

CRTA:

ELECTIONS : 2023



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

November 1st - November 20th

THE CONTENT

1 SUMMARY	3
2 POLITICAL CONTEXT	8
3 CALL FOR ELECTIONS	11
4 THE COURSE OF THE ELECTION PROCESS AND THE WORK OF THE ELECTION ADMINISTRATION	13
4.1 Work of the Republic Electoral Commission	13
4.2 Ruling on objections	15
4.3 Application process	16
4.4 Deciding on the forms and composition of the body for conducting elections	17
4.5 Voters' Register: open doubts, absence of data	18
4.6 City Electoral Commission of the City of Belgrade	20
5 COURSE OF THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN	23
5.1 State in elections: blurring the line between state and party	24
5.2 Production of intolerance and incitement of hatred in the election campaign	25
5.3 Pouring aggressive rhetoric into conflict incidents and preventing participation in political life	29
5.4 Pressures, bribery and clientelistic relationship with citizens	32
5.5 Doubts about misuse of citizens' personal data	33
5.6 Pluralism in the media	34
<i>5.6.1 Main findings of media monitoring</i>	34
<i>5.6.2 Representation and tone of reporting on political actors</i>	34
<i>5.6.3 The role of the President of Serbia in the election campaign</i>	36
5.7 Monitoring of social networks	37
6 CONTROL INSTITUTIONS AND BODIES	39
6.1 Agency for Prevention of Corruption	39
6.2 Regulatory Authority of Electronic media	40
<i>6.2.1 New legal framework for actions of REM in the election campaign</i>	40
<i>6.2.2 REM methodology and activities</i>	41
6.3. Oversight Committee for the Election Campaign	43
7 COMPLAINTS OF THE CRTA OBSERVATION MISSION ABOUT THE IRREGULARITIES OBSERVED	44
7.1 Complaints to the Anti-Corruption Agency:	44
7.2 Complaints to the Regulatory Authority of Electronic Media	46
7.3. Complaints to the Oversight Committee	47

METHODOLOGY	47
Methodology of long-term monitoring of the election campaign	47
ABOUT THE CRTA OBSERVATION MISSION	49

1 SUMMARY

The CRTA Observation Mission assesses that the course of the election campaign so far has been marked by distinct advantages that the parties in power gain by abusing institutions and manipulating the election calendar. In less than two years, the second snap parliamentary and Belgrade elections were called. Snap provincial elections were also announced, and without precedent and clear explanation, a decision was made to announce snap local elections half a year before the regular term in more than a third of the municipalities. The relatively short inter-election period was not used to improve election conditions.

The work of the election administration proceeds in accordance with the law and there are no formal restrictions on participation in the elections or 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 Republican Electoral Commission.**

The candidacy process is once again beset with doubts. The decision that, in addition to notaries, signatures of support for lists are also certified by municipal administrations is once again proving to be susceptible to abuse. **Recorded allegations of forgery of signatures threaten that, as in the last elections, some actors will illegally reach the ballot.**

The course of the election process was followed by suspicions of manipulation of the Voters' Register. The lack of timely and adequate information on the state of the Voters' Register, from election to election, causes suspicion of misuse and compromise of the Voters' Register and thereby further undermines confidence in the integrity of the election. **Allegations about organised migration of voters, primarily in Belgrade, will continue to raise doubts and raise tensions until the competent institutions provide the public with precise and relevant data.**

It has been shown that impunity for violations of the law from the previous elections led to even more serious abuses and relaxation of control mechanisms. The intolerance and hate speech that the ruling parties and the most influential media, as well as some actors from the opposition, place in the public, are more pronounced than in any election that CRTA has observed since 2016. Abuses of public resources and public functions to pressure voters and promote the government were also expressed. **On the ground, in the first 20 days of the campaign, about 50 events with elements of abuse of public resources were recorded, while in the past month, 450 appearances of high republican officials on the ground were recorded.**

Through conversations with citizens, **CRTA observers recorded serious allegations of political pressure and electoral clientelism in 12 cities in Serbia**, directed primarily at employees in the public sector. It has been recorded that citizens are threatened with dismissal and demotion at work, or are offered money or employment for contributing to party activities. The interlocutors pointed to **the atmosphere of fear**, but also to distrust towards the institutions, which they cite as the main reason why such cases are not reported.

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

In the first part of the campaign, the conditions for equal competition were not met. The direct participation of the state in the election campaign is even more pronounced than in earlier election processes. It is difficult to see the difference between individual party and state functionaries. The messages sent by the institutions - the Government of the Republic of Serbia, relevant ministries and the President of the Republic of Serbia - merge with the campaign of the list "Aleksandar Vučić - Serbia must not stop", which is the most dominant among the public. The campaign of opposition candidates to a significantly lesser extent is noticeable in the public space, and many opposition actors later entered the election campaign. Also, allegations of obstructions in the process of collecting signatures for candidacy in several municipalities in Serbia were recorded, mostly directed against opposition actors.

The appearances of the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, flood the public space, leaving the impression that presidential, not parliamentary, provincial and local elections are underway in Serbia. President Vučić is the main face and theme of the electoral list campaign led by the Serbian Progressive Party, occupying almost half of the time in the informative and political content of the most influential media.

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 programme highlights **biased, partisan and favouritism reporting in favour of the ruling parties, negative propaganda, inflammatory rhetoric and manipulation of information.** The division of programmes into informative ones, which are intended almost exclusively for representatives of the government, and election blocks, in which time is distributed to all election participants, creates the appearance of pluralism in the media.

On the Facebook social network, **every fifth post of above-average reach by election candidates and parties contains elements of violent communication.** The most intensive communication on a daily basis is achieved by the official account of the Serbian Progressive Party, whose every fourth post carries violent rhetoric.

Observers recorded attacks, intimidation and obstructions against election actors, as well as associations and initiatives of citizens throughout Serbia. Violent incidents were frequent in the first weeks of the campaign. On the ground, several cases of violence against political activists and citizens were recorded, from verbal and physical attacks to the endangerment of property. **The impression is that violence and threats are intensifying as the campaign progresses,** because in the course of just three days, November 20, 21 and 22, five incident situations were recorded – five cases of threats and destruction of property of political parties

and their activists, including the activation of smoke bombs in the assembly hall of the local parliament.

This election campaign is also marked by a large number of social protests (postmen, 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 organisers of the protest.

In just over two weeks of the election campaign, the CRTA Observation Mission submitted 21 applications¹ competent control institutions - the Anti-Corruption Agency (15), the Regulatory Authority of Electronic Media (5) and the Oversight Committee of the National Assembly (1). Of the complaints submitted to the Anti-Corruption Agency, nine concern the abuse of public office to promote election candidates², while six complaints refer to misuse of public resources and illegal activities in the campaign.³ Five complaints submitted to the Electronic Media Regulatory Authority⁴ and one submitted to the Oversight Committee⁵ they refer to cases of running a negative campaign and abuse of public office in public appearances.

Control institutions and bodies remain invisible in this election process. The activities of the Anti-Corruption Agency and the Oversight Committee of the National Assembly remain ineffective for now. **The Regulatory Authority of Electronic media, despite increased obligations, is almost completely passive in this reporting period, and its work is characterised by a lack of transparency.** After adopting the election campaign monitoring methodology, REM did not issue any press release or report on the findings of its monitoring and any actions it initiated ex officio or upon complaints.

The CRTA Observation Mission sent invitations for meetings to all relevant institutions. In the course of the campaign so far, CRTA has organised meetings with the Republican Electoral Commission, the Supervisory Committee for the National Assembly Campaign and the Protector of Citizens. The Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of State Administration and Local Self-Government, the Regulatory Authority of Electronic Media did not respond to the letters for the meeting until the conclusion of this report, while the Anti-Corruption Agency responded with an invitation to training on the implementation of the Law on the Financing of Political Activities. CRTA also filed a complaint with the Protector of Citizens against the work of the Ministry of Internal Affairs due to the lack of answers to the repeatedly requested information on the procedure for how citizens can check whether unknown persons have been registered at their addresses. During this period, the Observation Mission publicly appealed

¹ CRTA, CRTA's complaints, <https://link.crt.rs/bo>

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

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

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

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

to state institutions to provide the public with complete and verified facts and information in a timely manner and thus contribute to calming tensions and protecting electoral integrity.

Taking into account that the electoral environment is marked by the erasure of the border between the state and the party, which facilitates the misuse of public resources and institutions, that the culture of impunity has led to new violations and neglect of regulations, that dehumanising rhetoric is used, creates a distorted image of pluralism in the media, that recorded serious allegations of pressure on citizens, as well as allegations of abuse of citizens' personal data, that violent incidents were recorded and that part of the public suspected manipulations of the Voters' Register, as well as that the effects of the educational and informational campaign launched by some institutions are absent 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 falsification of voter support signatures, 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 State 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 Internal Affairs** should start publishing the number of registrations, deregistrations and passivisation for adult citizens on a monthly basis by municipality, as well as to 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 election process and elections;
- **Serbian Radio and Television** , in addition to ensuring the full equality of election participants and reporting on all topics in connection with which there is an interest for the public to be informed, to also fulfill its educational function as a public media service by producing content that will educate citizens on elections and which will encourage the participation of citizens in democratic processes and political life.
- **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 of Electronic media** to undertake without delay all available procedures within its jurisdiction in order to prevent further violations of the obligations of the media during the election campaign. This includes **the publication of data collected by REM monitoring**, timely publication of information on steps taken in connection with complaints to 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 harmonise its methodology for monitoring 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 its official capacity;

- **Republic Electoral Commission and the City Electoral Commission of the City of Belgrade** continue making efforts to timely inform the public on election day about the course of election day and election results through an improved display of election results and organising a media conference a few hours after the polling stations close.

2 POLITICAL CONTEXT

Snap parliamentary, provincial and local elections were announced in a climate of political, social and economic tensions that have not recently been recorded in Serbia. The atmosphere of strong feelings caused by the eruption, until then hard to imagine, of violent events that, even for a moment, erased all other social issues from the public discourse and awakened the public to the understanding of the extent to which violence pervades every pore of social reality. Feelings of fear, concern and anger among citizens have increased, as well as doubts that the institutions of the system are ready to fight against the ubiquitous violence.⁶ There was a further deepening of political polarisation,⁷ which culminated in the calling of snap elections.

At the beginning of the year, as part of the process of normalising relations between Belgrade and Pristina, the authorities in Belgrade demonstrated a slightly more constructive approach to the dialogue. The President of Serbia and the Prime Minister of Kosovo agreed on the text of the agreement⁸ the implementation of which would represent full normalisation of relations and *de facto* recognition of Kosovo by Serbia.⁹ There was an increase in tensions in Serbia, and the regime tried to cover up the essence of the agreement reached, focusing on the issue of establishing the Community of Serb Municipalities and calling for a boycott of local elections in the North of Kosovo, as a result of which Albanians were elected presidents of predominantly Serbian municipalities.¹⁰

After the mass murders that claimed 19 lives in May, mostly children and young people,¹¹ inadequate and inappropriate reactions of the authorities¹² caused a significant political mobilisation of citizens and a wave of protests against systemic violence in society, under the motto “Serbia against violence”.¹³ The protests underpinned the authorities’ responsibility for inciting or not preventing violence in society, for media promotion of violence, and the weakened education system, intolerance towards political dissidents, but also for the protection of politically connected persons from criminal prosecution. Changes in the media ecosystem were demanded, including the shutdown of tabloids that continuously violate the

⁶ CRTA, “Attitudes of Serbian citizens on violence - Public opinion survey - September 2023”, October 11, 2023, <https://link.crtars/cj>

⁷ CRTA, “Protests against violence, Survey of public opinion and attitudes of protest participants - August 2023”, August 23, 2023, <https://link.crtars/bp>

⁸ RSE, Lajen in Belgrade: Implementation of the Ohrid Agreement is de facto recognition of Kosovo, RSE, October 31, 2023 <https://link.crtars/bq>

⁹ EEAS, “Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue: EU Proposal - Agreement on the path to normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia”, 27. February 2023, <https://link.crtars/bt>

EEAS, “Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue: Implementation Annex to the Agreement on the Path to Normalization of Relations between Kosovo and Serbia”, March 19, 2023, <https://link.crtars/bv>

¹⁰ BBC, “Local elections in northern Kosovo”, 24 April 2023, <https://link.crtars/bw>

¹¹ BBC, “School shooting in Belgrade: Footage of the arrest of a suspected student, parents of children in despair”, May 3, 2023, <https://link.crtars/bx>
RTS, “Suspect for mass murder near Mladenovac and Smederevo sentenced to custody for up to 30 days”, May 7, 2023, <https://link.crtars/c0>

¹² DW, “Serbia: both society and system failed”, 8. May 2023, <https://link.crtars/c1>

¹³ RSE, “Protest ‘Serbia against violence’ in Belgrade and Novi Sad”, 8. May 2023, <https://link.crtars/c3>

code of ethics, changes within the public media service and the Regulatory Authority of Electronic Media, as well as the changes of responsible ministers.¹⁴

Protests brought 60,000 people to the streets of Belgrade at one point¹⁵ and they began to spread in cities all over Serbia.¹⁶ In response to the protests, the incumbent Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) organised a rally in support of the “Serbia of Hope” government,¹⁷ which, despite the great party mobilisation,¹⁸ engagement of state resources and extensive logistical support,¹⁹ failed²⁰, strengthening the impression of the opposition public that changes are possible.

In the same period, difficult economic conditions caused by persistent inflation of as much as 15%,²¹ but also the increasingly unfavourable position of the Serbs in the North of Kosovo,²² they shook the support of the dominant party in power.²³ Part of the opposition parliamentary parties organisationally supported the protests and transferred the demands to the highest representative and legislative body – the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia. A decision was adopted on the establishment of an Inquiry Committee that would investigate the circumstances that had led to the crime, as well as the institutional failures that followed it, but soon the ruling majority denied support for the work of the Inquiry Committee, through a strong negative campaign in the most influential media, referring to the demands of the victims’ families. i.e. fearing that the work of the committee would jeopardise the prosecutor’s investigation.²⁴

In an attempt to alleviate the politically unfavourable climate, the President of Serbia and the Prime Minister of Serbia announced increases in salaries and pensions, as well as one-time financial benefits for parents and pensioners. They also hinted at the possibility of early parliamentary elections, which could be held, as they said, already in September.²⁵ The government did not fulfil any of the protest demands, which the opposition continued to insist on.

¹⁴ Page “Stands against violence”, Demands of civil protests “Serbia against violence”, <https://link.crtars/c4>

¹⁵ Time, “Mass can do anything, when it is determined to get its own”, May 25, 2023, <https://link.crtars/c5>

¹⁶ The page “Stands against violence”, Map of the “Serbia against violence” protest, <https://link.crtars/c6>

¹⁷ Politics, Great People’s Assembly “Serbia of Hope” on May 26 in Belgrade, May 17, 2023, <https://link.crtars/c8>

¹⁸ CRTA, “Political pressures on citizens - Story 4: I will not go to the rally on May 26, even though they are forcing me” <https://link.crtars/c9>

¹⁹ CINS, “At the meeting of SNS with vehicles of state institutions”, June 1, 2023, <https://link.crtars/cb>

²⁰ Nova, “We find out: Vučić raged at his colleagues after the debacle at the counter rally”, May 27, 2023, <https://link.crtars/cc>

²¹ BBC, “Serbia and inflation: Price growth moderated for the third consecutive month, what summer brings to wallets”, June 26, 2023, <https://link.crtars/cd>

²² DW, “Dozens of people were injured in the clashes between KFOR and Serbs”, May 30, 2023, <https://link.crtars/ce>

²³ VOA, “Dissatisfaction of Serbian citizens is growing, what is the government’s response?”, June 5, 2023, <https://link.crtars/cg>

Crta, “Protests against violence - Survey of public opinion and attitudes of protest participants - August 2023”, August 23, 2023, <https://link.crtars/bp>

²⁴ Today, “The Assembly suspended further work of the Inquiry Committee after the request of the parents”, July 21, 2023, <https://link.crtars/ch>

²⁵ Euronews, “September, end of the year or spring 2024: The question of when Serbia will go to the vote is still an equation with more unknowns”, June 12, 2023, <https://link.crtars/ci>

In September, information appeared in certain media about the mobilisation of the SNS party infrastructure in preparation for the elections, and part of the opposition demanded early parliamentary and previously promised Belgrade elections.²⁶ In the media with national coverage, the rhetoric of political polarisation has intensified with the dominance of the anti-Western narrative. Attacks on leaders of opposition parties, representatives of the civil sector and prominent public figures from the field of culture continued,²⁷ and for the first time, “deepfake” technology had been used in order to further discredit the representatives of the opposition under the guise of humorous content.²⁸

At the end of September, an armed incident in the North of Kosovo led to the death of a Kosovo policeman and three members of an informal armed group of Serbian nationality. The event significantly worsened Serbia’s foreign policy position overnight.²⁹

Another announcement of early parliamentary, provincial and local elections quickly caused a situation in which, with unconvincing explanations, the mayors and presidents of 66 municipalities and cities resigned.³⁰ As these events coincided with the intensification of the campaign for social benefits and salary increases for broad sections of the population,³¹ it became clear that elections would soon be called.

