



ODIHR ELECTION OBSERVATION MISSION Republic of Serbia– Local Elections, 2 June 2024

STATEMENT OF PRELIMINARY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

The 2 June local elections were well-administered, offering voters a wide range of political alternatives, but concerns about widespread pressure on public sector employees, misuse of public resources and media bias in favour of the ruling coalition negatively impacted the process. Contestants could campaign freely but the continued dominance of the ruling party, and fragmentation of the opposition reduced the competitiveness of these elections. The electoral legal framework provides an adequate basis for the conduct of democratic elections, however, further reforms are needed to address outstanding ODIHR recommendations. Despite measures introduced to address concerns over alleged organized voter migration in previous elections, which contributed to reducing tensions in the run-up to these elections, many stakeholders considered these insufficient and expressed a general lack of confidence in the accuracy of the voter register. The diverse media landscape is highly polarized and provided selective coverage, prioritizing the national agenda over local issues, limiting the amount of essential information on local elections available to voters; cases of intimidation against journalists were of concern. Election day proceeded smoothly overall but was negatively affected by issues related to the secrecy of the vote, numerous procedural problems, claims of pressure and vote buying, and isolated instances of violence. The vote count and tabulation were assessed positively overall.

On 3 April 2024, the Speaker of parliament called elections for the Belgrade City Assembly, after its failure to form a majority after the 2023 elections. On 26 April, in response to demands of the opposition and following extensive talks between parliamentary groups, the Speaker called local elections for another 89 local assemblies on the same date. Part of the opposition boycotted the elections, while others chose to participate.

The electoral legal framework forms an adequate basis for the conduct of democratic elections. It was last significantly revised in 2022, when a number of prior ODIHR recommendations were addressed. However, several key ODIHR recommendations, including those related to ensuring a level playing field, measures to prevent the misuse of administrative resources, oversight of media and campaign finance, candidate registration, an effective dispute resolution process, remain unaddressed. Moreover, it contains several gaps and inconsistencies adversely impacting its effectiveness. A parliamentary working group, composed of representatives from both the ruling and opposition parties, as well as civil society, was established on 29 April, with the stated aim of addressing all previous ODIHR recommendations, held several meetings but did not agree upon any draft proposals before election day.

Despite the condensed timeframe, Local Election Commissions (LECs) administered the elections efficiently and overall met legal deadlines. LECs published most decisions in a timely manner, increasing transparency. Most ODIHR Election Observation Mission (EOM) interlocutors expressed confidence in the organizational capacities of LECs, but their dependence on the local administrations, dominated by the ruling coalition, decreased trust among the opposition stakeholders. While trainings were assessed as adequate, participation of polling board (PB) members remained low and was not made mandatory, not in line with previous ODIHR recommendations. The scope of voter education was limited, focusing on information on voting modalities and contestants.

Some 4.21 million voters were eligible to vote in these elections. Many ODIHR EOM interlocutors expressed a general lack of confidence in the accuracy of the Unified Voter Register (UVR), citing

allegations of deceased voters still recorded in the UVR and of voter migration during past elections. Following demands of opposition parties and civil society organizations (CSOs), the Law on the UVR was amended on 10 May, and voters could vote in these elections according to their place of residence as of 3 July 2023. This affected some 52,313 voters, including 12,554 who were reassigned to localities where no elections were held this time. The Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Governance (MPALSG) had agreed to give the parliamentary Working Group the possibility to monitor the implementation of the amendment; however, the conditions provided by the MPALSG for this verification did not allow for meaningful scrutiny.

LECs registered a total of 483 candidate lists in an overall inclusive manner, but the process was negatively impacted by concerns of confidentiality in the handling of voters' support signatures, difficulties in accessing certifying authorities, and uncertainty due to recent legal amendments. Contrary to international good practice and previous ODIHR recommendations, a voter may sign in support of only one candidate list.

Fundamental freedoms of expression and assembly were respected, and voters were offered a wide range of voting options representing a broad spectrum of political opinions. However, dominance of the ruling party and fragmentation of the opposition reduced the competitiveness of elections. The use of diverse names and numbers for opposition lists, and several lists with similar-sounding names, allegedly registered intentionally to confuse voters, affected voters' ability to make a fully informed choice. Widespread allegations of pressure on public sector employees and misuse of public resources raised concerns about voters' ability to make a choice free from undue pressure, provided undue advantage to the ruling party and coalition, and blurred the line between state and the party, at odds with paragraph 5.4 of the 1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document.

Despite a slight increase in the number of women in parliament following the last elections, women remain underrepresented in parliament and other decision-making positions. Women currently hold 10 of the 31 ministerial positions in the government, some mayoral positions, and 94 of the 250 seats in parliament, including the speaker. The law prescribes a 40 per cent gender quota for candidate lists, with strict placement criteria, but some LECs registered lists that did not fully comply with these requirements. In election administration, women represented 41 per cent of the Republic Election Commission (REC), and some 45 per cent of the LECs' standing composition. Women candidates had limited visibility, and the campaign rarely addressed issues related to gender equality.

