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## SERBIAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE KOSOVO SERB POLITICAL SCENE

On March 4<sup>th</sup>, the Serbian President dissolved the parliament and called early parliamentary elections in Serbia. Serbian state institutions stated that parliamentary elections will be organised in Kosovo as well. The Government of the Republic of Kosovo has not taken a specific decision on this matter with Prime Minister Isa Mustafa stating that there will be no classical elections in Kosovo. Instead, he said, there will be a collection of votes from Kosovo with facilitation by the OSCE Mission in Kosovo, which has not yet been confirmed by OSCE. He also stated that this is a right the Serb citizens of Kosovo are entitled to according to their constitutional rights on double citizenship.<sup>1</sup>

While there is still a sense of uncertainty how parliamentary elections called in Serbia will be organised in Kosovo, the pre-election campaign is in full swing in Kosovo. An intensive campaign is being organized luring voters in Kosovo. Serbian Prime Minister, Aleksandar Vučić recently visited several municipalities in northern Kosovo where he campaigned for himself and the party he leads the Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska napredna stranka, SNS). Following on his footsteps, caretaker Foreign Minister of Serbia, Ivica Dačić, also visited Kosovo. He portrayed the visit as a “visit to cultural shrines”, but nevertheless used the opportunity for campaigning and canvassing with voters.<sup>2</sup> There has been other campaigning from other parties as well. The following is an update on the Serbian parliamentary elections and developments surrounding their announced organization in Kosovo and possible implications that these may have for the political life of Serb community in Kosovo and on Kosovo political development in general.

### **Background**

On 24 April, Serbia is holding early parliamentary, regional and local elections. Parliamentary elections will also be held among the Serb population of Kosovo. According to the reports from Serbian Government, there will be no local elections in Kosovo. The Government of Kosovo is yet to make any public statements on this issue, choosing to relay that “no decision has been taken yet” and that “Kosovo will act in accordance with best international practices”.<sup>3</sup> Media in Kosovo have raised the possibility of OSCE facilitating these elections similar to the OSCE facilitation for Kosovo elections held in 2014 in northern municipalities, and Prime Minister Mustafa confirmed

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.gazetaexpress.com/lajme/vendvotimet-e-serbise-ne-kosove-mustafa-i-quan-qendra-te-grumbullimit-188191/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.oranews.tv/rajoni/dacic-neser-viziton-trashegimine-kulturore-serbe-ne-kosove/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://botasot.info/lajme/522589/qeveria-ende-pa-vendim-per-mbajtjen-e-zgjedhjeve-te-serbise-ne-kosove/>

this when he stated the OSCE will facilitate the collection of votes cast during the election.<sup>4</sup> As part of the election campaign, Serbia's caretaker Prime Minister, Aleksandar Vučić, visited Kosovo on April 3<sup>rd</sup> and campaigned for his party. During the visit, Vučić stated that SNS will win these elections, including in Kosovo, and that he's in Kosovo to support "the people who are living through tough times".<sup>5</sup> Prime Minister Mustafa stated that the visit of Vučić is "not a problem as he has asked for permission and we have granted it".<sup>6</sup>

Based on the ECMI Kosovo targeted interviews and meetings on the field, the general sentiment among Kosovo Serbs population in Kosovo is that they want to take part in the Serbian parliamentary elections in significant numbers. This does not necessarily mean that they support the current Serbian government or its policy in Kosovo. The act of casting a vote, many of our interlocutors stressed, rather carries huge significance for Kosovo Serbs as it allows them to realise their rights as citizens of Serbia and thus confirm their relationship with the Serbian state. As such, the questions whom to vote for was of less importance over the need that they want to take part in the election.

### ***The growing dominance of SNS in Kosovo Serb politics***

In the run up to the elections, the SNS has established unprecedented control over Kosovo Serb political life. The SNS's campaign is coordinated and logistically supported by the Serbian Office for Kosovo. The Director of the Office and leading SNS official, Marko Đurić, is extensively touring Kosovo. The line between his capacity as civil servant and SNS party official is non-existent. Time and again, Đurić confirms the current SNS-dominated Serbian government's continuing engagement with the Serb population of Kosovo, especially through the Brussels Dialogue. It is argued that the policy of the SNS to regulate public services provided by Serbia to the Kosovo Serb population through the Brussels Dialogue is leading to concrete improvements in the daily lives of the Kosovo Serb community.