In the course of several months of uncertainty about whether, when and which elections would be called, there was also a discussion about the electoral unification of the opposition, which led to the formation of the “Serbia against violence” list.³² Nationalist right-wing parties also negotiated a joint list, but did not reach a consensus on possible post-election cooperation with the pro-European opposition.³³

Pre-election tensions were also contributed to by the increase in social dissatisfaction, with announcements of stRECEs by educators, postmen, health workers and farmers.³⁴ Although the representatives of the authorities claimed that the elections were called at the request of the opposition, a strong impression remains that the decision was made taking into account, above all, their own interests.

The work of the parliament during 2023 was marked by manipulations and abuses of the rules by the incumbent majority, culminating in the last session before the election, where more than

²⁶ RSE, “Part of the opposition submitted a request for early elections in Serbia”, September 11, 2023, <https://link.crta.rs/ck>

²⁷ RSE, “‘It would be foolish to remain silent’: Actors in Serbia on criticism from the authorities”, June 8, 2023, <https://link.crta.rs/cl>

²⁸ VOA, “Ethics or laws - what can prevent the misuse of artificial intelligence”, August 17, 2023, <https://link.crta.rs/cm>

²⁹ Weekly, “Ferguson: Events in Banjska represent a real threat to regional stability”, September 30, 2023, <https://link.crta.rs/cn>

³⁰ Direct, “60 mayors resigned”, September 28, 2023, <https://link.crta.rs/cp>

³¹ Flash, “Bigger baby bump is coming! Today’s payment and social assistance: Dve grupe građana na listi”, 20. September 2023, <https://link.crta.rs/cq>

³² N1, “Joint appearance of the opposition “Serbia against violence” in the elections: Tepić and Aleksić holders of the republican list”, October 27, 2023, <https://link.crta.rs/cr>

³³ Beta, “Jovanović (New DSS): With the pro-European opposition, there is no programmatic government, only a technical one”, November 3, 2023, <https://link.crta.rs/cs>

³⁴ N1, “Postal workers continue spontaneous work stoppages across the country”, October 25, 2023, <https://link.crta.rs/ct>

50 laws were voted,³⁵ thus once again the parliament proved to be a mere tool in the hands of the executive.

Serbia was also left without essential improvements in electoral conditions, especially when it comes to problems such as pressure on voters, abuse of public resources and functions, expansion of clientelistic networks and lack of pluralism in the media.³⁶ International evaluations and indices of democracy still classify Serbia as a non-democratic (hybrid) regime,³⁷ and before the announcement of the elections, the European Commission reported on Serbia's minimal progress on the road to the EU accession, explaining in detail the assessment of the lack of progress in the domain of Chapters 23 and 24.³⁸

3 CALL FOR ELECTIONS

After less than two years, snap elections were called for December 17th for all three levels of government – parliamentary, provincial and local, thus continuing the decades-long bad practice of combining elections on one day. What this time additionally casts a shadow on that, otherwise problematic, practice is the announcement of snap local elections only for one large group of municipalities while leaving the other group to wait for their regular local elections that would be held half a year later. **The decision to select a part of municipalities for local elections was made without precedent in previous election practice, without reasonable explanations, and is a strong indicator of potential abuse of power to gain an unfair advantage in the upcoming elections.**

Early elections were announced on November 1st for December 17th, 2023 for members of parliament of the Republic of Serbia, councillors of the City of Belgrade Assembly and 66 local administrations of cities and municipalities. The elections for the Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, which would be held on the same day, were called on November 16th, 2023.

The announced parliamentary elections are also the second snap elections in a year and a half, and the third ones held in the past four years. Due to frequent snap election cycles, the citizens of Serbia will go to the polls in December for the sixth time since 2012.³⁹ Although early elections have been part of the political life of Serbia since the introduction of multi-party system, they have not been called in the last 10 years as a consequence of the instability of the ruling coalitions, but for reasons of political calculations.

Although a part of the parliamentary opposition sent a request to the President of Serbia in September to call for snap parliamentary and Belgrade elections⁴⁰, there was no inter-party

³⁵ Open Parliament, "Annual report of the Open Parliament on the work of the 13th convocation of the National Assembly in 2022 and 2023", <https://link.crta.rs/cu>

³⁶ Chart, "No progress in meeting OSCE/ODIHR recommendations", October 11, 2023, <https://link.crta.rs/cv>

³⁷ Freedom House, "Freedom in The World 2023", <https://link.crta.rs/cv>
V-Dem Institute, "Democracy Report 2023 - Defiance in the Face of Autocratisation", <https://link.crta.rs/d2>

³⁸ EU Delegation in Serbia, "Annual Report on Serbia 2023", <https://link.crta.rs/d4>

³⁹ Election cycles in Serbia since 2012: regular 2012, special 2014, special 2016, regular 2020, special 2022, special 2023.

⁴⁰ RSE, "Part of the opposition submitted a request for early elections in Serbia", September 11, 2023,

dialogue on this proposal. Instead of an atmosphere of conversation, the period leading up to the announcement of the elections was spent in fuelling tensions and complete uncertainty about which elections would be called and when they would be called. Without taking into account the public interest, the government abused its institutional position to call elections in a way, and when it suits them.

The parliamentary elections were announced with the same explanation that was used when announcing the snap parliamentary elections in 2022: *“Holding new parliamentary elections under the existing circumstances would ensure a higher degree of democracy, reducing the tensions created between opposing options in society, rejecting exclusivity and hate speech, and affirming the right to freely express opinions and views on certain political, economic and other issues, including further affirmation of European values.”*⁴¹

Calling snap local elections for more than a third of local self-governments represents a precedent in the electoral history of Serbia and points to the undemocratic practice of the government, which is carried out based on the needs of political calculation, rather than the real needs of citizens from those places.⁴² The CRTA Observation Mission noted through the available statements of municipal presidents and mayors, very uneven reasons for submitting resignations “upcoming elections in Serbia”⁴³, “instruction received” from the party⁴⁴, “so that citizens are not bullied into voting twice”⁴⁵, “for establishing legitimacy”⁴⁶, that is, giving the opportunity to win power in elections and “not by blocking roads, institutions and harassing citizens”.⁴⁷

Although elections for the Belgrade City Assembly will also be held in December 2023, they have not been announced for any of its 17 city municipalities. Big cities without local elections in 2023 include Novi Sad, Niš, Čačak, Valjevo, Jagodina and Užice.

There will be no elections in all 45 municipalities and cities in Vojvodina. **South of the Sava and Danube, most of the local self-governments with scheduled elections are in the regions of southern Serbia, Šumadija and Mačva.** The largest cities where snap local

<https://link.crtars.rs/d6>

⁴¹ The Government of the Republic of Serbia, “The Government sent the President of the Republic a proposal to dissolve the Parliament”, October 30, 2023, <https://link.crtars.rs/d8>

⁴² Almost half of the local self-governments in Serbia outside of Belgrade welcomed the announcement of the snap elections. Snap local elections will be held in 66 municipalities and cities in Serbia in December, while 88 of them await regular elections in the spring of 2024. Sixteen municipalities will remain without elections because they went to elections in 2021 and 2022. In Serbia, there are a total of 170 local governments for which elections can be called - 28 cities, 117 municipalities and 25 urban municipalities. On November 1, 2023, the President of the Serbian Parliament announced elections in 65 local governments - 12 cities and 53 municipalities. Out of 25 city municipalities, only the city of Vranje announced elections for its city municipality of Vranjska Banja.

⁴³ Info Center of the South, “Bojnik Municipality President Nebojša Nenadović also resigned”, September 28, 2023, <https://link.crtars.rs/d9>

⁴⁴ JugMedia, “Everything by agreement: Both the mayors of Pirot and Vranje and the presidents of the municipalities Vladičin Han and Medveđe resigned”, September 29, 2023, <https://link.crtars.rs/da>

⁴⁵ FAR TV, “Vladica Dimitrov resigned from the post of President of Dimitrovgrad Municipality”, October 2, 2023, <https://link.crtars.rs/db>

⁴⁶ eKučevo, “Municipal President Dr. Ivan Rajičić resigned: We are going to new elections to check who the people want”, September 28, 2023, <https://link.crtars.rs/dc>

⁴⁷ Infozija, “Kragujevac is also left without a mayor: Dašić revealed why he resigned”, September 29, 2023, <https://link.crtars.rs/dd>

elections will be held in 2023 are Belgrade, Vranje, Novi Pazar, Kragujevac, Leskovac and Šabac.

The actual reasons for the decision to hold local elections early in one part of the territory of Serbia remain unclear.

4 THE COURSE OF THE ELECTION PROCESS AND THE WORK OF THE ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

The work of the election administration has so far been carried out in accordance with the law and prescribed deadlines. Nevertheless, in addition to the technical improvements related to transparency, the way of working, organising and conducting trainings and informing voters, **these elections also show that this system of electoral administration, which is provided for by electoral laws, has reached its maximum, and in terms of its structure and capacity, it cannot provide a quality and timely response to all the challenges that the electoral process faces.** For further progress in the work of the election administration, legal changes are necessary that lead to the establishment of an independent, professional election administration with broader, different powers than the existing ones and with its own secretariat – professional service. Only under that condition, will the election administration be able to provide an institutional response to suspicions about forged signatures of voter support, manipulation of the Voters' Register and the right to the position of national minority parties in the election process. **The CRTA Observation Mission calls on the prosecution to investigate all allegations related to suspicions that some certifiers falsified the signatures of voter support, especially since these are potentially criminal offences prosecuted ex officio.**

4.1 Work of the Republic Electoral Commission

The work of the Republic Electoral Commission (REC) in the first weeks of the election campaign took place in accordance with the law and the deadlines set for the organisation and implementation of elections. In relation to last year's election process, the work of the REC has been improved in terms of working methods (introduction of an electronic system at the sessions), transparency, informing voters and conducting training for local election administration, as well as adopting a training plan for instructors and members of polling station committees. In the work so far, in addition to activities on organising and conducting elections and deciding on electoral lists, two discussions stand out in terms of importance and intensity, which were held on the issue of deadlines for replacing members of the expanded composition of polling station committees and the way of recording objections of members of polling station committees during voting. The majority of the decisions of the Republic Electoral Commission in this reporting period were adopted unanimously, however, certain decisions were preceded by discussions among the members of the REC when it comes to the interpretation of legal provisions and their application (replacement of members of the polling station committees and entry of objections of the members of the polling station committees into the minutes of the work of the polling station committee).

In the first days of the campaign, a **part of the REC members questioned the decision from the Instructions for Nominating Persons to Polling station committees for Voting in the**

Elections for Members of Parliament, according to which members of the extended composition of polling station committees cannot be replaced even if they get ill, die or they lose their right to vote, while members of the permanent composition of polling committees can be replaced up to three days before election day. **Although this decision was the result of harmonisation with the Law on the Election of Members of Parliament, it still caused a controversy in the public because in the period between election cycles, a wider professional debate was not conducted about it, and this decision was made before the very beginning of the election campaign.** Part of the opposition participants in the election therefore submitted a proposal to the Constitutional Court for an assessment of the constitutionality and legality of this decision. **By supplementing the aforementioned instruction, at the session held on November 5th, the REC extended the deadline for replacing the members of the extended composition of the polling station committees until December 13th,** which is the deadline that also applies to the members of the permanent composition.

The topic that also caused a lively discussion between the members of the REC, and is important for the election process, is **the question of how to enter the remarks of the members of the polling committee into the minutes of the work of the polling committee.** In the previous election process in 2022, and especially in the elections for the Belgrade City Assembly, members of polling station committees from some polling stations claimed that they had written remarks, but that they were not found during the review of election materials by the electoral commission. Part of the members of the REC demanded that the form of Minutes on the work of the polling committee be changed and that a special space be added in that form for the comments of members of the polling committee on the work of the polling committee. They pointed out that only such an intervention would be in accordance with the law, that is, only with such an amendment would the Minutes of the Polling station committee contain such remarks, as prescribed by the Law on the Election of Members of Parliament.

The REC decided that, as in the previous election process, the remarks of the members of the polling committee should be written in free form on a sheet of paper that is considered to be an integral part of the minutes of the work of the polling station committee. However, in order to prevent this phenomenon, as a novelty, the increased responsibility of the president of the polling station committee was established, who has the duty to confirm the existence of submitted objections with his signature, as well as to list the names of the members of the polling station committee who submitted objections in the minutes of the work of the polling station committee. This issue becomes especially important in the case of complaints or requests to cancel voting at the polling station, when the objections submitted by members of the polling station committee can be crucial for proving the existence/absence of irregularities at the polling station.

On November 20th, a total of 78 MPs submitted to the Constitutional Court a proposal for the evaluation of the constitutionality, compliance with confirmed international treaties and the legality of the Decision on forms for determining voting results in the elections for MPs, with the aim of challenging the validity of the form of Minutes of the Polling station committee's work.

The register of objections represents a step forward in increasing transparency in the work of the Republic Electoral Commission. The register contains all objections sent to

electoral commissions, decisions made based on objections, as well as legal remedies and the actions of the competent courts on them. Moreover, public access is enabled via a special banner on the website of the REC. In order to protect personal data, the REC issued a special instruction on pseudonymisation, which prescribes the procedure of election authorities when processing personal data.

In contrast to the previous election processes, materials for the sessions are not handed over to REC members in printed form, but all material is available in electronic form.

At the session held on November 3rd, a decision was made on the forms for submitting applications for observing the work of the election enforcement body, after which, after receiving accreditation, the CRTA Observation Mission began observing the work of the Republic Electoral Commission from the 14th session, i.e. the sixth session since the calling of the election, which was held on November 5th.

Domestic observers from the following organisations have been accredited so far to monitor the election enforcement authorities: Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights – YUCOM, CESID, Res Publica, Citizens on Watch and CRTA. Among the international observers, the ODIHR Mission was accredited for monitoring the work of the REC and other bodies for the implementation of elections.

Out of eleven declared election lists⁴⁸, four lists acquired the status of lists of national minorities. Each of the declared lists proposed a member and a deputy member of the Republic Electoral Commission in the expanded composition, except for the electoral list of the Party of Democratic Action of Sandžak.

