## **Post-Yugoslav Continuities: The Beginning of the Age of Affairs in Serbia**

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A Chronicle, Microhistory, and Prosopography of Serbia’s Recent Past (2012-2020)”

By early 2013, it became clear beyond the shadow of a doubt that Serbia was ruled by an authoritarian. What one needs to keep in mind that even though a person might be an authoritarian (e.g. possessing an authoritarian personality or exhibiting strong authoritarian tendencies), this need not directly imply that their method or governance is entirely authoritarian, or that the state they govern is similarly authoritarian in nature. As we mentioned at the beginning of this monograph, Radeljić’s analysis dubbed Serbia ‘semi-authoritarian’, drawing on Ottaway’s definition. As we go further in time, by the end of the described period, Serbia’s mode of governance will have increased in authoritarianism, though it still could not be classified as fully authoritarian, such as North Korea. We are adding this caveat due to the increasing proclivity of contemporary (primarily postmodern) academia to dub anything the author dislikes as ‘authoritarian’, ‘totalitarian’, or even ‘fascist’ or ‘nazi’, further diluting these terms which are by no means unclear or fuzzy. Furthermore, claiming that Vučić’s governance is ‘not fully authoritarian’ by no means absolves him or his cronies from any responsibility. Having said that, *another* additional caveat needs to be mentioned, due to yet another proclivity of contemporary scholars, this time the one via which *explaining* (or even describing) an issue is considered to be absolving. This we see as a monumental obstacle to the proper and viable functioning of contemporary scholarship, and distance ourselves from it by all means. How does this semi-authoritarianism work in theory?

