

CRTA:



ELECTIONS : 2022

CAMPAIGN BEFORE THE CAMPAIGN

Report for the period

October 2021

-

February 2022

CRTA OBSERVATION MISSION REPORT ON THE PERIOD LEADING UP TO THE 2022 ELECTIONS

The findings of the CRTA Observation Mission are that, unlike previous pre-election periods, and in the context of a parliament without any opposition parties¹, state institutions were strongly involved in running the campaign before the campaign until the calling of the elections. The key feature of this period and institutional practice was the production of narratives in favour of the government, and against the opposition and critical voices from the public. Institutions of legislative and executive power and the President of the Republic of Serbia, as well as the most influential media in the country, have been used by state officials as a continuous channel for creating an advantage for the ruling majority and building the cult of personality of President Aleksandar Vučić - through the promotion of their work and position and confrontations with political opponents, civil society and independent media.² The abuse of institutional advantages enjoyed by the ruling majority has also gained a clientelist flavour through the official policy of intensive one-off programs of financial aid for citizens.³ This not only erased the border between the state and the political party but also deepened social polarisation, which, in addition to verbal confrontations, escalated into physical violence at civil protests and police intimidation of citizens.⁴ The CRTA Observation Mission found that the atmosphere on the eve of the elections, as in previous pre-election periods, involved building developed, sophisticated, daily mechanisms of pressure on citizens, as well as the clientelist behaviour of the ruling party in trying to garner support through gifts and services for citizens.

The months leading up to the campaign were marked by several socio-political processes, taking place both in institutions and on the streets - from attempts to change electoral conditions

¹ Ninety-seven (97) percent of MPs belong to the ruling coalition after the 2020 parliamentary elections,

<https://otvoreniparlament.rs/poslanik>

² In the period of four months (September - December 2021), CRTA's "Open Parliament" initiative analysed a total of 738 speeches of MPs in which the tone of 6,465 individual mentions of political actors was assessed. The results of the Open Parliament survey show that the most mentioned actors in the speeches of MPs were opposition politicians (3,004), followed by President Aleksandar Vučić (2,905) and the Government of the Republic of Serbia (556). The number of mentions indicates that Parliament was mostly focused on the opposition, which was not part of the parliamentary convocation, and the insight into the tone of mentions (positive, neutral, negative) leads to the conclusion that the plenary debates were misused for party interests and propaganda messages - discrediting opposition and the parallel construction of the cult of personality of President Aleksandar Vučić, <https://otvoreniparlament.rs/istrazivanje/63>

³ Istinomer estimates that by February 15, 2022, about three million people received one-time financial support from the state on for various reasons - health workers received assistance amounting to 10,000 dinars, young people aged 16 to 29 received 100 euros, pensioners were paid aid 20,000 dinars, while it was announced that all educators would receive 20,000 dinars and that the state would repeat aid to young people after the elections if they "do not lose the elections on April 3", according to President Vučić, istinomer.rs/analize/pare-od-vucica-znak-paznje-ili-kupovina-glasova/

⁴ N1, "Policija upozorava građane, aktiviste, pa i novinare da ne idu na blokade",

<https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/policija-upozorila-urednika-jagodinskog-portala-da-ne-ide-na-blokadu-puteva/>; Saopštenje organizacija

civilnog društva; "Zahtevamo odgovornost policije za slom pravne države u Šapcu",

<https://www.gradjanske.org/zahtevamo-odgovornost-policije-za-slom-pravne-drzave-u-sapcu/>; N1, "NVO i advokati: Prekršajne

prijave zbog blokada - zastrašivanje i pritisak",

<https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/nvo-i-advokati-prekršajne-prijave-zbog-blokada-zastrasivanje-i-pritisak/>

through inter-party dialogues⁵, tectonic legislative changes to the election framework⁶, and more frequent and radical civil protests across Serbia.⁷ Also, immediately before the elections were announced, the part of the Constitution related to the judiciary was changed after citizens voted in the January referendum. There was almost no referendum campaign on changing the highest legal act of the Republic of Serbia. The topic of changing the Constitution remained in the shadow of other political topics, both in media reports and in the work of political actors who did not show much interest in the referendum issue. The day of the referendum was mostly conducted in accordance with the law, while significant irregularities were noted in four percent of polling stations. Although the extent of the irregularities did not affect the outcome of the vote, their character illustrates the worrying state of electoral conditions in Serbia, ahead of the country's most important elections.⁸

