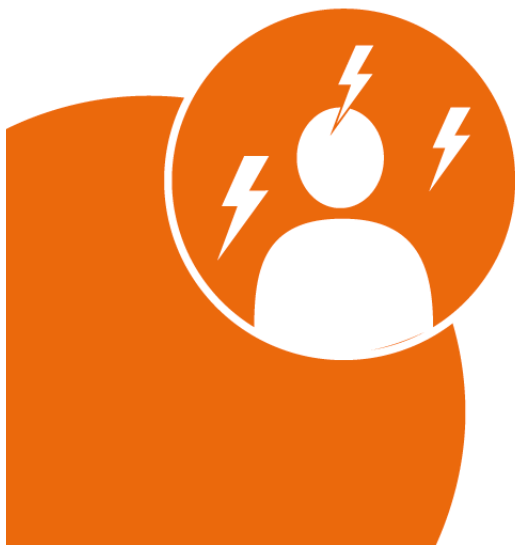


**2022 : ELECTIONS**

**UP - CLOSE**

# **Pressures and electoral corruption outlast the election campaign**



**CRTA:**

**Preliminary long-term  
observation report**

**February 15th – March 4th**

## **PRESSURE ON VULNERABLE GROUPS AND OTHER TYPES OF ELECTION CORRUPTION IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE CAMPAIGN**

Citizens from socially vulnerable categories, as well as public sector employees, are daily and continuously pressured to give their support or enforce support among other people for a political party. This is one of the main findings of the CRTA Observation Mission during the first part of the election campaign. Findings also show that, although present outside of the pre-electoral period, the practice of illegally influencing the will of the voters is more intensive during the official campaign.

Pressure is exercised both through punishments and tangible rewards for citizens, who are expected to align their behaviour with the demands of the political environment. So far, CRTA's Observation Mission has recorded various forms of pressure that are exclusively related to the parties in power, and to state institutions, which are the main tools for extortion and issuing rewards. CRTA's findings indicate that most cases of pressure occur in the workplace and that public sector employees and socially vulnerable and minority groups are most exposed to pressure. Abuses of institutions have also taken on the form of abuses of citizens' economic and social rights, and there is suspicion of systemic abuse of the personal data that institutions have at their disposal. By conducting fieldwork in recent months, including during the first half of the election campaign, CRTA's Observation Mission found that the Roma community is one of the most vulnerable categories of the population when it comes to electoral violence, conducted through intimidation, rewards, extortion, threats, and physical harassment.

During previous elections, CRTA's Observation Mission also recorded cases of pressure, other forms of electoral corruption, as well as abuse of institutions. According to CRTA's public opinion poll, conducted in the second half of February 2022, almost 1 out of 5 citizens was exposed to or witnessed some form of pressure in previous election cycles. However, the alleged allegations and abuse cases passed without an epilogue, i.e., without determining individual and institutional responsibility. Therefore, CRTA's Monitoring Mission appeals for the urgent reaction of the authorities, who must identify, sanction, and eliminate possible failings in the work of state bodies.

CRTA's Observation Mission began field observation of the pre-election atmosphere in November 2021, through which it also documents and thoroughly investigates cases, forms, and channels of pressure, i.e. electoral violence in Serbia. Through extensive, daily observation of the activities of political actors and institutions, observers report not only on the promotional activities of political parties competing in elections, but also on potential abuses and illegal actions - from misuse of public resources, public office, and institutions, to pressure on voters and political actors and other forms of electoral corruption, such as vote-buying. In addition to daily reporting on potential cases of abuse, since November, almost 60 interviews have been

conducted with citizens<sup>1</sup> who are victims and witnesses of pressure or have indirect knowledge of actions that contain elements of electoral violence.<sup>2</sup> Half of these interviews took place during the first three weeks of the election campaign, during which time CRTA's Observation Mission opened several more cases.

