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The 2026 Parliamentary Elections in Serbia: A Historic Win But a Long Process Ahead

Executive Summary

- The Students' List's election victory is historic, but it marks only the beginning of a long process of democratization in Serbia.
- The Student List secured 53.01% of the vote and 140 out of 250 parliamentary seats, achieving an absolute majority despite widespread electoral manipulation, state interference, media control, and fundamentally unequal campaign conditions.
- The victory was driven by broad popular mobilization, the students' bottom-up democratic organization, as well as the support of large parts of the established opposition. Opposition parties' decision not to run in the elections prevented the fragmentation of anti-regime votes.
- The electoral defeat of the SNS does not mean that the deeply entrenched power structures of the Vučić era will disappear overnight. Key priorities for the government now include depoliticizing and professionalizing the police and intelligence services and restoring judicial independence. Systematically combating corruption and clientelism and transforming the media landscape is also of utmost urgency.
- Serbia's political transformation offers an opportunity to improve its international standing and reinvigorate European integration. This requires credible domestic reforms as well as a more constructive EU approach that moves beyond its previous policy of prioritizing stability over democratic standards.
- The student movement's ideological diversity, its horizontal organization, limited governing experience as well as resistance from former power elites pose substantial risks for a successful democratic transformation. The ultimate challenge will be to translate the movement's extraordinary democratic energy into sustainable institutions and a new political culture.

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Introduction

"If I had happened to sleep through the last thirty years, I wouldn't know today whether I'd woken up in Milošević's Serbia or Vučić's," wrote Aurelija Đan, a young psychotherapist and columnist from Belgrade, in the summer of 2025.[1] At that time, we witnessed the regime's virtually unbridled violence against the predominantly young protesters on the streets of Belgrade and other cities in Serbia. Images of regime-controlled gangs of thugs on the streets of Serbian cities and of the Serbian police's brutal crackdown on young demonstrators were strikingly reminiscent of the 1990s, when Slobodan Milošević ruled the country. Back then, as well as in all the months following the start of the student protests, which were triggered by the collapse of the canopy at the train station in Novi Sad on November 1, 2024, it was evident that Aleksandar Vučić's regime was growing increasingly nervous and was gradually running out of ideas and leverage for dealing with the protests.

It was only a matter of time before new elections – a central demand of the student protests – would be called. The regime apparently feared the election, which explains why Aleksandar Vučić had delayed calling for new elections for as long as possible. The result of the election on October 25, 2026 and the overwhelming vote by the population against the Vučić regime and in favor of the Student List thus represents the preliminary climax of a grassroots democratic movement that did not even exist two years ago. It was above all the young Gen Z students, who were generally not taken into account at all, who after all became the political and social force that ultimately proved their power and resilience and gradually led Serbia out of the fear and paralysis of the Vučić era. The Student List's election victory can confidently be described as historic.

If Aurelija Đan had happened to wake up from her dream today, just over a year after the summer of 2025, she would have seen a transformed country in which the Vučić regime has been defeated, the prosecutor's office is finally beginning to function, state broadcasting has apologized for the media blackout of recent years, and the clientelistic and corrupt network of the formerly ruling SNS (Srpska napredna stranka / Serbian Progressive Party) is rapidly collapsing. This is the new reality of Serbia. However, this new and still-young reality is no guarantee that the Serbia of the future will automatically be democratic and free, nor that the nightmares of the Milošević and Vučić eras will never return.

The following article will discuss the run-up to the elections and the election campaign itself, analyze the Student List's election victory, and explore potential tensions and obstacles for the Student List's upcoming term in office.

Election Campaigns in a Competitive-Authoritarian Serbia

In recent years, in the academic literature Serbia has been described as a competitive-authoritarian regime – that is, a regime in which elections continue to be held regularly, but political competition is so severely restricted by a dominant and authoritarian political group that the elections themselves are neither fair nor free, and the results serve the interests of the center of power.[2] The penultimate parliamentary elections in Serbia in December 2023 clearly demonstrated this. At that time, Aleksandar Vučić and his SNS virtually dominated the entire media and public debate as never before. Moreover, in the run-up to the election, the regime had distributed approximately 400 million euros in taxpayer money to some three million Serbs, including one-time payments of 100 euros each to all young people under the age of 18, financial gifts to retirees, and direct payments to all those who marked their ballots in the "right" place.[3]

It should not be forgotten here that the SNS – being more of an interest group than a political party in the classical sense – was, until recently, one of the largest political parties in the world relative to its population. It had around 750,000 members, accounting for more than ten percent of the population.[4] This made it a massive machine through which jobs were distributed and access to material goods and resources was systematically controlled. In the immediate run-up to the December 2023 election, the voter rolls were also diligently manipulated. The culmination of this electoral manipulation were probably the buses full of voters from the Serb-dominated part of Bosnia and

1 Aurelija Đan, Rat kod kuce (War at home), 19.08.2025, Peščanik, available at https://pescanik.net/rat-kod-kuce/.
2 Vedran Dzihic, Cengiz Günay: Decoding the authoritarian code: exercising 'legitimate' power politics through the ruling parties in Turkey, Macedonia and Serbia, in: Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, 2016, DOI: 10.1080/14683857.2016.1242872.
3 Transparency International Serbia, Elections 2023 report, available at https://www.transparentnost.org.rs/images/dokumenti_uz_vesti/TS_Monitoring_report_-_elections_2023_-_final.pdf.
4 BTI Transformation Index, Serbia Country Report 2026, available at https://bti-project.org/de/reports/country-report/SRB.

Herzegovina, the Republika Srpska, with no registered address in Serbia, who were shuttled by the SNS from the "distribution center" in Belgrade's largest event hall, the famous "Arena", to "their" respective districts and polling stations to vote for the SNS there.[5] In short, the last elections in Serbia before the student protests began were neither fair nor free; they were more of a pseudo-democratic farce. On election night, Aleksandar Vučić described the elections as the "cleanest and most honest elections" Serbia had ever seen.[6] In the elections in 2026 as well, Vučić apparently had a similar vision of how the election should proceed and likely wanted to repeat the "cleanest and most honest elections" using all the methods mentioned above, thereby securing victory for himself.

