
SERBIA'S RULING POPULISTS SWEEP ELECTION IN CAPITAL BELGRADE

- 05.03.2018

abc News (4 March 2018)

Serbia's ruling populists of President Aleksandar Vucic swept the municipal election in the capital of Belgrade Sunday, further cementing an already tight grip on power in the country.

Preliminary results by the Ipsos polling agency and carried by Serbian state TV, projected that Vucic's Serbian Progressive Party won around 45 percent of the votes, while the main opponents — groups behind former Belgrade mayor Dragan Djilas — trailed with some 19 percent.

"This is the best result ever in Belgrade," Vucic told supporters. "This victory wasn't easy to achieve!"

The Belgrade vote was for local offices only, but it's considered important because of the city's key role in Serbia's economy and politics. Official results are due Monday, but they are not expected to differ much from the preliminary projections.

Some 1.6 million voters were eligible to elect Belgrade's 110-member assembly, which appoints the mayor. Two dozen parties and groups competed, but only four appeared to have passed the 5 percent threshold needed to enter the assembly.

Serbia's fractured opposition parties had hoped to mount a challenge to Vucic in the traditionally liberal capital city.

They have accused Vucic's party of intimidating opposition supporters, registering phony voters and slinging mud at political rivals in media outlets that the party controls. The ruling party has rejected the accusations.

A former extreme nationalist, Vucic now says he wants Serbia to join the European Union following wars and crisis, while still maintaining close ties with historic ally Russia.

Vucic has faced accusations of stifling democratic freedoms through pressure on opponents and independent media in Serbia, which he has denied. His party controls all positions of power in the Balkan country.

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