The legal framework regulating campaign financing contains shortcomings, and previous long-standing ODIHR recommendations remain unaddressed. Legislative shortcomings and the limited enforcement of the regulatory framework diminished transparency and accountability of campaign finances and undermined a level playing field. Many ODIHR EOM interlocutors reported that donors are hesitant to donate, due to fear of repercussions. Contestants' interim campaign finance reports were published by the Agency for Prevention of Corruption (APC) in a timely manner, but the law allows the APC to publish conclusions on these reports after 120 days, which is not in line with international good practice. Despite a previous ODIHR recommendation, there are no sanctions for inaccurate reporting.

Media environment is marked by systemic challenges to media freedom, including political and economic influences, which hinders content diversity. Long-standing concerns include threats and intimidations of journalists, strategic lawsuits against investigative journalism, impunity for crimes against them, media ownership concentration, and inconsistent legislation enforcement. ODIHR EOM media monitoring showed that the media prioritized the national agenda over local issues, depriving voters of essential information on local elections. Public service media primarily focused on the president, government, and ruling parties, granting access to opposition in the last ten days before the elections. National private broadcasters largely favoured public officials and ruling parties, marginalizing and often negatively framing the opposition. The Regulatory Authority for Electronic

Media (REM) Rulebook for election media coverage entered into force less than two weeks before the campaign silence. The REM monitored eight broadcasters without releasing its findings and has not yet responded to complaints.

The Constitution and the law recognize national minorities and foresee special measures to ensure their political participation and representation. The law lacks clear and objective criteria for election commissions to determine whether a candidate list represents a national minority, and many ODIHR EOM interlocutors alleged that several lists were registered as representing national minorities in order to gain representation more easily.

The law provides for expedited dispute resolution but additional safeguards are needed to ensure full access to effective remedy. The legal framework limits legal standing depending on the types of cases brought by stakeholders, contrary to OSCE commitments and international standards. Transparency of electoral dispute resolution by the courts is affected by lack of public hearings. The REC maintained a database of complaints filed with LECs and courts, contributing to transparency. Many ODIHR EOM interlocutors professed a lack of trust in the impartiality of the adjudicating bodies. Prior to election day, 180 complaints had been uploaded to the REC website, most related to the registration of candidate lists. Thirty cases were dismissed on technical grounds and twenty complaints were upheld. The remaining cases were rejected as unsubstantiated or are pending. Out of 28 appeals to the Higher Courts, nineteen upheld the LECs' decisions, and in two cases overturned.

The law provides for citizen and international observation. The Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA) observed the Belgrade City Assembly elections and the Center for Free Elections and Democracy (CeSID) deployed observers to Belgrade, Niš, and Novi Sad. While both organizations reported no difficulties in getting their observers accredited, earlier discrediting statements about citizen observers by state authorities raised concerns about citizen observers' ability to conduct their activities free from intimidation.

Election day proceeded smoothly overall but was negatively affected by issues related to the secrecy of the vote, numerous procedural problems, claims of pressure and vote buying, and isolated instances of violence. ODIHR EOM observers assessed voting negatively in 7 per cent of polling stations observed, attributed to frequent breaches of the secrecy of the vote, including due to the layout of the polling stations. ODIHR EOM observers also noted several instances of serious irregularities, including cases of vote buying and pressure on voters, as well as procedural shortcomings, including group voting and proxy voting. The counting process was negatively assessed in 10 of the 46 vote counts observed, mainly due to lack of adherence to prescribed procedures. Tabulation was assessed positively in all but three observations, with negative assessments attributed to lack of transparency, often a result of the layout of the tabulation premises.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Background and Political Context

On 3 April 2024, the Speaker of parliament called elections for the Belgrade City Assembly, following its failure to form a majority after the 2023 elections.¹ On 26 April, the Speaker also called local elections for the 89 local assemblies where local elections had not been held in December 2023. These elections were called after extensive talks between parliamentary groups, in response to repeated

¹ Following the December 2023 elections, the SNS won 49 of the 110 seats in the Belgrade City Assembly, falling short of a majority; by the legal deadline of 3 March, there was no quorum in the Assembly.

demands of opposition parties to hold local elections across Serbia on the same day, along with implementation of all previous ODIHR recommendations.²

The political landscape is shaped by the continued dominance of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and President Aleksandar Vučić, fragmentation of the opposition, entrenched polarization, and frequent early elections.³ In the 17 December 2023 early parliamentary elections, the SNS-led coalition won 129 of the 250 seats in the parliament.⁴ The opposition coalition ‘Serbia Against Violence’ (SPN) received 65 seats, the highest number of seats won by an opposition coalition since 2012.⁵ On 1 May, the SNS formed a governing coalition with the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) and three of the 12 MPs elected from national minority lists.

