Country in focus: Serbia

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THE SERBIAN ELECTIONS AND AFTER?

by Branimir Jovanović, wiiw Economist

Serbia's moment of truth comes on 25 October, with long-awaited parliamentary elections after two years of protests and blockades. The race is between Aleksandar Vučić, who has ruled the country for 14 years, and the Student List that emerged from the protests. If Vučić stays in power, economic and foreign policy will probably continue as before, with greater repression at home. If the students win, they will focus on the rule of law, support for domestic companies and higher-value-added activities, and a more pro-EU course, without turning their back on Russia and China.

The long-awaited parliamentary elections in Serbia will take place on 25 October. President Aleksandar Vučić finally agreed to call them after two years of protests and a political and social crisis that began on 1 November 2024, when the canopy of the newly renovated railway station in Novi Sad collapsed, killing 16 people. The decision appears to reflect a calculation that this is the most favourable moment for the government to go to the polls. The economy is performing relatively well, with growth in the second quarter at its highest level for two years, inflation down to 2%, and a sizeable package of pre-election sweeteners in place. In addition, Vučić seems to be calculating that after almost two years of protests, the students may be tired and unprepared for a snap election.

Who is running?

The main challenger is the Student List, the electoral expression of the student movement. Its candidates were selected at student plenums, with different faculties organising their own plenums and proposing candidates, who were then discussed, vetted and often vetoed. Most of its candidates are not professional politicians, but are academics, experts and other public figures, such as the former basketball star Dejan Bodiroga or the former central bank governor Dejan Šoškić. The list is headed by Ilija Srdanović, a cardiologist and professor at the Faculty of Medicine in Novi Sad, who was little known to the wider public before the campaign.

The list has deliberately avoided having a single, clearly identifiable leader. This is consistent with the students' bottom-up philosophy, but it may prove costly, as some voters prefer a clear political figure to rally behind. What its candidates have in common is that they are against the current ruling elite and against the current way of ruling. Its core promises are anti-corruption, the rule of law and better

governance. It has only published a short programme of 11 main points, and its positions beyond its core demands remain unclear.

On the other side is Aleksandar Vučić, who has dominated Serbian politics since his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) came to power in 2012. A member of the ultranationalist Serbian Radical Party and minister of information under Slobodan Milošević in the 1990s, he later recast himself as a pro-European reformer, serving as prime minister and, from 2017 until his resignation in September, as president. His rule has been authoritarian, marked by corruption problems and weak rule of law, as well as by restrictions on media freedom. He is close to Russia and China, but at the same time tries to be close to President Trump as well. Nominally, he is for EU accession, but in reality he has done nothing on that front. In the EU, he is close to right-wing and conservative parties. Politically, he is a conservative and nationalist strongman.

Ivica Dačić's Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) is running separately, but it has governed alongside the SNS since 2012 and is widely expected to remain its partner after the elections. It is going it alone, since it attracts a somewhat different electorate from the SNS – mainly older voters with more traditional socialist views, often nostalgic for Milošević.

Two other opposition lists deserve attention. European Serbia, built around Dragan Đilas's Party of Freedom and Justice, represents a pro-European, liberal opposition. Its weakness is that many voters associate its leading figures with the period before 2012, when they were in power. Its relationship with the student movement has been marked by friction, but it could well support the students after the elections. The Authentic Right, led by Miloš Jovanović, offers a different alternative: it opposes Vučić, but from a conservative and nationalist position, with scepticism towards the EU and support for closer relations with Russia.

Finally, minority parties could matter disproportionately if neither side secures a clear majority. Most of them, particularly the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians, have so far cooperated with the SNS, but they have generally sided with whoever forms the government.

An uneven electoral contest

The election is taking place on an uneven playing field. This has been a feature of all elections under Vučić, as repeatedly noted by observers from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, but it has become especially important this time, given what is at stake.

The standard pre-election sweeteners are present again, with the government announcing a series of payments and income increases in the run-up to the vote. The supplementary budget adopted at the end of August provides for one-off payments of RSD 20,000-35,000 (EUR 170-300) to pensioners, RSD 25,000 (around EUR 210) to recipients of child allowance, social assistance and veterans' benefits, and RSD 6,000 (around EUR 50) to every adult citizen who applies. Public-sector wages are being raised by 8%, and pensions will rise by 7.5% from December.