4.2 Ruling on objections

In this period, the REC decided on 15 objections, where 14 had identical content and all were unanimously rejected as unfounded. The objections pointed out that the Constitution was violated because the holder of the election list “Aleksandar Vučić - Serbia must not stop” is the President of the Republic of Serbia, who, according to the allegations in the objections, as the President of the Republic of Serbia reflects the unity of the country. Given that the Republic Electoral Commission does not assess the constitutionality of acts, and that other state bodies are responsible for the assessment of constitutionality, it decided within its jurisdiction and

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1. ⁴⁸ Aleksandar Vučić - Serbia must not stop
 2. Ivica Dačić – Prime Minister of Serbia
 3. Dr. Vojislav Šešelj – Serbian Radical Party
 4. Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski - Boško Obradović - National Gathering - State Power - Serbian Party Oathkeepers - Serbian Door Movement
 5. Dr. Miloš Jovanović - Hope for Serbia - Serbian Coalition Hope - National Democratic Alternative - New Democratic Party of Serbia (New DSS) - Movement for the Restoration of the Kingdom of Serbia (POKS) - Vojislav Mihailović
 6. Union of Vojvodina Hungarians - for our president, for our community, for the future!
 7. Serbia against violence - Miroslav Miki Aleksić - Marinika Tepić (Party of Freedom and Justice, People's Movement of Serbia, Green - Left Front, We are not drowning Belgrade, Ecological Uprising - Čuta, Democratic Party, Movement of Free Citizens, Serbia Center, Zajedno, Movement for Reversal, United Trade Unions of Serbia “Sloga”, New Face of Serbia)
 8. Ušame Zukorlić - United for justice - Pause for justice and reconciliation - Bosniaks of Sandžak, Tomislav Žigmanov - Democratic Union of Croats in Vojvodina
 9. SDA Sandžak - Dr. Sulejman Ugljanin
 10. Together for the future and development - Coalition for Peace and Tolerance
 11. People's Party - Safe choice. Serious people - Vuk Jeremić, PhD Sanda Rašković Ivić, Siniša Kovačević, Vladimir Gajić, Marina Lipovac Tanasković

rejected the objections. One complaint was rejected because it was filed by an unauthorised person.

One of the 15 objections received was filed due to the question of the correctness of the collected signatures for submitting the candidacy of the electoral list on the announcement of the electoral list of Ivica Dačić – Prime Minister of Serbia.

4.3 Application process

In 2017, the law on the authentication of signatures, manuscripts and transcripts completely transferred the authentication of signatures for candidacy to the jurisdiction of public notaries, which was also one of the recommendations of the ODIHR to improve the transparency and integrity of this process. Nonetheless, **in 2020, with the new election laws, the verification of signatures was returned to the jurisdiction of municipal and city administrations as well.** CRTA already pointed to the fact that it is a bad solution according to which signatures of support are verified in municipal and city administrations, which was also confirmed during the 2022 elections in case of suspicion of falsification of statements of support of citizens to the list “Russian Minority Alliance – Milena Pavlović, Pavle Bihale Gavrin“. Doubt was expressed by the Republican Electoral Commission, even though it announced the list based on the decision of the Administrative Court. CRTA also reported this to the public at the time and demanded the reaction of the competent prosecuting authorities in order to determine whether there was electoral fraud.

Although in this election process, the CRTA Observation Mission assesses that in a formal sense there was no threat to the freedom of actors to participate in the elections, it was observed that this process was faced with the distrust of political actors and the public, as well as indications that the candidacy process may violate the integrity of the election process this year as well. Allegations have appeared in the public domain⁴⁹ about problems with the verification of voter support signatures, as well as claims⁵⁰ about suspicious signatures on the lists, as in previous years, while in some places, through conversations with actors, field observers recorded allegations that citizens are being pressured not to give a signature for a certain list.

When it comes to the problems surrounding the certification of supporting signatures, CRTA concluded that the confusion was caused by the fact that some list submitters entered the names of municipal notaries, and sometimes inconsistently only stated that the certification was performed by municipal administrations, while there were also cases of listing the names of notaries from notaries’ office, not the office itself. For one such situation with the list of Ivica Dačić – Prime Minister of Serbia, a complaint was filed with the REC. The objection claimed that the notarisation was not performed by authorised certifiers. Ruling on the objections, the electoral commissions found that the specified certifiers in the records submitted by the list were indeed authorised. Thus, **all members of the REC agreed that the mentioned list should not be cancelled, that is, that the objection should be rejected. During the decision-making process, it was pointed out** that the documents were certified by the

⁴⁹ X, Đorđe Stanković, November 4, 2023. <https://link.cрта.rs/fa>

⁵⁰ The Grid, November 5, 2023. Suspiciously collected signatures for the local electoral list of United Serbia in Vlasotince, even the socialists filed a complaint, <https://link.cрта.rs/fb>

competent authorities because the documents bear the seal of the competent authority. Also, it was stated that these are undisputed statements and signatures of the voters who signed the statements, that is, that the statements contain all the essential elements that can be used to determine the will of the voters.

Additional light on the problems with the signature verification of voter support was provided by the case of a verified signature for the Russian Party – Slobodan Nikolić, who was announced for the elections for councillors of the Belgrade City Assembly. **When deciding on this list, one member of CEC Belgrade made claims that by personally contacting one of the signatories supporting the list, she found out that the signature was actually fake, that is, that the voter did not voluntarily give his signature of support.**

This is another example that shows how important it is to organise the process of verifying signatures of voter support in such a way that it is possible to determine the responsibility of the notary for each signature, **and this is only possible if the verification is entrusted exclusively to notary offices, i.e. returning the legal solution that is existed before 2020**, which CRTA suggests in its recommendations.

However, many questions, which are easy to manipulate, remain open due to the absence of reactions from the prosecution, which does not investigate allegations of possible abuses, even though they are potentially criminal offences prosecuted ex officio, as well as the absence of powers of electoral commissions to investigate these cases more closely.

We will remind you that the candidacy process has been rocked by serious controversies over the forgery of signatures and seals of certifiers, without institutional consequences. In the 2022 elections, the electoral list “Russian Minority Alliance” led by the controversial Leviathan movement, was declared despite the fact that it got to the stage of the election by illegal means. State authorities did not take any action regarding that case, which repeats the practice of not prosecuting cases of the criminal offence of forgery, as was the case in earlier election processes. Also, during the submission of the list of candidates for MPs in 2016, in the process of checking supporting signatures, the Republic Electoral Commission established the existence of numerous forged signatures of voter support.⁵¹

4.4 Deciding on the forms and composition of the body for conducting elections

On the day of the announcement of the election, the REC adopted the Decision on the forms for submitting the electoral list of candidates for the National Assembly MPs, as well as the Decision on determining the colour of the ballot and the colour of the control sheet for checking the correctness of the ballot box for voting in the elections for the National Assembly MPs. The timetable for conducting election activities in the procedure of elections for the National Assembly MPs, scheduled for December 17th, 2023, was adopted on November 3rd at the 11th session. The REC also adopted the Decision on the forms for determining the voting results

⁵¹ In numbers, in 2016, 8,684 forged signatures were found, seven election lists were supported by forged signatures, and most of the signatures were certified with a fake seal of the Basic Court in Šabac. In 2016, the First Basic Public Prosecutor’s Office in Belgrade filed indictments against seven persons for committing the criminal offense of document forgery under Article 355 of the Criminal Code, which is punishable by up to 3 years in prison. These indictments were forwarded to the First Basic Court in Belgrade for confirmation, but to date no information is available on the outcome of this procedure. The last information obtained by Crta about this procedure dates back to June 2020, when the Court of First Instance informed Crta that the criminal proceedings were suspended, because a warrant was issued for one of the defendants, which has not yet been implemented.

in the elections for MPs. Also, a Decision was made on the forms of minutes on the handover of election materials for the conduct of elections for MPs.

Regarding the composition of local electoral commissions, decisions were made on the composition and work of electoral commissions of local self-government units during the simultaneous holding of elections for MPs and councillors of municipal and city assemblies for the conduct of elections in Pristina, Kosovska Mitrovica, Gjilane, Peć and Gora. In accordance with its competences, the Republic Electoral Commission formed local electoral commissions with a permanent composition.

Based on the proposal of the municipal and city administrations, a decision was made to approve the designation of polling stations with more than 2,500 and less than 100 voters, after which a decision was made to designate polling stations in institutions for the execution of criminal sanctions

4.5 Voters' Register: open doubts, absence of data

Opposition representatives claims that several hundred citizens fictitiously change their address in Belgrade on a daily basis in order to participate in local elections⁵², as well as the statement of Milan Stamatović, the new political partner of the list "Aleksandar Vučić – Serbia must not stop"⁵³, which a part of the public interprets as a confirmation that "transfer of voters" is being carried out before the election, behind which the Serbian Progressive Party stands, put the Voters' Register under the public's eye in this election process as well and opened the issue of voter migration. Calling of snap local elections only in a part of Serbia further contributes to the suspicions of a part of the public that it is a political strategy that will ensure electoral victory in the December elections, that is, in the spring elections in the rest of the municipalities. As in previous elections, the negative perception of the Voters' Register based on the lack of timely and sufficient data, and facts about its condition represents a serious problem that contributes to public distrust in the electoral process.

As in the previous elections, the CRTA Observation Mission sent a letter to the competent ministries – the Ministry of State Administration and Local Self-Government and the Ministry of Internal Affairs with an invitation to a meeting, in order to gather additional information regarding the procedures of importance for such cases of potential manipulation of the Voters' Register, i.e. migration of voters. Until the conclusion of this report, the responses to the calls of the CRTA Observation Mission have not arrived. Furthermore, CRTA sent a request for access to information of public importance to the Ministry of Internal Affairs to obtain precise information on applications and passivation of residence. The response to the request arrived

⁵² N1, "Aleksić: 300 to 500 citizens fictitiously change their address daily due to the elections in Belgrade", October 19, 2023, <https://link.crtars.de>

⁵³ "But if the municipalities are divided now, so that in March, when the regular elections are held, 70 municipalities remain, SNS can, considering its position, transfer a good part of the voters to Čajetin and thus win. Which is totally legit. Some safe voters, perhaps from Užice or from another country, can be transferred to Čajetina and you, with the good support of your citizens, can lose because of people who came from abroad. And why do we look forward to the future in the long term, what would happen if we, as the only local self-government, were the opponent of a machine that has all the levers of power to simply blow us off the political scene?"

Danas, Milan Stamatović explains for N1 why he joins Vučić's movement, October 24, 2023, <https://link.crtars/df>

on November 17th, but with incomplete information⁵⁴, which makes it impossible to get a full insight into the problem and remove doubts about the manipulations of citizens' migrations. The remaining data is currently subject to processing and analysis.

On November 16th, the Ministry of Internal Affairs also published data on the movement of active applications for residence in the territory of the City of Belgrade as of October 31.⁵⁵ However, the data is given collectively for minors and adults, which, as in the case of the response of the Ministry of Internal Affairs to the request for access to information of public importance, prevents further analysis and removal of suspicions about manipulations of citizens' migrations.

The latest quarterly breakdown of the number of voters by municipality was published on the Ministry of State Administration and Local Self-Government website on October 23rd, 2023⁵⁶, and it is the last section before the conclusion of the Voters' Register. Based on the comparison of the trend in the number of voters with the previous sections, no major differences can be observed, except for a slight increase in Belgrade. **The CRTA Observation Mission does not consider these data sufficient for evaluation, because the data requested from the Ministry of Internal Affairs are crucial for analysis and gaining insight into the true state of voters' movement.**

On the other hand, **the CRTA observers, through field observation of the work of police stations in Belgrade, noted that there is an uneven practice by which citizens can check whether unknown persons have been registered at their addresses, that is, by which they can passivate them**⁵⁷. Officials of some police administrations considered it sufficient for citizens to passivate all persons who are not members of the household, and some police stations requested that a request be submitted first to determine whether there are persons who are not members of the household at the address, and only then the passivation procedure. Also, in Belgrade, CRTA determined the transfer of jurisdiction from the municipal police stations to the Directorate for Administrative Affairs, which is currently located at the address Omladinskih brigada 1, and vice versa for the case of checking and passivating unknown tenants. As a result, the CRTA Observation Mission sent a letter on October 23rd, 2023 to the Ministry of Internal Affairs with a request that the Ministry present precise information to the citizens regarding the mentioned procedures, but there was no response. The invitation to the Ministry of Internal Affairs was further repeated on October 27th and November 7th, but the Ministry did not respond even after the third letter sent. On November 22nd, CRTA appealed to the Protector of Citizens with a complaint about the work of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, with the hope that this institution, in accordance with its powers, will contribute to citizens getting the requested answers.

In the meantime, while public suspicions about organised voter migration were growing, state representatives still addressed the public. The Prime Minister, Ana Brnabić, denied the claims

⁵⁴ "The Ministry is unable to provide information on the number of adult citizens of the Republic of Serbia who have registered their residence in the territory of the city of Belgrade, and whose previous residence was abroad."

⁵⁵ Ministry of Internal Affairs, "Display and movement of active applications for residence in the territory of the city of Belgrade", 22. November 2023, <https://link.crtars.rs/dg>

⁵⁶ Ministry of State Administration and Local Self-Government, Overview of the number of voters - Status as of October 23, 2023, <https://link.crtars.rs/dh>

⁵⁷ Article 3 of the Law on Residence and Residence of Citizens stipulates that the passivation of an address is the marking in the records of the competent authority that the citizen does not live at the address of the registered residence or residence.

of the opposition leader, Đorđe Miketić, that he passivated an unknown person from his address. The day after the Prime Minister's address, **CRTA recorded an allegation at a police station in Belgrade that "there had just been" a change in practice – i.e. that citizens who want to check and passivate an unknown person from their addresses must first submit a request to determine who is registered at the address of the owner of the apartment.**

4.6 City Electoral Commission of the City of Belgrade

In the reporting period, the work of the City Electoral Commission of the City of Belgrade (CEC) took place in accordance with the law and in accordance with the legal deadlines. However, **in this election process, the CEC encountered a situation in which there was a suspicion that various abuses or criminal acts were committed in connection with the forgery of voter support signatures, and to which the CEC did not have a prescribed reaction mechanism**, which once again indicates the need to change the organisation and powers of electoral commissions.

The largest number of decisions of the City Electoral Commission of the City of Belgrade in this reporting period were adopted unanimously at the CEC sessions. CEC members discussed the most but then did not reach a unanimous decision on the announcement of the electoral list "Russian Party – Slobodan Nikolić", on determining the position of the national minority party for the list of the same name and deciding on the submitted objection to the announcement of that electoral list. Also, there were discussions about the announcement of the election list "Aleksandar Vučić - Belgrade must not stop".

When it comes to the electoral list of "the Russian Party – Slobodan Nikolić", some members of the CEC have made claims disputing at least one voter's signature in support of the said list,⁵⁸ and put forward a request that the vote on the announcement of the electoral list be postponed, in order to carry out an additional review of the material from the submission of the list. According to the CEC report on the receipt of the electoral list, "the Russian Party – Slobodan Nikolić" collected 2,069 signatures of voter support, of which 2,060 are correct (certified with the seal of an authorised certifier; they have the right to vote and have complete personal data). All signatures are certified by the seals of municipal notaries, of which the largest number, as many as 491, are certified by the seal of the municipal notary of the Municipality of Čukarica. During the discussion, the CEC member stated that she personally contacted a person who allegedly signed a statement of support for the Russian party and that this person denies that she voluntarily signed the said electoral list. For this reason, some members of CEC asked for additional insight into voter support signatures and delay in deciding on the electoral list. On the other hand, the president of CEC informed all members that according to the report of the expert service, it was established that 2,060 voter support signatures are legally valid, i.e. certified by valid signatures of authorised certifiers, and that CEC has no way of additionally establishing the validity of the collected signatures. The

⁵⁸ The list was submitted with a total of 2,069 attached signatures.

election list was announced with 9 votes “for” and 6 “against”, while CEC did not meet the request of individual members to review the collected signatures again.

Although the electoral list was declared by the majority of the members of CEC Belgrade, and its position of the party of the national minority in the electoral process was determined, some members of CEC announced that they would use the available legal means to challenge these decisions.

When it comes to the Decision on the announcement of the election list “Aleksandar Vučić – Belgrade must not stop”, eight members of the City Electoral Commission voted for the adoption of the list, while four of them abstained. **During the discussion, doubts were expressed that statements of support for this election list were collected on forms that do not conform to the forms prescribed by the decision of the City Electoral Commission of the City of Belgrade.** They also pointed out that there was a suspicion that this list started collecting signatures of support even before the official form⁵⁹ was adopted, which put the participants in the election race, at its very beginning, in an unequal position. **The President of CEC referred to Article 72 paragraph 4 of the Law on the Election of Members of Parliament, which stipulates that a certified statement of voter supporting the electoral list shall also be valid when such errors have been made at completing statement forms that allow determining with certainty which electoral list is supported, provided that the statement has been certified by the competent authority.** Whether this provision of the law can be applied to this case as well seems to be an open question, as it was not claimed that there were obvious mistakes, but that the statements were certified on an inappropriate form. One of the CEC members from the opposition proposed to establish a special commission that would check the number of such forms in the documentation of the mentioned list, but the City Electoral Commission rejected that proposal by a majority of votes.