CRTA's Observation Mission conducted a long-term observation of the period before the official start of the election campaign in Serbia, in line with [international standards for independent citizen election observation](#). As of October 2021, a team of observers has been systematically collecting information on media reports with national coverage during extended prime time⁹ on all political actors. Since December 2021, CRTA has deployed field teams for long-term observation of events on the ground throughout Serbia. They report on key elements of the atmosphere in which the elections for Parliament, the President of the Republic, and members of the Belgrade City Assembly were called.

The results of the inter-party dialogue on election conditions demonstrate that the burning problems which create inequality between election participants and citizens' distrust in the elections were not mitigated before the start of the campaign. The attempt to influence the uneven media representation by introducing the Temporary Supervisory Body did not eliminate serious shortcomings in the work of the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM), whose first results in monitoring political pluralism in the media are questionable in terms of completeness and accuracy.¹⁰ Then, the issue of abuse of the Voters Register was publicly reopened, which, in the absence of adequate reactions from institutions, encouraged citizens' distrust in the election process.¹¹ Also, the work plan proposed and followed by the Public

⁵ CRTA, *Analysis: Measures proposed by the co-facilitators in the EP mediated Inter-Party Dialogue will not ensure conditions for fair and free elections*, <https://crt.rs/en/analysis-measures-proposed-by-the-co-facilitators-in-the-ep-mediated-inter-party-dialogue-will-not-ensure-conditions-for-fair-and-free-elections/>;

CRTA, *Analysis of the Agreement on Improving the Conditions for Holding Elections*,

<https://crt.rs/en/analysis-of-the-agreement-on-improving-the-conditions-for-holding-elections/>

⁶ CRTA, *The Most Important Changes in Election Laws*, <https://crt.rs/en/the-most-important-changes-in-election-laws/>

⁷ RFE, "Serbs Block Major Highways In Latest Protest Against Lithium Mine Plans",

<https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-protest-lithium-mine-environment/31655935.html>

⁸ Posmatračka misija Crte, *Izveštaj o posmatranju referenduma o promeni Ustava - 16. januar 2022*,

<https://crt.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Crta-Izves%CC%8Ctaj-o-posmatranju-referenduma-2022.pdf>

⁹ Extended "prime time" is from 5.30 pm to midnight

¹⁰ CRTA, *Whom and how does the REM monitor? Analysis of the methodology of media monitoring in the 2022 elections*.

https://crt.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/CRTA_REM-Methodology-Analysis-2022.pdf

¹¹ Crta, "MUP i MDULS da razjasne navode o biračima iz BiH", <https://crt.rs/mup-i-mduls-da-razjasne-navode-o-biracima-iz-bih/>,

Crta, "Omogućiti proveru biračkog spiska po mestu prebivališta",

<https://crt.rs/omoguciti-proveru-birackog-spiska-po-mestu-prebivalista/>

Service Broadcaster¹² ticks the box when it comes to including the opposition in the program. However, the programs chosen by Radio Television of Serbia (RTS) for the participation of the opposition leave opposition representatives left off the most popular, most-watched programmes (such as the most-watched news in the country *Dnevnik 2*), which, according to the CRTA Observation Mission's media monitoring, were reserved exclusively for government officials.

The key findings of CRTA's Observation Mission, when it comes to the atmosphere in the media before announcing the campaign, indicate a chronic lack of political pluralism in the most-watched media. In addition to imbalances in the representation of political actors in favour of the government, there is bias in reporting on the ruling majority.¹³ The media favoured representatives of the ruling parties, allocating 85 percent of the total time devoted to political actors, while the remaining 15 percent was allotted to representatives of opposition parties. In addition, the data show that the media coverage of the ruling parties' representatives compared to representatives of the opposition has further deteriorated compared to the period before the parliamentary elections in 2020 (Chart 1).