Media control has reached new levels. In August, N1 and Nova S, the last critical television channels with nationwide reach, were taken over by a fund owned by a Portuguese businessman, whose financing is unclear. The new owner has tried to appoint new editors-in-chief, which the newsrooms have refused to accept. While the channels are still critical of the ruling structures, their reach had already been reduced before the takeover, as the main TV platforms and cable networks have removed them from their packages.

There are also serious concerns about the electoral roll. It contains around 900,000 more adults than were counted in the 2022 census, and members of the electoral commission estimate that at least 200,000 names on it should not be there. Part of the discrepancy reflects people registered at fictitious addresses.

Another issue is voters from neighbouring countries – Serbs from Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and from Montenegro, who hold Serbian citizenship and are registered at addresses in Serbia, although they do not live there. Each election day, many of them are bussed to Serbia to vote. There are no precise estimates of how many such voters there are, but they are counted in the tens of thousands. While this is not strictly illegal, as these people do have Serbian citizenship, it is highly problematic from a democratic point of view, as they do not live in Serbia and are brought to the polling stations in an organised way, which raises questions about how freely they vote.

Another big issue this time is voters abroad. A record number of people have registered to vote abroad – around 110,000, nearly three times as many as at the last election. Most of these votes are expected to go to the students. To prevent this happening, the institutions are making it hard for people abroad to vote. Despite a steep rise in the number of registered diaspora voters, the number of polling stations abroad has only increased from 81 to 93. Many people will have to travel a long way to vote. For example, there is no polling station in Bratislava, despite the presence of an embassy there and a large Serbian community, and so those people have to go to Vienna. The situation is even worse in North America, where there are only four polling stations in the US and two in Canada. Voters from Seattle will have to travel more than 1,500 km to vote in Los Angeles; meanwhile people living in Vancouver will need to go to Toronto (more than 3,000 km away). Moreover, voting hours will follow Serbian time rather than local time. Many voters outside Europe will thus have to vote during the night. This seems designed both to discourage people from voting and to make manipulation easier.

The campaign has also been marked by tension and incidents. Clashes between supporters of the two sides have been reported in Novi Sad, Valjevo, Belgrade and elsewhere, and a student activist was injured while campaigning door to door near Belgrade.

What will determine the result?

Several factors will determine the election result, but the most important is turnout. In the last two parliamentary elections, in 2022 and 2023, the SNS and SPS together received just over 2m votes. In 2023, of the 6.5m registered voters, around 3.8m voted – a turnout of about 59%. If the governing camp again receives around 2m votes, the students will need roughly the same number just to draw level. Assuming that the other lists together receive around 10% of the vote, as current polls suggest, that would require around 4.6m voters, or a turnout of around 70%. That is well above anything seen in

recent parliamentary elections – the highest turnout since 2000 was about 61%, in 2008. And since a large part of the electoral roll consists of people who do not live in Serbia, the actual mobilisation required among residents is even higher.

Of course, this is just a static calculation, assuming that the SNS and SPS receive the same number of votes as in the previous two elections – which is probably unlikely. The SNS lost votes in eight of the ten municipalities that held local elections in March, and even Faktor Plus (a pollster close to the SNS) shows its support declining from over 50% in 2024 to 46-49% this year. But it is generally expected that the turnout will have to be at least 65% if the Student List is to stand any real chance.

Votes from Bosnia and Herzegovina will also be important. According to Interior Minister Dačić, since 1997 more than 590,000 citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina have received Serbian citizenship. How many of them actually vote is unknown. In 2023, the opposition claimed that more than 40,000 voters had been brought in from Bosnia and Herzegovina, while the government said that just over 20,000 had crossed the border on election day (which does not rule out others arriving in the preceding days). Similar practices have been reported for Serbs from Montenegro. Whatever the truth of the matter, the fact is that these people cast tens of thousands of votes, most of them for Vučić – potentially decisive in a close race. This time, the number can be expected to be even higher, given the importance of the elections.

Votes cast abroad could partly offset this. Around 110,000 Serbian citizens have registered to vote abroad, roughly three times as many as in 2023 (39,000). The student movement is generally expected to perform well among diaspora voters, although the obstacles described above do mean that many registered voters may not manage to vote.

