

Serbia before the presidential election

2017 is another election year for the Serbs. After last year's parliamentary elections on April 2, the Serbs will once again go to the ballot box to vote for the new president. This year marks the end of the first term of Tomislav Nikolić, who won the 2012 election, defeating Boris Tadić, who was then fighting for re-election.

In accordance with the electoral law in Serbia, the acting president can apply for re-election after the first five-year term. After changing his mind a few times, Nikolić finally announced that he would not be fighting for the extension of his mandate. His decision was influenced primarily by the fact that his party, the Serbian Progress Party (Srpska napredna stranka, SNS), would be supporting another candidate: Aleksander Vučić, chairman of the party and the current prime minister.

Vučić – a march towards full power?

For many months Vučić has denied any suggestion that he was seeking to become president. However, in February he decided to accept the decision of his party's board and take part in the election. The numerous polls conducted between December and February seemed to indicate that the SNS would support the candidacy of Vučić, not the acting president. The polls indicated that Vučić had a chance to beat the other candidates in the first round of elections, while Nikolić could do it only in the second and without a significant advantage over his competitor.

However, it is still quite extraordinary that Vučić, throughout the entire campaign, is both prime minister and one of the presidential candidates. The opposition called on him to step

Poland should activate its policy in the Balkans, striving primarily to play the role of a state seeking to reduce tensions in the region. It would be worth taking advantage of the moment when Poland presides over the Visegrad Group, and propose an initiative aiming at increasing cooperation with the Western Balkans, which in the longer run could simultaneously strengthen that part of Europe.

down from his post during the election campaign, but Vučić does not intend to do this, especially given the fact that the campaign itself will not last long. The Serbian parliament, headed by Maji Gojković, decided that elections would be held on April 2. On the other hand, the second round would take place at Easter (on April 16). This decision was greeted with disapproval from the opposition.

Vučić has served as prime minister since 2014, but after two years as the head of the government he decided to hold another parliamentary election in which he won again. In his race for the presidency of the country, he has received support from the groups that co-create the ruling coalition with him. Even the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), the largest SNS coalition party, has decided not to put forward their own candidate.

Divided opposition

In the present situation, it seems that the only possibility of defeating Vučić would be the selection by the whole opposition of one common candidate. But that did not happen. Most of the opposition parties decided to put up their own candidates (see: Table 1). Analyzing the results of public opinion polls in Serbia over the last two months, it looks like Saša Janković and Vuk Jeremić are the most popular among opposition candidates. Janković is a former ombudsman, an independent candidate but with the support of some political parties and NGOs. On the other hand, Jeremić, the former minister of foreign affairs and the president of the United Nations General Assembly for the years 2012-2013, is running without the support of his former Democratic Party (Demokratska stranka, DS), which supported his competitor, Janković. Vojislav Šešelj, leader of the Serbian Radical Party (Srpska radikalna stranka, SRS), has also decided to run in the election. It is worth mentioning that in the past he worked together with Vučić and Nikolić in a single grouping. The other presidential candidates are the leaders of the opposition parties. The only thing that connects them all is the desire to defeat Vučić but they still remain divided on other issues.

Undoubtedly, the greatest surprise of this year's election campaign is Luka Maksimović, known as Ljubiš Preletačević 'Beli', a young (aged 26) Serbian comic. His nickname derives from the word 'preletač', meaning a politician who changes parties in order to achieve financial gain. By contrast, 'beli' stands for white. Maksimović is often dressed in white and rides a white horse. Indeed he arrived in a white limo to the election commission to submit the collected signatures. Contrary to many expectations, he managed to get the required

number of signatures (10,000) to be registered as a presidential candidate by the election commission. It should be emphasized that his party is experienced in participating in the elections. In last year's local elections, in the district of Mladenovac, the party gained 20 per cent support. Maksimović has also used social media in his campaign. His followers are primarily young people and those who are disappointed by the current situation in the state and distrust the Serbian political class. His campaign's slogan is: 'Sirotinja uzvraća udarac' – 'The poor counterattack.' However, Maksimovic has been trying to run a positive campaign, avoiding criticizing his competitors. He argues that after 30 years of politicians ridiculing the nation, it is high time for that nation to ridicule politicians.

Table 1. List of presidential candidates

Serbia's presidential candidate	Support
Aleksandar Vučić	Candidate for ruling coalition
Aleksandar Popović	Serbian Democratic Party (DSS)
Bosko Obradović	Dveri
Vojislav Šešelj	Serbian Radical Party (SRS)
Miroslav Parović	Narodni slobodarski pokret
Nenad Čanak	League of Social Democrats Vojvodina (LSV)
Milan Stamatović	Group of citizens 'For a Healthier Serbia - Milan Stamatović'
Saša Janković	Candidature proposed by a group of citizens 'For Serbia Without Fear.'
Sasa Radulović	Dosta je bilo
Luka Maksimović vel „Ljubiša Preletačević Beli, Beli - Samo jako"	"Samo jako"
Vuk Jeremić	Candidature proposed by a group of citizens 'We need better.'

However, none of the opposition candidates have too much chance of defeating the current prime minister. According to public opinion polls from early March 2017, Vučić enjoys the support of more than half of the population (see: Table 2), which means that he can count on victory in the first round. Moreover, according to analysis from the same poll (see Table 3), support for the ruling party meets with support for the current prime minister.

Table 2. Support for candidates (poll conducted on March 14-19, 2017 on a sample of 1201 people).