An Election Campaign Under Unequal Conditions

The entire campaign period for the 2026 parliamentary election in Serbia was exceptional compared to all previous elections during the Vučić era. As already mentioned, the student movement had called for new elections as early as the initial phase of the protests at the beginning of 2025. Ever since the until then largest rally on March 15, 2025 it was obvious that the movement's ability to mobilize, its mass appeal, as well as its persistence in advancing its demands, had the potential to bring about lasting change to Serbia's political landscape. The demand for new elections was a central part of the students' narrative regarding the need to break with the old regime and make a fresh democratic start for Serbia.

The regime reacted to the protests and the mounting pressure from the students with a mix of nervousness and aggression on the one hand, while on the other hand attempting to close ranks within the regime and mobilize its own supporters even more strongly. The regime visibly pursued the restructuring of the security and police apparatus and removed those top officials who stood for professionalism and independence.[7] Under these circumstances, gaining complete control over the security services was one of the regime's priorities. The public campaign by pro-regime media against the protesters gained significant momentum and consisted of a series of defamations and accusations against the students and their supporters, accompanied by an intense glorification of Aleksandar Vučić.[8] At the same time, as early as the initial phase of the student protests, an informal and partly paramilitary group of alleged students formed – the so-called "students who just want to study." This group, popularly known as "ćaci" (derived from the Serbian term "đaci," meaning "pupils", but written incorrectly), set up a tent camp in front of the presidential building and camped there to support Aleksandar Vučić and his policies. This tent camp, from which violent riots and clashes against the student movement were repeatedly organized, including during the large rally on March 15, 2025, in Belgrade, was home to many paid and armed petty criminals who were part of the larger informal squads of thugs maintained by the regime and the SNS.[9]

For a long time, Aleksandar Vučić refused to comply with the students' demands to call an election. However, the SNS's informal election campaign had already begun in the course of 2026. It was characterized by three factors: first, by growing polarization between the government camp and the student movement, including the political groups and figures supporting them; second, by constant threats of and outbreaks of violence on part of the regime, which were particularly intense during the summer months of 2025, when the brutality of the police in their crackdown on students made international headlines;[10] and third, by an increasingly obvious blurring of the lines between the state and the ruling SNS party, as SNS would instrumentalize state institutions and agencies dominated by SNS to serve the party in all possible types of preparations for the vote.[11]

5 CRTA, 17.12.2026, available at https://crta.rs/en/higher-turnout-in-belgrade-organized-transfer-of-voters/.
6 Nova RS, 22.12.2023, Vučić poručio da su izbori najčistiji ikad, moguće ponavljanje beogradskih: Kako ćemo u Evropu uz izbornu farsu? (Vučić Claims Elections Were the Cleanest Ever, Belgrade Vote May Be Repeated: How Can We Join Europe Amid an Electoral Farce?), available at https://nova.rs/emisije/vucic-porucio-da-su-izbori-najcistiji-ikad-moguce-ponavljanje-beogradskih-kako-cemo-u-evropu-uz-izbornu-farsu/.
7 N1, Elite Serbian police anti-terrorist unit undergoing radical changes, 10.02.2026, available at https://n1info.rs/english/news/elite-serbian-police-anti-terrorist-unit-undergoing-radical-changes/.
8 SEE Check, A record year of lies: Serbian pro-regime newspapers published more than 1,800 manipulative stories in 2025, 23.06.2026, available at https://seecheck.org/index.php/2026/06/23/a-record-year-of-lies-serbian-pro-regime-newspapers-published-more-than-1800-manipulative-stories-in-2025/.
9 Marko Todorovic, Serbia's Democratic Breakthrough, European Policy Center, 04.11.2026, available at: https://cep.org.rs/en/publications/serbias-democratic-breakthrough/.
10 See Amnesty International, 04.07.2025, available at https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/07/serbia-authorities-must-end-unlawful-use-of-force-against-protesters-and-investigate-reports-of-police-violence/ and also Deutsche Welle, 06.09.2025, available at https://www.dw.com/de/news-kompakt-polizeigewalt-gegen-demonstranten-in-serbien/a-73902760.
11 CRTA, Izveštaj Posmatračke misije Crte, izborna godina 2026/2027, Kampanja pre raspisivanja, mart-septembar 2026, https://crta.rs/wp-content/uploads/2026/09/EOM1-SR-Kampanja-pre-raspisivanja_4-updated.pdf.

The Old Regime Relies on Election Manipulation

With regard to the transparency and integrity of the electoral process itself, the regime did virtually nothing to implement specific demands for the democratization of the electoral process – demands that were also formulated by European bodies such as the EU and the OSCE in the wake of the last parliamentary elections in December 2023.[12] For instance, the voter registry remained unverified and unrevised. When Aleksandar Vučić on September 9, 2026 officially called for early parliamentary elections in Serbia, dissolved Parliament and scheduled the elections for October 25, 2026, all of the regime's actions indicated that the SNS was once again relying on massive manipulation, vote-buying, and other methods of electoral fraud to win the election. In the run-up to the election, more than 235,000 new ID cards were issued, many of them to people in the Republika Srpska entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Vučić's political ally, Milorad Dodik, again pulled out all the stops to generate votes for the SNS.[13] In Kosovo, too, the number of registered voters rose by 20,000 – with an overall Serbian population in the country probably currently somewhere between 70.000 and 100.000.[14]

The regime also stepped up its activities in the media sector, apparently aiming for total dominance of the public sphere. For instance, in the run-up to the election, the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM) had not issued a single decision in 22 months, while the concentration of media power in pro-government companies continued to grow. These developments included, among other things, the sale of media companies by the United Group, the expansion of Telekom Srbija, and the takeover of the cable network operator SBB, all of which limited the reach of critical media outlets. At the same time, Vučić intensified pressure on free and independent media outlets such as N1 and NOVA RS, while the media campaign waged by pro-regime outlets was in full swing. In these media outlets, including state-run broadcasting, the SNS and Aleksandar Vučić dominated 96 percent of the coverage, and positive reports about the president were 11 times more frequent than during the parliamentary and presidential campaigns in 2022.[15]

Given all these circumstances, it was clear that, just as in previous elections, and especially in the December 2023 election, which drew massive international criticism, the elections this time around would not be fair and free either.

The Contenders in a "Referendum-Style" Election

On September 27, 2026, Vučić officially resigned from his post as President of Serbia – his constitutionally allowed two terms in office would have expired in May 2027 – in order to run as his party's lead candidate in the parliamentary elections and again seek the office of prime minister. What Vučić had in mind here was the model familiar from Russia, when Vladimir Putin stepped down from the office of president of Russia for constitutional reasons and transitioned to the office of head of government. On September 28, 2026, Vučić formally handed over his official duties to Parliament Speaker Ana Brnabić, who assumed the presidency on an interim basis and will hold the office until the early presidential election (which must be held by December 27, 2026).

