



BALKANS & EASTERN EUROPE February 2019

Protests in Serbia: Vucic's opportunity for what?

Anti Vucic protests are entering their third month, but is it clear what function they objectively have and may have for the Serbian President? Indications are that the potential is huge and the reality might be a bit more drab.

Every Saturday, since December 8, civil society and political parties from the opposition organize protests in central Belgrade against Aleksandar Vucic, Serbia's President since 2017 and leader of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), in power 2012. The SNS has a comfortable majority in Parliament and controls all but three municipalities in the country.

Demonstrators say that Vucic has built a system of power that recalls Russia, Turkey or Hungary's authoritarian democracies. They argue that the SNS has taken over the courts, law enforcement agencies and media, using them against opponents. Media freedom, in particular, is a very sensitive topic for protesters. They accuse Vucic to use the State radio-TV as a party branch. In addition to that, they cast doubts on the independence of media owned by oligarchs close to the power.

So far, street protests have not concerned Vucic. After all, these are not mass protests. It is hard to think that they can bring radical changes in the political sphere. Polls conducted in recent weeks show that the SNS has a strong lead over opposition. Knowing it, Vucic could call early elections to confirm his party in power and cool down protesters' enthusiasm. Some institutional support to protesters has worried his government slightly more, but not to the point of any significant change.

Protests are not only about Vucic's style of power. They signal a huge discontent in Serbian society. The country's economy is growing, but it is still very precarious. Young talented people are leaving Serbia more and more, due to the lack of opportunities. The Kosovo question remains unresolved, slowing down accession to the EU. However, while trying to anchor his country to the EU, the Serbian president looks for a strong relationship with Russia. On 17 February, the Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Belgrade. He was welcomed like a hero. Thousands of people marched in Belgrade to homage to him.

The opposition believes that the SNS paid people to gather in the capital, forgetting that a sizeable part of Serbs really believes in the narrative of true friendship with Russia.

In principle for Vucic, protests could be not only a nuisance, but also an opportunity to push away Serbia from the limbo in which it is stuck. The only way is seizing membership of the EU, the historic goal that Vucic wants to achieve and the reason why in 2008 he and his predecessor as President, Tomislav Nikolic, chose to leave the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), the party symbolizing Serbia's ultra-nationalism.

Unfortunately, the last public appearances of Vucic and his Pristina counterparts show that North Macedonia's success has very little influence on the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue and that, thinking about his enduring legacy, protests are relegated to the level of day by day politics.

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