In addition to the above, the work of the City Electoral Commission of the City of Belgrade in this period was marked by the adoption of the timeline for conducting the elections, the adoption of the decision on the colour of the ballot and the control ballot, as well as forms for the implementation of various electoral activities. Instructions on handing over election materials before and after voting were also adopted, as well as a decision on fees, material and other costs related to the implementation of the election. The city Electoral Commission of the city of Belgrade decided on the announcement of election lists, but also on the appointment of members and deputy members in the extended composition.

In contrast to the previous election processes, the materials for the sessions are not given to CEC members in printed form, but all materials are available in electronic form on laptops that are provided for each member. Also, observers have access to all materials in electronic form via laptop computers provided by CEC. At the four sessions of the City Electoral Commission, decisions were made on numerous forms of importance for the election process.⁶⁰ Also, out

⁵⁹ Decision on the name and appearance of the forms for submitting the electoral list of candidates for councilors of the Belgrade City Assembly

⁶⁰ Decisions made on forms: Decision on the name and appearance of the forms for submission of the electoral list of candidates for councilors of the City of Belgrade (adopted at the 1st session), Decision on determining the appearance and color of the ballot and control slip, Decision on the forms for determining the voting results, Decision on the handover report forms of election materials, Schedule for carrying out election activities, Decision on forms for exercising the voter's right to information on whether it is recorded in the extract from the voter list that he voted in the elections for councilors of the City of Belgrade Assembly, Decision on fees, material and other costs related to implementation of elections (all adopted at the 4th session).

of six announced lists⁶¹, one acquired the status of a national minority. Each of the announced lists proposed members and deputy members to the expanded composition of the City Electoral Commission of the City of Belgrade.

Deciding on the objection to the announcement of the electoral list of “the Russian Party – Slobodan Nikolić”

In the reporting period, the City Electoral Commission of the City of Belgrade decided on one objection.

It is about the objection of the Coalition “Serbia against violence” against the decision on the announcement of the electoral list of “the Russian Party – Slobodan Nikolić”. The city Electoral Commission of the city of Belgrade rejected this complaint as untimely submitted with 10 votes “for” and 8 “against”. As a matter of fact, the president of the commission believed that in this situation the Law on the Election of Members of Parliament should be applied accordingly, and Article 79 of that law was applied. According to that article, the deadline for submitting objections is 48 hours from the publication of the decision on the web presentation of the Republic Electoral Commission and expired on November 17th at 9:21 p.m. The objection was submitted on November 18th at 4:17 p.m. However, in the discussion that followed, the members of CEC, who later voted against such a decision, pointed out that in this particular case, the Law on the Election of Members of Parliament cannot be applied accordingly, pointing to Article 8 of the Law on Local Elections, which states that the provisions of the Law on the Election of Members of Parliament are applied only in issues that are not specifically regulated by this law. They believed that Article 82 of the Law on Local Elections must be applied, which determines the general deadline for filing objections in local elections, namely 72 hours from the announcement of the decision. Referring to this article, they pointed out that the deadline had not expired and that the objection is timely, and that it could not be rejected for the stated reason. It was specifically requested that the representatives of the Russian Party in the extended composition be excluded from the decision on the given objection so that they would not decide on their own matter, which the president of the commission refused to do. Finally, the decision on which law should be applied in the specific case will be made by the High Court in Belgrade, since the filing of an appeal against this decision of the City Electoral Commission of the City of Belgrade had been announced.

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1. Aleksandar Vučić - Belgrade must not stop
 2. Ivica Dačić – Prime Minister of Serbia, Toma Filip – Mayor of Belgrade
 3. Serbia against violence - Dobrica Veselinović - prof. Dr. Vladimir Obradović (Party of Freedom and Justice, People's Movement of Serbia, Green - Left Front, We are not drowning Belgrade, Ecological Uprising - Čuta, Democratic Party, Movement of Free Citizens, Serbia Center, Zajedno, Movement for the Revolution, United Trade Unions of Serbia “Sloga”, New face of Serbia)
 4. Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski - Boško Obradović - National Gathering - State Power - Serbian Party Oathkeepers - Serbian Door Movement
 5. Dr. Miloš Jovanović - Hope for Belgrade - Serbian Coalition Hope - National Democratic Alternative - New Democratic Party of Serbia (New DSS) - Movement for the Restoration of the Kingdom of Serbia (POKS) - Vojislav Mihailović
 6. Ruska stranka – Slobodan Nikolić

5 COURSE OF THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN

In the period from November 1st to 20th, the CRTA field observers submitted about 1,700 reports on the election campaign conducted by the participants in the elections. On the ground, observers also monitored and reported on the activities of public authorities. From November 1st to 17th, media observers analysed more than 550 hours of nationally televised programmes featuring election candidates. Social media observers processed more than 450 posts by election candidates on Facebook, focusing on posts that exceeded the usual levels of reach and interaction on the social network.

The presence of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party, which leads the electoral coalition “Aleksandar Vučić – Serbia must not stop” **dominates in the public space** in comparison to other actors, both on the ground⁶², as well as in the media. On the ground, the Serbian Progressive Party has almost twice as many recorded activities as all other electoral lists. The activities of this party, however, are often combined or hardly distinguished from the activities of the public authorities, which creates the idea of a single entity - that is, **an election game in which the state, equal in the narrative with the President of the Republic of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, competes against the political parties of the opposition**. In one in three recorded activities of the Serbian Progressive Party, the merits were attributed to President Aleksandar Vučić, while in almost half of the recorded activities of this party, the work of public authorities was promoted, and the merits were attributed to the state. Also, the increased activities of the public authorities, which contribute to the affirmation of the ruling party, were recorded.

Although on a significantly smaller scale compared to the activities of the Serbian Progressive Party, **there are noticeable and intensified activities of the Socialist Party of Serbia on the ground**, which began its campaign through more intensive promotion through party rallies throughout Serbia (either independently or with coalition partners – United Serbia and Greens of Serbia), stands and street promotional actions. The active campaign of the Social Democratic Party of Serbia, which supported the list “Aleksandar Vučić – Serbia must not stop”, was also noticed.

Compared to the most dominant electoral list “Aleksandra Vučić – Serbia must not stop”, the activities of the opposition electoral candidates are significantly lower, especially in terms of field work. In some municipalities, there are almost no recorded activities of opposition parties nor their presence on the ground in this period. In the recorded activities **of the opposition parties, the “Serbia against violence” coalition stands out as the most active**, although it officially started its campaign only on November 16th.⁶³ The far right block, the National Gathering (Dveri and Oathkeepers) is also barely visible in the campaign. The activities of the opposition parties are predominantly observed in the form of posts on social networks and advertising in the media, while the recorded field work (stands, conversations with citizens, etc.) has so far been insignificant.

⁶² Recorded activities of political actors, the dominantly ruling Serbian Progressive Party: “door to door”, calling citizens by phone, stands, political meetings, party events and conversations with citizens, arranging public areas, bribing citizens with various material goods, etc.

⁶³ We are not drowning Belgrade. “The victorious Belgrade convention of the coalition Serbia against violence was held”, November 16, 2023, <https://link.crt.rs/di>

In addition to the election candidates and the public authorities, the activities and initiatives of “ProGlas”, a group of individuals who are concerned about the direction in which the government is leading the country’s policy and which gathered with the aim of inviting citizens to go to the polls in large numbers, stand out on the ground. By the time the report was concluded, the initiative had collected more than 130,000 signatures of support from citizens, and on the ground it organises forums of public figures gathered around the initiative.⁶⁴

In the following, we will present the phenomena that marked the first weeks of the election campaign to the greatest extent, according to the findings of the observers of the CRTA Observation Mission : **the phenomenon of merging the state and the party and the misuse of public resources and state functions to gain an advantage over opponents; tensions, inflammatory rhetoric in the election campaign and recorded incidents; political pressures on citizens and bribery; abuse of citizens’ personal data and unethical approach to running a campaign and surveying citizens; media pluralism and characteristics of the campaign on social networks.**

5.1 State in elections: blurring the line between state and party

The activities and messages recorded so far by both public officials and the ruling party in many cases do not make a clear and unequivocal distinction and boundary between the state and the party, leaving room for manipulation and illicit influence on voters.

Before the announcement of the campaign, and after receiving information about the resignations of municipal presidents and mayors in certain parts of the country, the CRTA Observation Mission actively monitored the activities of the highest state officials. **The CRTA observers have been in the past month⁶⁵ recorded almost 450 appearances of high-ranking government officials in local communities – either in individual or group visits or activities.** Their tours mostly coincide with municipalities where snap local elections have been announced.⁶⁶ In almost half of the recorded visits, officials were represented in the capacity of their public function, i.e. as representatives of the state of Serbia.

The **abuse** of manifestations, events and works financed from the state budget for the purpose of party promotion **is reflected in the presence of party symbols** in such events and activities, **crediting the ruling party and the president**, but also in the **open invitation of citizens to vote for the ruling party.**⁶⁷

The blurring of the boundaries between public and party functions, as well as the tendency to normalise the “merging of the state with the party” is also recognised in cases where **public officials, as part of official tours and visits, use the opportunity to appear as party officials on the same day**, visiting local, municipal and city party committees. Unclear roles of public/party officials are reflected in announcements and reports in local media and official

⁶⁴ The first forum of the “ProGlas” initiative was Organised on November 13 in Zrenjanin.

⁶⁵ From mid-October (the period before the announcement of elections) until the conclusion of the report.

⁶⁶ Over 200 appearances of high-ranking public officials - prime ministers, ministers, state secretaries, the president - were recorded in municipalities where local elections were announced.

⁶⁷ One such invitation was made by the mayor of Niš.

Facebook, Dragana Sotirovski Official page, November 10, 2023, <https://link.crt.rs/dj>

orders of officials regarding these events. **This type of campaign allows parties with which voters identify public officials to gain an additional advantage.**

On the other hand, in the intense and varied activities of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party, the increased presence of public officials is noticeable. In every third recorded SNS party activity, the presence of one of the public office holders was noted. **Furthermore, the dominant use of the AV brand (Aleksandar Vučić) or the placing of state symbols in the foreground, instead of the visual identity of the Serbian Progressive Party, i.e. the coalition it leads in the elections, contributes to the blurring of the border between the state and the party in the eyes of the public.**

The data collected as part of long-term observation indicate that **the activities of the Serbian Progressive Party are more intense in places where local elections will be held.** Accordingly, **a greater number of potential abuses of public resources were observed in these places.** Observers noted **about 50 cases that have elements of potential abuse of public resources** – official premises and offices, vehicles, machines or mechanisation of public enterprises and others. Observers specifically reported on cases of potential abuse of official vehicles ahead of the ruling party's rally, with allegations that vehicles owned by municipalities and public companies were used to transport activists and citizens to rallies.

Moreover, the strategic political communication of the ruling coalition gives the impression that the elections being held are presidential and not parliamentary, provincial or local. In the addresses of officials of the ruling party, **the narrative of “supra-party interests” and the state-building electoral list “Aleksandar Vučić – Serbia must not stop” is insisted on, which strengthens the associative link between the state and the ruling party.**

5.2 Production of intolerance and incitement of hatred in the election campaign

The election race so far has been characterised by intolerant rhetoric that reinforces the already highly polarised atmosphere in society. **The CRTA Observation Mission assesses with concern that the rhetoric, which aims to cause intolerance and hatred towards dissenters, is on an upward trajectory after the first weeks of the election campaign.** Apart from observing events on the ground, aggressive and violent rhetoric spreads through traditional media – both electronic and printed, as well as through social network channels. **State institutions, instead of actively participating in calming tensions, intensify them with dangerous insinuations that some actors have a plan to challenge the election results through violence.**

The CRTA' observers noted **the easy attribution of the label of “anti-state parties”** to political opponents and the use of inappropriate speech in public addresses by representatives of the government, as well as candidates of parties in power and the opposition. In the field, the appearance of promotional materials in which party representatives are called derogatory names, or hate speech is directed towards them, was recorded.⁶⁸ **The polarisation is further**

⁶⁸ Since mid-October, on the eve of the calling of early elections, anonymous materials - such as leaflets, posters or stencils - have been recorded in Belgrade and several cities in Serbia, which aim to incite hatred towards opposition leaders, such as the

deepened by the dominant narrative of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party, which defines the issue of the upcoming elections as a referendum question for or against Serbia, which is presented to the citizens as an ultimatum.

The negative campaign and inappropriate speech and hate speech are present on social networks (posts on the official accounts of parties and party officials), local media and portals, but also on the ground – in conversations with citizens and promotional material. Through a systematic observation of the social networks of election candidates, the CRTA Observation Mission assessed that since the beginning of the campaign, **one in five posts that overturns the norms of usual interaction and reach on Facebook contains elements of violent communication.**⁶⁹

On the same day that the elections were announced, November 1st, the President of Serbia labelled the representatives of the opposition list “Serbia Against Violence” as “beaters”.⁷⁰, which was followed by a series of articles about the alleged “crimes of the opposition leaders”⁷¹. Headlines about “monstrous attacks on Vučić’s family” followed⁷², “the ‘shooting’ of Vučić with anti-Serb triage”⁷³, and everything is presented as a combination of tycoons, the opposition and their media. Accusations that “tycoons”, “false patriots” and “pro-European elite” have joined forces to “overthrow Vučić” appeared on the front pages⁷⁴, while the portals also wrote about the scenario that “should weaken Serbia” and which implies that “three heads must fall in order for Vučić’s to fall.”⁷⁵ The President of Serbia emphasised in his speeches and at party rallies that the only programme of the opposition is “hate”⁷⁶, and that opposition politicians “want the destruction of our families” and “the destruction of our country”⁷⁷. An almost identical message was repeated by the President of the Assembly, Vladimir Orlić⁷⁸ and the Minister of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure, Goran Vesić⁷⁹. Alleged “hunts for

identification of Pavle Grbović with the Ustasha regime or Zdravko Ponoš with the NATO general. Opposition leaders, such as Marinika Tepić, Miroslav Aleksić and others, were targeted with anonymous leaflets.

⁶⁹ See section 5.7 for more on social media monitoring findings.

⁷⁰ YouTube, Aleksandar Vučić, “Vučić: The elections will show what kind of politics the citizens support”, 1. November 2023, <https://link.crtars.rs/du>

⁷¹ Serbian telegraph, “Outrageous violence and crimes of opposition leaders: Who is behind the proclamation of the opposition and how they behave on the public stage”, November 7, 2023, <https://link.crtars.rs/dm>

⁷² Kurir, “Monstrous attacks on Vučić’s family - A strong message from the president: My father is Anđelko and I love him endlessly”, November 4, 2023, <https://link.crtars.rs/dn>

⁷³ Večernje novosti, “Documentary on TV N1: The ‘shooting’ of Vučić with the triage of anti-Serbs”, November 4, 2023, <https://link.crtars.rs/do>

⁷⁴ Informer, “Now everything is finally clear to everyone - Ljotićevci + Europeans = Đilasov - Tycoons, false patriots and the ‘pro-European elite’ joined together with only one goal - to overthrow Vučić and bring Dragan Đilas to power, so that he could once again get rich by stealing from the people”, November 6, 2023, <https://link.crtars.rs/dp>

⁷⁵ Serbian telegraph, “There is a scenario at work that should weaken Serbia: Three heads must fall for Vučić’s to fall”, November 6, 2023, <https://link.crtars.rs/dr>

⁷⁶ YouTube, Aleksandar Vučić, “Vučić: We will defeat them all together and convincingly”, November 3, 2023, <https://link.crtars.rs/dv>

⁷⁷ YouTube, Aleksandar Vučić, “Vučić: We will save all families in Serbia”, November 3, 2023, <https://link.crtars.rs/dw>

⁷⁸ Informer, “Destroying families is the only programme of the opposition! Orlić on the tycoon’s attack on Andrej Vučić: Every day a chase!”, November 4, 2023, <https://link.crtars.rs/ds>

⁷⁹ Informer, “Pure hatred! Vesić: The opposition’s only policy is to attack Vučić and his family”, November 12, 2023, <https://link.crtars.rs/dx>

the president”⁸⁰, in the pro-government media, there was also proof that the opposition is working “against its own people”⁸¹. Analysts and the media contributed to such intimidation of citizens by announcing that “in the coming weeks we can expect a dirty campaign by the opposition”⁸², that the opposition is planning an attack on the Republic Electoral Commission on the Election Night⁸³, “the destruction of the earth”⁸⁴, that he wants to “come to power by force” and “set the country on fire”⁸⁵.