There is little or no room for political plurality in the debate. Serbian state's support to Kosovo Serbs goes through the Office for Kosovo and Metohija and is completely equalised to the SNS. Any opposition or sign of political division is delegitimised as threatening for the Serbian interests in Kosovo. There are also rumours that the Serbian government puts pressure on civil servants in Kosovo (working in Serbian institutions) to provide support to the SNS by securing votes or to make sure that enough people show up during election campaign meetings.

The SNS has managed to gain the backing of a large majority of governing Kosovo Serb politicians. At the central level, all Serb ministers in the government are either affiliated to the SNS or have expressed their support to the politics of the party. They regularly join Đurić on his visits to Kosovo. Kosovo Serb politicians at the local level have massively joined the SNS on the occasion of rallies in Štrpce/Shtërpçë, Zubin Potok and the Anamoravë/Pomoravlje region.<sup>7</sup> The

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.gazetaexpress.com/lajme/vendvotimet-e-serbise-ne-kosove-mustafa-i-quan-qendra-te-grumbullimit-188191/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://politiko.net/vucic-ne-kosove/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://fax.al/read/news/3281750/11424510/mustafa-vucic-ne-kosove-nuk-paraqet-problem-i-kemi-dhene-leje-per-kete>

<sup>7</sup> <http://kossev.info/strana/arhiva/djuric/6967>,

[http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2015&mm=09&dd=14&nav\\_category=11&nav\\_id=1039](http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2015&mm=09&dd=14&nav_category=11&nav_id=1039)

Mayors of Zubin Potok and Novo Brdo/Novobërdë, Stevan Vulović and Svetislav Ivanović, respectively, have apparently left the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) of incumbent Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivica Dačić and joined the SNS. The only governing Kosovo Serb politician who is not a member of SNS is Dragan Jablanović, Mayor of Leposavić/Leposaviq, who is affiliated with Aleksandar Vulin's Socialist Movement. Other prominent members of Vulin's Socialist Movement are Aleksandar Jablanović (former minister in the Kosovo government) and Slavko Simić, President of Srpska lista. With regard to Kosovo, the Socialist Movement supports a continuation of the current Serbian politics and is not waging critical opposition against the SNS, with whom the Socialist Movement forms a coalition in Serbia.

From the opposition, the coalition of the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS, *Demokratska stranka Srbije*) and Dveri, and the Serbian Radical Party (*Srpska radikalna stranka*) are most active in Kosovo. The SRS of Vojislav Šešelj held an election meeting in Mitrovica on 12 April. Šešelj, persona non grata in Kosovo, had announced that he would personally attend the meeting – leading to draconic safety measures – but in the end addressed the crowd from Belgrade. The SRS's message conveys support to Serbs staying in Kosovo and states that only the complete and unconditional return of Kosovo to Serbia is righteous. The policy of the current government is criticised as deceptive, as it is leading to the gradual integration of Serbian institutions in the Kosovo framework.<sup>8</sup>

A similar argument is made by the rightist coalition DSS-Dveri. The policy of the SNS and the Serbian government to integrate Serbian institutions in the Kosovo framework through the Brussels Dialogue is only the first step to the complete dismantling of all Serbian institutions and public services in Kosovo.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Current organisation of Serbian political life in Kosovo:***

The growing uniformity of Kosovo Serb political life and its close connection to the Serbian government is a continuation of a development that started with the Kosovo local elections of 2013 and the parliamentary elections of 2014, where the Kosovo Serb electorate voted for a coalition of local Kosovo Serb politicians who received the support from the government in Belgrade. Srpska lista, the list that won the majority of the Kosovo Serb votes during the parliamentary elections of 2014, in fact is a conglomerate of Kosovo Serb politicians of various affiliation who joined forces in order to unify and strengthen the position of Kosovo Serb politicians at the central and local level. As a result of this development, 9 of the 10 Serb-majority municipalities are governed by a mayor representing Srpska lista and 9 of the 10 MPs representing the Serb community are from Srpska lista.<sup>10</sup>

The current developments leading up to the Serbian elections of April 2016 indicate that Kosovo Serb politicians have linked their fate firmly to the SNS. In fact, even the one mayor not from the

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[http://kossev.info/strana/arhiva/djuric\\_kolektivno\\_uclanjenje\\_u\\_sns\\_u\\_kosovskom\\_pomoravlju/7463](http://kossev.info/strana/arhiva/djuric_kolektivno_uclanjenje_u_sns_u_kosovskom_pomoravlju/7463).

<sup>8</sup> <http://kossev.info/strana/arhiva/srs/8416>.

<sup>9</sup> <http://kossev.info/strana/arhiva/dss/8201>.