¹² The Agreement on Improving the Conditions for Conducting Elections and the accompanying conclusion, resulting from the inter-party dialogue conducted under the auspices of the Speaker of the National Assembly, without the mediation of the European Parliament: <https://crt.rs/en/analysis-of-the-agreement-on-improving-the-conditions-for-holding-elections/>

¹³ CRTA's media monitors, trained according to the highest international standards for media observation in the election process, watched all television stations with national coverage in the period from October 1, 2021 to January 31, 2022. The following stations with national coverage were included in the observation: RTS 1, TV Pink, TV Prva, TV Happy and TV B92. The focus of the observation was the entire schedule during the prime time of television (extended "prime time" from 5.30 pm to midnight) in which political actors appeared or were mentioned. The representation of political actors was measured by recording the basic unit of measurement, the number of seconds that were dedicated to each political actor on each observed television station. The tone of the coverage of political actors was determined on a three-point scale from negative to positive, where a negative tone reflects attacks or unfavourable reporting on a political actor, neutral tone reflects facts without offensive or affirmative reporting and a positive tone reflects affirmative and supportive reporting on a particular political actor. The coverage of political actors in the roles of subject and object were measured in seconds. As a subject, the political actor is addressed in the first person directly to the audience in the television program, while as an object, the political actor is talked about, for example other political interlocutors, guests or news presenters talk about the political actor.

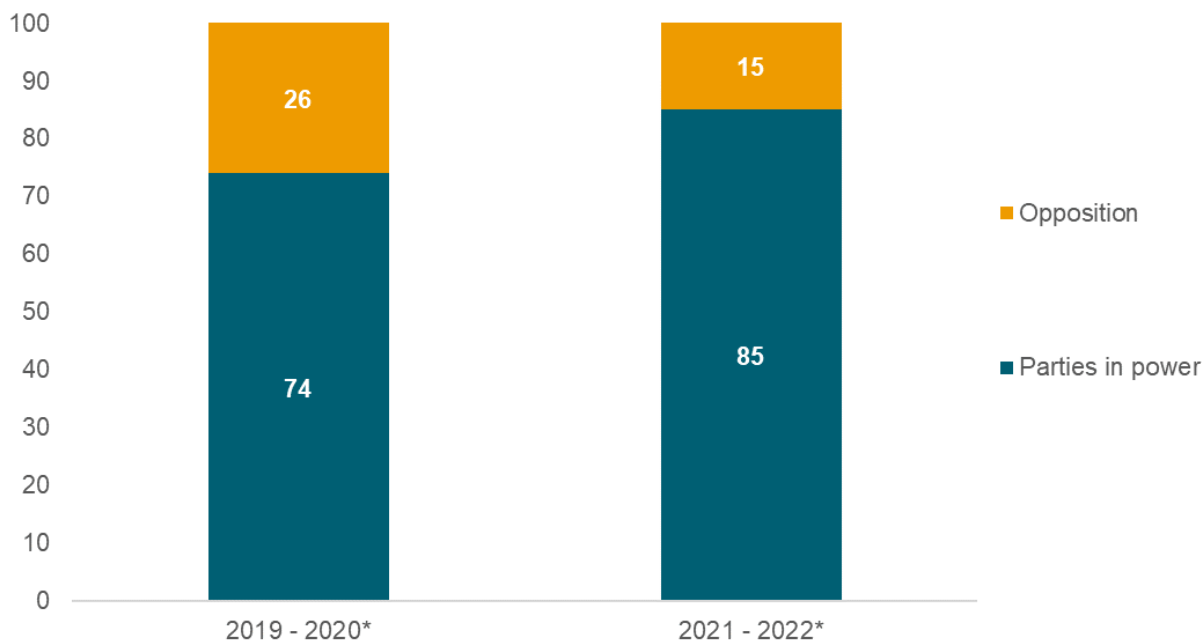


Chart 1: Representation of members of the ruling parties and the opposition on television stations with national coverage in the period from October to January 2019-2010 and 2021-2022*, i.e., the period leading up to the 2020 and 2022 election campaigns.