The discourse of divisions is particularly expressed in the campaign of the ruling party, in which all **opposition parties are discredited as “enemies” who orchestrate an attack on the state, that is, the president of the state**. One of the most explicit examples of the disinformation campaign about the violent opposition, which has been led by SNS representatives in cooperation with the media since the beginning of the campaign, is the statement of the President of the State in the morning programme of Pink television, in which he said that one of the main messages of the opposition is “if it turns out that we have not won, we will kill all of them”⁸⁶. In this kind of rhetoric, national sentiment is often manipulated, so the issue of Kosovo and Srebrenica is often used as a dividing line, as well as the entry into NATO and the issue of imposing sanctions on Russia. Threats to the citizens of the opposition were also reflected in the forecasts of the representatives of the government that, in case of victory, the opposition politicians would impose sanctions on Russia, join the NATO alliance, declare the Serbs a “genocidal people”, and Kosovo would get a seat in the UN.⁸⁷ While listening to these forecasts, viewers of Pink TV also watched a video with the statements of the candidates of the “Serbia against violence” list about the genocide in Srebrenica, and the audience of the portal also read along with the same video how the opposition candidates “put a stamp on the Serbs”.⁸⁸ In this context, the pro-European opposition bloc is presented as a “friend of Kurti’s enemy” and “those who will betray/sell Kosovo”, while the right-wing parties are presented as false patriots⁸⁹ which use the national issue for personal material gain. Among other statements that resonated in the media, and which can also be placed in the category of threats, was the statement of the former director of the Security Intelligence Agency and the

⁸⁰ Serbian telegraph, “Shame! Vučić is bringing back what is Serbian, and the opposition is chasing the president! Another proof that they are working against their own people - national treasure returned to Serbia!”, November 13, 2023, <https://link.crta.rs/dz>

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Kurir, “In the coming weeks we can expect a dirty campaign of the opposition! Gajić gave advice to citizens before the elections: This is what they need to know”, November 8, 2023, <https://link.crta.rs/e0>

⁸³ Hello, “Attack on REC - We discover what the opposition is planning on election night: The most aggressive proponent of such ideas is Čuta, and Srđan Miliivojević gives him wholehearted support”, November 10, 2023, <https://link.crta.rs/e1>

⁸⁴ Hello, “Demolishing opposition: The pro-Western opposition, gathered around Dragan Đilas in the desire for Serbia to stop, openly presented a plan to destroy the country by stopping crucial projects for only one reason - Vučić started them!”, November 14, 2023, <https://link.crta.rs/e2>

⁸⁵ Informer, “They would set the country on fire again! The people of Đilas want to come to power by force”, November 16, 2023, <https://link.crta.rs/e3>

⁸⁶ YouTube, Aleksandar Vučić, “Vučić: For us, the future of Serbia is a key issue”, November 18, 2023, <https://link.crta.rs/e4>

⁸⁷ YouTube, Aleksandar Vučić, “Vučić: People who love Serbia are the greatest strength of our country”, November 9, 2023, <https://link.crta.rs/e6>

⁸⁸ Serbian telegraph. “The entire Đilas opposition stamped on the Serbs: Does anyone on the ‘Serbia against violence’ list not consider that our people are genocidal?”, 13. November 2023, <https://link.crta.rs/e7>

⁸⁹ Facebook, Serbian Progressive Party Knjaževac, November 10, 2023, <https://link.crta.rs/e9>

leader of the Socialist Movement, Aleksandar Vulin, that the recognition of Kosovo will be “galloping if Vučić is not in power.”⁹⁰. The tragedy that happened in May was also used to deal with the opponents, with accusations that the opposition tried to “politically profit from the death of the children who were killed.”⁹¹

Inappropriate speech, however, is not only reserved for the ruling party. **In the addresses of the representatives of the opposition, strong criticism of the regime was directed, which in some cases was presented through the use of labelling, stereotyping and hate speech.** Phrases like “mafia organisation and scum”⁹², “SNS beaters”, “professional hand holders in the Assembly”⁹³ could be heard from representatives of the opposition. The belittling of the party symbols of the Serbian Progressive Party was also noted⁹⁴, and malicious labels for supporters of the Serbian Progressive Party could also be heard. **This way of communication between political opponents** certainly does not contribute to the quality of the political struggle, but, on the contrary, destroys the reputation of the electoral process, but also contributes to the passivation of citizens and the degradation and meaninglessness of any form of political engagement. That is why **CRTA calls on all election participants to treat their political opponents and citizens responsibly and with respect and appreciation.**

The messages of intolerance and hatred of representatives of political parties are not only directed at political opponents, but also directly and indirectly addressed to the media.⁹⁵, the civil sector and citizens who are insulted in the addresses of party and public officials because

⁹⁰ Večernje novosti, “Interview, Aleksandar Vulin: The recognition of Kosovo will be galloping if Vučić is not in power”, 12. November 2023,

<https://link.crt.rs/eb>

⁹¹ Facebook, Serbian Progressive Party Krusevac, November 10, 2023,

<https://link.crt.rs/ec>

⁹² SOinfo, “Nikolić: Mafia State or State Mafia”, November 14, 2023,

<https://link.crt.rs/ee>

⁹³ Facebook, Glas Pirola, November 15, 2023,

<https://link.crt.rs/eq>

⁹⁴ Facebook, People’s Movement of Serbia - Kladovo, November 16, 2023,

<https://link.crt.rs/eh>

⁹⁵ An example of a campaign directed against the media was observed in the reactions to the broadcast of the documentary “I, Aleksandar: State gambit” which was shown on television N1. After the broadcast of the film, which presents the political biography of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić from the perspective of the author, Informer published an article entitled “VUČIĆ ON TARGET! A general attack is underway that should result in his murder and the murder of his family!”. High-ranking officials - Irena Vujović, Siniša Mali, Milenko Jovanov and others - also reacted to the documentary, announced as a “saga about the devastation caused by the autocratic regime” by Aleksandar Vučić, on social networks. In addition to the media preparation of the assassination of the president, N1 was also accused of running “the dirtiest anti-Serb campaign”, and the film was said to “reminisce Hitler’s and Goebbels’ propaganda films against the Jews”.

Informer, “VUČIĆ ON TARGET! A general attack is underway that should result in his murder and the murder of his family!”, November 2, 2023,

<https://link.crt.rs/ek>

N1, “I, Alexander: State Gambit”, premiering on N1 on Thursday at 8 p.m.”, October 28, 2023,

<https://link.crt.rs/el>

Instagram, SNS Serbia, November 3, 2023, <https://link.crt.rs/em>

Instagram, SNS Serbia, November 2, 2023,

<https://link.crt.rs/eo>

Instagram, SNS Srbija, November 2, 2023, <https://link.crt.rs/ep>

X (Twitter), Vladimir Đukanović, November 2, 2023, <https://link.crt.rs/er>

Informer, “Nebojša Bakarec: Two Hours of Hate - N1 Checked Myself!”, November 3, 2023,

<https://link.crt.rs/es>

of their political orientation, sexual orientation⁹⁶ or nationality⁹⁷. Individuals gathered around the “ProGlas” initiative, which is aimed at raising awareness of the importance of voting and democratic elections and a society without violence, are also the target of verbal attacks, as well as the media and journalists who have a critical attitude towards the government.⁹⁸ **With such attacks, the right and freedom of choice were disavowed and, paradoxically, presented by some actors as an obstacle to a democratic society, and not as the basis of every democratic society.**

Instead of calming tensions and calling all political actors to account, the reactions of public and party officials to these events were aimed at legitimizing inappropriate and illegal behaviour and speech. **The Government of the Republic of Serbia, the Ministry of State Administration and Local Self-Government, as well as the institution of the President of the Republic of Serbia, were misused to deal with political opponents and to encourage inflammatory and irresponsible rhetoric. Through the channels of these institutions, it is insinuated and claimed that some actors are planning to challenge the election results through violence.**⁹⁹ Following the worrisome rhetoric used by representatives of the government, as well as the opposition, with state institutions actively participating in inciting hatred and intolerance against political opponents of the government, the CRTA Observation Mission has publicly called on all parties to calm tensions, and state institutions to protect the integrity of the elections and to enable citizens to go to the elections on December 17th without fear.¹⁰⁰

5.3 Pouring aggressive rhetoric into conflict incidents and preventing participation in political life

Rhetoric of aggression and violence and irresponsible and inappropriate behaviour of political actors, to which citizens were exposed even before the official start of the election campaign, resulted in verbal conflicts, as well as in several incidents in the past period. The CRTA Observation Mission **recorded several incidents of threats, intimidation and**

⁹⁶ Vranje News, “Palma in Vranje: Three things Dačić and I will never allow”, November 11, 2023, <https://link.crtars.eu>

⁹⁷ N1, “People’s Movement of Serbia: After Miroslav Aleksić’s forum, Nazi messages on the house of an opposition activist of Roma nationality”, November 21, 2023, <https://link.crtars.eu>

⁹⁸ Večernje novosti, “The opposition proclamation was supported by a woman to whom Serbia is a fascist society!”, November 9, 2023, <https://link.crtars.eu>

⁹⁹ Their desire is to keep Serbia in permanent instability and chaos, and that is why they are now using ODHIR in order to prepare for protests, which they already plan to start after the next elections, and in an attempt to further destabilize the country if the citizens, again, in this election cycle as well as in many previous ones, they will not want to vote for them.”

Government of the Republic of Serbia, “Commitment of the Government to an open, fair and democratic electoral process” - announcement by the Prime Minister, October 15, 2023,

<https://link.crtars.eu>

“It is obvious that, on the one hand, the opposition is looking for an alibi for the election defeat, and on the other hand, these everyday brutal lies represent political preparation to declare the election victory of the opposition on December 17, immediately after the end of the elections, and to take to the streets of Serbian cities and municipalities, and to cause chaos, and maybe civil war.”

Ministry of State Administration and Local Self-Government, “Martinović: The will of the people, not lies and manipulation” - announcement by the minister, November 10, 2023, <https://link.crtars.eu> ;

“They have (a message) - we hate Vučić and his family, we have to protect the private business of Šolak and Đilas and number three - and if it turns out that we have not won, we will kill them all, we will hide them all, because it is theft because we have to win. Šolak and Đilas must not lose, the people, the whole nation is always for them and the whole nation hates Vučić’s family.” YouTube, Aleksandar Vučić, “Vučić: For us, the future of Serbia is a key issue”, November 18, 2023, <https://link.crtars/f6>

¹⁰⁰ CRTA, “Enable citizens to vote without fear of “chaos and civil war”, November 11, 2023, <https://link.crtars/f7>

attacks against party activists and the authorities and the opposition ahead of the announcement of the elections, as well as in the first weeks of the campaign. Three attacks were recorded on activists and the premises of the municipal committees of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party in Novi Sad (October 20th).¹⁰¹ to the Belgrade municipality of Zvezdara (October 24th)¹⁰², and then again in Novi Sad (November 19th)¹⁰³; two cases of threats and violent behaviour directed against activists of the opposition coalition “Serbia against violence” at stands organised in the Belgrade municipalities of Mladenovac (October 29th).¹⁰⁴ and Voždovac (November 7th)¹⁰⁵; as well as one case of physical attack on “Serbia against violence” activists during the field campaign in the vicinity of Novi Sad (November 12th).¹⁰⁶ **The impression is that violence and threats intensify as the campaign progresses.** In the course of just two days, on November 20th and 21st, the incidents happened one after the other: setting fire to the estate of the president of the Democratic Party in Prokuplje and burning machines¹⁰⁷, writing Nazi messages on the house of an opposition activist of Roma nationality¹⁰⁸ and breaking the windshield of the car of a journalist of an independent local media¹⁰⁹. The target of these incidents are those who are critical of the government, but in one of the cases the ruling party also reported damage to a van¹¹⁰. Incidents also marked November 22, when opposition councillors in the parliament in Majdanpek activated a smoke bomb and unfurled an offensive banner.¹¹¹

¹⁰¹ SNS Novi Sad announced that an activist of this party and the president of the Novi Sad City Assembly was attacked while participating in party activities, by a woman who attacked her and tried to steal party material from her. Instagram, SNS Novi Sad, October 20, 2023, <https://link.crta.rs/f9>

¹⁰² SNS Zvezdara, Belgrade, announced that their colleague ended up in the Clinical Center due to injuries resulting from an attack while visiting their members. Apart from the description of the events mentioned in these announcements, it was not possible to find additional information.

X (Twitter), SNS Zvezdara, October 24, 2023, <https://link.crta.rs/f8>

¹⁰³ SNS Novi Sad announced that the glass in their office was broken. Instagram, Danica Vukajlović, November 21, 2023, <https://link.crta.rs/f5>

¹⁰⁴ SSP Mladenovac (Serbia against violence) reported the intimidation of its activists in Mladenovac, when the mayor of the municipality, accompanied by associates, approached their stand. Along with the application, a video was published, in which you can see a verbal altercation with the president of the municipality in front of the opposition stands. X (Twitter), Freedom and Justice Party Mladenovac, October 29, 2023, <https://link.crta.rs/f4>

¹⁰⁵ The published video shows the disruption of the stands, it is about the stands of the opposition “Serbia against violence” in the settlement of Stepa Stepanović in the municipality of Voždovac in Belgrade, which was attended by the president of the municipality with her associates. According to the statements of eyewitnesses obtained by the Observation Mission of the Line, right after the opposition set up their stands, SNS activists appeared and set up their stands. A group of 7 to 8 men dressed in black appeared with them and stood in front of the opposition stands, preventing citizens from approaching them. According to eyewitnesses, there was also an attempt to seize the “Serbia against violence” walker, which was prevented, to which the police patrol that happened to be nearby did not react and moved away, and another police patrol, which came later on the call, stated that there is no security threat. X (Twitter), Miroslav Šantić, November 7, 2023, <https://link.crta.rs/f2>

¹⁰⁶ Opposition politician, Janko Veselinović, claims that he and an activist were physically attacked while they were carrying out a field campaign near Novi Sad with Serbia against violence activists - they claim that they were physically injured. He claims that he was attacked by the director of City Greens of Novi Sad, who followed him with his associates before that. SNS Novi Sad denies this case with the words “Đilas’ psychopaths, thugs and liars have shown this time that they are no stranger to violence and lying”, with claims that the director of City Greenery was actually attacked, and that the case was reported to the police.

Autonomy, “Beta: Janko Veselinović was physically attacked by the director of City Greenery from Novi Sad”, November 12, 2023, <https://link.crta.rs/f1>

Dnevnik, ““ĐILAS’S GANG VIOLENT AND LIARS” The SNS city committee in Novi Sad strongly condemned the untruths that Janko Veselinović makes public”, November 12 2023, <https://link.crta.rs/f0>

¹⁰⁷ Beta, “The DS requests an urgent investigation into the fire at the property of the president of the DS in Prokuplje”, November 20, 2023, <https://link.crta.rs/ey>

¹⁰⁸ N1, “People’s Movement of Serbia: After the forum of Miroslav Aleksić, Nazi messages on the house of an opposition activist of Roma nationality”, November 21, 2023, <https://link.crta.rs/ew>

¹⁰⁹ Voice of Šumadija, “Ritma grada journalist’s car smashed”, November 21, 2023, <https://link.crta.rs/eq>

¹¹⁰ SNS Jagodina announced that their branded van was damaged. Instagram, SNS Jagodina, November 21, 2023, <https://link.crta.rs/en>

¹¹¹ Nova, “The members of the opposition lit a smoke bomb at the session of the Assembly of Majdanpek, they face a sentence of three years in prison”, November 22, 2023, <https://link.crta.rs/ej>

In addition, the interlocutors of CRTA's observers, who come from the ranks of the ruling coalition and the opposition, as well as state institutions, testify to **the pressures with which they try to prevent equal political competition in local areas**¹¹² and holding public events of actors who are critical of the current government.¹¹³ The CRTA observers noted situations in which prominent representatives of the local community deny or make it difficult to rent space for party events, or civil movement events, i.e. placing advertisements and billboards in public space.