Meanwhile, the Student List relied on grassroots democratic organization and the nationwide mobilization of people. It is almost astonishing how wisely the young Serbian students have acted over the past two years. They relied on a democratic organization from the bottom up that is virtually unparalleled in modern history of democracy. In student assemblies, using a sophisticated system of participatory decision-making, they drew up an electoral list of 250 candidates who possessed great professional expertise but very little political experience.[16] Thus, the list included numerous university professors, doctors and lawyers, as well as ordinary people from all walks of Serbian society, who will now take their seats in the Serbian Parliament. At the same time, the students organized marches across the country, cycling or walking to Strasbourg and Brussels and stopping in many European cities along the way to mobilize Serbian compatriots in the diaspora

12 ODIHR Election Observation Mission, Republic of Serbia, Early Parliamentary Elections, 17.12.2023, Final Report, available at https://odihr.osce.org/sites/default/files/f/documents/1/3/563505_0.pdf.

13 NOVA RS, Četvrt miliona novih ličnih karata izdato za četiri meseca: Postoji opasnost da budu zloupotrebljene za glasanje na više mesta (A Quarter of a Million New ID Cards Issued in Four Months: "There Is a Risk They Could Be Misused to Vote at Multiple Polling Station), 15.10.2026, available at: https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/cetvrt-miliona-novih-licnih-karata-izdato-za-cetiri-meseca-postoji-opasnost-da-budu-zloupotrebljene-za-glasanje-na-vise-mesta/.

14 Regarding the exact number of Serbs in Kosovo we do not have reliable data and numbers presented by Kosovar authorities (approximately 50.000) and those by Serbian authorities (100.000 Serbs) largely diverge; see also: Jaschar Dugalic, Caught between Belgrade and Pristina, Kosovo's Serbs face an uncertain future, NZZ, 10.04.2025, available at: https://www.nzz.ch/english/caught-between-belgrade-and-pristina-kosovo-serbs-face-an-uncertain-future-ld.1877453.

15 CRTA, Izveštaj Posmatračke misije Crte, izborna godina 2026/2027, Kampanja pre raspisivanja (Campaigning Before the Elections Are Officially Called), mart-septembar 2026, https://crta.rs/wp-content/uploads/2026/09/EOM1-SR-Kampanja-pre-raspisivanja_4-updated.pdf.

16 Link to the program of Studentska lista and the list of candidates for the general elections. https://studenti.org.rs/studentska_lista/.

and to spread the message of change throughout Europe. The strong mobilization within the country also proved effective in the diaspora. In Austria, Germany, throughout Europe and worldwide, voter registration for the election rose dramatically with an increase in voters registrations of 160% in comparison to elections in 2023.[17] When the election campaign officially began, the students relied on a strategy of direct contact with people ("od vrata do vrata" – "door-to-door") and a positive and sometimes humorous social media campaign.

Another distinctive feature of this election was certainly the fact that it basically amounted to a referendum for or against Vučić, and in this atmosphere of polarizing competition, all other political options, including those parties that had been represented in the last Serbian parliament, faced the choice of either supporting one of the two blocs or running on their own. All in all, a total number of 18 lists were running in the elections (see also Figure 3 below).[18] On the regime's side, the incumbent coalition partners SNS and SPS (Socijalistička partija Srbije / Socialist Party of Serbia), led by Interior Minister Ivica Dačić, ran with separate lists. Another rather national-conservative party, which was previously represented in the parliament, the so called Autentična desnica – Odvažno srpski! (Authentic Right – Boldly Serbian!) led by Miloš Jovanović, also ran independently.

Most parties from the opposition ultimately decided to support the Student List and refrained from running separately at the elections. This approach was highly remarkable, as for numerous established parties – some of which had previously been represented in parliament – it meant they had to subordinate their own political and organizational interests to the common goal of a democratic transfer of power in Serbia. Given the years of fragmentation within the Serbian opposition and its repeated defeats at the hands of the Vučić regime, this decision represented a remarkable break with previous patterns of political competition and infighting. It was the result of a realpolitik realization that the student movement had simply developed a social, and certainly emotional, mobilizing force that far exceeded that of the traditional opposition parties. By refraining from fielding their own candidates, these parties played a decisive role in preventing a fragmentation of the votes against the regime. Among the parties and movements that took this path were the Democratic Party (DS), the Green-Left Front (ZLF), the Movement of Free Citizens (PSG), the People's Movement of Serbia (NPS), New Face of Serbia (NLS), the Ecological Uprising (Ekološki ustanak), Kreni-promeni (Go-Change) and the League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina (LSV). However, the historic election victory of the Student List now presents these parties with a new dilemma (see last chapter).

Voting Day and Election Results

October 25, 2026 was a day that felt like a strange roller coaster of emotions in Serbia. Starting in the early morning hours, thousands flocked to polling stations across the country to cast their votes in the parliamentary election. Throughout the day, the lines barely got any shorter; the images and the figures released intermittently pointed to a record voter turnout. The regime, presumably still expecting a close race, as was predicted by even independent polls beforehand, and with the intention to declare its own victory, deployed special police units and armed thugs in Belgrade during the day. Democracy and elections aside, the regime was always and especially on this day concerned with remaining in power and sheer survival. Vučić was apparently prepared for any event, including violence. But it was all for nothing; the Student List won the election by a landslide, thereby making history not only in Serbia. At 9:30 p.m. on election night, Vučić appeared before the media and announced the Student List's clear victory, thereby admitting his SNS's defeat. In the meantime, there is intense speculation about what dissuaded him from resorting to violence. The overwhelming voter turnout and the large percentage margin were certainly a factor, but alleged phone calls from the US and European capitals also undoubtedly played a role in making it clear to Vučić where the red line was.[19]

As already mentioned, Election Day on October 25, 2026 above all was initially marked by an extraordinary level of political mobilization, the scale of which surpassed that of all previous parliamentary elections