Vladimir Pavićević of the Faculty of Political Science (later to become a MEP for the Nova Stranka and one of its founders) categorized his power by separating it into four pillars. The first was the institutional/formal, having in mind that he held institutional power based on his position. Even though his main official position did not exist (First Vice-President of the Government), he was in charge of state security. The second pillar is what Pavićević called the pillar of personal power, as he controls not only the high-ranking members of his party, but the Ministers as well. The third pillar – which we will concentrate heavily on later – finds its foundation in the tabloid press (initially, he drew support from the tabloid Kurir, later to be replaced by the significantly more detrimental tabloid Informer), as he ’announces his threats without any limitations through the tabloid press, gives his interpretations, announces, influences public opinion’.[[1]](#footnote-1) The fourth pillar Pavićević found in his political pragmatism and intelligence. He saw it wise for Vučić to evade the questions regarding Kosovo and the failing economy, ’focusing instead on the populist aspects of arrests’. And indeed, during the first half year of his reign, he announced numerous arrests of ’corrupt’ officials and criminals, most of which never happened. He claimed that ’arrests’ would happen regarding several questionable public company privatizations that have happened prior to his government, as the ’state acts responsibly and does hard work when it comes to the battle against corruption’,[[2]](#footnote-2) he also claimed that ’arrests would shake up Serbia’;[[3]](#footnote-3) he additionally announced the arrest of Dragan Šutanovac of the DS (his main opposition party).[[4]](#footnote-4) In order to boost the ’First Vice-President’s’ image, the tabloid Kurir compared him to Zoran Đinđić: ’Vučić like Đinđić: If I am removed, the arrests will not stop’.[[5]](#footnote-5) This was an utterance in need of more context and explanation. Đinđić once famously said that should he disappear, Serbia would continue to go forward. History has proven him wrong. Nevertheless, what we also see here is the attempt for the ’reformed nationalist’ to paint himself in a positive light, even though his own politics and actions during the preceding decades were a direct opposite of the murdered Đinđić. Thirdly, he positioned himself as the object of potential violence. Vesna Rakić-Vodinelić compared him to Milošević in the manner that both of them held significant extra-institutional power, a trait typical for authoritarian rulers.[[6]](#footnote-6) She further noticed the difference, mainly in the fact that Milošević decided to cut ties with the international community, whilst Vučić tries to cooperate.[[7]](#footnote-7) She dubbed his power as ’out of control’.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The one arrest that *did* happen was the arrest of one of the richest people in Serbia, the business mogul Miroslav Mišković.[[9]](#footnote-9) The reason for his arrest was the accusation of illegally obtaining 30 million euros;[[10]](#footnote-10) later on, Vučić claimed that the DS ’supported Mišković’.[[11]](#footnote-11) What turned out to be a hoax in the end was taken seriously by many, including Al Jazeera, who wrote that his arrest had shown how ’nobody is protected in the battle against corruption, which is the „life’s mission“ of the First Vice-President of the Government, Minister of Defense, and the President of the ruling Progressive Party, Aleksandar Vučić’.[[12]](#footnote-12) Falling for the deception hook, line, and sinker, Al Jazeera kept reporting that there were ’no protected people’ in Vučić’s ’battle against corruption’.[[13]](#footnote-13) The High Commissioner for EU Expansion, Stefan Fule, praised Vučić as well.[[14]](#footnote-14) *Many* fell for it. Note that the alleged battle against corruption figured extensively in his pre-election campaign, and that he had continued with the same discourse once he got elected, the result being an *increase* in corruption within the country. Mišković’s son was arrested as well in mid-February 2012.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The show turned out to be much ado about nothing. Dragged through the tabloid mud for months and months, Mišković paid bail, and nothing happened. Writing for Radio Free Europe, Branka Trivić later wrote that the arrest was a ’play’ conducted by Vučić.[[16]](#footnote-16) The leader of the Independence Syndicate (Sindikat „Nezavisnost“), Branislav Čanak, used the same word to describe the hoax,[[17]](#footnote-17) while Zora Drčelić called it a ’spectacle arrest’.[[18]](#footnote-18) Čanak noticed that what Dragan Đilas was accused of, similarly, entailed ’two million years of heaviest incarceration’, yet nothing happened. Years later, Mišković was even seen in the company of one of Vučić’s closes henchmen/collaborators, at this point in the future Mayor of Belgrade, Siniša Mali, who himself was involved in a row of serious affairs.[[19]](#footnote-19) Five years after the ’play’, Radmilo Marković wrote about the case, saying that a scenario was set up, with all the actors put into right positions. The play: ’the arrest of the tycoon, false death threats to Aleksandar Vučić, the loyal media avalanche that creates public opinion to the benefit of the government, and pressure onto the jurisdiction’.[[20]](#footnote-20) On 6 September 2017 – five years after the alleged beginning of the ’battle against corruption’, Mišković was acquitted. Vučić pretended to be disheartened by the acquittal, saying ’Here are your tycoons, you can have them, may they lead the state and steal everything that has been created’.[[21]](#footnote-21) During the years-long charade, ’Vučić has turned Mišković into a political opponent – almost a coalition partner to the DS, but the whole of the opposition as well’.[[22]](#footnote-22)

In the realm of political, social, and public life, Aleksandar Vučić kept the prime place under the ever-glowing spotlight. Some journalists, like Zora Drčelić, wrote about the changed image that Vučić managed to present both within the country and on an international level. He became an acceptable ’player’, as ’what was but yesterday defined as aggression, cheekiness, and exclusivity of Šešelj’s prime trainee, Aleksandar Vučić, is today read as energy, bravery, and decisiveness of the young lion of Serbian politics. His proclivity towards scandals and affairs is nowadays explained as being knowledgeable about political marketing’.[[23]](#footnote-23) As many others did, she correctly found the explanation for his radical surge in popularity in his alleged battle against corruption and the arrest of Mišković.[[24]](#footnote-24) The vast majority of the media, including state officials and public figures started ’acknowledging’ and ’praising’ his ’resolve’ in his ’battle’, competing who would ingratiate themselves most efficiently, ’some are perhaps in fear of being taken over by Vučić, so they assess that is better to praise him than attack him’.[[25]](#footnote-25) Srbijanka Turajlić, a retired Belgrade University professor, spoke how people in general tend to look for a leader.[[26]](#footnote-26) The sociologist Radmila Nakarada went into more detail, telling how a ’lickspittle mentality’ and the desire for leadership are just part of the equation, adding to it the fact that he lead the politically strongest party within the state, as well as that his constituents saw an opportunity to get rid of the corruption.[[27]](#footnote-27) The social scientist and former politician, Žarko Korać, spoke how ’Vučić presents himself to the public, willy-nilly, as an extremely authoritarian ruler, on whom, as the single honorable and fair person, everything depends’.[[28]](#footnote-28) He additionally described an instance within the Parliament, where he witnessed how the MEPs, having heard that Vučić was on his way, formed an honorary line to greet him, as if he were a feudal lord or monarch.