The methodology for long-term monitoring of the election process used by CRTA is based on international standards for election observation<sup>3</sup>: the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation, the Code of Conduct for International Election Observers, the Declaration of Global Principles for Non-Partisan Election Observation<sup>4</sup> and the Code of Conduct for Non-partisan Citizen Election observers.

The data collected so far reflect certain consistencies in the practice of putting pressure on voters, as well as in other attempts to influence citizens through corrupt methods. CRTA's Observation Mission will continue to investigate election violence up to election day, but also after the election.

### **PATTERNS IN VOTER PRESSURE, “PENALTIES AND REWARDS”**

The results of CRTA's research so far indicate that the citizens who are most exposed to pressure are members of the ruling party, those who got a job through the party, those employed under a fixed-term contract, and socially disadvantaged, vulnerable and minority groups, as well as unemployed young people. Members or sympathizers of opposition parties, civil society activists, professional and independent journalists, owners of private companies, and friends, neighbours and family members of individuals who have been labelled as disobedient and disloyal by the ruling party or have displayed resistance to them are also often exposed to electoral corruption. The instances of pressure are not exclusively related to participation in political activities, but there is an obvious tendency to encroach on the private lives of citizens, including the cultural and media content they consume, places they visit and similar information (**Table 1**).

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<sup>1</sup> The research combines several sampling techniques: intentional sampling, the “snowball” technique and convenience sampling. The research included people who were pressured or participated in abuses or vote buying, as well as those who are direct or indirect witnesses of such phenomena. Among the participants are journalists, activists, political actors, employees of public institutions and companies, representatives of minorities and other associations, etc. whose knowledge enables a deeper understanding of the context of the researched phenomena and mechanisms.

<sup>2</sup> The research used a qualitative method of semi-structured and unstructured in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted according to a pre-defined protocol, which includes steps to ensure the safety of participants and protect their identity, as well as steps to ensure quality data collection and compliance with the prescribed pandemic measures.

<sup>3</sup> 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](http://www.ndi.org/dop)

<sup>4</sup> National Democratic Institute, Declaration of Global Principles for Nonpartisan Election Observation and Monitoring by Citizen Organizations and Code of Conduct for Nonpartisan Citizen Election Observers and Monitors, April 3, 2012. [www.ndi.org/DoGP](http://www.ndi.org/DoGP)

## FREQUENT TYPES OF PRESSURE

### Pressures aimed at encouraging participation in activities:

- Attending political rallies, events, opening of factories
- Attending courses, education programs, and similar events organized by political parties, and obligations to bring along others (friends, family members)
- Collecting secure and "capillary" votes
- Participating in political party propaganda on social media and other types of activities outside of regular job description
- Denunciation and spying on colleagues (for party purposes)
- Demands for citizens to explicitly declare their political preferences within the workplace
- Providing funds or sponsorships for political party events or initiatives
- Changing business decisions or partners in favor of political parties

### Pressures aimed at forbidding participation in activities:

- Reading or watching "opposition media" (in office premises or public spaces)
- Following "unacceptable" social media accounts, pages, posts
- Socializing with people deemed "non grata" by political parties or officials
- Spending time in "inappropriate" ("opposition") places (e.g. restaurants, bars)
- Advertising in "unsuitable" media

**Table 1:** Frequent types of pressure registered during the observed period

Citizens very rarely report these and other types of pressure because they do not trust institutions or believe that citizens will be protected.

The findings so far show that pressure on employees is mostly conducted through a centralized system, i.e., the principle of hierarchy and that it is manifested through a system of services, conditioning, extortion, threats, and in some cases, physical attacks. CRTA has identified jobs, positions, money, and information as the main resources that political actors "trade" in clientelist networks, while party-based employment is one of the most common ways of establishing control over both voters and public resources (**Table 2**).