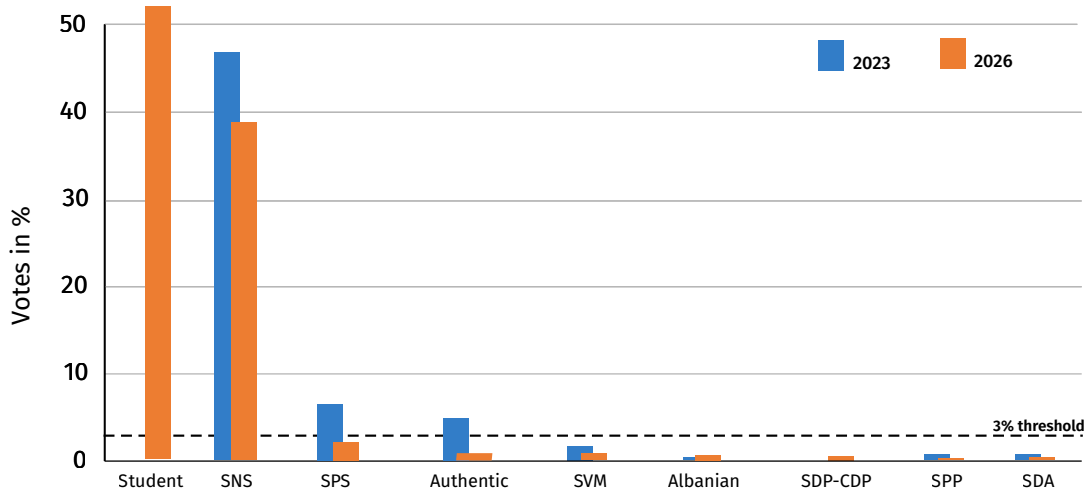
17 See RIK final report on diaspora voting, available at https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/290784/rik-adopts-report-on-voting-results-abroad.php.
18 RIK, Republička Izborna Komisija (State electoral commission), available at https://www.rik.parlament.gov.rs.
19 Srđjan Cvijić, Serbia's students achieved the impossible. Europe must not fail them now, The Guardian, 29.10.2026, available at: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2026/oct/29/serbias-students-achieved-impossible-europe-must-not-fail-them-now.

during the Vučić era.[20] Long lines formed in front of numerous polling stations since the early morning hours, and voter turnout was significantly higher from the outset than in the December 2023 parliamentary elections. According to final figures from the State Election Commission (RIK), more than 4.44 million citizens participated in the election, representing a turnout of 68.9 percent.[21] This exceptionally high turnout was primarily a reflection of the political momentum sparked by the student movement, but it was certainly also due to the fact that this election amounted to a referendum on whether to continue supporting the Vučić regime or to embark on a new democratic beginning for Serbia.

Similar to the December 2023 elections, Election Day was again marked by numerous irregularities and isolated violent incidents. Among other things, the independent election observation organization CRTA documented the photographing of ballots in 48 percent of the polling stations it observed, violations of the prescribed procedures for identity verification, as well as an increase in violent incidents throughout the day in Belgrade, Novi Sad, and other cities in Serbia.[22] The OSCE's international election observation mission also noted in its preliminary report that the elections had taken place amid deep political polarization, massive inequality in campaign conditions, and significant advantages for the ruling party. Despite these circumstances, the actual voting process was assessed positively in the vast majority of polling stations observed.[23]

The exceptionally high voter turnout ultimately proved to be the decisive factor in the election results. Contrary to the expectations of the ruling camp, which, once again, was able to draw on the political, institutional, and media power structures it had built up over the years, the student movement succeeded in mobilizing a broad social majority behind its demand for a fresh political start. According to the final results announced by the Republican Electoral Commission on November 5, 2026, the **"Studentska lista – Studenti pobeđuju"** list received a total of 2,354,417 votes (53.01%), winning 140 of the 250 seats in the Serbian National Assembly. The **"Ujedinjena Srbija"** list (SNS), led by Aleksandar Vučić, received 1,731,323 votes (38.98%) and 103 seats. The remaining seven seats in

Figure 1: **Parliamentary Election Results 2026 (compared to the 2023 elections)**

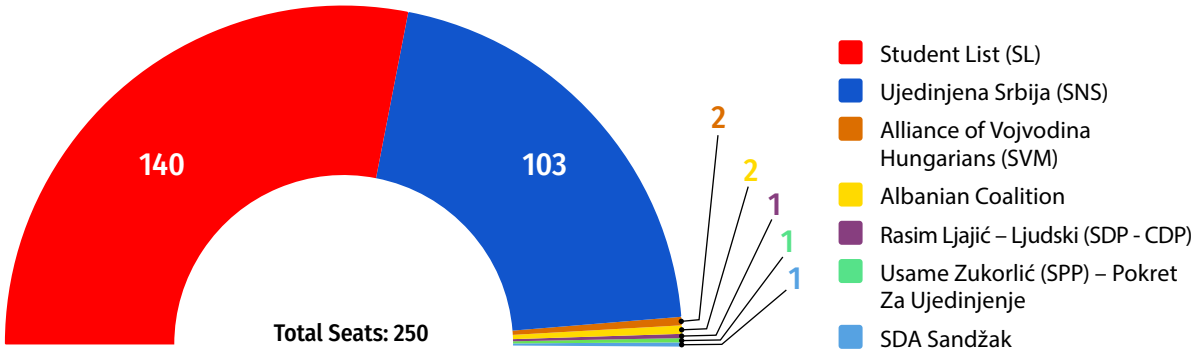


	Student List	SNS	SPS	Authentic Right	SVM	Albanian Coalition	SDP-CDP	SPP	SDA
2026	53.01	38.98	2.13	0.89	0.8	0.62	0.46	0.28	0.28
2023	–	46.75	6.55	5.02	1.7	0.35	–	0.76	0.57
	+53.01	-7.77	-4.42	-4.13	-0.9	+0.27	+0.46	-0.48	-0.29

Source: https://www.rik.parlament.gov.rs/542645/sr/rezultati/

20 Web-Platform PolitPro offers an overview of all previous elections in Serbia including their results and voter turnouts. Available at https://politpro.eu/sr.
21 RIK, Republička Izborna Komisija (State electoral commission), available at https://www.rik.parlament.gov.rs.
22 See the reporting of CRTA on the election day, which can be found at the webpage of CRTA dedicated to the elections on October 25th, 2026, available at https://crta.rs/izvestaj-o-izbornom-danu/.
23 OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, Serbia's early parliamentary elections saw high turnout amid a polarized environment and unequal campaign opportunities, international observers say, 26.10.2026, available at https://odihr.osce.org/odihr/669153; CRTA.