The significant coverage of the President, Aleksandar Vučić, in the programs of all television stations with national coverage is an important feature of the months before the elections are announced. CRTA's observation team noted that the President had received a full 40 percent of the total time allocated to all political actors in the extended prime time of television stations with national coverage during the past four months. In the past 13 months (from January 2021 to January 2022), observers have noticed a trend that indicates that television stations with national coverage interrupted the schedule almost once a day on average to broadcast events at which the President spoke. This trend was most noticeable on the private television channel Pink, which interrupted the schedule 356 times in the past 13 months to show live broadcasts of President Aleksandar Vučić's speeches.

Regarding political activities on the ground throughout Serbia, the past three months have been marked by the dominance of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party, with more than 1,000 recorded field activities, far more than other political actors, both ruling and opposition.¹⁴

¹⁴ The field team of long-term observers from CRTA's Monitoring Mission noted significant activity of political actors throughout Serbia in the three months prior to the announcement of the referendum campaign. The observation was conducted in 160 cities and municipalities in Serbia. From the beginning of the observation until the announcement of the campaign, the observers submitted more than 4,000 daily reports. More than 2,500 events were recorded during which political parties, alone or in coalitions, addressed or worked with citizens. More than 1,500 activities of public authorities were organised for citizens, i.e. for the community. Observers are trained to record all activities through which political parties and public authorities, i.e. institutions and officials, come into direct or indirect contact with citizens in local communities. When it comes to the activities of political actors, observers record and analyse stands, public forums and events, rallies, door-to-door campaigns, press conferences and press releases, the gathering of votes and support through direct contact or indirectly (by phone, internet). In the case of public authorities, observers record information on municipal projects, citizen programs or promotional activities. In each of the recorded activities, regarding both

Although with a much smaller, but still significant volume of activities, the other most notable parties on the ground were the opposition Freedom and Justice Party, the People's Party, Dveri, the Democratic Party, and the Moramo coalition (Chart 2).

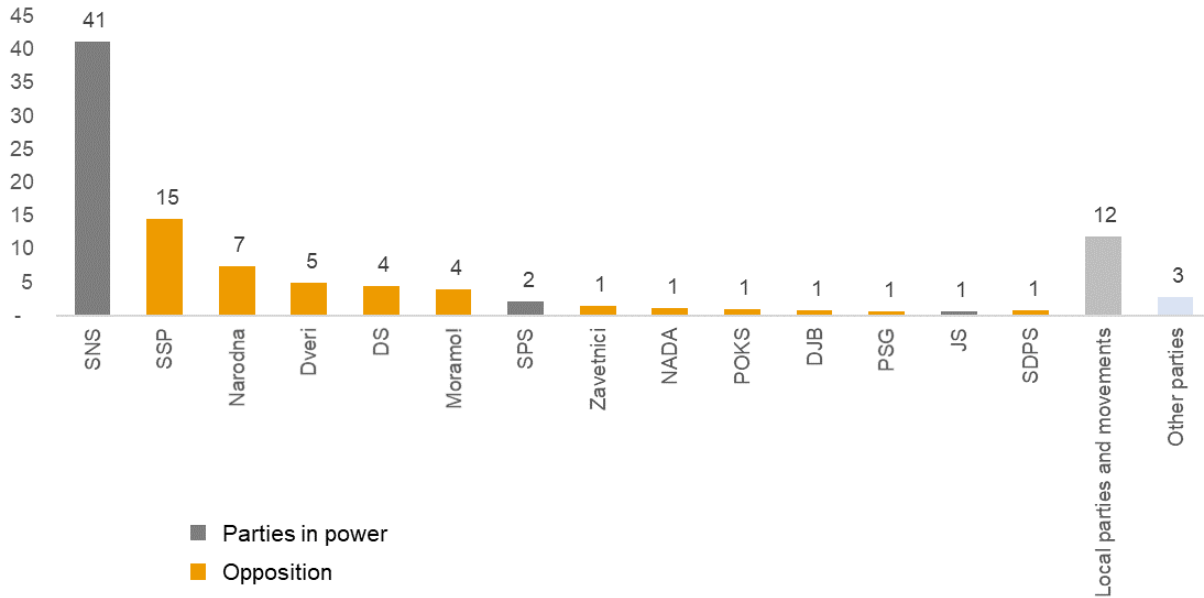


Chart 2: Share of political party activities in the period December 2021 - January 2022 (%)