Corruption and affairs, however, were ubiquitous and all-permeating within Vučić’s government. One of the first large affairs to pop up in 2013 was the so-called ’Banana affair’, in which it turned out that the Prime Minister, Ivica Dačić, was in contact with the notorious criminal Rodoljub Radulović, called Miša the Banana;[[29]](#footnote-29) this turned out to be further problematic due to the fact that Dačić was additionally the Minister of Internal Affairs, in charge of the police. Beside the video in which Dačić was recorded having a drink with him, Radulović’s collaborator, Darko Šarić, additionally, sent a message to the government in which he claimed that he was conniving with members of the government.[[30]](#footnote-30) Miša the Banana was reported then to have fled to South America.[[31]](#footnote-31) The crux of this particular issue, however, was not on the criminal activity of the two drug lords, or the connection of the Prime Minister with them. It was Vučić’s willingness to look the other way provided that Dačić continued to show his utmost loyalty. As Jovana Gligorijević wrote, Dačić had been receiving ’unambiguous signals that he is removable, that he was part of the former government’.[[32]](#footnote-32) Even though Dačić’s political position was initially seen as ’severely weakened’,[[33]](#footnote-33) once again, nothing happened, and the affair was unresolved. As the journalist Tatjana Tagirov wrote, this was to be expected, as Vučić already controlled the courts, so that the whole case could be seen as Dačić being accused by Vučić, and then later acquitted – all of it informally, as the cornerstone of Vučić’s rule.[[34]](#footnote-34) The former opposition leader, Vesna Pešić, spoke how the whole affair was staged by Vučić in order to subjugate Dačić, who had lost a significant amount of his political credibility and power, and was left to Vučić’s mercy.[[35]](#footnote-35) The production of affairs soon continued, still centered around Ivica Dačić, who was perhaps judged to be in need of further reminders about who pulls the strings.

In February 2013, the ’Airplane affair’ thus struck. The BIA ’warned’ the Prime Minister Dačić, who was at that time in an official visit to Dublin, that the plane he was supposed to come back on was ’unsafe’, so that it was estimated that ’there might be a diversion’. Dačić then consulted – one might have guessed at this point – Aleksandar Vučić, who gave him a green light to fly back. However, if there was a possibility of ’diversion’, how would the First Vice-President know that it had actually been safe? The Ministry of Internal affairs made a public announcement that ’leaders of specific criminal clans ... were trying to cause a malfunction on the airplane’.[[36]](#footnote-36) Yet again, nothing happened with the plane, no criminals were charged, and Dačić came back to Serbia without a single problem present; the veteran journalist Miloš Vasić wrote that this was yet another instance of ’a systematic upholding of the state of heightened neurosis ... the production of affairs, they make us afraid via hellish conspiracies worth a political thriller on the television’.[[37]](#footnote-37) Experts have opined on the issue, explaining how rigging a plane borders on the impossible, with the possibility of somebody tampering with a plane, especially one that carries hight-ranking members of the government, being extremely low to nonexistent.[[38]](#footnote-38) This will, in the years to come, become one of the prime characteristics of Vučić’s governance, his prime *modus operandi:* invent a problem, blame alleged culprits, and then ‘solve’ it himself, reminiscing of a pyromaniac who sets the house on fire, and then comes to help with a bucket of water.