Attempts to stifle freedom of expression and pressure were also exerted on certain professional groups that, since the beginning of the election campaign, expressed their dissatisfaction with working conditions and unfulfilled promises by the line ministries through protests and blockades. Although none of the protests were officially supported or organised by any political party, the government representatives in their speeches tried to politicize the protests of farmers, employees of JP Post and employees of the Clinical Centre, interpreting them as an attempt by the opposition to destabilize the state in this way, as well. **The consequence of this discourse manifested itself through a wave of violence and intimidation** to which the participants of the farmers' protest were exposed. In the conversation with the CRTA's observers, the agricultural assessors testified that they were called by phone by unknown persons who threatened to harm them if they continued with the protest.¹¹⁴ and that during the night unknown perpetrators painted the facades of their houses¹¹⁵. In one of the cases of threats sent by telephone, the prosecutor reacted and initiated the fact-finding procedure. The incident in Bavanište stands out in particular¹¹⁶, when members and activists of the Serbian Progressive Party, as well as public officials, blocked the house of one of the farmers' protest organisers. According to the victim who was interviewed, the blockade of his house was organised according to the directive of the president of the municipality with the aim of intimidation.

Also, allegations of obstructions in the process of collecting signatures for candidacy were recorded in several municipalities (Sopot, Novi Kneževac, Niš, Pančevo, Barajevo, Požega, Vlasotince). The interlocutors of CRTA state that notaries and notaries in the courts were instructed to prioritise certain parties, which is why some parties could not organise the collection and verification of signatures even though they had previously received confirmation of the dates. Intimidation and threats were also recorded against citizens who came to sign their support for certain opposition lists. The interlocutors of CRTA referred to **the atmosphere of fear** in which signatures were collected in some smaller municipalities, because activists of the ruling party and representatives of the local government watched and "followed who entered the party premises", which some citizens experienced as intimidation, and they gave up from signing.

¹¹² CRTA observers recorded cases in Loznica, Zrenjanin, Sombor and Pančevo where it was difficult or impossible for opposition parties to find space for their party promotion. Also, cases of destruction of promotional materials and billboards were recorded in Indija, Zrenjanin, Sombor and Stara Pazova.

¹¹³ During the Proglas forum held on November 13 in Zrenjanin, SNS activists, led by the deputy mayor of Zrenjanin and a member of parliament, threw insults at the participants, which caused the forum to be interrupted for a moment.

¹¹⁴ These cases were recorded in Sombor and Kikinda.

¹¹⁵ Two such cases were recorded in Bačka Palanka.

¹¹⁶ Nedeljnik, "Bavanište and the paradigm of society: SNS cadres blocked a farmer's house, the locals defended him with more than 50 tractors", November 14, 2023, <https://link.crt.rs/ef>

5.4 Pressures, bribery and clientelistic relationship with citizens

This election campaign is also characterised by pressure on citizens. In its reports¹¹⁷, CRTA has already indicated that pressures on citizens, as is the manner of political folklore in Serbia, are continuous and are not exclusively related to the election cycle, but that they intensify before each election. Observers' reports confirm that **public sector employees are especially exposed to pressure**, and are blackmailed to participate in party activities (to gather reliable votes, to participate in a door-to-door campaign and to attend political meetings or to bring someone else with them) have kept their jobs.¹¹⁸ According to CRTA's interlocutors, in one of the recorded cases, the head of the city administration even asked for ID cards from employees, as well as from their adult family members, in order to be entered in the list of safe votes.

With the aim of further examining the pressures and the mechanisms that enable them, CRTA's team, like last year, conducted in-depth interviews with the victims of the pressures (10 interviews have been conducted so far). The interlocutors pointed to **the atmosphere of fear**, but also to distrust towards the institutions, which they quote as the main reason why such cases are not reported. In the interviews, **the attitude of political parties towards voters** was also problematised, in which they are treated as quotas that are necessary for the acquisition of political power, and not as citizens whose interests the political parties should represent.

This is confirmed by **reports of observers** who note forms of clientelism. According to the interlocutors of CRTA's observers, in several cases citizens were offered money and services (getting a job in the public sector, contract extension) in exchange for a signature of support for candidacy, joining a party or for a (certain) vote.¹¹⁹ One of the illustrative examples of the clientelistic attitude of parties towards citizens is the case of a mother who was promised by the municipality that her deaf-mute son would get a job if she collected a sufficient number of safe votes. There was also a case of an "agreement" between the villagers of a village and a political party, which implies that the villagers will provide political support in exchange for an asphalted road.

The target of pressure, bribery and party clientelistic mechanisms are often citizens from socially and economically deprived categories, i.e. those who are most dependent on state aid. In this campaign, as well as in previous ones, populist messages were most often sent to them. Dominantly, such messages came from the ruling coalition. Activities that promoted care for the vulnerable and marginalised were primarily intended for party members and sympathisers, but some of them targeted other citizens as well. These categories of citizens were often addressed in the addresses and activities of representatives of the public authorities, and initiatives and measures related to them were promoted and announced. **As in the previous cycles, these activities are primarily linked to the parties in power, while**

¹¹⁷ Crta, Political pressures on citizens, <https://link.crtars/ei>

¹¹⁸ Such cases have been recorded in several municipalities so far: Kostolac, Pirot, Smederevo, Zaječar, Barajevo, Indija, Irig, Koceljeva, Kragujevac, Smederevo.

¹¹⁹ Such cases have been recorded so far in Belgrade, Novi Kneževac and Indija.

at the same time they raise suspicions about the misuse of data on citizens because they are aimed at visits to the poorest households.¹²⁰

In addition to these categories, as a focus of the campaign, activities aimed at women, which include the promotion of women's participation in political life, female entrepreneurship and leadership, as well as pensioners, are particularly highlighted. Also, in the addresses of public and party officials, Serbian families who either returned to Serbia after a long stay abroad or decided to stay in Serbia "despite receiving an attractive business offer from abroad", as well as minority communities, were addressed. In these activities as well, political parties along with populist messages distributed special packages and gifts. In this campaign, the phenomenon of so-called "personalised gifts" was recorded, where sympathisers and citizens were offered gifts and services "as desired".

The atmosphere in which threats, blackmail and bribery are normalised and in which the struggle for the electorate implies "bartering" of material goods and services in exchange for political support, points to an insufficiently developed political culture, but also to weak institutions that are not autonomous in their work, and thus they are unable to sanction the mentioned phenomena.

5.5 Doubts about misuse of citizens' personal data

The characteristics of the households, which are targeted by clientelistic activities, raise the suspicion that they are on the "list" of political parties because their contacts and needs were obtained through illegal means. Research conducted by CRTA during, and in the period after the elections held in 2022, showed the susceptibility of the social protection system, i.e. Social Welfare Centres, to misuse the data about their users. The fact that gift-bearing party activists mostly visit households that are in a worse socio-economic position is a strong indicator of a planned campaign based on previously obtained data. On the other hand, during this election campaign, in several cities in Serbia, the CRTA observers recorded a case that came to the public about special lists in which party activists classify citizens by social status, as well.¹²¹

As in previous election processes, the CRTA Observation Mission recorded statements from citizens all over Serbia that they received phone calls from parties or agencies, which, with frequent manipulative presentations ("I am calling you from the office of the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić", "we have a personal message from Aleksandar Vučić for you"), also raised suspicions about misuse of personal data. In some cases, citizens who received calls were addressed by the name and surname of the person who has a contractual relationship with mobile operators (Telekom, Yettel in the cases recorded so far), and not the actual user of the number. Also, it was recorded that some agencies called citizens for the purpose of conducting short "political polls" without collecting the respondents' demographic data. In these situations, it was also recorded that all citizens from the same household received calls in short periods of time, which additionally raises suspicions about the previous

¹²⁰ Tours of poor households were recorded, where they were given firewood, food packages, white goods (refrigerators, washing machines), but also bicycles and toys for children from these households.

¹²¹ Kragujevacke, "Gatherers of "safe votes" for progressives: I left the building crying", November 17, 2023, <https://link.crtars.rs/ed>

possession of personal data, false representation and targeted collection of data for unknown needs, which causes fear among citizens.

The phenomenon of misuse of polls for propaganda purposes – **PUSH POLL** – which misleads voters, and which CRTA has been recording since 2020, is also a registered tactic of the call Centre of the Serbian Progressive Party. When calling citizens, interviewers pretend to be calling from the office of the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, asking questions about satisfaction with the government's work, and also playing a personal message from Aleksandar Vučić, in which he addresses himself as the president of the country. In this way, the boundary between the state and the party is further blurred.

5.6 Pluralism in the media

5.6.1 Main findings of media monitoring

The first 17 days of the election campaign on televisions with national coverage are characterised by biased, partisan and favouritism reporting in favour of the government, which is additionally characterised by negative propaganda, inflammatory rhetoric and manipulation of information. Most of the time allocated to political actors (81 percent) was allocated to government representatives, while the opposition received only 19 percent. By dividing the programmes into informative ones, which are intended almost exclusively for representatives of the government, and election blocks, in which the time is distributed to all the participants in the election, the media distorts the image of media pluralism. On the other hand, the role of opposition representatives is being marginalised and degraded. The President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, received almost half of the time in central television news shows with national coverage, which continued the practice of building his role as an unsurpassed leader. The opposition, on the other hand, faces negative tones – in the information segment, which plays a key role in the formation of voter attitudes, opposition representatives are portrayed negatively as much as 77 percent of the time, and only 1 percent positively.

5.6.2 Representation and tone of reporting on political actors

The data collected by the CRTA Observation Mission from monitoring the media in the period from November 1st to 17th, 2023 reveal a significant inequality in the media representation of political actors on television with national coverage.¹²² As much as 81 percent of the time allocated to political actors is allocated to government representatives, while the opposition gets only 19 percent. This imbalance is even more pronounced in regular news broadcasts, where government representatives get 94 percent of the time, and the opposition gets 6 percent of the time.

The imbalance in media representation in news programmes between representatives of the government and the opposition represents the continuation of a trend that CRTA constantly recorded right after the end of the previous parliamentary elections, and which extends until the official start of the current election campaign. **Although the opposition seems to have somewhat balanced representation in the electoral blocs (45 percent of the opposition**

¹²² No political advertising was recorded in the same period.

versus 55 percent of the government), this is overshadowed by the disproportionate coverage in the regular news program. Such distribution of time indicates the covert promotion of the ruling majority in the media in those segments that attract more viewers and have a greater influence on the formation of citizens' attitudes and opinions.

Besides the quantitative imbalance, there is also an extremely pronounced qualitative bias in the tone of reporting. Representatives of the authorities were almost exclusively portrayed in a positive light, both in regular and election parts of the programme, with almost no negative portrayal (0.2 percent in regular news, 1 percent in electoral blocs). In contrast, the opposition faces a significant negative bias. In electoral blocs, their representation is equally negative and positive (10 percent each), but **in the more important, informative segment, which plays a key role in the formation of voter attitudes, the opposition is portrayed negatively as much as 77 percent of the time, and only 1 percent positively.** Additionally, CRTA recorded the appearance of unsigned videos targeting representatives of the opposition.¹²³

The unequal position of the opposition representatives in relation to the government representatives can also be seen in the role in which they were presented, i.e. whether they had the opportunity to directly address the audience in the first person or someone else spoke about them. Representatives of the government had the opportunity to directly address the audience 2/3 of the time (67 percent), while representatives of the opposition less than 1/2 of the time (47 percent). This difference is even more drastic in the regular parts of the news program, where representatives of the government again had the opportunity to address the audience directly in 2/3 of the time (66 percent), while representatives of the opposition had this opportunity only in 7 percent of the time. Therefore, the clear difference in the opportunities for direct address to the audience between representatives of the government and the opposition, especially in regular news programs, further emphasises inequality and violates the principle of pluralism in the media space of Serbia.

When it comes to individual television stations with national coverage, data on media representation and the tone of reporting during the election campaign in Serbia indicate a significant bias in reporting by all television stations. **TV B92 is the most biased television**, with 88 percent of the time allocated to the ruling majority and a percentage of positive tone towards it of 9 percent, while the opposition is represented there with only 12 percent and a negative tone in almost 1/2 (49 percent) of the time. TV Pink and TV Prva also show a similar level of bias, allocating 83 percent and 84 percent of time to the ruling structure, respectively, with high percentages of positive tone (28 percent and 17 percent). **The public media service, RTS 1, showed a somewhat more balanced approach.** Although here too the representatives of the government were given significantly more space (72 percent) compared to the opposition (28 percent), the tone is somewhat more balanced compared to commercial television because both are presented positively 10 percent of the time. However, representatives of the opposition are twice as often presented negatively compared to representatives of the government. Although TV Happy gives the impression of balanced reporting when it comes to the tone of reporting on political actors, with 76 percent of the time

¹²³ These are videos in which opposition candidates are discredited and presented as collaborators of foreign embassies. In addition, in August 2023, Crta recorded the first case of abuse of deep fake technology in order to discredit the political opponents of the ruling party. This feature, presented as satirical content, was broadcast in the Pink TV news programme without the indication that it was content created with the help of artificial intelligence, which could have misled viewers.

devoted to the ruling parties, it also indicates their favoured position on this television, which confirms the general trend of biased reporting. These data reflect a clear tendency to favour the ruling parties over the opposition, with a pronounced imbalance in media representation and tone of reporting.

5.6.3 The role of the President of Serbia in the election campaign

The analysis of the data collected by CRTA through media monitoring not only reveals a clear favouring of the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, but also points to the creation of a referendum atmosphere in the media space, where the amount and manner of representation of the president set the framework for the entire campaign. Almost half of the time in central television news shows with national coverage is devoted to Vučić, which indicates a conscious media strategy that emphasises his role as an irreplaceable and unsurpassed leader.¹²⁴ This kind of reporting contributes to the idea that the president's position is crucial for the future of the country.

In addition, Vučić's statement, which can be interpreted as a form of manipulation and emotional blackmail, in which he suggests that his defeat in the elections would also mean the end of his presidency because he would not be able to "play president" while the country is run by those who, according to him, are opinion, destroyed, further strengthens this atmosphere.¹²⁵ In addition, CRTA records that since the beginning of the campaign, there have been 13 direct addresses of the president, and since the beginning of the year as many as 261, to the audience watching television with national coverage have been recorded. In addition, it was recorded that over 30 televisions from local and cable networks broadcast every party rally under the slogan "Aleksandar Vučić – Serbia must not stop", where the president addressed the voters. These data indicate a strong media campaign aimed at the promotion of President Vučić, which contributes to the creation of a damaged media space in which other political actors cannot compete equally.

In the total time allocated to all political actors, Aleksandar Vučić received almost one third (32 percent) of the media space. However, when this time is analysed by programme type, an even greater imbalance is observed: **the president received almost half (49 percent) of the time allocated to political actors in news programmes, while he received six percent of the time in election programmes.**¹²⁶

In the context of the current media representation of President Aleksandar Vučić, the data of the CRTA Observation Mission provide an insight into the comparison with the presidential election campaign from March 2nd to April 3rd, 2022. **Although this year is only about snap parliamentary elections, the representation of Aleksandar Vučić remains consistent, moving around 1/3 (32 percent this year versus 30 percent last year) of the total time devoted to political actors.**

¹²⁴ Crta recorded 78 media reports on various televisions, most often related to the construction of infrastructure, roads, employment and the like, in which citizens thank the president for the work done, wish him good health or a long reign.