## SANCTIONS AND BENEFITS FOR (NOT) ABIDING WITH PRESSURES

Sanctions	Benefits
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Losing a job</li> <li>● Transfer to a different or lower position</li> <li>● Material sanctions (salary reduction or similar)</li> <li>● Decreased scope of work (less classes, empty desk syndrome)</li> <li>● Increased scope of work</li> <li>● Difficult working conditions (obstruction)</li> <li>● Losing advertisers (in print media)</li> <li>● Inability to advance or be promoted</li> <li>● Denying work resources (vehicle, gas)</li> <li>● Inability to participate in public procurement (for private enterprises)</li> <li>● Sanctioning non-existing or banal offenses</li> <li>● Inability to find employment</li> <li>● Inability to use legally guaranteed working rights (paid leave, vacation)</li> <li>● Restraining professional development</li> <li>● Inability to admit children into daycare</li> <li>● Indirect "punishment" of spouses or other close persons</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Material gain</li> <li>● Paid overtime</li> <li>● Career advancement</li> <li>● Party "points" (advancing within a political party)</li> <li>● Employment</li> <li>● Keeping a job</li> <li>● Work contract extension</li> <li>● Keeping a job position</li> <li>● Increasing social capital (entering powerful and influential circles)</li> </ul>

**Table 2:** Overview of sanctions and benefits registered during the observed period

Pensioners, farmers, Roma, social assistance beneficiaries and other socially vulnerable groups have been identified by CRTA as the most common targets of vote-buying. In exchange for votes, political actors offer money, employment, food packages, white goods, heating, and legalisation of illegally built buildings, social housing, housing repair services, and general repairs.

Of the total number of political activities recorded daily by CRTA's Observation Mission in the first three weeks of the election campaign,<sup>5</sup> 10 per cent had the characteristics of vote-buying and were implemented exclusively by the ruling parties (**Table 3**).

<sup>5</sup> CRTA's observers report daily on the activities of political actors, as well as the activities of institutions. During the first three weeks, observers sent more than 1,800 reports about individual activities.

MOST COMMON GIFTS :	MUNICIPALITIES AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES :
Refrigerators, freezers, washing machines	Voždovac (Belgrade), Surčin (Belgrade) Ruma, Loznica
Television sets	Voždovac (Belgrade), Novi Beograd (Belgrade), Ruma, Šid
Rotating tractor beacons	Grocka (Belgrade)
Wood burning stoves	Šid, Vrbas
Firewood	Grocka (Belgrade), Vinča (Belgrade), Ritopek (Belgrade), Boleč (Belgrade)
Clothes and shoes	Zemun Polje (Belgrade), Novi Beograd (Belgrade), Mladenovac (Belgrade), Pećinci
Housing adaptations, furnishing bathrooms or bedrooms	Babušnica, Smederevska palanka
Financial aid	Ruma
Groceries and cosmetics	Zvezdara (Belgrade), Rakovica (Belgrade), Mladenovac (Belgrade), Niš, Vladimirci, Bogatić, Leskovac, Ruma, Majdanpek, Brus, Pećinci,

**Table 3:** Overview of gifts provided to citizens by political parties, across municipalities and local communities, during the observed period

During this period, the ruling parties delivered various material gifts to the addresses of dozens of households throughout Serbia. Observers reported that certain households were targeted for these actions by party activists, particularly households in poorer socio-economic positions. The distribution of gifts to the wider population, which would indicate that these gifts were provided on a random basis, did not happen.

Although each one of these donations was presented as an individual action by party activists to "help neighbours", their consistent promotion of party orders raises the possibility of a strategic approach to influencing voters via illicit means.<sup>6</sup> There is also the issue of the financing of political party activities by third parties, which in the Serbian context can be interpreted as an attempt to circumvent the laws governing the financing of party activities.