Finally, the fate of smaller parties and national minority lists may prove crucial in deciding who forms the next government. Votes for lists that fail to cross the 3% threshold do not translate into seats, which increases the share of seats of the larger lists. European Serbia and the Authentic Right, which are both against Vučić, are polling at or around the threshold, and it is uncertain whether they will pass it. The SPS, which is close to Vučić, is polling slightly better and is expected to pass, but even that is not certain, and no one expects it to win as many votes as in previous elections. National minority lists are exempt from the threshold and together usually win around a dozen of the 250 seats available, which may be crucial in the end. If the students win the most seats but lack a majority, they will need partners: the national minority parties and the potentially smaller opposition lists could be decisive.

Four possible outcomes

The polls offer no clear answer as to who is likely to win the elections. In mid-September, a survey by Faktor Plus (considered to be close to the government) gave Vučić's list 48.6% and the Student List 37.1%; meanwhile, also in September, New Serbian Political Thought put the Student List ahead, at 44.4%, as against 41.7%. CRTA's poll from June had the Student List even further ahead, at 44.9%, as against 35.7%. On average, the three polls have the two sides practically level pegging, at around 42% each. No matter how biased the polls might be, a landslide such as the one witnessed in Hungary in April is virtually impossible. We therefore see four possible scenarios; the probabilities given should be understood as rough analytical judgements rather than as statistical estimates.

Scenario number 1 is a convincing student victory, meaning that the Student List wins more votes than the SNS and SPS put together, so that Vučić cannot challenge the result. The national minority parties support a student-led government, allowing it to take office. This is not a very likely scenario, given the government's electoral advantages and the obstacles described above. We give it only a 6% probability.

Scenario number 2 is a narrow student victory, meaning that the Student List finishes first, but the SNS and SPS together have more votes. In that case, everything depends on whether the smaller parties cross the threshold and on the position of the national minority parties. If European Serbia and the Authentic Right do enter parliament, they could support the students. If the students and their potential partners together have more seats than the SNS and SPS, the national minority parties would likely support them. However, if European Serbia and the Authentic Right do not get into parliament, the national minority parties may side with the SNS and SPS. Thus, while the students might gain the largest number of seats, they would not enter government.

North Macedonia's experience after the December 2016 elections offers a useful regional parallel. VMRO-DPMNE finished first, but after months of political wrangling (and with substantial involvement on the part of the EU and the US) the SDSM formed a government with the support of the Albanian parties. In Serbia, too, diplomatic engagement by the EU could prove important. In either case, the result would likely be contested, with protests and tension continuing after polling day. This is the most likely scenario in our opinion, with a probability of around 47%.

Scenario number 3 is a narrow SNS victory, with the SNS gaining marginally more votes than the students. The SNS and SPS secure enough seats to remain in power, but the students dispute the result. Given the scale of the protest movement and the concerns about electoral fairness, demonstrations – and possibly clashes – would be on the cards. International pressure could become important, and if it were strong enough, a rerun of the elections could not be ruled out.

However, such pressure seems unlikely. None of the major international actors has clearly positioned itself against Vučić. Russia and China maintain close relations with him, the US administration and France are supportive, and Germany is reserved but not opposed. The EU remains divided in its approach to Serbia. The situation is therefore very different from 2000, when Milošević – having already been weakened by a decade of wars – faced a united Western opposition. Moreover, Serbia's police force is strong enough to contain large-scale protests. We consider this the second most likely scenario, with a probability of 44%.

Scenario number 4 is a convincing Vučić victory, meaning that the SNS triumphs comfortably over the students, the international community recognises the result, and the government continues with limited disruption. The students would complain about the fairness of the election, but mobilisation would probably lose momentum. Given the strength of the student movement, this is also unlikely – we give it a 3% probability.

What happens afterwards?

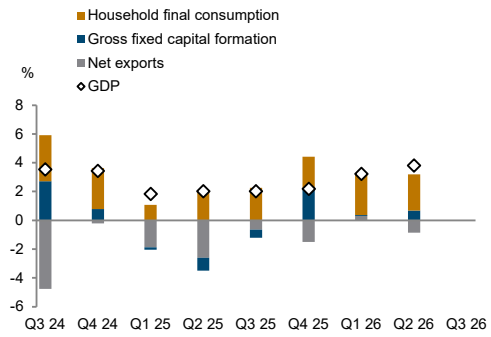
The consequences will extend beyond the immediate question of who forms the next government.

