

CRTA:

ELECTIONS : 2023



**FIRST INTERIM REPORT
OF LONG TERM
ELECTION OBSERVATION**

November 1st - November 20th

SUMMARY

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The CRTA Election Observation Mission assesses that the course of the election campaign thus far has been marked by pronounced advantages which the ruling parties have gained through the abuse of institutions and manipulations of the electoral calendar. In less than two years, the second extraordinary parliamentary and Belgrade elections were announced. Extraordinary provincial elections were also announced, and without precedent and clear explanation, a decision was made to hold snap local elections in over a third of the municipalities half a year before they were set to be scheduled. The relatively short inter-election period was not used to improve electoral conditions.

The work of the electoral administration proceeds in accordance with the law and there are no formal restrictions on participation in the elections or in their observation. Nevertheless, **the powers, capacities and authority of the administration are once again proving insufficient to protect the integrity of the electoral process, despite the increased transparency and proactivity of the Republic Electoral Commission.**

The nomination process is once again beset with doubts. The decision to have municipal administrations, in addition to notaries, authenticate the signatures of support for the lists, is proving susceptible to abuse once again. **Recorded allegations of signature falsification threaten to allow some actors to illegally make it to the ballot, as was the case in the previous elections.**

The electoral process is accompanied by suspicions of voter register manipulations, eroding citizens' trust in the elections from one election to another. The lack of timely and adequate information about the state of the voter register, from one election to another, raises suspicions of misuse and compromises the voter register's integrity. **Reports of organized voter migrations, primarily in Belgrade, will continue to fuel suspicions and tensions until the relevant institutions make the precise and relevant information available to the public.**

It has been demonstrated that impunity for violations of the law from the previous electoral cycles led to even more serious abuses and relaxations of control mechanisms. The intolerance and hate speech disseminated by the ruling parties and the most influential media, as well as some actors within the opposition, are more pronounced than in any elections CRTA has observed since 2016. Abuses of public resources and public office for voter pressure and promotion of the government are also evident. **On the ground, there have been around 50 recorded incidents containing elements of public resource abuse in the first 20 days of the campaign, while 450**

appearances of high-ranking government officials were recorded in the past month.

Through conversations with citizens, **CRTA observers have documented serious allegations of political pressure and electoral clientelism in 12 cities in Serbia**, primarily directed toward public sector employees. It has been noted that citizens are threatened with dismissal or demotion at work, or offered money or employment in exchange for contributing to party activities. Respondents have pointed out an **atmosphere of fear and distrust toward institutions**, which is cited as the main reason for not reporting such cases.

Allegations about the illegal collection and misuse of citizens' personal data, which CRTA recorded in prior electoral processes, are also worrying. In several places in Serbia, the implementation of political polling by telephone was observed, raising citizens' suspicion that their personal data was previously available to the party or the agency that called them.

In the first part of the campaign, conditions for fair competition were not met. State involvement in the electoral campaign is even more pronounced than in previous electoral processes. It is challenging to distinguish between certain party and state officials. Messages conveyed by institutions—the Government of the Republic of Serbia, relevant ministries, and the President of the Republic of Serbia—merge with the campaign of the "Aleksandar Vučić - Serbia Must Not Stop" list, which has dominated public perception. The campaign of opposition candidates is significantly less noticeable in the public space, and many opposition figures entered the election campaign later. Additionally, reports of obstructions in the process of collecting signatures for candidacy have been recorded in several municipalities in Serbia, mostly directed against opposition actors.

The appearances of the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, inundate the public space, leaving the impression that presidential, and not parliamentary and local elections are underway in Serbia. President Vučić is the main face and topic of the campaign of the Serbian Progressive Party-led list, occupying almost half of the time in influential media's informative-political content.

The pronounced media inequality between the government and the opposition, which has been going on since the last election, spilled over into the campaign period, rendering the legally defined rules of reporting during the campaign meaningless. On televisions with national coverage, **the program highlights biased, partisan and partial reporting in favor of the ruling parties, negative propaganda, inflammatory**

rhetoric and manipulation of information. The division of programs into informative segments, primarily catering almost exclusively to government representatives, and electoral blocks where time is allocated to all election participants creates an illusion of media pluralism.

On the social network Facebook, **every fifth above-average reach post published by election candidates and parties contains elements of violent communication.** The official account of the Serbian Progressive Party generates the most intense communication on a daily basis, with every fourth post featuring aggressive rhetoric.

Observers throughout Serbia have documented attacks, intimidation, and obstructions against election participants, as well as associations and citizen initiatives. Violent incidents have been frequent in the initial weeks of the campaign. Several cases of violence against political activists and citizens have been recorded, ranging from verbal and physical assaults to property threats. **The impression is that violence and threats intensify as the campaign progresses,** as within just three days, from November 20th to the 22nd, five incidents were recorded - four cases of threats and property destruction against political parties and their activists and the activation of a smoke bomb in a local Assembly Hall.

This election campaign is also marked by a large number of social protests (postal workers, farmers, health and education workers), which the government labels as opposition activities. **It is worrying that the protests were followed by a wave of violence and intimidation** to which the participants of the farmers' protest were exposed, including phone threats, writing offensive graffiti on the facades of houses, as well as the blockade of the private house of one of the organizers of the protest.