¹²⁵ Politics, "Aleksandar Vučić in Smederevo: If the opposition wins the elections, I will not be president", November 12, 2023, <https://link.cрта.rs/ea>

¹²⁶ In addition, President Vučić was dominantly portrayed in a positive context, 17 percent of the time, while he was portrayed negatively in only 0.35 percent of the time. This type of reporting can be understood as covert propaganda that glorifies the President of Serbia, especially in the informative parts of the program.

As the most represented personality in the public space, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and holder of the “Serbia must not stop” list simultaneously dictated the narratives that could be heard in the statements of other state officials, as well as in the most influential media. One of the most dominant narratives, which in the observed period moved exclusively on an upward trajectory, refers to the labelling of the opposition as corrupt, violent and destructive.¹²⁷

5.7 Monitoring of social networks

Until the day of the first status report, all posts (N=475) of prominent political actors and political parties from their official profiles on the Facebook social network were analysed.¹²⁸ Special attention in the analysis is devoted to the existence of violent communication and its types.¹²⁹ **Every fifth post (88 of them) in the observed sample contains elements of violent communication.** Such content was recorded on the accounts of electoral actors from the ruling majority, as well as from the opposition, and yet, **the Facebook page on which the most violent language was used is the official page of the Serbian Progressive Party and its officials.** Among the posts in which violent communication was recognised, the most prevalent elements of violent communication are **demonisation** and personal attacks: as many as seven out of ten violent posts fall into one of these two categories. Given that the observed period refers to the beginning of the campaign, political parties and their representatives also shared informative content on their accounts - where signatures are collected, who supported the lists, how many signatures were collected.

Although elements of violence can also be found among the posts of representatives of the government and the opposition, this type of content was mostly posted on the official page of SNS, and elements of violent communication were also found on the profiles of other representatives of this party. Out of 129 analysed announcements on the official profiles of SNS and its officials, 32 announcements had elements of violence in communication. Most of those announcements were on the official SNS profile (23), while there were six announcements on the official account of Miloš Vučević. Out of 172 analysed posts from the official profiles of representatives and parties of the “Serbia against violence” coalition, 24 posts had some elements of violent communication. In this political group, with 10 violent posts, the official account of Miloš Parandilović from New Face of Serbia stands out the most, while an additional 14 posts were observed on the remaining 12 analysed profiles. When it comes to the “National gathering – state-building force” coalition, which consists of the Serbian

¹²⁷ See section 5.2 for more on the production, intolerance and incitement of hatred in the election campaign.

¹²⁸ The data was withdrawn from the Crowdtangle platform, and the criteria for withdrawing posts was two-stage. In the case of pages with a high intensity of posts, it was possible to select posts based on above-average performance (posts that recorded more interactions than the page average, “overperforming”), and for pages that post less often, posts were drawn based on the criterion of total interactions (posts that recorded the highest the number of interactions in a given time, regardless of page average). Data storage took place in four phases, the first time on November 7, the second time on November 11, November, the third time on November 15, and the fourth time on 18 November. 35 prominent pages were observed, including official profiles of residents as well as candidates and prominent party figures. **NB:** Some candidates do not have Facebook pages (Vladimir Orlić, Ana Brnabić, for example), and some send their political announcements from their personal profiles (Radomir Lazović). Crowdtangle does not offer the ability to retract posts that are not published on a page or in a public group, so some actors are not included in the analysis.

¹²⁹ We recognise violent communication as a message that contains at least one of the following elements: hate speech, personal attack, threats, incitement or justification of violence, scapegoating (blaming individuals or groups for broader social problems), demonisation, dehumanisation, or the use of militaristic rhetoric.

movement Dveri and the Serbian party Oathkeepers, CRTA processed 55 posts, 16 of which had elements of violent communication.

The two most common forms of violent communication are demonisation and personal attacks, which together account for 68 percent of all posts containing violence. Across the entire sample, there were several distinctly negative posts that defy any standard classification. For example, the SNS Facebook page shared an interview with the President of the Serbian Assembly, Vladimir Orlić. Among other things, in that interview¹³⁰ we identified personal attacks, dehumanisation, demonisation and conspiracy:^{131 132}

“Another in a series of examples of filth and dishonesty of tycoons and thieves from the former regime [film released on N1¹³³] This is their “democracy”, as they imagine it: bursts of insults, lies, slander and unconcealed hatred, without the right that the one whom they want to organise a trial, worse than in the gulag era and whom they want to lynch, can even answer. Apart from their personal hatred towards Aleksandar Vučić, they showed us something else in that Goebbelsian propaganda: how much they hate Serbia itself and the Serbian people, about whom they speak the worst, falsely accuse, call them criminals and villains, genocidal beasts, even denying that ours belongs to us. Kosovo and Metohija. And we can remember: this is how they treated their country and people when they were in power. The destruction of Serbia that they carried out at the time – that was their political agenda. The same ones, the worst of the worst, would still like to destroy Vučić and Serbia on behalf of their foreign mentors. But their hatred cannot be stronger than our love for our people and our Serbia, never.”¹³⁴

Among the orders of right-wing political actors, as a special type of violent communication, “conspiracy” with the aim of discrediting the authorities, the media, and the West is noticeable. And on the accounts of SNS actors, various variations on the theme of conspiracy appear: opposition actors have **foreign mentors**, or when attacking the right-wing opposition with insinuations that they are from “**Đilas’s list**”.¹³⁵

Moreover, in the area of conspiracies, the right-wing opposition, especially the Serbian party Oathkeepers, accuses the media of being under the influence of a minister:

“As a matter of fact, these three portals [B92, Novosti, Politika, prim.auth.], which we reasonably suspect are indirectly controlled by the current Minister of Finance, Siniša

¹³⁰ Serbian Progressive Party, “Orlić: I believe that the people will choose work, results, and security”, November 12, 2023, <https://link.crt.rs/e8>

¹³¹ The methodology here also shows its limitations, so although the main goal was fulfilled, i.e. it was recognised whether the post contains elements of violence or not, for the sake of methodological consistency it was necessary to ignore the fact that one post contains as many as four different elements of violent communication.

¹³² By conspiracy we understand any insinuation that actors in the political space do not have decision-making autonomy, that is, that their actions are attributed to some other “shadow actor”. Likewise, conspiracy means insinuations that any actor, domestic or foreign, aims to destroy a country (in this case, Serbia). That the earth is a flat plate, for example, is not a conspiracy, even though it is a conspiracy theory; it is necessary that the conspiracy aims to discredit political actors.

¹³³ The film “I, Aleksandar: state gambit” was released on November 2., 2023 on cable television N1.

¹³⁴ The post on the Facebook profile of the Serbian Progressive Party, at the time of analysis, had slightly less than 1,600 interactions - an above-average number for SNS, and unattainable for all others.

¹³⁵ Serbian Progressive Party, “Đurić: A vote for Miloš is equal to a vote for Đilas”, November 13, 2023, <https://link.crt.rs/d7>

Mali, have been hunting down for weeks the president of our party and one of the leaders of the National Gathering, Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski.”¹³⁶

In its posts on the Facebook social network, the Serbian Party of the Oathkeepers paid attention to international cooperation with other “state-building” parties. An example of such a publication is a photo of Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski with the president of Alternative for Germany, Tim Krupal, while holding a T-shirt with the message “No surrender”¹³⁷. During the protest in front of the French embassy, Stamenkovski conveyed through a post the common sentiment of these parties towards the EU and Brussels, which was identified as conspiratorial:

“The European Union and the Brussels administration suppress national identities, erase people’s cultures, deny history and create new achievements, destroying the foundations on which the whole of Europe rested.”¹³⁸

Given that the observed period refers to the beginning of the campaign, political parties and their representatives, in addition to posts that had elements of violent communication, also shared informative content on their accounts – where signatures are collected, who supported the lists, how many signatures were collected. This primarily refers to the opposition parties, which after announcing the elections primarily used social networks to invite citizens to participate in the electoral process. The official SNS account, on the other hand, used the Facebook social network mainly to convey announcements from both high and low officials.

6 CONTROL INSTITUTIONS AND BODIES

6.1 Agency for Prevention of Corruption

The Anti-Corruption Agency (hereinafter: Agency) in the current course of the election campaign has shown greater transparency¹³⁹ and proactiveness in work in relation to previous election cycles, while again there is no information on the work of the Agency ex officio. So far, three announcements and three news items have been published. They, first of all, indicate the legal obligations of political subjects in the election campaign (obligation to mark advertising and other materials; submission of preliminary reports on election campaign expenses; opening and use of special accounts for the election campaign), illegal activities (financing of humanitarian activities is prohibited) and the prohibition of misuse of public resources in the election campaign.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ Facebook, Serbian Party Oathkeepers, November 7, 2023, <https://link.crt.a.rs/d5>

¹³⁷ Facebook, Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski, November 16, 2023, <https://link.crt.a.rs/d3>

¹³⁸ Facebook, Serbian Party Oathkeepers, November 15, 2023, <https://link.crt.a.rs/d1>

¹³⁹ A special section called “Elections 2023” has been opened on the Agency’s website with all relevant data on the Agency’s actions in the election campaign, which includes information related to the Agency’s most significant activities after the announcement of the elections, as well as the relevant provisions of the Law on Political Financing activities regulating the behavior of political subjects (political parties, groups of citizens and coalitions of political parties) in the election campaign.

¹⁴⁰ Agency for the Prevention of Corruption, “Elections 2023 - Announcements - Submission of preliminary reports on election campaign expenses”, <https://link.crt.a.rs/d0>

Also, the Agency informed the public that 135 observers and coordinators hired by the Agency have started working in the field to monitor election campaigns.¹⁴¹ **Field observers** have the authority to unhinderedly collect information and data related to the activities of political entities in the election campaign through audio and video recordings, photos in electronic format and collecting copies of promotional election materials on behalf of the Agency, until the Election Day. Besides, observer coordinators, in order to obtain information related to the election campaign, at the request of the central coordinator, can contact political subjects, state bodies, bodies of the territorial autonomy unit, bodies of the local self-government unit and city municipality bodies.

The latest news that was published on the Agency's website refers to the invitation to political entities to participate in a training in Belgrade called "Application of the Law on Financing Political Activities", where the participants will be introduced to the obligations and procedures in accordance with this law and the by-laws that regulate this area, and special emphasis will be placed on the rules of behaviour of political subjects in the election campaign.

When it comes to the Agency's decisions on applications from natural and legal persons, i.e. decisions in procedures initiated ex officio, as of November 20, 2023, **there were no published decisions.**

6.2 Regulatory Authority of Electronic media

The newly adopted Law on Electronic Media specified the obligations of the Regulatory Authority of Electronic Media (REM) during the election campaign and gave it the possibility to impose stricter sanctions on television stations that do not respect their obligations during the election campaign. **Despite the increased obligations, REM's work in this reporting period was marked by a lack of transparency and almost complete passivity: after adopting the election campaign monitoring methodology, REM did not issue a single press release or report on the findings of its monitoring and any actions it initiated. ex officio or upon applications.**

6.2.1 New legal framework for actions of REM in the election campaign

New legal framework¹⁴² retains the previous solution that orders media service providers to provide election participants with representation without discrimination, as well as the one that obliges them to respect the ban on political advertising outside the election campaign, and to make transparent the criteria for determining the price of political advertising during the campaign. The new Law on Electronic Media imposes on media service providers the obligation to clearly mark the pre-election program, as well as to respect the prohibition of covert publication of the pre-election programme in the form of informative, entertaining or other types of programs. Also, it was specified which information related to the publication of the results of public opinion polls during the campaign will have to be presented to the public.

¹⁴¹ The agency also published on its website the Decision on the selection of election campaign observers for deputies and councilors of city assemblies and municipal assemblies in the Republic of Serbia, which will be held on December 17, 2023. Years. 135 election campaign observers were selected, namely 33 coordinators and 102 field observers.

¹⁴² At the last session of the National Assembly in the Thirteenth convocation, among the 60 items on the agenda that were jointly discussed, the new Law on Electronic Media was adopted, which, among other things, introduces certain novelties in terms of the obligations of media service providers as well as in terms of the duties that REM has during the election campaign. The law entered into force on November 4, 2023.

The ban on reporting on certain ceremonial activities (opening of infrastructural and other facilities and marking the beginning of the construction of such facilities) of officials who are candidates at the same time was extended from ten to thirty days before the Election Day. This prohibition does not include those public officials who are not candidates on the election lists for the elections to be held on December 17th: the President of the Republic even though he is the holder of the election lists, ministers who are not candidates on the lists, etc.

An important novelty brought by the new law is that violations of the obligations of media service providers in relation to the election campaign will always be considered serious or particularly serious violations of the law, which is important for choosing the type of measure REM will be able to impose.¹⁴³ Also, in cases of violation of obligations in relation to the election, REM will also have the duty to simultaneously submit to the competent misdemeanour court a request for initiation of misdemeanour proceedings.

With the new law, the framework for actions of REM during the campaign has also been somewhat improved: REM is **obliged** to adjust the monitoring methodology to the specifics of the election campaign, as well as to conduct proceedings against the media service provider within a very short period of time upon learning of a violation. It is a period of 48 hours from the moment of learning about the violation, in which the REM initiates the examination procedure with a conclusion, and no more than 72 hours can pass from the moment of reaching that conclusion to the moment of the end of the procedure. **However, the opportunity was missed to oblige the REM by law to periodically report on monitoring findings, to determine the key elements of the methodology and criteria for selecting the sample that will be included in the monitoring, as well as to enable judicial control of every REM decision made based on applications. of legal and natural persons submitted during the campaign.**

6.2.2 REM methodology and activities

At the session held on November 2nd, 2023, the Regulatory Authority of Electronic media adopted the Methodology for monitoring the 2023 election campaign, as well as the decision on the number of media service providers that will be continuously or periodically monitored during the 2023 election campaign. The methodology was published on REM's website, while the sample of televisions over which REM will conduct public surveillance was presented by Višnja Arandelović, member of the Council of Regulators, in a statement to the media. According to her statements, REM 's monitoring and analysis team will monitor the campaign on public media services, on all four televisions with a national license and four cable operators – K1, N1, Nova S and Al Jazeera Balkans.¹⁴⁴

The methodology for monitoring the election campaign in 2023 does not differ from the methodology applied by REM for monitoring the campaign in 2022, which CRTA

¹⁴³ Law on Electronic Media ("Official Gazette of RS", No. 92/2023), Art. 39. and 40. A serious violation of the law will always be considered a negligent violation of obligations related to the election campaign and, when it is determined that it has been committed, REM will issue a warning measure for it, while a particularly serious violation will be considered a deliberate violation of obligations related to the election campaign, for which the following measure of temporary ban on publication of programme content, i.e. measure of temporary ban on publication of advertising messages.

¹⁴⁴ Demostat, "Election campaign and the media - how the televisions with national coverage should report", November 20, 2023, <https://link.crtars/cz>

assessed as inadequate for objective and impartial measurement of the representation of political actors in the election campaign.¹⁴⁵

A significant novelty is the announcement that instead of weekly, as it did in 2022, REM will report on the 2023 campaign every two weeks. As of the date of the conclusion of this report, however, REM has not published any periodic report, nor has it issued a statement or finding of previous control of the behaviour of media service providers during this year's campaign.

The applications submitted in the previous part of the campaign have been published on the website of the Regulator. These are five complaints against two television stations submitted by CRTA on November 16, 2023. REM did not decide on the submitted applications.

¹⁴⁵ Chart, "Who and how does REM track? Analysis of the methodology of media monitoring in the 2022 elections", <https://link.crtc.gc.ca>

6.3. Oversight Committee for the Election Campaign

The Oversight Committee for the Election Campaign¹⁴⁶ was educated in a timely manner in this election cycle. The previous work of the Committee¹⁴⁷ was marked by limited proactivity, given that for this period the Committee **considered information related to the actions of participants in the election process in only two sessions, after which it expressed concern, especially in relation to media content and discrediting of election candidates.** Also, transparency in the work of the Committee is questionable because the public has not yet been informed about what information was discussed at the session, as well as about the existence of possible applications or objections that have been sent to the Committee so far.