What was happening with Serbia’s EU ascension in the meantime? Vučić’s government was vocal on supporting Serbia’s affiliation, at the same time continually boasting that it would never recognize Kosovo. Having waited for twelve years to barely be granted the status of a candidate state, Serbia has seen slow improvements on its way towards EU membership. One can argue that the prolonged period of waiting, with the additional lack of improvement in Serbia-EU relation, contributed to a dwindling of the support for EU accession. From more than 70 percent, the support for Serbia’s joining the EU dropped down to below 50.[[39]](#footnote-39) Serbia’s relation with Kosovo – in other words, its lack of willingness to form a relation with what it considers an integral part of the state – only served to hinder the EU accession negotiation process. Even though the French Ambassador to Serbia, Francois Xavier Denio, mentioned that Serbia’s place is within the EU,[[40]](#footnote-40) and although a new round of negotiations came to pass in March 2013, there were no steps forward. High representatives of the Serbian government, Aleksandar Vučić and Ivica Dačić, joined with the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, and the representatives of Kosovo, led by Hashim Thachi, in order to establish what was called simply a nondescript, undefined ’dialogue’.[[41]](#footnote-41) This ’dialogue’ was initially so fruitless and without any particular topic of point, that Ashton’s spokeswoman, Maja Kocijančić, even though she claimed at a certain point that the ’negotiations entered a key phase’, could not confirm that there was in actual fact a document, paper, or simple suggestion that is being negotiated about.[[42]](#footnote-42) After a while, a ’paper’ was drafted, concentrating on structural issues with the organization of Serbian municipalities in the north of Kosovo. The agreement on the paper was supposed to dictate the tempo of further EU negotiations and integration,[[43]](#footnote-43) and the European Council (SAVET EVROPE? U originalu) decided to open Serbia’s accession talks in January 2014 at the latest;[[44]](#footnote-44) the decision was up to Guido Westerwelle.[[45]](#footnote-45) The Serbian press painted Vučić’s negotiating team as fighting vigorously for the best deal to Serbia.[[46]](#footnote-46) After the *tenth* round of negotiations, a deal was struck, one that Hashim Thachi described as the ’recognition of Kosovo’.[[47]](#footnote-47) Praised as the ’best’ deal for Serbia and North Kosovo Serbs in the government-supporting media, the deal, however, was protested against by Kosovo Serbs, who did not figure much in the interest of Serbia’s negotiating team.[[48]](#footnote-48) Vučić’s regime, however, painted itself in a positive light once again, both in front of a national and international audience, and the potemkinization of the country continued unabashed.

It would be of importance to also notice the Government-Church relations on the topic of Kosovo. ADD ON RELIGION IN SERBIA. The Serbian Orthodox Church, that used to support the ’reformed nationalists’ for decades, now decided to criticize the government for their ’betrayal of Kosovo’. This serves as an important point in understanding the Right Wing forces in Serbia, as those who were further to the Right on the political horseshoe will slowly become disillusioned for the new government’s ’moderate nationalism’; there seemed to have been an expectation of hard nationalism, and consequent disappointment. As Jovan Byford of the Open University mentioned, while Nikolić kept attempting to present himself as a ’great Christian’, Ivica Dačić criticized the Church for abandoning Kosovo all the way back in 1690.[[49]](#footnote-49) Miljenko Dereta, on the other hand, saw that the Church-state relation were already tried to be amended by the President’s visit to the Patriarch and the already seen softening of the discourse on both sides.[[50]](#footnote-50)

More analyses about the new government’s *modus operandi* were available by that time. The most striking property of Vučić’s government and the Vučić-Nikolić-Dačić triumvirate was the difference between Vučić and Nikolić. There seemed to have been a ’division of labor’ of sorts – or at least a division of audiences – that the two have worked on separately. While Nikolić was meeting Lukashenka and Putin, Vučić was on tours in the West, in the USA and Germany. While Nikolić made an image of a local man, a ’good host’,[[51]](#footnote-51) pushing a conservative agenda, turned towards Russia, Vučić worked hard to create an image of himself as a pro-European, reformed nationalist, open to the world and more ’pragmatic’.[[52]](#footnote-52)In other words, the new Vučić-led government understood two major issues: one was that their constituents were largely on the right side of the political spectrum, the other that this particular side would not be seen by the international community as viable. Thus, Nikolić kept the conservative line of their constituency in line within the country, while Vučić worked on improving his image outside of the borders of Serbia. Vučić’s behavior outside of Serbia’s borders has thus proven to be quite servile and submissive,[[53]](#footnote-53) unlike in Serbia, wherein he would command and order with vigor and aggression. The journalist Predrag Popović called him a ’weak man without a character’[[54]](#footnote-54) when dealing with people outside of Serbia, while the author Svetislav Basara started calling him the ’Overlord’ for his mannerisms within (Dačić was dubbed the ’Underlord’).[[55]](#footnote-55) This Overlord, however, according to Zora Drčelić, succeeded in convincing his constituents that he is in fact the leader, something that the opposition, led by the DS and now Dragan Đilas, had failed in.[[56]](#footnote-56)