Figure 2: **Distribution of Seats in the National Assembly**



Source: https://www.rik.parlament.gov.rs/542645/sr/rezultati/

Parliament went to the parties representing **national minorities**: two each to the **Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (SVM)** and the **Albanian Coalition**, and one each to the lists headed by **Rasim Ljajić** and by **Usame Zukorlić**, as well as to the **SDA Sandžak**.[24] None of the other lists that ran managed to cross the 3% threshold to win a seat in parliament (this threshold does not apply to minority lists). Consequently, once-powerful political parties such as the SPS, formerly led by Slobodan Milošević and now by Ivica Dačić, are no longer represented in Parliament, nor is the "European Serbia" electoral list led by former Belgrade Mayor Dragan Đilas, which consists of the Party of Freedom and Justice (SSP, Stranka slobode i pravde), Serbia Center (SRCE, Srbija centar), and the Solidarity Movement, all of them previously represented in the Parliament.

With this election result, the Student List secured an absolute parliamentary majority, while the SNS and its allies lost their previous majority in the National Assembly after more than a decade. As a result, parliamentary life in Serbia during the coming legislative term will be dominated by only two major parties, which also marks a break with the previous practice of party pluralism in parliament. The political significance of this election result, however, extends far beyond a mere shift in the balance of power in parliament. For the first time since the SNS came to power in 2012, a social movement that had developed outside established party structures succeeded in breaking Aleksandar Vučić's political dominance through the electoral process. Crucial to this success was not only the mobilization of those segments of the population that had already taken a stand against the regime in recent years, but also the student movement's ability to transform the protest against corruption, institutional arbitrariness, and the co-optation of the state into a broad-based social electoral movement that not only promised a mere change in power but was also able to offer a positive and hopeful vision of a new Serbia.

From a political science perspective, the result highlights the limitations of a competitive-authoritarian system of governance that had secured its political stability for years through control of state resources, dominance in the media, informal networks, and, ultimately, the weakness of a fragmented opposition. The fact that the ruling party could be voted out of office despite the massive inequality in electoral conditions and the systematic undermining of democratic competition rules highlights the relevance and scope of this societal mobilization, which will be relevant far beyond Serbia's borders.

The Lenghty Struggle for a Democratic Serbia Begins

What, then, does the SNS's defeat in parliament and the ousting of the "Vučić system" mean? It is certainly true that this election victory will by no means lead to the immediate and rapid dissolution of the power structures that have been built up over the years. The central question at present is to what extent the new leaders in Serbia, who, for the first time since the early 1990s, cannot rely on a strong party apparatus or practical political experience, will succeed in initiating a genuine and structural break not only with the Vučić system but also with the historical legacy of authoritarianism in the state and society that overwhelmingly shaped the politics of the country since the beginning of the 1990s, with only a short period of democratization after Milošević's fall in October 2000.

24 RIK, Republička Izborna Komisija (State electoral commission), available at https://www.rik.parlament.gov.rs.

The next concrete steps toward forming a new government have now been determined: On November 5, 2026, following a repeat of the election at some polling stations one week after the parliamentary election, the Election Commission submitted its final report with the corresponding election results to the Serbian Parliament.[25] On November 6, the decision on the allocation of seats in the new composition of Parliament was issued. On this basis, on November 8, Serbia's interim president, former prime minister and speaker of Parliament as well as one of Vučić's closest political allies Ana Brnabić, convened the first constituent session of Parliament for November 17. Once Parliament is constituted, a 90-day period will begin during which a government must be formed. At the same time, the presidential election must be announced by November 27 at the latest. The election must then be held by December 27, 2026 at the very latest.

Grassroots Democracy vs. Governing: A Dilemma

The Student List's comfortable parliamentary majority is certainly a solid basis for the swift election of a government capable of taking action. At the same time, due to the Student List's commitment to grassroots democracy, a question arises – one that has rarely been a practical political concern until now – namely, how the elected representatives in parliament and members of the government themselves will interact with the Student List's continuing grassroots democratic structure. More fundamentally, this points to the dilemma of the Student List's own internal consolidation. Its political strength during the campaign rested precisely on the fact that it was not a traditional party, but rather a broad, ideologically heterogeneous social movement that transformed the country through grassroots democratic decision-making processes, horizontal organization, and a remarkable capacity for mobilization. Now this movement must make the transition from a protesting and campaigning mindset to a governing one.

The formation of parliament and the establishment of a government capable of taking action are the first challenges. The selection of political leaders – which was the subject of intense discussion within the student assemblies in the days following the election victory – will undoubtedly be decisive as well. Added to this is the question of how the movement's grassroots democratic culture can be reconciled with the demands of day-to-day politics, where decisions often must be made quickly and difficult compromises must be reached. The new members of parliament are accountable to the electorate and will most likely act in close consultation with student organizations. It is also clear, however, that as members of parliament, they can and will now represent individual and independent positions, which is inherent in the independence of the office and the personal integrity of MPs. Whether this will give rise to tensions or, on the contrary, result in a new form of grassroots democratic checks and balances – one that proves effective beyond state bodies and institutions – remains to be seen and can hardly be predicted due to a lack of experience with this form of governance in other countries.

The ideological diversity that was a strength during the joint struggle against the Vučić regime could become a significant challenge when it comes to issues of economic, social, and above all foreign policy. The new government will therefore not only have to implement institutional reforms but also develop a common political direction without losing the democratic energy and openness that made the success of the student movement possible in the first place. The challenges facing the democratization of Serbia and the liberation of its institutions are immense. Over fourteen years of rule, Aleksandar Vučić and his SNS have built a system in which the boundaries between the state, the ruling party, economic interest groups, and elements of organized crime have become increasingly blurred. The political defeat of the SNS in no way means that this system has disappeared overnight. The cadres of the old regime remain in place in ministries, municipalities, public enterprises, the judiciary, the police, and the intelligence services. Particularly within the security apparatus – which in recent years had become a key instrument of repression against the protesting population and the opposition – adamant resistance to democratic change could emerge. Here, the new government will have to act swiftly, decisively, and in accordance with the rule of law. Depoliticizing the police, reforming the intelligence services, restoring an independent judiciary, and systematically combating corruption will be among the central tasks. In doing so, the necessary reckoning with the practices of the old regime must not lead to a new political instrumentalization of these institutions. This new democratic beginning will be judged precisely by whether it succeeds in freeing the state from the clutches of partisan and clientelistic interests and putting it back at the service of citizens.

