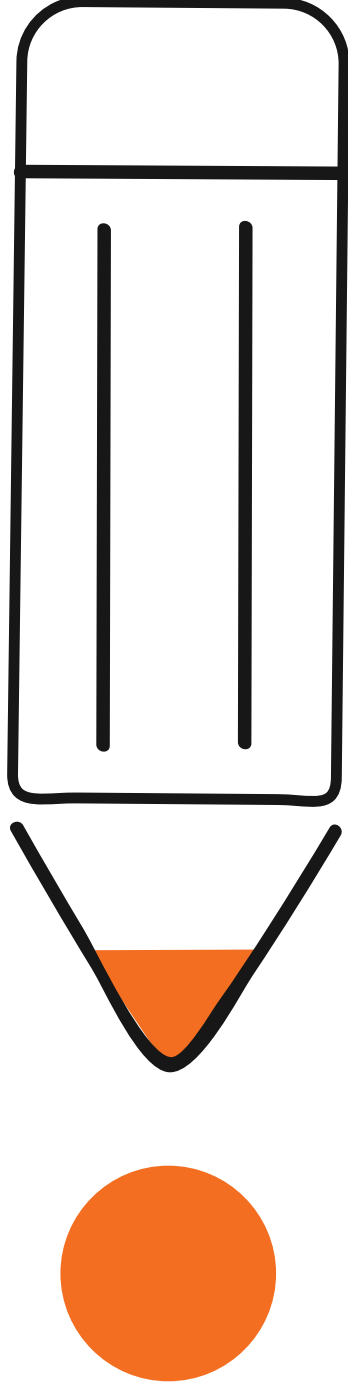


CRTA.



# ELECTIONS 2020

## Long term observation report

Report for the period March 4th - March 16th and May 12th - May 24th 2020

## SUMMARY

The election process and all election activities had been suspended for almost two months because of the declaration of the state of emergency due to the COVID-19 virus pandemic. These are important factors influencing the elections in Serbia in 2020. The pause and the state of emergency were reflected in the dynamics of the election campaign, conditioned by the ongoing measures of social distancing and further monitoring of the coronavirus epidemic in the country. Apart from the dynamics in the way that political actors communicate with voters, the ban on public gatherings and examples of testing virtual rallies in this reporting period, the feasibility of collecting and verifying the signatures of those candidates who did not submit their lists before the break in the election process was also a challenge.

When the state of emergency was lifted, amendments to the Law on the Election of the Members of Parliament and to the Law on Local Elections were adopted in anticipation of the resumption of the election process. In the “second half” of the elections, the submitters of the electoral lists were given access to a wider circle of institutions for the verification of the collected supporting signatures, than the submitters of the electoral lists before the state of emergency had. At the same time, this is the only novelty conditioned by the coronavirus situation recorded in this period, that regards the election process. Although the measures of social distancing are followed and applied in the implementation of the campaign, the Republic Election Commission (REC) in this reporting period did not consider the introduction of special rules of conduct and precautionary measures on the Election Day, because the COVID-19 Crisis Headquarters did not issue particular instructions in that respect.

From the moment of calling the elections on March 4<sup>th</sup> until the interruption of the election process on March 16<sup>th</sup> due to the declaration of the state of emergency, as well as from the announcement of the resumption of elections on May 11<sup>th</sup> to May 24<sup>th</sup>, the CRTA observation mission monitored the work of the election administration, while 120 long-term observers deployed in the field in 1051 places monitored on a daily basis all key elements of the election campaign for the election of the members of the parliament. The media monitoring team systematically collected information on media coverage done by the media with national frequencies in the extended prime time about all political actors, whilst a special team of monitors followed up the activities of political stakeholders on social networks.

In this observation period, until May 24<sup>th</sup>, the REC announced a total of 11 electoral lists. Nine electoral lists were declared before the state of emergency, while two lists were declared between May 12<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup>, one of which was repealed. The CRTA observation mission, that observed 18 out of a total of 19 REC sessions, estimates that the REC decisions were made in accordance with the existing laws and bylaws. 12 complaints were submitted to the REC, out of which six were overruled (four untimely and two unauthorised), four were rejected (three as unfounded and one inadmissible), and one complaint was adopted after the decision of the Administrative Court.

When it comes to the content of the political actors’ activities, the campaign lasted for 12 days in March and 13 days in May without clear policy programmes and plans, while political actors - both representatives of the ruling majority and the opposition - mostly adhered to broad topics regarding areas of socio-economic development. In March, political actors made contact with voters, primarily organising activities to collect signatures for submitting candidacies. In the continuation of the campaign, after the state of emergency, there is a noticeable lack of other forms of communication, which characterise the later stages of the election campaign - public events of a larger or smaller scale, such as rallies or forums.

The CRTA observers noted that the coronavirus topic, together with the activities carried out by the state during the state of emergency, appeared in promotional activities, mainly in those of the ruling parties. In spite of international organisations’ recommendations urging political actors to refrain from shaping up their campaigns on the COVID-19 topic, as it can be treated as another form of abuse in the form of misappropriation of state results for party propaganda purposes, promotional videos using this topic appeared in the public. Besides videos, the CRTA

observation mission noted that a push poll, a propaganda marketing technique, was used throughout Serbia. (Push-polling is defined as a form of negative campaigning, disguised as a political poll that aim to persuade a large numbers of voters and affect election outcomes, rather than measure opinions.)<sup>1</sup> The phone calls were made from the party headquarters in order to first ask citizens to comment on the government's moves during the state of emergency, and then on their willingness to support the party on the Election Day.

