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Early Elections Mark Serbia's (Good) Start to Negotiations with the EU

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The Serbian authorities' decision to call an early parliamentary election to be held on 16 March was taken soon after the launch of accession talks with the EU on 21 January. The government assumes the talks will be completed by 2018, and membership of the EU will follow two years later. Compared with Croatia, Serbia is better prepared for negotiations, but the key challenge for the government in Belgrade will be relations with Kosovo. Moreover, the Serbian authorities will have to conduct a range of structural reforms, with EU assistance and the possible participation of Poland.

The Decision to Call the Election. The initiator of the early election is the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), the larger of the two ruling parties—the other being the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS). The main argument of the SNS was the need to establish a government with a strong mandate, able to carry out difficult reforms en route to EU membership. In practice, however, it is about strengthening the position of the SNS in the future government, and translating 42% public support into parliamentary seats. The SNS also calculates that the election will lead to the replacement of the current prime minister, Ivica Dačić of the SPS, with current deputy and SNS leader Alexander Vučić, who last year enjoyed public approval exceeding 70%, and who is the chief advocate of an early poll.

If voting reflects such high support, the SNS will win the right to appoint a new government, although it may run out of votes to rule alone. The socialists can count on an estimated 10% of the vote, but this time it seems that the SNS could afford to build a coalition with one of the smaller parties exceeding the 5% electoral threshold (for example, the Liberal Democratic Party), to fill as many ministries in the new government as possible. At the same time, the creation of a government based on the current opposition is unlikely. This is because the opposition is clearly divided: the Democratic Party, the main group in the 2008–2012 government, enjoys 14% backing, but its support could decline in favour of the New Democratic Party of former President Boris Tadić (set up in January 2014). At the moment, this new formation cannot be assured parliamentary seats, and it shares this uncertainty with the United Regions of Serbia and the Eurosceptic Democratic Party of Serbia (both currently represented in parliament).

In addition to the charismatic figure of its chairman, the SNS owes its increasing support (up from 24% in the parliamentary election in May 2012) to both the results in the fight against corruption and to progress in EU integration, made possible by the compromise on the Kosovo issue. In less than two years, the law enforcement institutions detained dozens of people associated with the previous government on corruption charges, and Serbia has improved its position from 33 points to 42 (out of 100) in the Corruption Perception Index by Transparency International, although compared to most EU countries this is still a modest result (the EU average is 63). On the other hand, thanks to the agreement with Pristina last April, which assumed inclusion in the administrative system of municipalities inhabited by Serbs in the north of Kosovo, the government in Belgrade has gained the support of EU capitals for the start of accession negotiations.

Kosovo: The Key Question. The development of relations with Kosovo will be the biggest challenge on the road to the EU for the future government in Belgrade. These relations have in fact been included in Serbia's negotiation framework in a separate chapter, which will automatically cover the issues set out in the dialogue with Pristina, and have thus become an official part of this country's integration process with the EU. This opens the window for interpretations and—although the premise is not to raise new issues in Serbia–Kosovo relations—in practice it can be

used to continue imposing conditions on the government in Belgrade. During the accession talks, EU pressure on Serbia to define the final shape of relations with Kosovo (in other words the recognition of its independence) will in fact be growing. EU Member States will want to make sure that, on the one hand, there is no ambiguity about the area covered by the accession negotiations with Belgrade, and, on the other, that the door remains open for Kosovo to join the EU after the accession of Serbia. However, since five Member States do not recognise this independence, the lack of consensus within the EU about the legitimacy of far-reaching conditions related to Kosovo could prolong Serbia's accession talks.

Paradoxically, the issue could be settled due to Serbia's own active attitude, which will continue the peaceful transfer of attributes of statehood to Kosovo. The government in Belgrade could, by actions such as agreeing on a representative of the Pristina government at the United Nations, encourage those EU countries which have not recognised the independence to reconsider their positions. Such strategic decisions towards Kosovo will be a challenge for the new government, though they will not necessarily be impeded by the attitude of Serbia's society, 56% of whom have supported dialogue with Kosovo regardless of pressure from the EU, and far-reaching concessions no longer threaten the political consequences that they would have done several years ago.

Other Challenges for the New Government. As part of the alignment with the *acquis*, Serbia will have to ensure greater independence of the judiciary, shorten the proceedings and make them more transparent. In contrast to Croatia's negotiations, no problems are expected in cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, which the EU is now describing as commendable. However, the EU has reservations about respect for minority rights, especially freedom of sexual expression. It will also call, consistently, for more efficient measures to fight organised crime, including drug-related offences. The corruption level needs to be reduced further, and the administration must be thoroughly reformed. Significant shortcomings in these areas were revealed by recently completed screening of chapters 23 and 24, which cover human rights, justice and home affairs. Although Serbia is in a better starting position for the negotiations than Croatia was in 2005 (talks with the EU took almost six years), one can assume that one term of government in Belgrade will be too short for the completion of the accession negotiations. Even more so, since a weak economy will also have to be reformed, which will lead to unpopular decisions such as further privatisation and closure of unprofitable businesses. At the same time, the government will have to create favourable legal conditions for small and medium enterprises and foreign investment, in order to reduce unemployment from 20%.

Public support for EU integration certainly will not cause trouble for the new government. Today, slightly more than half of Serbia's population is in favour of membership, a figure which will, as in the case of Croatia, fluctuate with the progress or failure of the negotiation process. However, no radicalisation of social attitudes towards the EU should be expected, even in the case of substantial change in policy towards Kosovo, as the consequence of this may be progress in talks with the EU. At the same time, Serbia enjoys broad support from Member States and the European Commission, and a shift in such an approach after the change of the EC is unlikely.

Conclusions and Recommendations. The announcement of an early election and the change of a stable government serves above all to exploit high social support and to consolidate power. It will be in the next prime minister's interests to create a government quickly, in order to open the first chapter of negotiations in the first half of the year, with the support of the Greek Presidency and the outgoing Commission. The new government will most probably continue the rule of law reforms, but will also have to be bold in restructuring the economy, which will be exposed to greater risk of criticism from society. In contrast, a consistent policy towards Kosovo, indicating further concessions, may help to avoid public opposition, even more so because it will certainly be compensated for with progress in talks with the EU. In turn, the efficient management of EU funds may influence the social evaluation of the effectiveness of the integration process, and thus the competence of the government.

Despite the EU governments' broad support for Serbia, this country will make progress in integration only on the basis of reforms carefully supervised by the EC. For the countries less involved in the EU enlargement in the Balkans, Serbia's accession negotiations open the door to greater participation in the integration process of this country. It is worthwhile for Poland to continue sharing its transition experience with the Balkans, particularly in regard to tackling organised crime. Solid solutions in this area would be even more valuable for Serbia, since it lies on one of the drug trafficking routes from Asia to Europe. Better control in this field should be achieved by doing such things as building institutions in line with European standards, such as, for example, the Polish Central Bureau of Investigation, and establishing mechanisms for closer cooperation with other Member States and Interpol.

The ongoing process of integration with the EU should also mean safer conditions for Polish trade and investments in Serbia. The country will continue to be attractive for entities that export railway rolling stock and buses, in which Polish companies have a lot of experience. The need for replacement of obsolete rolling stock, the lack of strong local competition, and the convenience of the recently abolished duty on buses exported from the EU to Serbia, may encourage the intensification of Polish companies on the Serbian market.