The scope of activities of the Serbian Progressive Party is not surprising, given that the party has an infrastructure of local branches and organisational capacity that other actors cannot match. However, as much as a third (almost 400) of the recorded activities of the strongest party in Serbia have a clientelist character (Chart 3).

political parties and public authorities, the observers also reported on whether there was any indication of abuse of public resources, public office, pressure on voters and/or political actors, or clientelism.

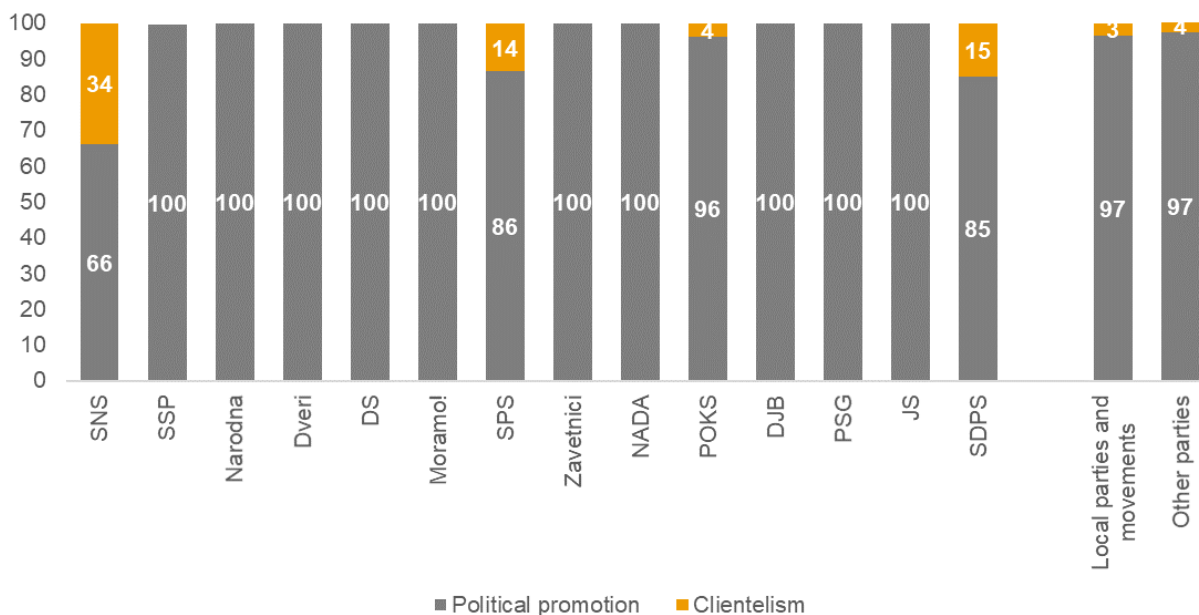


Chart 3: The share of recorded promotional activities of political actors and clientelist activities (%)

This is a form of electoral corruption, in which the political party presents itself to the citizens as a benefactor who directly offers tangible benefits, primarily in the form of a gift of material goods, from food or clothing packages to household equipment and even employment. Cases of goods delivered to citizens that stand out in the previous period are stoves and TVs, which the Serbian Progressive Party was giving away to households across Serbia. CRTA's observations show that socio-economically vulnerable groups are most exposed to such clientelist methods, which, as noted, are used almost exclusively by the ruling parties through direct contact with citizens (Chart 3).

