Serbia at a Crossroad

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Democratic Concerns, Geopolitical Balancing, and the EU's Role

Serbia's democratic backsliding under President Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), as recently highlighted by the flawed parliamentary and local elections on December 17, is a cause for concern. Given Serbia's crucial role in maintaining stability across the broader Balkan region, the ongoing transition deserves heightened attention.

Fraudulent Elections

On November 1, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić dissolved parliament and called early parliamentary elections for December 17. Making it the third parliamentary election in less than four years. While his party, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), won an absolute majority with 47% of the vote, the opposition centre-left party Serbia Against Violence (SPN) only received 23%.

Yet while Vučić celebrated his victory, the opposition and several election monitoring organizations, including the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), declared that serious irregularities marked the elections. These included the dominance of Vučić in the media (who, according to the law, cannot take part in the parliamentary election campaign), vote buying and multiple voting. Following this, the opposition, as well as thousands of protestors, took to the streets for over a month and demanded the annulment of both parliamentary and local elections, although without results.

The electoral fraud has exacerbated the already growing social polarization in the country. Triggered by two mass shootings in May 2023, there were weekly mass protests in which representatives of opposition parties and civil society took part. Strikes occurred in various areas of society to demand economic and political reforms. In addition, tensions and violence in northern Kosovo escalated in September 2023, further fueling the public debate about the situation in the region.

Democratic Backsliding

Serbia's democratic backsliding can attributed to the ascent of Vučic to power in 2012. Initially, after the fall of Milosevic in 2000, there were efforts towards democratization with reforms to reduce institutional power, liberal economic policies, and a reduction in human rights violations. However, Vučić's successive roles as deputy prime minister (2012-2014), prime minister (2014-2017), and president (since 2017) marked a significant deterioration in democracy.

Not only has Vučić been accused of interfering in elections, but also of threatening the opposition, suppressing press freedom, and trying to control the judiciary. Additionally, his open admiration of war criminals, like Ratko Mladić, convicted by the ICTY, has raised serious concerns. Vučić attempts to undermine democracy, are also exemplified in the shift in Serbia's Freedom in the World Index ranking (0 = least free, 100 = most free), which has dropped from 88 in 2014 to 60 in 2023.

Balancing Act in Foreign Policy

Serbia's shift towards an illiberal democracy is a notable concern, but equally pressing is the ambiguity of its foreign policy as it navigates between

relations with the EU, Russia and China. In the midst of this geopolitical balancing act, the relationship with the European Union stands out. The granting of candidate status to Serbia in 2012 was an important step towards EU integration. Moreover, the EU is not only Serbia's most important trading partner, accounting for 65.9% of exports and 51.9% of imports, but it is also the most important source of foreign investment in the country.

Although Vučić has publicly expressed his commitment to Serbia's European membership in a speech in 2023, the actions on the ground paint a different picture. Not only has there been no progress in European integration, as noted in the European Commission report from 2022, but the country is also not willing to align with the EU's Foreign Policy when it comes to imposing sanctions on Russia.

Indeed, Russia has cultivated close ties with Serbia, emphasizing shared cultural heritage based on the notion of the "Slavic Brotherhood." Furthermore, Russia positions itself as a defender of Serbian integrity by blocking the UN's recognition of Kosovo's independence. Energy diplomacy also plays a role, as Serbia secured a new three-year deal in gas supply in May 2022 amidst war. On top of this, not only Russia but also China and the Gulf states are increasingly winding their influence in the country and in the entire Balkan region.

What Comes Next?

Given Vučić's attempts to undermine democracy, it is imperative that the EU plays a mediating role: Active EU engagement in talks with the opposition and civil society, combined with efforts to persuade Vučic to implement democratic reforms, could serve as a crucial catalyst for democratic recovery and eventually EU membership. While it has been argued that the EU cannot afford another Orban in its ranks, one thing should be clear: However the EU decides, abandoning Serbia and leaving the region as a grey area of Europe will only exacerbate anti-democratic tendencies throughout the Western Balkans. Not to mention, it would increase the risk of Serbia allying with non-Western allies such as Russia and China.