

Serbia's latest election is entirely unnecessary

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On 17 January, Serbia's Prime Minister, Aleksandar Vučić, called for early elections to be held in April, despite the country's next election not being due until 2018. Florian Bieber assesses why new elections have been called. He argues that while the elections may allow Vučić to secure a larger parliamentary majority, there were also some broader strategic calculations and systemic reasons behind the decision.



Serbia has held parliamentary elections in 1990, 1992, 1993, 1997, 2000, 2003, 2007, 2008, 2012, 2014 and will now hold early elections in 2016. This is not to mention the elections of the parliament of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1992, 1992/3, 1996 and 2000.

A citizen who turned 18 in 1990 has therefore been able to vote on 15 separate occasions for parliament in two and a half decades, not to mention the ten presidential elections since 1990. If the frequency of elections were an indicator of the quality of democracy, Serbia would be a great democracy. Unfortunately this is not the case. Of the 11 Serbian parliamentary elections in the 26 years since the introduction of a multiparty system, 7 were early elections. Some were held because the governing coalition broke apart (i.e. 2008), but most were the result of the ruling party trying to secure an electoral advantage.

None of these elections, however, were as gratuitous as the one just called by Prime Minister Vučić. In the 2014 elections the [Serbian Progressive Party](#) secured a majority with 48.35 per cent of the vote, greater than any party before it, including the [Socialist Party](#) under Slobodan Milošević in its most successful poll in 1990. It could have ruled alone with a majority of 158 seats of 250, but decided to form a coalition with the Socialists. Its grip on power is strong and there is no conceivable reason why early elections would be necessary (I made a similar [argument](#) in 2012).

Calling early elections is part of the toolbox of populist rulers with an authoritarian streak. Franjo Tuđman used a similar tactic in Croatia in 1995 after the military victory over the rebel Serbs and Nikola Gruevski has called early elections in Macedonia in the past (even the latest elections called for April this year are being forced by him against the opposition's will). But why hold elections when you hold a majority in parliament? Such a step might seem risky for an incumbent. After all, one might lose power (and indeed this was the case for Milošević in 2000 and Boris Tadić in 2012).

For Vučić, there are first strategic calculations. With a high level of popularity and a fragmented weak opposition, the election is a good opportunity to put some more years in power 'in the bank' – who knows what the situation will be when the next regular elections are due. Furthermore, frequent election campaigns prevent the opposition from recovering from previous defeats and perpetuate a weak opposition.

There are also more systemic reasons for early elections. As a populist incumbent, Vučić can use elections to mobilise voters and rule as a campaigner. A populist in power is always caught between speaking in the name of the people against the elite – whoever the 'elite' may be – while actually establishing a new elite in office. This balancing act is facilitated by elections framed as 'us vs. them' contests, which distract from the process of governing.

Second, the current government is based on a one-man-show in the shape of Vučić. The dominance of one individual over the government and country represents an advantage in the context of campaigning, but is a weaknesses in relation to governing, as the cadres of the party are weak and often incompetent, lacking the popularity of the party leader.

Looking at the broader picture, 2016 will be an election year not just in Serbia, but in the Balkans overall, with Montenegro and Macedonia also going to the polls in the coming months. However, so far these elections promise little progress in terms of democracy or reforms – rather they threaten to simply reaffirm semi-authoritarian rule in the region.

Note: This article originally appeared on [Florian Bieber's personal blog](#). It gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: Jovan Marković (CC-BY-SA-2.0)

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