In just over two weeks of the election campaign, the CRTA Observation Mission has filed [21 complaints](#)¹ with relevant oversight institutions - 15 to the Anti-Corruption Agency, 5 to the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM), and 1 to the Supervisory Board of the National Assembly. Nine reports filed with the Anti-Corruption Agency concern the abuse of public office to promote election candidates², while six reports relate to the misuse of public resources and unauthorized activities in the

¹CRTA, CRTA reports <https://link.crt.rs/bo>

²One complaint was filed against the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić; the President of the Stara Pazova Municipality, Đorđe Radinović; the Minister of Family Welfare and Demography Darija Kisić; a member of the Provisional Authority of the City of Belgrade, Vladimir Obradović; the Minister of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure, Goran Vesić; the President of the Provisional Authority of the Municipality of Despotovac, Zlatko Marjanović; the President of the Temporary Authority of the City of Šabac, Aleksandar Pajić; the President of the Provisional Authority of the Municipality of Ruma, Aleksandra Ćirić; the President of the Provisional Authority of the City of Pirot, Vladan Vasić.

campaign³. Five reports submitted to the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media⁴ and one to the Supervisory Board⁵ concern instances of negative campaigns and abuse of public office in public appearances.

Oversight bodies and institutions remain invisible in this electoral process. The activities of the Anti-Corruption Agency and the Supervisory Board of the National Assembly remain ineffective for now. **The Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media, despite increased obligations, is almost completely passive in this reporting period, and its work is characterized by a lack of transparency.** After adopting the election campaign monitoring methodology, the REM did not issue a press release or report on the findings of its monitoring and actions it initiated according to its line of duty or according to reports.

The CRTA Observation Mission has sent out invitations for meetings with all relevant institutions. During the course of the campaign so far, CRTA has organized meetings with the Republic Electoral Commission, the Supervisory Board of the National Assembly, and the Ombudsman. The Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government, and the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media did not respond to a request for a meeting by the time this report was concluded, while the Anti-Corruption Agency responded with an invitation to a training session on the implementation of the Law on the Financing of Political Activities. CRTA also filed a complaint with the Ombudsman in relation to the Ministry of the Interior's lack of response to repeatedly requested information about the procedure for citizens to check whether unknown individuals are registered at their addresses. During this period, the CRTA Observation Mission publicly appealed to state institutions to provide the public with complete and verified facts and information in a timely manner, and thus contribute to the calming of tensions and protection of electoral integrity.

Given that the electoral environment is marked by: the erasure of the border between the state and the party, which facilitates the abuse of public resources and institutions; the culture of impunity which has led to new violations and disregard of regulations; the use of dehumanizing rhetoric; the distorted image of pluralism in the media; the serious allegations that have been recorded about pressures on citizens, as well as allegations of misuse of citizens' personal data; the violent incidents that have been recorded and the suspicion of a part of the public regarding manipulations of the voter register; the

³Four complaints were filed against the Serbian Progressive Party, one against the Freedom and Justice Party and one against the Socialist Party of Serbia.

⁴Four complaints were filed against TV Pink and one against TV Prva.

⁵The complaint was filed against the Serbian Progressive Party and a member of the SNS Presidency, Miloš Terzić, for running a negative campaign.

scarce effects of educational and informational campaigns launched by some institutions due to low visibility, **the CRTA Observation Mission appeals to:**

- **The Prosecutor's Office** to investigate allegations of criminal acts in the elections, including allegations of signature falsification of voter support, as well as to investigate recorded cases of pressure on voters and suspicions of abuse of citizens' personal data, and to inform the public about the findings and results of the proceedings;
- **The Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government** to publish a consolidated overview of the quarterly cross-sections of the number of voters by municipality for the period of the last year;
- **The Ministry of the Interior** to start publishing the number of registrations, deregistrations and passivizations for citizens of legal age on a monthly basis by municipality, and publish this data for at least the last two years;
- **State institutions** not to participate in promoting incendiary rhetoric and fostering an atmosphere of fear, but to provide conditions for free and fair elections and to provide reasoned answers to all doubts about the integrity of the electoral process.
- **Parties and election actors** to refrain from incendiary rhetoric and the spread of rumors that further threaten citizens' trust in the electoral process and elections;
- **Radio Television of Serbia** to not only ensure full equality among election participants and report on all topics of public interest, but also fulfill its educational role as a public broadcasting service by producing content that educates citizens about elections and encourages their participation in democratic processes and political life;
- **The media** to ensure the equality of election participants in their programs, to refrain from unethical reporting on election candidates, as well as not to manipulate the public by creating a false image of pluralism;
- **The Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media** to promptly undertake all available procedures within its jurisdiction to prevent further breaches of media obligations during the election campaign. This includes **the publication of data collected by the REM monitoring, timely publication of information on steps taken in connection with reports made to the REM of violations of the law**, but also **timely imposition of measures** on television stations that ignore legal obligations in the election campaign;
- **The Anti-Corruption Agency** to align its methodology for observing the implementation of the Law on Prevention of Corruption and the Law on Financing Political Activities with the conditions in which the campaign is carried out, as well as to actively inform the public about the steps it undertakes in accordance to its line of duty;

- **The Republic Electoral Commission** to continue making efforts to inform the public on Election Day about the course of Election Day and election results in a timely manner and through an improved display of election results and organize a press conference a few hours after polling stations close;