In addition to these insights into clientelist practices, the observation team's findings indicate that instances of pressure on voters occur almost daily, i.e., individuals or groups are often continuously exposed to such pressure over an extended period. Allegations and testimonies of pressure on voters show daily exposure to requests, orders, or expectations that have led to certain actions or inactions in favour of political actors (in most cases in favour of the ruling party or parties in the ruling coalition, both locally and at the state level). Preliminary analysis of the material collected from 19 cities in Serbia since the beginning of the observation shows that the employees in public service who obtained a job through connections with political parties and with whom a fixed-term employment contract was signed are the most exposed to pressure. In addition to public sector employees, vulnerable and minority groups are frequent targets of political party pressures on voters.

From the beginning of the observation until the calling of the elections, CRTA submitted 14 complaints to relevant institutions, of which six were sent to the Anti-corruption Agency, seven to

the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM), and one to the Education Inspection of the City Administration of Leskovac. The complaints filed with the Agency concern prohibited party activities, i.e the distribution of goods to citizens, which was in all reported cases conducted by the ruling Serbian Progressive Party. Complaints were also filed in regard to the misuse of public resources and public office for political party promotion at the national and local level. CRTA filed a complaint against the Ministry of State Administration and Local Self-Government (MPALSG) and Minister Marija Obradović due to a MPALSG video promoting the ruling party. CRTA also filed a complaint against the mayor of Šabac, Aleksandar Pajić, for abusing the municipality's website to promote the ruling party. Finally, a complaint was filed against the President, Aleksandar Vučić, because in his capacity as the President of Serbia he promised financial aid from the state if his party wins the elections.

CRTA filed complaints against six television stations¹⁵ with the REM, including two with national coverage - Pink TV (two complaints) and Happy TV (one complaint), and four local televisions: TV Pančevo, TV Santos, Zona Plus, and TV Studio B. These complaints relate to violations of the ban on hate speech, violations of the ban on political advertising outside election campaigns and the obligation to provide truthful, objective and complete information.

¹⁵ All reports were submitted on the basis of violation of the provisions of the Law on Electronic Media.

OBSERVATION METHODOLOGY

Between October 2021 and February 2022, that is, until the calling of the extraordinary parliamentary elections and elections for the City Assembly of Belgrade, the CRTA Observation Mission observed the work of the highest state institutions and their representatives, institutions responsible for conducting elections, including the changes to electoral rules and procedures which occurred during the observed period, the quality of media reporting with a focus on media representation of the government and the opposition, as well as activities on the ground of all political actors, both from the ruling majority and the opposition.

The methodology for long-term election observation employed by CRTA is based on international standards for election observation: the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation¹⁶, the Code of Conduct for International Election Observers, the Declaration of Global Principles for Nonpartisan Election Observation and Monitoring by Citizen Organizations¹⁷, and the Code of Conduct for Nonpartisan Citizen Election Observers and Monitors.

Field monitoring methodology

Starting in December 2021, and trained according to the highest standards, a field team of long-term observers has been monitoring the atmosphere and the course of the election campaign in 160 cities and municipalities across Serbia on a daily basis. This systematic approach allows CRTA to have equal access to information about the course and trends in the electoral process for the territory of the entire country.

The methodology for long-term observation of the period prior to calling of the elections, which will also be used during the official campaign and until Election Day, April 3, entails collecting data, on a daily basis, on the manner that political actors present themselves to voters across the country in order to mobilize their support, including the frequency of communication and promotional content, types of messages and content of the programs that political actors have prepared. In addition to the course and content of regular political party activities, CRTA's observers are also monitoring anomalies on the ground, i.e. irregularities and abuses in the election campaign, across the following categories: clientelism, vote buying and pressure on voters, abuse of state resources, officials campaigning and abuse of state office, and pressures on political actors. The observation methodology puts equal focus on monitoring the behaviour of ruling parties and opposition parties, as well as opposition parties not present in Parliament. The long-term observation also implies monitoring the activities of all public officials and holders of public office who were elected directly, on the national, provincial, and local levels. The focus

¹⁶ National Democratic Institute, Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and Code of Conduct for International Election Observers, October 27, 2005. www.ndi.org/dop

¹⁷ National Democratic Institute, Declaration of Global Principles for Nonpartisan Election Observation and Monitoring by Citizen Organisations and Code of Conduct for Nonpartisan Citizen Election Observers and Monitors, April 3, 2012. www.ndi.org/DoGP

was on public office holders' conduct which entailed their every activity on the ground, where they addressed voters directly or indirectly, through local media or other channels of communication.