25 RIK, Republička Izborna Komisija (State electoral commission), available at https://www.rik.parlament.gov.rs.

Reform of the Security Services: The Top Priority

A key aspect following the formation of the new government will be a rapid reform process within the judicial and security systems. Vučić had placed several persons with problematic track record in top positions within the police and the intelligence services, including Marko Kričak as the Head of Serbia's Criminal Police Directorate.[26] Removing them could prove to be a delicate and potentially dangerous balancing act. One of the most urgent and, at the same time, politically sensitive tasks facing the new leaders will be the fundamental reform of the security apparatus. The police and the intelligence services – above all the domestic intelligence agency BIA (Bezbednosno-informativna agencija / Security Information Agency) – were among the central instruments of power in Aleksandar Vučić's regime. The BIA also played a central role in the surveillance and wiretapping of numerous opposition politicians, activists, and members of civil society. Restructuring the BIA is likely to be particularly difficult, as personnel and institutional ties to the old power structures must first be fully disclosed, and the BIA's connections to the Russian intelligence service must also be thoroughly investigated. The fact that the public prosecutor's office launched several investigations immediately after the SNS's election defeat[27] and is also taking action against high-ranking police officials shows that initial changes, which are certainly unexpected for many, are beginning to emerge within institutions that have been politically controlled until now.

The first concrete calls and proposals for decisive action regarding the police and security services are coming from the Student List itself and from key institutions in civil society. Sociologist and prominent Student List candidate Jovo Bakić, who has publicly thrown his hat into the ring for the office of Minister of the Interior, has already announced a comprehensive review of all Ministry of the Interior employees – including their financial circumstances – and the reinstatement of professional police officers, who were sidelined under Vučić, to their previous positions. Bakić also aims to thoroughly investigate the links between state institutions and organized crime.[28] Experts from the Belgrade Center for Security Policy are also calling for a swift but systematic reform that must go far beyond merely replacing top leadership.[29] The central challenge here is to dismantle the political and criminal networks of the old regime without simply placing the security institutions under new party-political control.

Media Reforms: The Battle for a Free Public Sphere Has Already Begun

Throughout the 14 years of the Vučić era, the Serbian media and virtually the entire public sphere served as a central pillar of his power. The fundamental restructuring and reform of the Serbian media landscape will therefore be one of the top priorities of the new Student List government. However, things began to shift as early as the first few days following their election victory. At the public broadcasters RTS and Radio-Televizija Vojvodine (RTV) – which for years had served as largely uncritical mouthpieces for the regime – there were public apologies for biased reporting, resignations by senior executives, and the replacement of numerous editors. RTS Director Manja Grčić resigned, as did RTV Director General Goran Karadžić.[30] Even among private media outlets that had previously been loyal to the regime, such as Pink and Informer, panic appears to have set in, and the first signs of change are becoming evident. In particular, the broadcaster Informer, known for its aggressive propaganda against the student movement and all critics of Vučić, along with the daily newspaper Informer, became the target of public protests. In the very first days following the Student List's election victory, a group of protesters forced their way into the Informer editorial building; however, the formal structures of the student movement explicitly distanced themselves from this incident and the demonstrators soon withdrew.[31]

26 N1, Radar: Putting the police in the service of politics, 18.04.2024, available at https://n1info.rs/english/news/radar-putting-the-police-in-the-service-of-politics/; Predrag Petrovic, Security Services Must Be Reformed to Dismantle Serbia's Mafia State, 29.10.2026, available at https://balkaninsight.com/2026/10/29/security-services-must-be-reformed-to-dismantle-serbias-mafia-state/bi/.

27 Radio Slobodna Evropa, Postizborna hapšenja u Srbiji, otvaranje fioka i novi slučajevi (Post-Election Arrests in Serbia: Reopening Shelved Cases and Launching New Investigations), 09.11.2026, available at https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-hapsenja-posle-izbora/33893970.html.

28 N1, Jovo Bakic, 08.11.2026, available at https://n1info.rs/vesti/jovo-bakic-se-ozbiljno-sprema-za-ministra-policije-izneo-plan-reforme-mup-a/.

29 BCBP, Policija mora da služi građanima, a ne političkim centrima moći (The Police Must Serve Citizens, Not Political Power Centers), 07.11.2026, available at https://bezbednost.org/policija-mora-da-sluzi-gradjanima-a-ne-politickim-centrima-moci/.

30 A detailed analysis of the media landscape in Serbia before and after the elections will shortly be published in issue 06 / 2026 of the Südosteuropa Mitteilungen: Thomas Brey, 'The Media as the Pivotal Point in "Old" and "New" Serbia'.

31 Media Centar Online, Mediji nakon Vučića: Smene, ostavke i promene uređivačke politike (Media After Vučić: Dismissals, Resignations, and Changes in Editorial Policy), 04.11.2026, available at https://media.ba/bs/magazin-novinarstvo/mediji-nakon-vucica-smene-ostavke-i-promene-uredivacke-politike.

The Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM), which for years had remained largely inactive despite numerous violations by pro-government television stations, suddenly began to take action: On November 4, 2026, it imposed a seven-day broadcast ban on Informer's morning show and similar programs, while the station Prva was hit with a one-day ban on its news program and a five-day ban on its morning program.[32] On the one hand, these developments show how quickly loyalties within the former media power structure are beginning to crumble following the SNS's defeat. However, this opportunistic switching of sides, for which the term "preletači" (political turncoats) has become established in Serbian, harbors dangers. It is quite clear that a mere replacement of editors-in-chief, public apologies, or suddenly favorable coverage of the new rulers is far from sufficient to create a free and independent media landscape. What is needed, rather, is a fundamental reform of the media regulatory authority REM which has been largely inactive to date, a transparent review of the ownership and financing structures of media outlets loyal to the regime; and a consistent enforcement of journalistic and legal standards, underpinned by the rule of law. Public media, in particular, must not simply replace their previous political loyalty with a new one. The Student List itself has already stated this unequivocally: What is needed is not a public broadcaster that now parrots the views of the new rulers, but one that operates independently and professionally. Whether it will be possible to transform the current media landscape dominated by propaganda into a truly pluralistic public sphere will certainly be one of the key tests of Serbia's democratic renewal.