In May 2013, Aleksandar Vučić, stunningly, won the prize for being the ’most European’, however bizarre that might sound.[[57]](#footnote-57) It was awarded to him by the ’First European House in Belgrade’, officially registered as an NGO, campaigning for the ’betterment of understanding, mutual knowing and collaboration of citizens, especially regarding cultural, scientific, educational, economic, healthcare, and other forms of connection’ – the unclear, linguistically unsound version of the original is carried over in the translation.[[58]](#footnote-58) Vučić thanked everyone who ’recognized the fighting passion in the wish to help his people and the country, so that Serbia should become a modern state’, indicating that those who are against him did not *recognize* his fighting zeal and the wish for a better Serbia, thus, of lower cognitive capacity. Positioning himself yet again as a (potential) victim, he said it was unknown if he would ’end up under the hooves or on horseback’, adding that ’everybody nowadays knows that Serbia is stronger than everyone’ and that ’the fight against corruption is proof of this’.[[59]](#footnote-59) The ’First European House’, in the justification of the award, mentioned that ’Vučić, as the key man in the government, made clear, brave, and tangible steps towards the reform of the state and its governance, especially in regard with the strengthening of the institutions of jurisprudence, security, public tenders, the fixing of incomplete or quality-lacking laws and regulations, especially when it comes to the fight against corruption and criminality’.[[60]](#footnote-60) Not a single instance in the claim above, however, was true. The high aspirations of the ’First Vice-President of the Government’, the ’most European’, and the man who said that a hundred Muslims should be killed for each killed Serb, were further exacerbated in early 2013, when Nebojša Stefanović, one of his prime yes-men, mentioned that Vučić should be Prime Minister, which would soon happen.[[61]](#footnote-61) In order to shift the spotlight from the lack of any successes of the new government, Vučić will, in 2013, mention the possibility of the ’reconstruction of the government’, wherein he would allegedly change some of the ministers within the government, even though his position at that time was in no place to do so, as he was not yet the Prime Minister.[[62]](#footnote-62) The accumulation of extra-institutional power, however, allowed him to do what he saw fit. The idea of the ’reconstruction’ was given to the public parallel to the idea of new elections. This was the beginning of the endless election cycle that will characterize Serbia in the years to come. In the meantime, more local elections were held, such as the one in Zaječar, mid-2013, where members of the URS reported that they have been attacked by thugs from the SNS.[[63]](#footnote-63) This was also the type of activity that will come to be one of the defining moments in the government’s dealing with the opposition in Serbia, only to see it climax in 2018 with the beating of Borko Stefanović, one of the opposition leaders, soon to follow by statewide protests against Vučić in 2018. The reconstruction mentioned some known international names, such as Dominique Stross-Kahn (known for his extra-marital affairs and association with sex workers[[64]](#footnote-64)), Alfred Gusenbauer, Stephen Byers, or Pieter Lili,[[65]](#footnote-65) ending up with the selection of one Lazar Krstić, a young economist, described as a wunderkind, to the position of the Minister of Finances.[[66]](#footnote-66) Zora Drčelić wrote with prescience that Krstić would ’eventually fail’.[[67]](#footnote-67) One Saša Radulović, unknown to the general public at the time, was selected as the Minister of Industry, later to quit and start campaigning against Vučić.[[68]](#footnote-68) The international names that were initially mentioned were never mentioned again, yet probably useful in ingratiating oneself to the West. Đorđe Vukadinović wrote in 2013 that it was probably not possible for Vučić to achieve such success without the support, or at least permission, from the West.[[69]](#footnote-69) Slobodan Milošević immediately pops into mind, as he was initially supported by the International Community. ADD Vesna Pešić opined how the idea of the ’reconstruction of the government’ was a threat towards the partners of the SNS, a type of mobbing, so that they would ’on their own, in fear of blackmail and being destroyed by the tabloids, give up on the agreed upon division of power when the coalition was formed’.[[70]](#footnote-70) Among the other ministers, Aleksandar Vulin was placed into the position of the Minister without Portfolio, in charge of Kosovo, while Branko Ružić, with no experience whatsoever in regards to European affairs, was placed in charge of European integration. Even though the ’reconstruction’ happened, talks about elections did continue, especially after the toppling of Dragan Đilas from the position of the Mayor of Belgrade – a position he had won against Vučić himself in the past. The idea was to hold local Belgrade elections with a state-wide parliamentary ones together, in order to milk the popularity of Aleksandar Vučić.[[71]](#footnote-71) Vučić spoke that he hadn’t known about the change in power in Belgrade and the toppling of Đilas, claiming that he is busy with ’important things, and not nonsense’.[[72]](#footnote-72) As the talk about elections continued, more and more commentators wrote how the insistence on another election round was put forth in order to cover up the fact that the new government, led by Aleksandar Vučić, has not achieved much, and that the incessant talk about reforms and the ’battle against corruption’ had failed.[[73]](#footnote-73)