<sup>6</sup> Law on Financing Political Activities, article 23

## **VOTE-BUYING AND MECHANISMS OF PRESSURE ON VOTERS OF ROMA NATIONALITY**

The statements made by informants who are members of the Roma community reveal specific mechanisms of pressure. Informal Roma settlements are most exposed to pressure, and it is most often a matter of "selling" the votes of individuals and their families. According to the informants, Roma have always been exposed to pressure at elections at all levels, but now the pressure is more intense and aggressive. The overall impression is that in Serbia there is "institutional discrimination and manipulation of Roma" who are often beneficiaries of social assistance and that political parties abuse the endangered socio-economic status of Roma. Political parties tend to view them exclusively as "certain/guaranteed votes" and not as political entities with legitimate needs and interests.

The informants also talked about cases of misuse of personal data, as well as the right to vote with assistance, which is a common mechanism for voter control. Allegations about the use of lists of people from Centres for Social Work are particularly worrying, because, as the informants stated, this means that political parties misuse the personal data of social assistance users. A former resident of a Roma settlement shared information about the pressure put on Roma who are social assistance beneficiaries, by employees of the Centre for Social Work who "remind their clients to vote for a certain party." According to him, social assistance has sometimes been cut off or suspended for those who did not vote as "agreed or suggested", and that one-time assistance was not paid to the beneficiaries.

CRTA's Observation Mission points out that the misuse of personal data has cast a shadow over earlier election processes, for example by using data from beneficiaries of old-age, disability, and survivors' pensions in the Republic of Serbia (including minors) who received promotional party leaflets during parliamentary elections in 2020. These cases passed without any resolution, i.e., without establishing individual and institutional responsibility. CRTA's Observation Mission calls for an urgent reaction by the authorities, who must identify, sanction, and eliminate possible failings in the work of state bodies.

According to the informants, political parties put pressure on the inhabitants of Roma settlements indirectly. This is often done through a person who is a member of the Roma community but not necessarily a member of the party, who nevertheless lobbies for its interests within a Roma settlement whose residents they know well (one of the interlocutors called this person a "coordinator for the Roma settlement", another referred to "the Roma commissioner of the party"). According to an informant, votes are usually sold for 2,000 Serbian dinars, with the person who collects the certain votes taking half, so that the voter who "promised" their vote receives 1,000 dinars.

Some of the insights from the interviews highlight the existing mechanisms of pressure, which the informants describe as "double rewarding of certain votes": before the vote, they receive a package of groceries, and then, after proof of voting the instructed way has been provided, the money was paid out (or vice versa). Also, one informant testified that residents of Roma

settlements are often given ID cards a few weeks before the election, before returning them on election day, in front of the polling station. Others stated that on election day, unknown people enter Roma settlements by car, ask around for people who have not yet voted, and offer money and a lift to polling stations in return for votes. On the day of the last elections, an informant stated, there was a physical confrontation between the inhabitants of a Roma settlement in Serbia when unknown people came to "buy" votes for the ruling party.

In one case, the staff of polling stations in Roma settlements were pressured. The informant, a direct participant in the event, testified that on the day of the referendum this year, the polling board received instructions from the ruling party to "fill the ballot box" by voting on behalf of other people on the voter list. Each board member was supposed to put a certain number of ballots in the box during the day. Before the polls closed, they were instructed to insert several hundred more ballots into the box, which the board members did.

CRTA's research also collected allegations of pressure on Roma by city authorities and members of the ruling party through the allocation of humanitarian packages or assistance in conducting infrastructure works. After these actions, SNS activists came to "remind" citizens to vote and even take them to polling stations.

Informants closely involved with Centres for Social Work stated that political parties are trying to maintain support from members of the Roma nationality in numerous ways, including organizing receptions where one-time assistance is granted. According to one informant, high-level municipal officials award amounts of money of between three and five thousand dinars, as well as Easter packages, several times a year at receptions organized by the Centre for Social Work and other local associations.