Presidential candidate	Support (%)
Aleksander Vučić	56
Luka Maksimović	9
Vojislav Šešelj	9
Saša Janković	8
Vuk Jeremić	7
No answer	4
Others	7

Source: <http://www.nedeljnik.rs/nedeljnik/portalsnews/ekskluzivno-istrazivanje-demostata-za-nedeljnik-vucic-i-seselj-zajedno-na-65-odsto/>, (date accessed 24.03.2017)

Table 3. Support for political parties in Serbia

Parties	Level of support (%)
Serbian Progressive Party (SNS)	51
Serbian Radical Party (SRS)	10
Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS)	7
Democratic Party (DS)	6
Movement of B. Preletačević (<i>Pokret Sarmu probo nisi</i>)	6
No answer	6
Serbian movement - Dveri	3

Source: <http://www.nedeljnik.rs/nedeljnik/portalsnews/ekskluzivno-istrazivanje-demostata-za-nedeljnik-vucic-i-seselj-zajedno-na-65-odsto/>, (date accessed: 24.03.2017)

Who's the new prime minister?

Should Vučić win the presidential election, whether in the first or second round of elections, the question remains: who will become the new prime minister? The decision will be made shortly after the election. There are many potential candidates. Starting with Nikolić, the creator of the SNS party. It is still a mystery how Vučić persuaded the current president to step down. Most probably he was promised a high-ranking position. It is unknown what position that could be. However, the position of prime minister seems unlikely as he would not be able to get the support of the largest coalition partner of the socialist SNS. Ivica Dačić, the chairman of the SPS, and now the deputy prime minister and foreign minister, also has the ambition of becoming prime minister once more (a position he held in the years 2012-2014, when he co-created the government with the Vučić party). Other potential candidates include other members of the current government, such as: Ana Brnabic, minister of public and local government, the first minister openly admitting to being a homosexual. Another candidate for the position is Dušan Vujović, minister of finance, in the past a longtime employee of the World Bank. Zorana Mihajlović, deputy prime minister and head of the Ministry of Transport, Construction and Infrastructure Sector, is also mentioned among those who could replace Vučić in the prime minister's seat. Despite the trust the current head of government gives her, her candidacy would be difficult to accept for Dačić, with whom she often argued. Another possible candidate is a young politician, Nikola Selakovic, former minister of justice or Nebojša Stefanović – deputy prime minister and interior minister and Jadranka Joksimović – minister without portfolio.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. The presidential elections give Vučić another chance to confirm his leadership in the country. On the other hand it may be the moment for the opposition to choose its leader – especially if the election is not settled in the first round. Then it would also be clear to what extent opposition groups are able to reach agreement on their common goal, namely the withdrawal of Vučić from power.
2. It is highly probable that Vučić will win the election. The question remains whether he will succeed in the first or second round. However, if he does not get more than 50 per cent, it

may potentially weaken his position during talks on the selection of a new prime minister. Regardless of who eventually becomes head of the Serbian government, it should be assumed that they will be controlled by Vučić. However, Vučić's influence on the government would be much greater if he wins in the first round, confirming his dominant position in the country.

3. The candidature of Luka Maksimović may increase voter turnout. The higher the turnout, the greater the chance that Vučić will not win in the first round. Mobilization of the young generation, which is mostly disappointed with the situation in the country and more and more frequently decides to emigrate, could in the long run translate into changes in the Serbian political scene.

4. The European Union should further support Serbia in its quest to become an EU member, regardless of the outcome of the election. This country is one of the guarantors of the region's stability in a situation where most countries are still dealing with unresolved disputes. The most serious situation is currently in Macedonia, but also in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This increasingly fierce dispute, mainly between the government and the opposition is also visible in Kosovo, Albania and Montenegro. It is imperative that the EU starts to show real signs of commitment instead of just pronouncing declarations about its involvement in the Balkans. If this does not happen, the Balkan states will begin to move away from the EU. Russia, which has been trying to consolidate its influence in the region, will be the main benefactor of such a course of events.

5. Poland should activate its policy in the Balkans, striving primarily to play the role of a state seeking to reduce tensions in the region. It would be worth taking advantage of the moment when Poland presides over the Visegrad Group, and propose an initiative aiming at increasing cooperation with the Western Balkans, which in the longer run could simultaneously strengthen that part of Europe.

Author: Agata Domachowska, Research Fellow at the Foreign Policy Programme at the Casimir Pulaski Foundation

The Casimir Pulaski Foundation is an independent, non-partisan think-tank specializing in foreign policy and international security. The Pulaski Foundation provides analyses that describe and explain international developments, identify trends in international environment, and contain possible recommendations and solutions for government decision makers and private sector managers to implement.

The Foundation concentrates its research on two subjects: transatlantic relations and Russia and the post-Soviet sphere. It focuses primarily on security, both in traditional and non-military dimensions, as well as political changes and economic trends that may have consequences for Poland and the European Union. The Casimir Pulaski Foundation is composed of over 40 experts from various fields. It publishes the Pulaski Policy Papers, the Pulaski Report, and the Pulaski Viewpoint. The Foundation also publishes "Informator Pułaskiego," a summary of upcoming conferences and seminars on international policy. The Foundation experts cooperate with media on a regular basis.

Once a year, the Casimir Pulaski Foundation gives the Knight of Freedom Award to an outstanding person who has promoted the values represented by General Casimir Pulaski: freedom, justice, and democracy. Prizewinners include: Professor Władysław Bartoszewski, Professor Norman Davies, Alaksandar Milinkiewicz, President Lech Wałęsa, President Aleksander Kwaśniewski, President Valdas Adamkus, Bernard Kouchner, and Richard Lugar.

The Casimir Pulaski Foundation has a partnership status with the Council of Europe and is a member of the Group Abroad, an association of Polish non-governmental organizations involved in international cooperation.

www.pulaski.pl