By mid-2013, it was clear that Vučić’s regime held a significant portion of its power due to the supporting media. ADD ON MEDIA IN SERBIA. By 2013, it was the daily tabloid *Kurir* that promoted Vučić, the government, and their policies with the most zeal, before the *Informer* took over during the upcoming years. The Kurir tended to go ’all in’ when it came to strong encomiast discourse about primarily Vučić himself. The Kurir wrote how Aleksandar Vučić was the ’most trusted’ among the citizens, as well as that, should it come to another round of elections (note that this was but one year after the 2012 elections), ’his party would win the largest number of votes’, with some 69% of the votes,[[74]](#footnote-74) indicating the relation with Vučić and the party – it was ’his’, reminiscing on the half a century of Communist rule. The same source mentioned that 60% of the citizenry supported the ’reconstruction of the government’, and that 57% of them thought that a new round of elections would be beneficial. In another text from 2013, Vučić was simply dubbed as the ’politician of the year’, with the article title saying ’Aleksandar Vučić: Serbia above all!’.[[75]](#footnote-75) Another article simply gave the title ’Vučić visited Serbian workers in Angola!’,[[76]](#footnote-76) to show his alleged connection to the ‘common people’ and the diaspora. Conspiracy theories were regular in the Kurir as well, as at one point Snežana Marković wrote that there was a secret operation called ’The Dictator’, whose ’target’ was Aleksandar Vučić.[[77]](#footnote-77) According to this article, there was a secret operation led by the opposition leader, Dragan Đilas, to paint Vučić as a dictator in the West, with the tycoon Mišković ’standing behind it all’. As the journalist Tamara Skrozza wrote, the writing of the tabloid press was ’in complete agreement with the government’s current political needs and interests’,[[78]](#footnote-78) and that ’the media in today’s Serbia represent the favorite weapon for the confrontation with political enemies, as well as the most profitable of all PR servies’.[[79]](#footnote-79) Dragan Đilas, being constantly attacked by the pro-government press, decided to send his complaints to the European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy, Stefan Fule, who in turn chose to file in the complaint into the European Commission Progress Report.[[80]](#footnote-80) The head of the Political Sector of the EU delegation in Serbia, Luca Bianchoni, opined that the media situation is by no means good in Serbia.[[81]](#footnote-81) Skrozza saw the tabloid press – arguably rightly so – as the main culprit. They were now powerful enough, socially and financially, to smear anyone whom the government dislikes up to such a level that it could be easily classified as character assassination. Where the tabloid press got their finances from was unknown.[[82]](#footnote-82) Furthermore, some media outlets who have been known in liberal circles to have continuously stood up to authoritarianism, such as the E-novine portal, have ’switched sides’ to Vučić’s as well; when Mirjana Miočinović criticized the editor-in-chief, Petar Luković, for ’ruining his own biography’ by doing this,[[83]](#footnote-83) he responded with a smear-piece, comparing her to the DS government, in a Vučić-like move.[[84]](#footnote-84)

In the meantime, Vučić stepped up his victim discourse, presenting himself as a potential casualty. In September 2013, he said the following: ’I know how I will die, because I know my people very well. I know myself, my people, and I love them more than anything in the world. This is why I know how I will die’.[[85]](#footnote-85) A note on the translation: The original, in Serbo-Croatian, was ’znam kako ću da skončam’. The word *skončati* is fairly difficult to translate, as it entails one’s death, or at least utter demise.[[86]](#footnote-86) It can be used with a strong connotative meaning of dying, which is why the above translation was made as such, having in mind the context and the rest of Vučić’s utterance, especially when he said ’this is why I am in a hurry, as I know my end is near’.[[87]](#footnote-87) A victim, yet again.

