Democratic Party has been marred by infighting, including a scuffle at the party headquarters on election day between different wings. Otherwise, the opposition is an uneasy alliance between the far-right Dveri, unpopular split offs of the previously ruling Democratic party and a few other groups. Now out of parliament, it is cut off from funding: without a clear strategy and few international allies and contacts, the opposition has a rough time ahead.

The EU is the final loser in the elections. Serbia has long been hailed, uncritically, as the front runner in the EU enlargement process. Now, it is confronted with a parliament that lacks a democratic mandate and a regime whose authoritarian nature has become more visible. A joint statement by the High Representative Josep Borrell and Neighbourhood and Enlargement Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi was strikingly critical, noting limited voter choice and the media dominance of the ruling party. The European parties fell, unsurprisingly, along partisan lines. The Socialists and Progressives correctly called the elections a mockery of democracy and demanded a slowdown of accession, whereas Donald Tusk of the European People's Party congratulated their party family associate SNS, only noting ominously that the "more power, the more responsibility."

The enlargement process has been seriously compromised by the elections. Serbia has been negotiating accession for more than six years, the same period during which democracy and the rule of law has been backsliding according to every indicator and all organisations monitoring democracy globally, including Freedom House, the Bertelsmann Transformation Index, the VDem Institute, and the Economist Democracy Index. The EU institutions, with the notable exception of the parliament, have been strikingly silent on this. If the EU returns to business as usual after the election, it will not only encourage the further consolidation of authoritarianism in Serbia, but also among others in the region, including Montenegro and Albania.

More importantly, it suggests that the EU is not just struggling with keeping autocrats in check within the EU but also during the accession process, where more tools are available. To confront the authoritarian drift, the EU needs to engage with Serbia. Back in 2014, the EU at first ignored the authoritarianism of the Gruevski government and the eviction of the opposition in North Macedonia. Only the 2015 wiretapping scandal triggered more sustained EU engagement. The risk is that in Serbia the political alternatives will become more Eurosceptic, as they see the government backed by the EU and its member states and as many of the parties already today oppose European integration.

A renewed EU engagement requires several components, namely a meaningful mediation between government and opposition on how to bring the opposition back into the political process based on tackling some of the most serious democratic restrictions. Furthermore, a rule of law mission, such as the Priebe report drafted in 2015 by independent experts that would identify the shortcomings and priorities for reform, and a follow-up process. The European party families should work together on their assessment of democracy rather than making democracy a partisan issue in the Western Balkans. Bipartisan statements and mediation by MEPs from the largest European parties would reduce the risk of authoritarianism being further facilitated by partisan rift.

Finally, the Commission, the European Parliament and the member states need to consider the full range of options regarding the accession talks themselves. These options include not opening new chapters in negotiations, which would represent a low-level signal. More serious would be to evoke the imbalance clause, which has been part of the accession negotiations for eight years. It allows talks to be frozen on all chapters if not enough progress is made in regard to the rule of law.

Finally, the new methodology, set up by the Commission in response to France's veto over accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania, offers further tools to put pressure on accession candidates. It allows member states to put negotiations in some areas on hold and re-open closed chapters, as well as reassessing funding and other benefits of cooperation. The most serious option would entail suspending accession talks altogether.

While the latter option might be counterproductive at the moment, it would be good to consider some of the intermediate measures. The suspension of accession talks, however, has to be a credible threat unless the Serbian government makes some clear and verifiable steps to restoring democratic institutions. Considering the tools the EU has available now to insist on the core values of the EU in the accession talks, not using them would cement the election result as a lost opportunity for Serbia and the EU.

[Please read our comments policy before commenting.](#)

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

About the author



Florian Bieber – *BiEPAG / University of Graz*

Florian Bieber is the coordinator of the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG) and Jean Monnet Chair for the Europeanization of Southeastern Europe at the University of Graz. He recently published *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans* (Palgrave, 2020).