<sup>10</sup> ECMI Kosovo, '#Local Elections 2013: Lessons Learnt for Minority Communities' (19 December 2013); ECMI Kosovo, '[Minority Political Parties in Kosovo's Changing Political Landscape](#)' (29 July 2014).

ranks of Srpska lista, Bratislav Nikolić from Štrpce of the Serbian Liberal Party (SLS), the party traditionally taking a more independent stance from Belgrade, has joined the SNS.<sup>11</sup>

Since 2013, Serbian political life in Kosovo has been dominated by Srpska lista, a civic initiative composed of several smaller parties including the previously dominant Serbian Liberal Party (SLS), led by ex-cabinet member Slobodan Petrović. Srpska lista is currently part of the governing coalition in Kosovo, and occupies several prominent positions in government including that of the Deputy Prime Minister, but unlike previous coalition partners representing the Serbian community in Kosovo, it has maintained a staunchly pro-Belgrade stance in all of its activities. Its representatives, including senior-level politicians, regularly travel to Belgrade and meet with high-ranking politicians there; messages received there are then generally conveyed to citizens in the field in Kosovo.

In case the SNS wins the Serbian parliamentary elections, as is generally expected, Kosovo Serb political life will become firmly linked to Serbia's dominant governing party. This not only implies that that Kosovo Serb politicians in government will support the position of Belgrade in the Brussels Dialogue, as has been the case so far, but it may further weaken political plurality within the Kosovo Serb community. Kosovo Serb political parties do not participate independently in parliamentary elections in the Republic of Serbia, choosing instead to run as part of an already existing party list there, such as SNS, SPS, or DSS. This, in turn, means that parties like Srpska lista, SLS, and others in Kosovo are intrinsically linked with parties in Serbia and tend to reflect the ideology of their bigger partners in Serbia.

While SNS is the largest party in Serbia and is expected to win elections in Serbia and gain a majority of the vote in Kosovo, other parties, in coalition with SNS at the central level, are also in the running for votes in Kosovo, including SPS of caretaker Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivica Dačić, and PS of Minister of Labour Aleksandar Vulin. From the opposition, DS and DSS are also running candidates from Kosovo and are canvassing for votes, albeit in a lower level than SNS. In the last parliamentary elections held in Serbia in 2014, six MPs were elected representing regions in Kosovo. Two from SNS, two from SPS, one from SDS, and one from PS. Interestingly, the current mayor of Gračanica/Gračanice, Vladeta Kostić, was elected MP in the Serbian parliament in the 2014 elections; he then resigned his seat in order to run for mayor of Gračanica/Gračanice; an election which he won.

The apparent successful centralization of decision-making in Kosovo—at the local and central levels through government ministers loyal to SNS—will link the fate of Kosovo Serb politicians to that of SNS and its leader Vučić, may further reduce the accountability and answerability of these politicians towards citizens and their voters in Kosovo.

Lastly, the direct, open, and strong support Kosovo Serb politicians from Srpska lista, also from Kosovo's government Officials, including Ministers and other functionaries, espouse for SNS and Serbia at this point is being ignored by the two Albanian coalition partners in Kosovo Government, the PDK and LDK in the Kosovo government. Since the resignation/dismissal of Jablanović in February of 2015, Ministers from Srpska lista have largely tended to avoid giving strong statements of support for Serbia or statements that do not recognize or in fact

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2015&mm=09&dd=16&nav\\_id=1039892](http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2015&mm=09&dd=16&nav_id=1039892).

delegitimize the institutions of the Republic of Kosovo. However, they have supported and have been present in all activities of Serbian Government in Kosovo. On the other hand, the two Albanian coalition partners have chosen to ignore occasional controversial statements and meetings and frequent trips by Srpska lista politicians to Belgrade to consult with Serbian institutions.

However, the opposition parties have taken note of this. During a parliamentary session back in February, Vetëvendosje MP Ismail Kurteshi rhetorically asked government representatives who was the real master of Kosovo cabinet Ministers from Srpska lista. Vetëvendosje has consistently accused Srpska lista of being a tool used by Serbia to divide Kosovo.<sup>12</sup> Other opposition parties, chiefly AAK and Nisma, have tended to be more cautious and have concentrated their criticism on specific issues such as the Association/Community of Serb-Majority Municipalities and not directly on Srpska lista.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.telegrafi.com/vetevendosje-lista-serbe-kthehet-per-ta-ndare-kosoven/>

<sup>13</sup> <http://koha.net/?id=27&l=79461>

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