

CRTA:

First Interim Report Of Long Term Election Observation

May 13th ————— Summary



BELGRADE
ELECTIONS2024

The campaign for the Belgrade elections officially began practically at the same time as the political dialogue on improving electoral conditions. It remains **uncertain whether the measures discussed in the parliamentary dialogue will extend to the Belgrade elections on June 2nd or if these discussions are merely symbolic gestures for the distant future. This ambiguity is concerning as it might divert attention from addressing the lack of accountability concerning the illegal activities that tainted the December elections.**

The CRTA Observation Mission **has not recorded any measures taken by the Serbian institutions in the period before the Belgrade elections were announced regarding chronic electoral problems and holding individuals accountable for violations of the law in the previous electoral process.**

The CRTA Observation Mission emphasizes that this electoral process cannot be adequately understood without considering the context of the previous elections, which were marred by illegitimate and illegal practices such as electoral engineering and voter list manipulations in December. Even though the June 2nd elections were nominally triggered due to the inability to form a majority in the Belgrade city assembly, it is important to highlight the persistent domestic public demand for the cancellation of the Belgrade elections. Additionally, international institutions have reacted by stating that the December elections did not comply with democratic standards. Therefore, the upcoming elections for the Belgrade City Assembly should be regarded as a continuation of the electoral process from 2023.

The strongest ruling party began its campaign for the Belgrade elections even before the official announcement, yet the absence of any commitment from institutions to address impunity for criminal acts during the electoral process has prompted a segment of the pro-European opposition bloc to advocate for boycotting these elections. **Consequently, the initial phase of the campaign witnessed divisions over the boycott matter among former opposition allies, alongside the ongoing blurring of boundaries between the state and the party.**

The new electoral cycle began without fulfilling the priority ODIHR recommendations regarding the necessity of an independent audit of the voter registry. In publicly available data from the Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government (MPALS) on the number of voters in the Unified Voter Register, drastic deviations and unexplained trends are observed - stagnation in the territory of Belgrade and a decrease in the number of voters in other regions. **The CRTA Observation Mission has found that the total number of registered voters for parliamentary elections in Serbia decreased by 226,798 between the elections on December 17th and the end of April.**

New suspicions were raised by **contradictory information provided by MPALS.** When the CRTA Observation Mission informed the public for the first time in April about extensive and

unexplained changes in the voter registry, the ministry denied CRTA's findings, responding with data that was not even consistent with the aggregate numbers of voters by municipality in the quarterly snapshots published by MPALS.

Furthermore, in the second half of April, quietly and without informing the public, MPALS introduced the possibility of voting by temporary residence (as opposed to permanent residence) in municipal or city elections. Due to the way the change was introduced and the absence of educational and informational campaigns for citizens, it is unclear what the purpose of this change was. **Following CRTA's and a part of the public's reaction, it was agreed at the Collegium of the Assembly that this change would be withdrawn, which took place on May 11th.**

During this period, there was also a reorganization of polling stations in Belgrade, increasing their number by 85 compared to the previous elections. In this regard, **the Belgrade Electoral Commission referred to the implementation of the ODIHR recommendation to reduce the size of polling stations to avoid overcrowding, without providing the public with information on the criteria based on which new polling stations were formed.**

Eight lists were declared by May 11th, the deadline for submitting candidacies, while decisions of the Belgrade Electoral Commission on another six lists that submitted their candidacies at the very end of this deadline are awaited. The verification of **only a quarter of the over 43,000 collected signatures of support from voters by notaries for the eight declared electoral lists, primarily conducted at municipal administrations, raises doubts about the integrity of the candidacy process.** This is worrying because most cases of potentially falsified signatures in previous elections concerned signatures verified in municipalities and courts. It is alarming that none of the numerous such cases has led to indictments, which clearly indicates a culture of impunity and points to the danger of repeating the criminal act. Further suspicion is heightened by the fact that certain declared lists, which solely verified their signatures within municipalities, were only disclosed to the public upon the submission of their candidacies. Observers from CRTA did not notice any indication on the ground that these individuals intended to run for election.

In the context of blurring the line between the state and the party, **the campaign for the Belgrade elections is accompanied by manipulations with state symbols, resources, and functions.** Public officials participate daily in promotional party actions, the city government intensifies its activities, and the image of the ruling party is built through the activities of the government and the president.

Public sector employees are facing new forms of pressure as they are compelled to travel from various cities to Belgrade during working hours to partake in campaign activities for the ruling party.

Despite these being local elections, the initial phase of the campaign has been dominated by what are referred to as **existential national issues emphasized by representatives of the**

ruling majority, pushing aside topics significant for the local community. In contrast, the opposition's campaign messaging has primarily centered on electoral conditions.

The media bias favoring the ruling party, a trend previously noted by both domestic and foreign observers and addressed by ODIHR recommendations, continues to characterize the first half of the campaign for the Belgrade elections. **Reports from the media demonstrate a clear preference for the government, with 91 percent of central news coverage on national television being allocated to actors from the ruling majority, while portraying the opposition predominantly in a negative light.** President Aleksandar Vučić remains a prominent figure in media coverage, while **the reporting of the Public Broadcasting Service (RTS) shows no significant deviation from other television stations with national coverage.** In the most widely viewed news program, Dnevnik 2 on RTS, there is a pronounced bias in favor of the ruling majority, consuming 91 percent of the airtime.

There is no evidence of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media conducting any oversight of the campaign, nor did it respond to an invitation for a meeting with the CRTA Observation Mission. Meanwhile, **observers from the Anti-Corruption Agency are active in the field**, with the Agency carrying out its regular activities during the campaign, including handling complaints, as confirmed during a meeting with CRTA. However, **the CRTA Observation Mission has not received responses to meeting invitations sent to the Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade, and the Higher Court in Belgrade since the second half of April.**

Concurrently with the election campaign, discussions on electoral conditions have commenced between the parliamentary groups of the government and the opposition in the Serbian parliament. Subsequent to the reactivation of the established institutional mechanism for electoral conditions - the Working Group of the Government of Serbia - certain measures were taken in March to address the ODIHR recommendations. However, these actions were taken without transparency or public consultations. **An analysis of the measures taken, which were only made public in mid-March, revealed that issues such as media, voter pressures, the state of the Unified Voter Register, and the separation of state activities from the election campaign were not prioritized. Furthermore, no adequate measures were proposed to address these issues.** Additionally, the decision-making process of this working group regarding amendments to five electoral laws occurred without public participation, with the public being informed about the proposed legislative changes only in the first half of April.

Despite the insistence on speed, **numerous activities undertaken in the National Assembly since the beginning of April towards changing electoral conditions have not produced concrete results three weeks before election day.** In addition to the establishment of a working group of the Committee on Constitutional Issues and Legislation of the National Assembly, amendments to the Law on the Unified Voter Register were made so that citizens who registered their residence in Belgrade after July 3, 2023, can exercise their voting right in

the community where they previously had residence on June 2, 2024, if the elections are held on that day. Many issues discussed in the National Assembly remain open. **Attempts to hastily resolve ODIHR recommendation issues open the possibility of adopting partial and inadequate solutions that could have long-term consequences for the quality of electoral legislation and practice.**