Serbia's Changed Image: An Opportunity

The victory of the Student List has not only altered the balance of political power within Serbia but has also fundamentally shifted the country's international image. It was only two years ago that Serbia was perceived by the European and international public primarily through the lens of Aleksandar Vučić's authoritarian rule, through police violence against protesters, nationalist provocations against neighbors, and the close ties between politics and organized crime. The regime's attempts to create a positive image of Serbia through costly international publicity stunts and political marketing had increasingly little impact on this perception. Vučić had long since lost control of the international narrative about Serbia. This image quickly began to change during the month-long student protests. Suddenly, Serbia was no longer just the country of an authoritarian ruler, but also a country where young people were rising up against the politics of fear with remarkable creativity, democratic innovation, and social solidarity. After the election victory, this shift became even more evident in international coverage. A country that was often seen as an example of the authoritarian dismantling of democracy became a country of hope and democratic renewal. This new positive view of Serbia could soon pay off politically and economically as well. A credible fight against corruption, the restoration of institutions based on the rule of law, and the creation of transparent economic conditions could strengthen the confidence of international partners and potential investors. Serbia's democratic renewal would thus be not only a political but also a social and economic unleashing.

Serbia and the EU

The historical opportunity is particularly significant in terms of relations with the European Union. Relations between Brussels and Belgrade have been marked by a fundamental contradiction in recent years. While the EU officially insisted on the rule of law, democracy, and adherence to European values, it was often surprisingly lenient toward Aleksandar Vučić's authoritarian regime. Moreover, through their political cooperation, numerous European heads of state and government conferred on Vučić an international legitimacy that, given the democratic rollback in Serbia, had long since ceased to be justified. This policy of supporting a supposed stability, a concept that has come to be known in the debate as "stabilitocracy",[33] led to a profound erosion of trust in the EU, particularly among the very young people who have now brought about democratic change. It was therefore by no means surprising that the Student List did not make EU membership a central issue in its election campaign. At the same time, their fundamental demands for an independent judiciary, free media, transparent institutions, and the fight against corruption reflect a clearly European political orientation. It is now up to both sides to seize this opportunity. The new Serbian government will have to develop a clear strategic direction and initiate credible reforms. Brussels, for its part, must finally break free from the logic of mere stability management and treat Serbia as a partner with whom a new European path can be shaped together.

32 Danas, Prva odluka REM-a posle izbora: TV Informer, blizak SNS-u, kažnjen (REM's First Post-Election Decision: TV Informer, Close to the SNS), Sanctioned 04.11.2026, available at https://www.danas.rs/bbc-news-serbian/prva-odluka-rem-a-posle-izbora-tv-informer-blizak-sns-u-kaznjen/.

33 Florian Bieber, What is a stabilitocracy, 05.05.2017, available at https://www.biepag.eu/op-ed/what-is-a-stabilitocracy.

A first concrete step could be the release of previously blocked funds from the EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, provided that the necessary conditions are met. This would need to be swiftly followed by further steps: opening up additional European funding programs, greater institutional involvement of Serbia in the work of European bodies, for example, through observer status in appropriate forums, as well as gradual integration into the European Single Market. A longer-term perspective for deeper economic integration, extending even to possible participation in the European Economic Area, should also be discussed. The idea of gradual integration of accession candidates, increasingly promoted in Brussels, could be given tangible political substance, particularly in the case of Serbia. This must not involve constantly presenting the new government in Belgrade with new conditions and ultimatums from a position of supposed European superiority. Rather, the EU must regain the trust it squandered during its years of cooperation with Vučić through concrete support, political openness, and a credible roadmap for integration. Under favorable political conditions, Serbia's EU membership by 2030 appears to be an ambitious but conceivable goal. In any case, the democratic awakening in Serbia offers Europe a historic opportunity to infuse its enlargement policy, which has been stagnating for years, with new credibility and momentum.

Potential Stumbling Blocks and Obstacles

However, it would be naive to believe that this new European path will proceed without major conflicts. The Student List is by no means homogeneous when it comes to matters such as foreign policy. Issues such as relations with Russia and China, the stance on Kosovo, or coming to terms with Serbia's nationalist past were largely sidelined or inadequately discussed during the election campaign. Now these issues will inevitably come onto the agenda. In particular, the question of aligning with the EU's common foreign and security policy – and thus the possible imposition of sanctions against Russia – could prove to be a difficult domestic political test. Here, it is worth looking back at the period following the democratic upheaval of October 5, 2000, when Serbia's new democratic leadership under President Zoran Đinđić, who was assassinated in 2023, was quickly confronted with international demands for the extradition of war criminals indicted by the Hague Tribunal. The resulting conflicts placed a considerable strain on the already difficult democratic transition process. A repetition of this dynamic through new ultimatums from Brussels would be politically problematic. This by no means implies that fundamental foreign policy issues could be permanently sidelined. On the contrary, Serbia finally needs a broad, open, and democratic public debate on its foreign policy orientation, its relations with Russia, its responsibilities toward neighboring states, and its European future. The EU member states, including Croatia, will also play an important role in this process. The initial outcries from Croatia, including directly from Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, who accused the Student List of failing to wave EU flags upon their victory, can be interpreted as a warning of Croatian obstruction.[34] It will be up to major EU member states to use their political clout to ensure that bilateral conflicts do not become tools for a permanent blockade of European integration.

What Role for Other Political Parties?

Another relevant dimension – one that is not currently at the center of the debates – is the future shape of the political party landscape in Serbia. In any case, the Student List's election victory presents Serbia's existing democratic opposition with a fundamental political dilemma. A large portion of the opposition parties had deliberately refrained from fielding their own candidates and supported the Student List to avoid splitting the vote against Aleksandar Vučić's regime. This decision contributed significantly to the Students' List's win of a parliamentary majority but it placed the opposition parties in a paradoxical situation: They are among the moral co-winners of the historic transfer of power, yet they are politically weakened and not represented in the new parliament. However, unlike those opposition parties that ran independently and suffered a heavy electoral defeat, they still retain political credibility and organizational structures. Their future will now depend on whether they succeed in repositioning themselves programmatically and ideologically under the new democratic conditions. After all, the student movement was not the cause of the crisis in the Serbian party system, but rather a reaction to its long-standing failure. The democratization of Serbia could therefore also mark the beginning of a fundamental reorganization of the Serbian party system, in which left-wing, liberal, conservative, and environmentalist forces can once again develop their own distinct political identities.

34 T-Portal, Plenković o pobjedi studenata u Srbiji: 'Na proslavi nije bilo nijedne europske zastave', 03.11.2026, available at https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/plenkovic-o-pobjedi-studenata-u-srbiji-na-proslavi-nije-bilo-nijedne-europske-zastave-foto-20261103.