By early Fall, the Pride Parade was once again set to happen on September 23, with additional police forces supposed to protect it.[[88]](#footnote-88) Jovana Gligorijević wrote that it would serve as a test on everything that Aleksandar Vučić used to talk about, such as the European direction of the state, a decisiveness in the respect of human rights, as well as the strength of the state in combating the criminal structures that stand behind the hooligans who are trying to prevent it.[[89]](#footnote-89) Something similar was voiced by the marketing expert, Nadežda Milenković, who wrote that the alleged concentration of the Serbian government on EU accession cannot happen without the recognition of basic human rights. Beside Kosovo, another difficult step towards that goal would be a successful Pride Parade – ’difficult’ for the government.[[90]](#footnote-90) A couple of days before the attempted parade, the organizers spoke how the safety assessment for this year’s Parade was positive, though Ivica Dačić opined at the same time that the assessment has not been conducted yet.[[91]](#footnote-91) Yet again, nonetheless, the Parade was banned, citing ’safety’ as the prime concern, when the Bureau for the Coordination of Security Services forbade the gathering. Ivica Dačić explained how ’safety estimates spoke that at this time, nobody could guarantee the safety of the participants of the parade, and that there are serious threats to public order and human life’.[[92]](#footnote-92) Note the personification of the ’safety estimates’, as they seemingly ’spoke’: it was not the government who put a ban on the parade, but the ’safety estimates’ themselves, repeating the discursive patterns of yesteryear. Veselin Milić, head of the Belgrade Police force, spoke how ’some extremists, who planned a showdown on Saturday with the Parade attendees, were armed, and they planned „very serious things“’.[[93]](#footnote-93) He did not make it clear what these ’very serious things’ were. He further spoke that the police were working on gathering evidence in order to raise legal action against potential perpetrators. They did not. Aleksandar Vučić spoke his mind, saying that ’hooligans did not defeat the state’.[[94]](#footnote-94) Reality spoke to the contrary. Milić echoed his sentiment,[[95]](#footnote-95) saying also that nobody was stronger than the police.[[96]](#footnote-96) Nevertheless, a mini-Parade was held contrary to the ban, with an approximation of 150 protesters taking to the streets in the center of Belgrade. Boban Stojanović, one of the organizers, said that ’they were disappointed when the Parade was cancelled, but by these actions, we aim to prove that we are not giving up ... since the state bowed down to hooligans, that does not mean that we should do it too’.[[97]](#footnote-97) Zoran Živković, leader of the newly formed democratic opposition party, the NS, tweeted that ’Vučić and Dačić capitulated in front of a handful of primitive chauvinists’.[[98]](#footnote-98) The Dveri, however, took to the streets as a form of protests, dubbing it a ’family walk’.[[99]](#footnote-99) Their protest was not banned. Jovana Gligorijević noticed that the ’security assessment’ came only a single day before the planned parade, asking how it was possible, having in mind that the police claimed that they were in possession of knowledge about plans to stop the parade, for them not to arrest the individuals behind it.[[100]](#footnote-100) Miloš Vasić wrote how Vučić and Dačić waited for the last moment to ban the parade; he made the conjecture that an outright ban from the very beginning would raise a red flag within the international community, whereas waiting for the last possible moment for the ban and citing security concerns would be easier to ’sell’ on an international level.[[101]](#footnote-101) Having in mind that the ’mini Parade’ did happen, he saw that the ’impossible’ has been achieved – intra-state Right Wing groups would be satisfied with the ban, while the international community would be satisfied that a parade of sorts actually did happen. Noticing the lack of effort by the state to curb violence, Nadežda Milenković wrote how ’the state did not ban hooligans from beating people up. It just made it impossible for them to beat somebody up on that particular day’.[[102]](#footnote-102) Dejan Ilić mentioned that ’enemies of the Parade, at this moment, possess an advantage ... the government, parties, the Church, national-fascist groups and movements, football fans and criminals fortify their worldviews, interests, and financial connections every day’. Supporters of the Parade only have one day per year to express their support for the LGBT community. Vesna Rakić-Vodinelić stressed that, officially, Aleksandar Vučić himself ran the Security Service that had put the ban on the Pride Parade. Citing a legal perspective this time, she also spoke how, according to the laws of the state, only the Police could enforce such a ban, as is written in the Law on the Bases of the Organization of Security Services, article 11, does not even mention such options.[[103]](#footnote-103) Vladimir Đorđević wrote the following (errors in English are left in their original form within the quote):