A new government led by Vučić would probably bring continuity in economic policy and international relations. Serbia would continue to rely on foreign direct investment and large-scale public investment in infrastructure, and on a balancing act between the EU, the US, Russia and China. EU membership would remain the official goal, but there would be no real progress. The more significant change could be at home. After two years of protests, the authorities would likely crack down on political opponents, the independent media and civil society. This would further weaken democratic institutions and encourage more people, particularly younger and better-educated citizens, to leave the country.

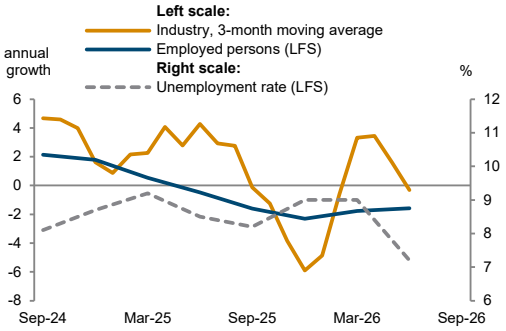
A government led by the students would represent a more substantial political break, focused on the rule of law, the fight against corruption, the independence of institutions and media freedom. On the economy, they offer some change, though their ideas remain underdeveloped. The only concrete idea announced so far is a shift away from a model based on low labour costs towards high-technology and higher-value-added activities, with more support for domestic companies. This is a welcome direction, but there is little detail yet on how it would be achieved. The students would probably pursue closer relations with the EU, but they have made it clear that that would not mean a break with Russia or China. Serbia's almost complete dependence on Russian gas, in particular, limits how quickly relations with Moscow could change.

Serbia

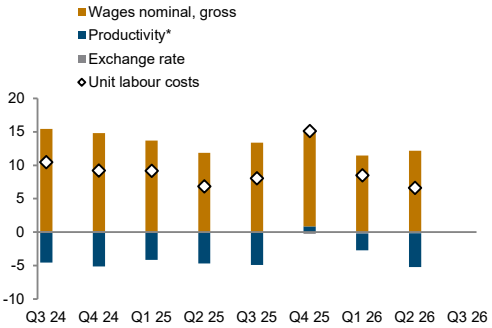
Real GDP growth and contributions
y-o-y



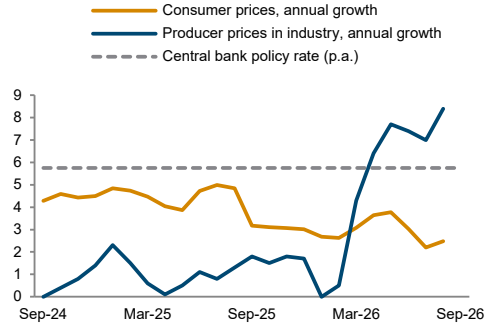
Real sector development
in %



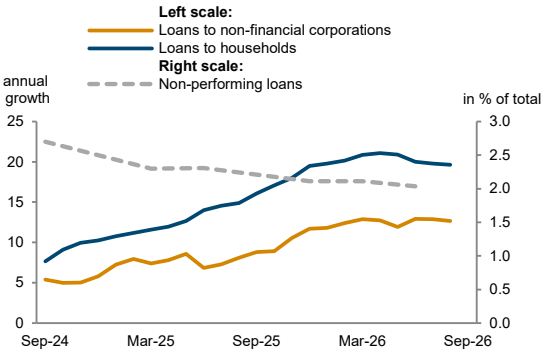
Unit labour costs in industry
annual growth rate in %



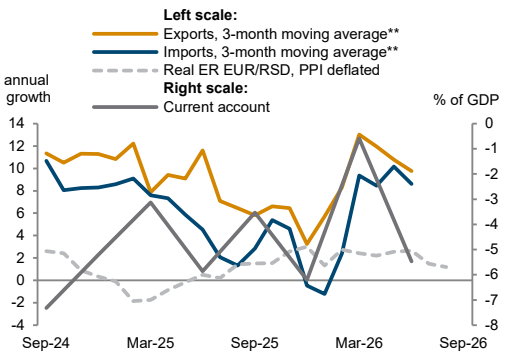
Inflation and policy rate
in %



Financial indicators
in %



External sector development
in %



*Positive values of the productivity component on the graph reflect decline in productivity and vice versa.

Source: wiiw Monthly Database incorporating Eurostat and national statistics. Baseline data, definitions and methodological breaks in time series are available under:https://data.wiiw.ac.at/monthly-database.html