Conclusion: Hard Work Ahead and Optimism

The greatest threat to this relaunch of democracy, however, still lies within Serbia itself. The victory over Vučić was a first kick-off sprint, but the country's democratic transformation will be a marathon. In this marathon, the mistakes of the early 1990s, when Zoran Đinđić took office as prime minister and made the fight against the authoritarian structures, corruption, and criminality of the Milošević regime his cause, must not be repeated. At that time, the main setback was the hesitant and ultimately unsuccessful reform of the security and police services, which cost Đinđić his life in March 2003.

The old power elites will fight back against the loss of their political and economic privileges. Ever since losing power, Aleksandar Vučić has announced day in and day out that he will settle scores with the new structures and return to power. Even if these could be understood merely as threats born of a wounded ego, they should not be underestimated.

The new government will make mistakes, and the euphoria of the first few weeks will sooner or later give way to the grind of everyday politics. What will be decisive is whether it succeeds in translating the extraordinary democratic energy of the student movement into permanently functioning institutions and a new political culture. This also includes overcoming the nationalist mindsets that have repeatedly poisoned Serbian politics since the late 1980s. A truly democratic and European Serbia will not only have to break with the authoritarian practices of the Vučić era but also engage in an open examination of its recent history, the wars of the 1990s, and its relations with its neighbors. The new patriotism that the student movement has already exemplified through its social solidarity and democratic commitment could serve as an important foundation for this.

Serbia thus stands at a historic crossroads. The prospects for a democratic, cosmopolitan, and European new beginning have rarely been as good since the fall of Slobodan Milošević in October 2000. Whether this opportunity is successfully seized, depends not only on the new political leaders in Belgrade, but also on whether Europe is prepared to accept the outstretched hand of the new Serbia.

Figure 3: **Election Results of Key Competing Parties in 2026 and 2023**

Party/List Acronym	Party/List Name Original	Party/List Name English	Lead Candidate	Vote Share (2026)	Vote Share (2023)	Seats (2026)	Seats (2023)	Difference Seats
SL	Studentska Lista – Studenti Pobeđuju	Student List – Students win	Ilija Srdanović	53.01%	did not run	140	–	+140
SNS	Aleksandar Vučić – Ujedinjena Srbija	Aleksandar Vučić – United Serbia	Aleksandar Vučić	38.98%	46.75%	103	129	-26
SPS	Ivica Dačić – Faktor Stabilnosti! (Socijalistička Partija Srbije, Jedinstvena Srbija, Socijaldemokratska Partija Srbije, Zeleni Srbije)	Ivica Dačić — Factor of Stability! (Socialist Party of Serbia, United Serbia, Social Democratic Party of Serbia, Greens of Serbia)	Ivica Dačić	2.13%	6.55%	0	18	-18
	Autentična Desnica – Dr Miloš Jovanović – Odvažno Srpski! (Novi DSS – Monarhisti – Srpska Koalicija Nada – Nacionalno Demokratska Alternativa – Nova Demokratska Stranka Srbije – Pokret Za Kraljevinu Srbiju)	Authentic Right – Dr Miloš Jovanović – Boldly Serbian! (New Democratic Party of Serbia – Monarchists – Serbian Hope Coalition – National Democratic Alternative – New Democratic Party of Serbia – Movement for the Kingdom of Serbia)	Dr Miloš Jovanović	0.89%	5.02%	0	13	-13
SVM	Vjadasági Magyar Szövetség – Dr. Pásztor Bálint Savez Vojvođanskih Mađara – Dr Balint Pastor	Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians	Bálint Pásztor	0.80%	1.7%	2	6	-4
	Albanska koalicija – Koalicioni Shqiptar	Albanian Coalition	Shaip Kamberi	0.62%	0.35%	2	1	+1
SDP-CDP	Rasim Ljajić – Ljudski (SDP – CDP)	Rasim Ljajić – Humane	Rasim Ljajić	0.46%	did not run	1	–	+1
PSS-BK	Bogoljub Karić – Pokret Snaga Srbije – BK	Bogoljub Karić – Strength of Serbia Movement – BK	Bogoljub Karić	0.45%	did not run	0	–	–
SPP	Usame Zukorlić (SPP) – Pokret Za Ujedinjenje	Usame Zukorlić – SPP – Movement for Unification	Usame Zukorlić	0.28%	0.76%	1	2	-1
SDA	SDA Sandžaka – Čuvari Sandžaka	SDA Sandzak – Guardians of Sandzak	Sulejman Ugljanin	0.28%	0.57%	1	2	-1
	Evropska Srbija – Marinika Tepić – Zdravko Ponoš (Stranka Slobode i Pravde SSP, Srbija Centar – SRCE, Solidarnost – Samoodbrana – Oslobođenje)	European Serbia – Marinika Tepić – Zdravko Ponoš (Party of Freedom and Justice SSP, Serbia Centre – SRCE, Solidarity – Self-Defence – Liberation)	Dragan Đilas, Marinika Tepić, Zdravko Ponoš	0.28%	did not run*	0	–	–
	Ruska Stranka – Srbija u Briksu – Slobodan Nikolić	Russian Party – Serbia in BRICS – Slobodan Nikolić	Slobodan Nikolić	0.15%	0.3%	0	1	-1
SPN	Srbija Protiv Nasilja (Stranka Slobode i Pravde, Narodni Pokret Srbije, Zeleno-Levi Front, Ne Da(vi)mo Beograd, Ekološki Ustanak – Ćuta, Demokratska Stranka, Pokret Slobodnih Građana, Srbija Centar, Zajedno, Pokret Za Preokret, Udruženi Sindikati Srbije "Sloga", Novo Lice Srbije)	Serbia Against Violence (Party of Freedom and Justice SSP, People's Movement of Serbia, Green-Left Front ZLF, We Won't Let Belgrade D(r)own, Ecological Uprising – Ćuta, Democratic Party, Movement of Free Citizens, Serbia Centre, Together, Movement for Change, United Trade Unions of Serbia "Sloga", New Face of Serbia)	Miroslav Miki Aleksić, Marinika Tepić	did not run	23.66%	–	65	-65
MI-GIN	Mi — Glas iz naroda	We — Voice from the People	Prof. Dr Branimir Nestorović	did not run	4.69%	–	13	-13

**parts of this electoral coalition ran as part of SPN in 2023*
Source: https://www.rik.parlament.gov.rs/542645/sr/rezultati/