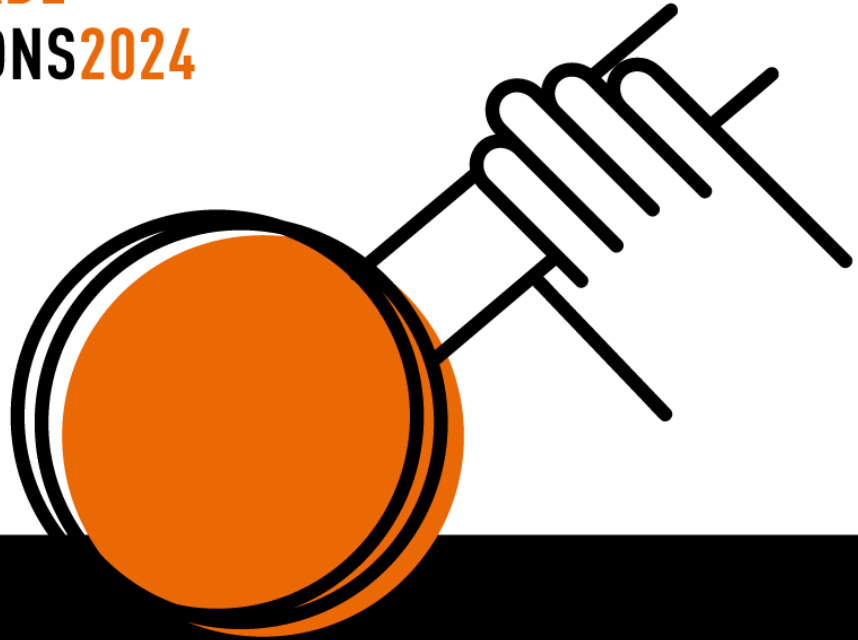


BELGRADE
ELECTIONS2024



CRTA:

Second Interim Report Of Long Term Election Observation

May 13th - May 28th — **Summary**

In the second half of the campaign for the Belgrade City Assembly elections, there has been an increase in campaign activities, as well as a trend of local policy issues being overshadowed by national topics promoted by top government officials. Part of the public had hoped that the inter-party dialogue aimed at improving election conditions, which was happening alongside the campaign, would enhance the quality of the election environment for Belgrade's elections, but these expectations were unmet.

During the reporting period (May 13 - 28), the inter-party dialogue on improving election conditions and implementing ODIHR recommendations was halted before achieving any significant results. A political agreement was reached to amend the Law on the Unified Voter Register so that voters who changed their municipality of residence since July 2023 will need to cast their vote in their previous municipality (if local elections are held there on June 2, 2024). Besides this, **no substantial progress was made toward joint positions on potential legislative and public policy proposals for a better electoral process and fulfilling ODIHR recommendations.**

The Parliamentary Working Group for Improving the Electoral Process was supposed to adopt a unified stance on proposed legal and bylaw amendments that could impact the June 2 elections by May 20. However, this did not happen due to the refusal of members from the ruling majority to discuss the proposed solutions.

The CRTA Observation Mission, whose observers are accredited to monitor the elections for the Belgrade City Assembly, assesses that the final phase of the campaign has been marked by chronic electoral issues: the blurring of lines between state and party, pressure on voters, and misuse of public resources for party campaigns.

The election campaign, dominated in terms of activities by the ruling party's list and supported by top state and city officials, resembles a **national or presidential election rather than a race for city council seats.** The main narrative of the campaign, promoted even before the elections were announced, **frames the Belgrade elections as a matter of national survival and future. This perspective has been imposed by high-ranking state and city officials.**

The blurring of the line between the state and the party, as well as between local elections and a parallel national campaign under the slogan "Serbia Tomorrow," with messages like "We are not a genocidal people" signed "Serbia and Srpska," is **evidenced by the fact that the same messages were conveyed at party rallies of the ruling party's list and through state activities.** By May 27, the CRTA Observation Mission recorded over 300 campaign activities across Belgrade where high-ranking public officials appeared 700 times. Their speeches predominantly emphasized messages framing the local elections in Belgrade as crucial for the nation. Although not a candidate, Aleksandar Vučić was the main face and brand of the campaign for the coalition gathered around the list "Aleksandar Vučić - Belgrade Tomorrow." In this capacity and as the President of Serbia, Vučić was the overwhelmingly dominant figure in the media space, addressing the public 55 times on major television networks

over the 55-day campaign period, receiving twice as much airtime in prime news slots as all other electoral actors combined.

CRTA observers in Belgrade recorded **94 instances of public resource misuse**, including using institutional symbols in promotional spots, using vehicles and premises of public institutions, and involving public sector employees in party promotional activities.

Over 70 individuals interviewed by the CRTA Observation Mission in Belgrade reported experiencing or witnessing voter pressure. These findings suggest that political pressures during the Belgrade election campaign have become normalized to the extent that both political actors and citizens view them as an integral part of the election season. Witnesses described an atmosphere of fear, where citizens rarely report pressures due to a lack of trust in institutions to provide protection. Reports of pressure and fear came from **employees in public utility companies, municipal administrations, preschools, schools, gerontology centers, and disability associations.**

The CRTA Observation Mission documented a **concerning case of child exploitation in the campaign**, where a Belgrade preschool took children to a play that included political messages from the ruling party and its list. There are also alarming reports that parties in Belgrade **specifically targeted people from socially vulnerable groups and households with unpaid public utility bills.**

Election issues and city policy topics were sidelined in the most influential Serbian media, which CRTA systematically monitored from **April 3 to May 19, 2024. Additionally, the most influential media outlets—RTS 1, TV Pink, TV Prva, TV Happy, and TV B92—demonstrated a highly unequal treatment** of ruling and opposition representatives. Monitoring results show almost absolute dominance of ruling party representatives in prime news slots, with an average presence of 93%.