’Third year in row most prominent Serbian politicians went before cameras to proclaim victory rather than defeat of the state in not allowing Gay Parade to happen. And now when I come to think of it, it really seems that Serbian political culture is gradually becoming enslaved by these highly inappropriate “victory proclamations”. Just to remind you, it was Slobodan Milosevic who started this trend and spoke of victory after NATO bombing of Yugoslavia back in 1999 and, to follow his suit, Milosevic’s disciple, currently a PM of Serbia Ivica Dacic, imitated his former mentor on several occasions by speaking of “victory” in not letting LGBT community and its supporters have their 970-step walk down a couple of Belgrade streets. Unfortunately, it is precisely these 970 steps that keep Serbia away from Europe and obviously Serbian politicians are just blind enough not to see it. Thus, instead of having a political elite that is brave enough to change things and lead the country by introducing a new value discourse, Serbia is unfortunately still stuck with the elite whose haphazard ways are a reminder that Serbian political scene is somewhat trapped in „roaring 1990s“’.[[104]](#footnote-104)

Milica Jovanović simply described the events as ’institutional homophobia’.[[105]](#footnote-105)

October 2013 saw the jubilee of the SNS, as the party celebrated five years of existence and activity, since the fateful day when a number of members of Šešelj’s Radical Party decided to split and form the Progressives in late 2008.[[106]](#footnote-106) The government-supporting media responded with vigor and jubilance, carrying over Vučić’s words: ’The Serbian Progressive Party was born out of Serbia’s need to survive. We have restored the citizens’ trust in the state’.[[107]](#footnote-107) He additionally presented his ’action plan’, naming the restoration of the economy, Serbia’s accession to the EU by 2020, fiscal responsibility, zero tolerance towards crime and corruption, as well as reforms in the areas of education and the pension system. All but one will happen, as the ’reforms’ within the pension sector would soon entail the unconstitutional lowering of pensions. The same source, the Večernje novosti, wrote how ’the hall boiled up when Vučić took the stage’. The Telegraf carried over Vučić saying how ’the rating of the Progressives tells how the citizenry recognized hard-working, honest people in the Progressives, who keep the good of Serbia in the first place instead of their own’.[[108]](#footnote-108) Kurir wrote how the Progressives are holding their ’anniversary in the moment at which they have a record support of the citizens and hold a decisive position in Serbia’s government’.[[109]](#footnote-109) Some commentators saw the celebration as a ’general rehearsal’ for the next elections.[[110]](#footnote-110) Vesna Pešić wrote that the ’Banana affair’ justified the idea for new elections, but since there was no green light from the international community, nothing could happen yet.[[111]](#footnote-111)

An amusing instance is the mentioned claim that due to the SNS, citizens would tend to trust the state. Data on this is, to say the least, conflicting. By 2019, Eurobarometer polls were in, stating that the citizens of Serbia – when compared to neighboring states (often dubbed ’the Region’) – are the ones with the most trust in their institutions: 41%.[[112]](#footnote-112) Coincidentally, 55% believed that corruption was widely spread, as reported by USAID and CESID.[[113]](#footnote-113) The Belgrade Center for Security Policy, conducted via the assistance of the EU, reported that a staggering 74% who believed that corruption within the police, as one of the institutional pillars of the state, was either present, or present in an extreme form.[[114]](#footnote-114)

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