

Serbia: Right-wing nationalist wins presidential election

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Aleksandar Vučić has won the presidential election in Serbia with 55 percent of the vote. He achieved an absolute majority in the first round making a second round of voting unnecessary. Vučić is chair of the right-wing nationalist Serbian Progress Party (SNS) and had previously been prime minister. He becomes head of state replacing SNS founder Tomislav Nikolić, who narrowly won the presidency in the second round five years ago.

Vučić's election means a major turn to the right in Serbia. Moreover, it intensifies conflicts in the highly unstable Balkans, heightening the danger of new war.

The European Union, and above all Germany, has long relied on the right-wing politician, which even newsweekly *Der Spiegel* has criticised for his “autocratic methods of rule, harsh neo-liberal economic reforms, half nationalist, half pro-European rhetoric and his seesaw politics between Moscow and Brussels.”

In fact, this characterization is quite understated. Vučić stems from the ultra-nationalist Serbian Radical Party (SNR), of which he was a member from 1993 to 2008, and for whom he sought to whip the press into line as Minister of Information.

In the 1990s, the SNR recruited nationalists for the Croatian and Bosnian wars, forming paramilitary units which were infamous for their atrocities. In 2006 in Belgrade, several SNR members were found guilty of committing war crimes and crimes against humanity for their actions during and after the battle of Vukovar in 1991, as well as the massacre at Vukovar in which 200 defenseless and mainly wounded men were taken from a hospital and murdered.

In 2008, there was a split in the SNR. While a wing around Vojislav Šešelj continued to call for a Greater Serbia, the wing around Nikolić and Vučić regarded rapprochement with the EU as advantageous for

Serbia's narrow ruling elite. In fact, however, Vučić held fast to his nationalist politics. For example, he has never distanced himself publicly from his 1995 statements, when he said for every Serb that was killed, 100 Muslims had to die.

In recent months, Belgrade has once again been inciting the conflict with Kosovo, which Serbia does not recognise as an independent state. The government organised a train emblazoned with the slogan “Kosovo is Serbia” to head towards the northern part of this former Serbian province, in which many ethnic Serbs still live. An elite Kosovan police unit was put on standby, ready to halt the train. As a result, President Nikolić threatened to deploy the army, and Prime Minister Vučić directed a “final warning” at the Kosovars. In the end, he halted the train in Raška, the last Serbian town before the border.

Vučić's electoral success is due to the absence of any political alternative. According the Ipsos Institute, turnout was around 50 percent—even lower than in the 2012 presidential elections. Ten other candidates polled far behind. In second place, with 16 percent, was the former ombudsman and independent candidate Saša Janković. The satirist Luka Maksimović achieved around 9 percent. Opposition parties either did not stand their own candidate, or achieved only a low vote.

The majority of the population in Serbia face an insecure future. Unemployment has fallen slightly, but this is because younger, educated people are leaving the country in droves. The current unemployment rate stands at 20 percent, and is twice as high among young people. The average wage stands at just over 300 euros a month, although prices have reached a level similar to Western Europe.

Vladimir Gligorov of the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies paints a bleak picture

of the Serbian economy, declaring “Serbia has shown the worst performance after Croatia. The increase in exports can largely be put down to sinking domestic consumption as a result of the recession. Growing employment is a consequence of falling wages, making labour cheaper.” Many work part-time jobs or are self-employed, according to the economist.

Vu?i? and the SNS control considerable sections of the security apparatus, the judiciary and the media. Vu?i? denies he is seeking to control the press. In the days running up to the election, however, seven of Serbia's largest circulation newspapers printed a poster of Vu?i? on their front pages.

The organization Reporters Without Borders reported that critical journalists in Serbia are put under severe pressure, while government media are subsidized by the state. The SNS will use the presidency and its majority in parliament to establish authoritarian structures.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel recently praised Vu?i? for his “reform efforts.” Vu?i?'s authoritarian policies are welcomed in the EU. During the refugee crisis, countries such as Germany and Austria relied on the brutal closing off of the so-called “Balkan route” by Serbia. The *Financial Times* recently quoted a Western official saying: “You need a man like that in Belgrade.”

Vu?i?'s close relations with Moscow, however, are regarded critically. Recently, Belgrade and Moscow have agreed on defence deals and several energy projects. Immediately following his election victory, Vu?i? thanked both German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The strategic significance of the Balkan region, the conflicts between Europe and Russia, and the extreme nationalism Vu?i? embodies in the states of the former Yugoslavia all heighten the danger of war.

The Austrian EU Commissioner Johannes Hahn recently warned on broadcaster Deutsche Welle of the “risk that something will happen in the Balkans.” And the *Hamburger Abendblatt* remarked, “What Europe cannot afford is the outbreak of a war fired by nationalist hate. But this is precisely what threatens in the Balkans, the very place where in 1914, the First World War, Europe's seminal catastrophe, broke out.”

In *Focus* magazine, a former adviser to Merkel, Werner Weidenfeld, also warned of a new Balkan war. There was a “considerable potential for conflict,” he declared, demanding the European Union act more

decisively against Serbia.



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