In this period of the campaigning, as well as in the period before the calling of the elections, activities that do not fall within the scope of work of a political party were recorded, which can be classified as clientelistic strategies, i.e. indirect vote buying. Although party-organised humanitarian activities, such as the distribution of food packages and similar types of aid, marked the period before the calling of the elections and the first days of the election campaign, there was a change in the campaign after the state of emergency. A wide range of work actions - from cleaning green areas to infrastructure works - carried out by political party activists throughout Serbia became more prevalent than humanitarian activities after the state of emergency. In the period after the state of emergency, public works were also the reason for more frequent appearance of public officials in the field, whose regular activities in this period increased by 40% compared to the campaign period in March.

The CRTA observation mission noted allegations of pressure on voters in almost 30 cities and municipalities in Serbia during this reporting period. In the recorded 38 cases of pressure on voters, these were most often conducted in person or by telephone, with the aim of collecting signatures supporting the lists for participation in the elections, in most cases with threats of dismissal or loss of social aid.

During this reporting period, the CRTA observers recorded a total of 17 cases of pressure on political actors, in 16 cities and municipalities. Out of the total number of registered cases, almost one half related to the unequal position of parties and local movements in collecting and verifying signatures and the availability of notaries. The CRTA observers registered five incidents of attacks on party premises, as well as physical attacks on party activists and officials by unknown individuals.

The declaration of the state of emergency and the suspension of the conduct of election activities also affected the work of independent institutions participating in the election process. The Anti-Corruption Agency continued to act on reports after a pause during the state of emergency when it operated at reduced capacity. During the reporting period, the Agency acted within the legally prescribed deadlines and in accordance with its powers, but only for those violations that occurred during the election campaign. Within this reporting period, the CRTA observation mission submitted a total of eight complaints to the Anti-Corruption Agency for various cases of official campaigning, misuse of public resources, and violations of regulations regarding the financing of political entities.

There are no publicly available information that the Council of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM) decided on citizens' complaints during the reporting period. The CRTA observation mission submitted seven complaints against five broadcasters (TV Happy, TV Pink, TV Pančevo, RTV Studio B and RTV Novi Pazar), as they broadcast, during the reporting period, contents jeopardising equality of participants in the election campaign. Six complaints related to contents that gave privileged treatment to state and local officials who are at the same time candidates on electoral lists or prominent representatives of parties whose lists have been declared.

On the other hand, the Supervisory Board, the existence of which was envisaged by the Law on the Election of Members of the Parliament, has been established for the first time in 20 years with the aim of supervising the actions of political parties, candidates and the media in the elections, but had limited effects during this reporting period. The Supervisory Board failed to meet during the first 20 days of the campaign, while the first meeting dedicated to the adoption of its own Rules of Procedure was held on May 20<sup>th</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> As defined by American Association for Public Opinion Research, <https://www.aapor.org/Education-Resources/Resources/What-is-a-Push-Poll.aspx>

Representatives of the ruling parties were the most represented in the total time allocated to political actors on TV stations with national frequencies during the election campaign before and after the state of emergency. The representation of the parties in power decreases during the election campaign after the state of emergency in comparison to the previous period, in contrast to the representation of the opposition that will participate in the elections, as well as the opposition in the boycott, which is growing. There was an increase in the neutral representation of all three groups of political actors, and at the same time a decrease in the negative and positive tone in reporting.

Monitoring the behaviour of political actors on social networks in the observed period shows greater activity on the profiles of opposition actors in relation to the profiles of political actors from the ruling majority on the social networks Facebook and Twitter. This datum can be interpreted as an attempt of the opposition to compensate for the lack of media space in communication with citizens through social networks. The greater dynamics of activities on the profiles of relevant political actors who do not belong to the ruling majority is even more pronounced after the lifting of the state of emergency, when the profiles of political parties and opposition leaders were almost four times more active. In addition to the increase in activities on the profiles of opposition political actors, in the period from May 12<sup>th</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup>, there is also a noticeable increase in the reach of their posts.

The CRTA observation mission urges the competent institutions to proactively respond to all violations of the law observed during the election campaign and to sanction the illegal behaviour of the participants in the elections. We point out the need for the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media to act upon and inform the public about the results of complaints about observed irregularities, thus ensuring equal media representation of electoral lists without discrimination, and objectivity of media reporting. It is extremely important that the Anti-Corruption Agency timely and consistently decides on violations of the law regarding the misuse of public resources, public office and financing election campaigns, as well as to inform the complainants about the outcome as soon as possible. The observation mission calls on all political actors, both those participating in the elections and those who have decided to boycott them, to respect each other and behave fairly. The CRTA observers continue to monitor allegations of pressure on voters and political actors and urge relevant institutions to take all necessary steps, investigate cases and sanction possible perpetrators.

The CRTA observation mission will monitor the election campaign, the Election Day and all election activities until the announcement of the final election results. Until the Election Day, the CRTA will publish another preliminary report on the findings of the election campaign observation. The preliminary report on the Election Day itself will be published on June 22<sup>nd</sup>, and the final report on the entire election process after the announcement of the final election results.