The involvement of the Centres for Social Work in political activities was noted during the first half of the campaign, including events that the centres organize jointly with political parties. For example, the Centre for Social Work in Požarevac, during the three weeks of the election campaign, together with the Council for Social Affairs of the Serbian Progressive Party, repeatedly organized guidance sessions for citizens regarding their social conditions and the material support provided by the Centre for Social Work and other topics. At these events, where the director and associates of the institution addressed citizens, certain services were promoted - from permanent financial aid, financial allowances for help and care of another person, various forms of one-time assistance for medicines, home help, soup kitchen services, etc. Also, according to publicly available information, the Council for Social Affairs of the Serbian Progressive Party in Požarevac, together with one primary school, organized a panel discussion on the inclusion of children from vulnerable groups in the educational system. In each of these activities in which social policy or educational institutions participated, as well as representatives of a political party, citizens expressed their financial situation or received information about the types of support offered by the institution or local community to alleviate their problems.



In addition, CRTA's research indicates that Roma citizens who want to be engaged in projects by charity organizations are put under pressure. Namely, only "certain voters" (i.e. guaranteed votes) are granted access to some organizations: "[This] means, in order to be in (...), to get a project (...), to be a coordinator (...) you have to support SNS in some way. It doesn't matter whether you will be a member of the SNS or a propagandist of the SNS." The testimonies also show that the aid provided by international organizations, which is most often implemented through local and national Roma associations, is received by members, or certain voters, of the ruling party.

The informants share the impression that the inhabitants of the Roma settlements that are under pressure are afraid that they will lose social assistance, that they will be evicted, or that someone will physically attack them if they do not obey the demands of the "party's people". This is the main reason that this pressure is not discussed publicly and why citizens dare not report it to the relevant institutions.

CRTA will continue to investigate allegations of pressure on voters and other forms of electoral corruption, as well as report them to the public and, if possible, respond via institutions to violations and abuses of electoral rights.

## OBSERVATION METHODOLOGY

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 Observation<sup>7</sup>, the Code of Conduct for International Election Observers, the Declaration of Global Principles for Nonpartisan Election Observation and Monitoring by Citizen Organizations<sup>8</sup>, 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 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.

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<sup>7</sup> 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](http://www.ndi.org/dop)

<sup>8</sup> 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](http://www.ndi.org/DoGP)

### *Methodology of in-depth research of electoral corruption and violence cases*

In order to better understand the atmosphere suggested by the numbers in statistical analysis, CRTA's Observation Mission is conducting research with the main goal to identify and, if possible, classify the most frequent types of pressure exerted on voters, misuse of public resources and personal data and vote-buying. The research is additionally conducted so as to gain a deeper insight in mechanism underpinning these phenomena.

CRTA's observers, trained according to the highest international standards for documenting and investigating the cases of political and human rights violations, employ qualitative methods of semi-structured and non-structured interviews for research purposes. Interviews were conducted in accordance with the predefined protocol, which implies taking the necessary steps to ensure the security of the participants and the protection of their identity as well as to ensure high-quality data collection. Given both the sensitive nature of research topics and pandemic circumstances, the informants are given the opportunity to choose whether they will participate online or in person. Live conversations are been conducted in absolute compliance with the prescribed pandemic measures. Interviews are recorded with participants' consent, transcribed, coded and analysed. Data that may suggest the identity of the participants are anonymized during transcription. In accordance with the goals and specific tasks of the research, an interview guide was formulated on the basis of which the interviewers subsequently adjusted the questions and sub-questions.

Several sampling methods are combined: purposive, convenience and snowball sampling. The research includes people who are pressured by political parties or actors or participated in the misuse of public resources and personal data or vote-buying, as well as those who are direct or indirect witnesses of such phenomena. Participants also include journalists, activists and political actors who are either victims of pressure or have specific knowledge that could complement a deeper understanding of the context of the phenomena and mechanisms under research. Currently, 58 interviews with informants from 25 municipalities have been conducted (total duration: 44 hours 31 minutes 52 seconds). Duration of a single interview ranges from 30 minutes to 2 hours.

## **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.