Data collection occurred daily, through direct reporting, with the unit being one event - whether it was performed by a political party or a public authority. The analysis of the period prior to calling of the elections was conducted on the basis of more than 4,000 reports, submitted in the period between December 2021 and February 2022.

Media monitoring methodology

The CRTA Observation Mission officially started monitoring televisions with national coverage on October 1, 2022. The main objective of media monitoring was to determine whether all political actors received equal representation, what was the tone of reporting on political actors, and whether all political actors were equally represented in the roles of subjects and objects. In this way, the CRTS Observation Mission aims to provide insight into the level of media pluralism, and the professional approach of the media to all actors on the political scene.

CRTA's observers, trained according to the highest international standards for media monitoring in the election campaign, monitored all television channels with national coverage, between October 1, 2021, and January 31, 2022. The monitoring included the Public Service Broadcaster Radio-Television Serbia 1 (RTS1), Pink Television, TV Prva, TV Happy, and TV B92. The focus was on the extended prime-time, between 5:30 pm and midnight, and programmes which either reported on or mentioned political actors.

The representation of political actors was measured by recording the basic unit of measurement, i.e the seconds, which were dedicated to each political actor by each observed television. The tonality of reporting was measured on a three-point scale, ranging from negative to positive, where the negative tone reflected attacks on, or unfavourable reporting on political actors, the neutral tone implied presenting facts without offensive or affirmative reporting, and the positive tone reflected affirmative or positively biased reporting on a certain political actor. The seconds were measured for each political actor, both in the role of the subject and the object. The subject role implies that the political actor is speaking in first person, directly to an audience in television programmes, while the object role implies that other actors, television guests, hosts or news anchors, are talking about a certain political actor.

The CRTA Observation Mission will continue with long-term observation of the election campaign for extraordinary parliamentary elections, election for the Belgrade City Assembly, and the campaign for the presidential elections, between their announcement and the Election Day on April 3, 2022. Until Election Day, CRTA will publish two additional preliminary reports, with regular reporting of its findings to the public.

ABOUT CRTA

CRTA is an independent, non-partisan civil society organisation dedicated to promoting the democratic culture and civic activism. By creating public policy proposals, advocating for the principles of responsible conduct and accountable authorities and state institutions, and educating citizens about their political rights, CRTA advocates for the establishment of the rule of law and democratic dialogue development.

Since 2016, CRTA has been conducting election observation on the national and local level. CRTA coordinates the “Citizens On Watch” network, counting several thousand citizens trained to observe the regularity of the vote. Continuous efforts to improve conditions for fair and free elections is at the very core of all CRTA activities. CRTA observes elections in accordance with international standards and rules of citizen observation. So far, CRTA has observed the 2016 and 2020 parliamentary elections, the 2017 presidential elections, local elections in Zaječar and Pećinci in 2017, the 2018 Belgrade and local elections in Lučani, as well as the 2022 referendum on constitutional changes.

The CRTA Observation Mission’s projections and results on Election Day have been confirmed by the official results of the Republic Electoral Commission (REC), while CRTA’s findings and recommendations from previous electoral cycles are complementary to findings and recommendations of the OSCE/ODIHR international observation mission. CRTA is a member of the global and the European networks of election observation organisations - ENEMO and GNDEM.

The aim of the CRTA Observation Mission during the 2022 election campaigns is to efficiently monitor and analyse the implementation of the legal framework and international standards in preparing and conducting the elections, inform citizens about the quality and the democratic character of the election process and events during the campaign, and ensure timely reactions in case of breaches to electoral procedures and processes. Additionally, election observation should bring about the development of recommendations to improve the quality of the election process.