In this period, a total of four sessions were held, the outcome of which the public could find out via the website of the National Assembly. The Oversight Committee turned to the public media service in order to obtain information about the conclusion of the agreement for the representation of the applicants of the declared lists. Then, in a press release, the Committee appealed to all participants in the election process to *“present the pluralism of political ideas that they stand for in a civilised, decent and dignified way.”*¹⁴⁸ Also, all interested parties are invited to submit objections or complaints to the Committee on irregularities they notice during the election process. So far, the Oversight Committee has, in only two sessions, considered information related to the actions of participants in the election process submitted by members of the Oversight Committee, as well as citizens in the form of petitions. After the first session where the given information was discussed, the Committee expressed its concern about the actions of all participants in the election process, and especially because of media content aimed at discrediting the election participants based on political convictions and violating the moral integrity of the election candidates. The Oversight Committee once again appealed to all participants and the media to refrain from inciting hatred and attacking the personality of the candidate.

On November 21st, the CRTA Observation Mission met with representatives of the Oversight Committee and on that occasion they exchanged opinions and plans on the way in which the Oversight Committee will monitor the election campaign. Also, as the main obstacle in the performance of its function, the Oversight Committee has underpinned insufficiently defined jurisdiction.

¹⁴⁶ On October 26, 2023, the National Assembly passed a decision on the appointment of members of the Oversight Committee for the election campaign. In accordance with the Law on the Election of People’s Deputies, half of the members were elected on the proposal of the Government, and half on the proposal of parliamentary groups in the National Assembly. The members of the Committee are: Svetislav Gončić, Aleksandar Milosavljević, Dragan Vučinić, Jovanka Matić, Slobodan Prvanović, Branko Rakić, Miodrag Savović, Bojan Tubić, Vojin Vučićević and Aleksandar Stamatović.

¹⁴⁷ The Oversight Committee also adopted the Rules of Procedure, which established its competence in terms of controlling the actions of public media services, monitoring the activities and pointing out the irregularities of election actors, protecting the moral integrity of the candidate’s personality, giving the initiative to initiate proceedings before the competent state authority and in terms of determining the number and the duration of the shows for the presentation of the applicants of the announced lists.

¹⁴⁸ National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, Oversight Committee, “Public Release”, November 13, 2023, <https://link.crtars.rs/cw>

7 COMPLAINTS OF THE CRTA OBSERVATION MISSION ABOUT THE IRREGULARITIES OBSERVED

Based on the information collected by long-term observers in this period, CRTA filed **21 complaints for various types of irregularities in the election process:**

15 complaints were submitted to the Anti-Corruption Agency due to cases of misuse of public resources and public functions and illegal activities of political parties.

Five applications were submitted to the Regulatory Authority of Electronic Media for cases of negative campaigns and official campaigns, and one application was submitted to the Oversight Committee of the Assembly of Serbia for the case of running a negative campaign.

7.1 Complaints to the Anti-Corruption Agency:

- **Four complaints were filed against the Serbian Progressive Party for violating the Law on the Financing of Political Activities:**
 - Use of public resources for the purpose of party promotion - misuse of public resources (event of November 6th, Petrovac na Mlavi, opening of asphalted streets and announcement of new infrastructure works);
 - Using the website of the City of Vršac for the purpose of promoting the party and candidates on the list – abuse of public resources (text from November 4th, promotion of candidates on the website of the City of Vršac);
 - Use of the mayor's social media profile for party promotion – misuse of public resources and promotion of humanitarian activities (post from November 6 on the Instagram profiles of the mayor of Čačak promoting the party's humanitarian activities);
 - Organising humanitarian activities, distribution of free packages and radiological examinations – illegal activities of a political party (event in Niš on November 6th).
- **One complaint against the Freedom and Justice Party for violating the Law on Financing Political Activities:**
 - Use of public resources for the purpose of promoting the party (the promotional video of the Party of Freedom and Justice was recorded in the official premises of the Belgrade City Assembly and published on the social network "X" (Twitter) on the account of Vladimir Obradović, the holder of the election list Serbia against violence – Dobrica Veselinović – Prof. Dr. Vladimir Obradović" and a candidate for mayor of the City of Belgrade).

- **One complaint against the Socialist Party of Serbia for violating the Law on the Financing of Political Activities:**
 - Violation of the Law on the Financing of Political Activities in the Election Campaign – organising and financing activities of a humanitarian nature, possible illegal contribution to a political party by Ana Grozdanović and the possible existence of elements of a criminal offence from the Law on the Financing of Political Activities. (In the election campaign, Aleksandra Ana Grozdanović announced on her Instagram profile that she distributed coffee and chocolates to citizens, and she received money from an unknown person, and she did all this for the purpose of promoting the political party Socialist Party of Serbia and Ivica Dačić, the candidate and holder of the list.) IVICA DAČIĆ – PRIME MINISTER OF SERBIA”. The post was also reposted by the Instagram account “sps_vlasotince”).

- **Nine complaints for abuse of public office and misuse of public campaign resources, i.e. violation of the Law on Prevention of Corruption:**
 - Complaint against **Aleksandar Vučić, the President of the Republic of Serbia**, because at the pre-election rally in Pirot held on November 9th, he was announced as the President of the Republic, and during his speech he did not clearly state to the public whether he was presenting the position of the president or the position of a political party;
 - Complaint against **Đorđe Radinović, the president of the Municipality of Stara Pazova**, because during a party activity – a tour of the market in Nova Pazova on November 12th, 2023, he publicly invited citizens to vote for the Serbian Progressive Party, acting as a public official;
 - Complaints against **Darija Kisić Tepavčević, Minister for Family and Demography**, because during a party activity – a visit to the market in Nova Pazova on November 12th, 2023, she publicly invited citizens to vote for the Serbian Progressive Party, acting as a public official;
 - Complaint against **Vladimir Obradović, a member of the Provisional Authority of the City of Belgrade**, for using public resources for the purpose of promoting the party (the promotional video of the Party of Freedom and Justice was recorded in the official premises of the Belgrade City Assembly and published on the “X” (Twitter) account of Vladimir Obradović, the holder of the electoral list Serbia against violence – Dobrica Veselinović – Prof. Dr. Vladimir Obradović” and candidate for mayor of the City of Belgrade).
 - Complaint against **Goran Vesić, Minister of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure** and a member of the Serbian Progressive Party political party, because on November 16th, 2023, from his official Instagram account, the Minister of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure promoted the SNS political party and called on citizens to vote for the electoral list “Aleksandar Vučić – Serbia must not stop” in the upcoming elections;
 - Complaint against **Zlatko Marjanović, president of the Provisional Authority of the Despotovac municipality** and a member of the political party Serbian Progressive Party, because on November 10th, 2023, the official

- YouTube account of the municipality of Despotovac was used to promote the SNS political party, the public presentation of the electoral list “Aleksandar Vučić – Serbia must not stop “ and for inviting voters to vote for the same list;
- Complaint against **Aleksandar Pajić, president of the Provisional Authority of the city of Šabac** and member of the political party Serbian Progressive Party, because he used the official Facebook account of the mayor of the city of Šabac, as well as meetings in which he participated as an official, for the promotion of the SNS political party and for the public presentation of the declared electoral list “Aleksandar Vučić – Serbia must not stop”, as well as calling for citizens to vote for that political party and electoral list;
 - Complaint against **Aleksandra Ćirić, president of the Provisional Authority of the Municipality of Ruma** and a member of the political party Serbian Progressive Party for using the official Facebook account of the President of the Municipality of Ruma to promote the SNS political party and the announced electoral list “Aleksandar Vučić – Serbia must not stop”.
 - Complaint against **Vladan Vasić, president of the Provisional Authority of the city of Pirot** and a member of the political party Serbian Progressive Party, because in the period from November 9th to 18th he used the Instagram and Facebook accounts of the city administration of the city of Pirot, as well as the gatherings in which he participated as an official for promotion the SNS political party and the announced electoral list “Aleksandar Vučić – Serbia must not stop”.

7.2 Complaints to the Regulatory Authority of Electronic Media

CRTA submitted five Complaints to REM during the reporting period. Four Complaints were filed against TV Pink, and one against TV Prva.

- The complaint against TV Prva was filed because President Vučić was included live in the central news program, in a part of the programme that was not marked as election, at the moment when he signed his support for the electoral list that bears his name. In a ten-minute address, Vučić led a negative campaign against the opposition, and TV Prva did not take steps not to broadcast such a campaign in its programme.
- The complaint against Pink TV was filed because President Vučić was included live in the central news programme, in a part of the programme that was not marked as election, at the moment when he signed his support for the electoral list that bears his name. Vučić was allowed to conduct a negative campaign against the opposition in a twenty-minute address.
- Two complaints were filed against TV Pink for conducting an intense negative campaign against the opposition and its representatives. In one case, a propaganda video was played against the president of the DSS, Miloš Jovanović, who, among other things, was accused of acquitting the killers of Serbian children, while in another, content was shown in which the opposition was attributed responsibility for comments made by anonymous users on social networks against members of the Vučić family, which is why the representatives of the opposition were compared to hyenas.
- Another complaint was filed against TV Pink because, for the purpose of election promotion, Aleksandar Šapić, candidate for mayor of Belgrade on the “Aleksandar

Vučić – Serbia must not stop” list, showed his activities as president of the Provisional Authority of the City of Belgrade.

7.3. Complaints to the Oversight Committee

During this reporting period, CRTA submitted one report to the Oversight Committee:

- The complaint was filed against the Serbian Progressive Party and member of the party’s Presidency, Miloš Terzić, for conducting a negative campaign from the official account of the Serbian Progressive Party on social networks, against the election candidate Zdravko Ponoš, which violated the moral integrity of the election candidate.

METHODOLOGY

As an independent domestic Observation Mission, CRTA monitors the entire election process of the snap parliamentary and Belgrade elections in 2023, according to international standards for non-partisan and impartial election observation: Declaration on Principles for International Election Observation,¹⁴⁹ Code of Conduct for International Election Observers, Declaration on Principles for Non-Partisan Election Observation by Civil Organisations¹⁵⁰ and the Code of Conduct for Non-Party Observers.

The election observation methodology includes three periods: before the Election Day (long-term observation), the Election Day observation (short-term observation), and the third period after the Election Day until the announcement of the final election results (long-term observation). The observation methodology during each phase enables the CRTA Observation Mission to collect and process relevant information on a daily basis about the campaign that was conducted for the parliamentary elections, as well as the campaign for the election of councillors of the City Assembly of the City of Belgrade. The legal team of the CRTA Observation Mission monitors all sessions of the Republic Electoral Commission and the City Commission of the City of Belgrade, and collects information on the work of local electoral commission, which enables comprehensive insight into the organisation and implementation of elections, as well as procedural and legal procedures in the protection of electoral rights, procedures for repeating elections, and determining the final results.

Methodology of long-term monitoring of the election campaign

Since November 1st, 2023, the CRTA Observation Mission has been conducting systematic field observation of the election campaign, the work of the election administration, conducted media and social network monitoring, as well as a desk research of specific topics in the

¹⁴⁹ National Democratic Institute, “Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and Code of Conduct for International Election Observers”, October 27, 2005, <https://link.crtars.rs/6z>

¹⁵⁰ 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, <https://link.crtars.rs/70>

elections, in order to report to the public on the climate and main features of the campaign for the parliamentary and Belgrade elections scheduled for December 17th.

Field observation of elections

Since November 1st, 2023, a field team of long-term observers, trained to the highest standards, has been deployed to monitor the climate and flow of the election campaign from 168 cities and municipalities in Serbia on a daily basis, which provided CRTA with equal access to information on the flow and trends of the election process for the territory of the whole country. The method of data collection and verification provided the Observation Mission with a comprehensive insight into the events that marked the elections at all three levels, with an equal focus on monitoring the behaviour of the ruling parties, as well as non-parliamentary, i.e. opposition parties. The field observation included the monitoring of the activities of the public authorities, institutions, all public officials and holders of other public positions who were directly elected, both at the national, provincial and local levels. From the beginning of observation until November 20th, about 1,700 observer reports were received and processed.

Media monitoring

On November 1st, 2023, the CRTA Observation Mission began monitoring the work of television stations with national coverage. The goal was to provide insight into the presence of political pluralism in the media and the level of media professionalism in relation to all actors on the political scene. CRTA's observers, trained according to the highest international standards for media monitoring in the election process, watched all televisions with national coverage: RTS 1, TV Pink, TV Prva, TV Happy and TV B92. The focus of the observation was the entire prime-time television programmes (extended "prime-time" from 17:30 to 24:00) in which political actors appeared or were mentioned.

The representation of political actors was measured by recording the basic unit of measurement – the seconds devoted to each political actor by each observed television. The tonality of political actors was determined on a three-level scale from negative to positive. A negative tonality reflects attacking or unfavourable coverage of a political actor, a neutral tonality a presentation of facts without attacking or affirmative reporting, while a positive tonality reflects affirmative and supportive coverage of a political actor. The seconds that political actors had in active and passive roles were measured. In the active role, the political actor is present in the video-tone address from the first person, while in the passive role, journalists, presenters, presenters or other programme participants talk about the political actor. You can read the detailed methodology of media monitoring on the CRTA website.¹⁵¹

Monitoring of social networks

Monitoring was based on the conceptual definition of violent communication as messages containing at least one of the following elements: hate speech, personal attack, threats, incitement or justification of violence, scapegoating (blaming individuals or groups for broader social problems), demonisation, dehumanisation, or use militaristic rhetoric. The monitoring included the recognition of the conflictual or sacrificial framing of the political topics raised.

¹⁵¹ CRTA, "Methodology of political pluralism media monitoring", <https://link.crtars/3c>

The CrowdTangle tool was used in the monitoring of violent communication¹⁵², which enabled the monitoring of Facebook pages of political parties, movements and coalitions, as well as candidates. The base formed in CrowdTangle consisted of 41 Facebook accounts, of which 35 were active in the observed period (starting from November 1st, 2023). The monitoring procedure included checking all posts (text, photos, graphs, video material and related content). The unit of analysis was the post and its associated content (if the link leads to the site, the post from the site was analysed as an integral part of the post on Facebook). Up to 20 posts per week were analysed for each of the observed pages. The first criterion for the selection of posts involved the withdrawal and analysis of those posts that record an above-average number of interactions (compared to the average of the viewed page). Should this criterion prove too exclusive, posts with the most interactions would be analysed, regardless of how the post ranks relative to the page average.

A code sheet with the following categories was used as an instrument: theme (up to three entries), subject, object, violence in communication, type of violence in communication, conflict frame, conflict object, conflict theme, victim frame, victim object, narrative (up to two entries), woman as an object.

Coding was done in MS Excel. From the CrowdTangle tool, data on observed actors, absolute numbers of all types of interactions for each post, as well as links leading to the post on Facebook were downloaded.

ABOUT THE CRTA OBSERVATION MISSION

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

Since 2016, CRTA has been observing elections at the national and local level. CRTA coordinates the work of the “Citizens on Watch” network, which includes several thousand citizens trained to monitor the regularity of voting. The continuous struggle to improve the conditions for fair and free elections is the backbone of all CRTA’s activities.

CRTA observes the elections in accordance with international standards and rules of citizen observation. Since 2016, CRTA has followed all national (parliamentary and presidential) and Belgrade elections, as well as local elections in Zaječar and Pećinci in 2017 and in Lučani in 2018.

CRTA’s findings and recommendations from previous election processes are complementary to the findings and recommendations of the international observer mission OSCE/ODHIR. Due

¹⁵² CrowdTangle is Facebook’s tool for monitoring and analyzing social networks. CrowdTangle Team (2020). CrowdTangle. Facebook, Menlo Park, California, United States

to compliance with international standards for independent, civil election observation, CRTA is a member of the European Network of Election Observation Organisations ([ENEMO](#)) as well as the Global Network of Election Observation Organisations ([GNDEM](#)).

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