During the campaign, political party **activists reported being subjected to physical and verbal attacks, with the highest number of incidents recorded in the second half of the campaign.** Representatives of the ruling party list announced that their activists were attacked in New Belgrade by passersby allegedly instructed by the opposition. The National Movement of Serbia reported an attack on activists in Stari Grad, a Green-Left Front activist was attacked by masked assailants in Zvezdara, and SNS activists threatened activists from the "I Choose the Fight" list in Voždovac to drive them away from their stand. An incident also occurred at a press conference about removing river barges when Aleksandar Šapić snatched a phone from a citizen and threw it on the ground.

During this period, the City Election Commission adopted a decision to publish the total number of voters in Belgrade, which is **1,602,112**, down by 11,222 voters compared to the last Belgrade elections in December 2023.

Concerns about the state of the Unified Voter Register, which was finalized on May 17 for the June 2 elections, resurfaced among the public. Besides information provided by CRTA observers, the **Observation Mission received over 200 calls from citizens** from the start of the campaign until May 28. Citizens often expressed **suspicion that unknown individuals were registered at their addresses**, and CRTA received information that **voting invitations were sent to unknown persons at some addresses**. Additionally, citizens reported receiving **voting invitations for deceased individuals** and for those who had **deregistered from the address** to which the invitation was sent.

Verification of the new legal provision, whereby citizens who changed their residence between municipalities after July 3, 2023 would vote at their old addresses (if local elections are held there on June 2, 2024), was conducted under extremely limited conditions. Factors limiting oversight of the implementation of this new provision by the Parliamentary Working Group included the lack of control over the criteria and methods used by the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) in forming the list of voters who changed their residence between local government units after July 3, 2023, and the inability to search the Unified Voter Register database by name, middle name, surname, and voter address.

Despite limited verification capabilities, CRTA, whose representatives as members of the Working Group monitored the law's implementation from the Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government (MPALS), **found that the list provided by the MOI did not include all voters who had changed their residence between local government units after July 3, 2023. Hence, this provision was not fully and faithfully implemented.**

The Belgrade City Election Commission worked in accordance with the law and legal deadlines during this reporting period. The commission maintained the same level of transparency as in the first month and a half of the election campaign, which was improved over last year's election process by introducing live video streaming of sessions. **Most decisions were adopted unanimously.** The Commission also ruled on two complaints—one was dismissed, and the other was rejected.

A total of 14 electoral lists are running in these elections. To qualify, each list needed to submit at least 3,000 certified voter support statements, with the total number of submitted support signatures exceeding 59,000. **The lists predominantly certified these signatures in municipal administrations—only 22% were certified by public notaries.**

The nomination process, concluded on May 12, was again marked by **reports of obstructions in collecting support signatures for candidacies, as several opposition candidates reported the unavailability of certifiers.** There were also **allegations of at least one falsified voter support statement, noted in the electoral list of the Greek national minority “Belgrade Our City.”** Suspicions also arose regarding the rapid collection and certification of missing voter support statements for the **“We - the Voice of the People” list.**

The Anti-Corruption Agency's response has been notably slower than in previous election cycles, despite legal provisions requiring action on complaints within short deadlines of five days. CRTA noted that the actors involved in these complaints were late in sending responses to the Agency, preventing it from acting effectively within the deadlines. **The Agency's first actions were recorded only in the campaign's final weeks**, despite CRTA's complaints being filed in mid-April.

The CRTA Observation Mission filed 46 complaints with oversight and regulatory bodies, most of them during this reporting period. CRTA submitted 31 complaints to the Anti-Corruption Agency and 15 to the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM).

Complaints submitted to REM against media outlets that neglect and violate legal obligations—such as promoting aggressive rhetoric, hate speech, and using artificial intelligence against political opponents—were not published on the institution's official website. **Only in the campaign's final week did REM announce that it had initiated its first procedure** following a complaint from the CRTA Observation Mission about the use of deep fake technology to simulate a statement by the leader of the electoral list “Dr Savo Manojlović - I, too, am Belgrade - Start-Change” on TV Pink.

A positive step in regulating media coverage during elections is that, for the first time since 2020, commercial television stations are now included under the Rulebook on Media Service Providers' Obligations During Election Campaigns, which came into effect on May 18, 2024. However, by the end of this reporting period, **REM had not enforced the new obligations imposed by the Rulebook.** CRTA's observation mission recorded political ads during the main news broadcasts on TV Pink, TV Happy, and TV B92, despite the Rulebook stating that "political advertising is not allowed during the central news programs."

Up to this point, CRTA's observation mission has held meetings with the Anti-Corruption Agency, the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, and the Ombudsman. REM responded to CRTA's invitation for a meeting only at the end of the campaign, suggesting June 1 as the meeting date. The Higher Court in Belgrade informed CRTA that it could not organize a meeting as it had already begun deliberating certain cases related to the electoral process. The Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade, the Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government, the Ministry of the Interior, and the Ministry of the Interior's Working Group for Supporting the Improvement of the Electoral Process in Serbia did not respond to CRTA's official invitation for a meeting.