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The presidential bid in Serbia remains important, both for the show and for the institutions

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Serbia held on Sunday, 6 May, a comprehensive election that didn't pose many surprises but remains important in terms of the repositioning of the main political players on the domestic scene and the implications for the institutional checks and balances. Serbian citizens went to the polls to elect members of the national parliament and the regional parliament of the northern Vojvodina province, local councillors and mayors and a president. However formal and inconsequential the election of a president in a parliamentary democracy may seem, in Serbia this vote carries a special charge. It is both an outright, individualised expression of the performance of the main parties and actually a determinant of the balance of power among Serbia's main institutions, given the president has the right to be formally member of a political party and keeps his influence there and in the parliamentary caucus.

According to the latest available results from Monday, the opposition Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) will have the most mandates in the 250-seat parliament – 73, followed by the Democratic Party (DS, currently in power) with 68, the Socialist-led coalition with 45, the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) – 20, the Preokret coalition – the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO) – 20 seats and the United Regions of Serbia (URS) with 16. The SNS is led by Tomislav Nikolic, the guy who four years ago decided to secede from the Serbian Radical Party of war crimes indictee Vojislav Seselj and make his own, more pro-European Union yet quasi-nationalist formation. The DS's strong figure is the incumbent president Boris Tadic, the face in Serbian politics most closely associated over the last decade with the country's EU orientation and progress. Those two are also the ones to fight for the presidential post in the runoff election after two weeks, with the current results giving them the most votes and a slight lead for Tadic.

The election results are hardly a surprise. The public opinion polls in the run-up to the vote accurately forecast the slight leads of the SNS in the parliamentaries and Tadic in the presidentials. Now is the time for the big bargaining, as no party will be able to form its own government (even supported by the current coalition partners). The Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) seems to be able to wield the biggest leverage right now. It is the coalition partner of DS and if it stays so, for which the chances are not small, the current government will reprint itself in a slightly modified form – the sum of the legislative mandates of the two parties is 115 now, and 126 are needed for a majority, so a third coalition partner will be needed. This may be either the Preokret coalition (LDP + SPO, 20 mandates) or the URS (16 mandates). At this point both are reluctant to commit and are kind of enjoying the position of courting targets. But basically, in ideological terms, they are closer to the DS than to the SNS. The SNS, on its part, is proud of its election achievement and gives out self-confident signals that it has already started talks for a new government formation. With whom, it is unclear yet. In any case, Serbia has no dilemmas regarding its EU future and whoever forms the next government, the EU and economic recovery will remain the country's priority.

One interesting thing about the elections are the scenarios that might develop in inter-institutional and intra-party relations. Currently, the Serbian president is a relatively powerful figure in a parliamentary system. He keeps his party membership (and leadership) and leverage within the party structures, thus also exerting influence over the members of parliament and the executive itself. Boris Tadic has been the undisputed leader in Serbian politics lately – he 'appointed' the prime minister Mirko Cvetkovic and he pulls the strings in the DS and the state administration, more generally speaking. If he keeps the presidency, the pattern will replicate itself. But if Nikolic wins in the runoff, will he reproduce this presidential kind of model in Serbian parliamentary democracy or will he delegate more informal powers to the executive and the legislative, where they belong? The next president in Serbia will continue to have this unsuspected relevance, both symbolically and institutionally.