The last local elections across Serbia, held on 21 June 2020, were boycotted by the opposition, resulting in SNS victories in the majority of municipalities. In December 2023, concurrently with the early parliamentary elections, early local elections were held for 65 of the 174 cities, municipalities, and city municipalities, and the Belgrade City Assembly.⁶ After the announcement of the election results, SPN organized large-scale protests, alleging electoral fraud and organized migration of voters to Belgrade.

In April 2024, in a welcome step towards an inclusive dialogue, the Speaker of parliament invited all parliamentary groups and three civil society organizations to hold discussions within the parliament, with the stated aim to implement previous ODIHR recommendations.⁷ The opposition demanded setting up a commission to audit the voter register, increased coverage of the opposition by the public broadcaster, and the holding of local elections in the municipalities where local elections had not been held in December 2023.⁸ On 19 April, the SPN coalition partners did not reach a consensus on their joint participation in the elections.⁹ Some opposition parties claimed that the election conditions did not ensure equality of opportunity and decided to boycott, and others chose to participate to avoid being excluded from municipal assemblies and election commissions. As a result, opposition lists in different municipalities were comprised of different parties. The opposition demanded that voters who changed their residence within the last 12 months vote in the place of their previous residence; legal amendments adopted on 10 May fulfilled the demand for changes of residence within the last 11 months.

The Speaker of the parliament and 93 of the 250 MPs are women (37.6 per cent), a slight increase from the previous convocation, but women remain underrepresented in parliament and other decision-making

² Initially, the opposition demanded local elections for autumn 2024, which would have necessitated a constitutional amendment to postpone elections of local councils last elected in June 2020. On 23 April, the law was amended to allow for elections in the 89 municipalities on 2 June instead of 21 June, when their mandate would expire.

³ The 17 December 2023 early parliamentary elections were the third parliamentary elections in less than four years, and the sixth since 2012.

⁴ Since 2012, the SNS has won six parliamentary and three presidential elections.

⁵ SPN comprised the Justice and Freedom Party (SSP), Peoples’ Movement of Serbia (NPS), Green-left Front (ZLF), Don’t Let Belgrade Drown, Ecological Uprising (EU), Democratic Party (DS), Movement of Free Citizens (PSG), Serbia Centre (SRCE), Zajedno (Together), Movement for Reversal (PZP), United Trade Unions (SLOGA), and the New Face of Serbia (NLS). In addition, the NADA coalition, comprising the New Democratic Party of Serbia (New DSS) and the Movement for the Restoration of the Kingdom of Serbia (POKS), won 13 seats, Voice of the People – 13, and national minority list – 12. The Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) won 18 seats.

⁶ In December 2023, for the Belgrade City Assembly, SNS obtained 367,239 votes (39.08 per cent), SPN – 325,429 votes (34.63 per cent), NADA – 56,415 (6.00 per cent), We – the Voice of the People – 50,535 (5.38 per cent) SPS – 44,671 (4.75 per cent). SPN participated with one or two separate lists in each municipality and also with diverse names of the lists. In 2023, ODIHR EOM only observed the early parliamentary elections.

⁷ SRCE and SSP declined to participate, while the New DSS withdrew after the Head of the EU Delegation and the US Ambassador were also invited to the discussions in the parliament.

⁸ The [proposal](#) of the opposition requested “a Commission composed of representatives of the government, the opposition and relevant civil society organizations, which will have the authority to carry out continuous supervision, control and audit of the voter register to align it with reality.”

⁹ Mainly, SSP and SRCE opted for boycott, particularly in Belgrade, but decided to participate in the elections in Vojvodina and some other municipalities.

positions.¹⁰ A deputy prime minister and 9 of the 31 ministers in the new government are women (32 per cent). On the local level, women account for 13.3 per cent of the mayors and presidents of municipalities and for 37.6 per cent of the members of local assemblies. In the judiciary, 70.5 per cent of the judges are women, with six of the 11 judges of the Constitutional Court, including the president, 77.5 per cent in the Supreme Court of Cassation, and 48.7 per cent of the public prosecutors.

Legal Framework and Electoral System

Serbia is party to international and regional instruments related to democratic elections. Local elections are primarily regulated by the 2022 Law on Local Elections (LLE) and the 2022 Law on the Election of Members of Parliament (LEMP), which applies to matters not specifically regulated by the LLE.¹¹

The legal framework forms an adequate basis for the conduct of democratic elections, but several key ODIHR recommendations are yet to be addressed, including those related to ensuring a level playing field, measures to prevent the misuse of administrative resources, separation between the official functions and campaign activities, oversight of media and campaign finance, candidate registration, and effective dispute resolution process. Moreover, several gaps and inconsistencies negatively impact its effectiveness.¹² In practice, implementation of provisions in the LEMP for matters not regulated by the LLE posed challenges.¹³

The election-related legislation was last significantly revised in 2022, when a number of prior ODIHR recommendations were addressed, but it remained largely unchanged since then, and ongoing efforts for a further reform of the legal framework are curtailed by the frequency of early elections. The government-led inter-agency Working Group on Co-ordination and Follow-up of the Implementation of ODIHR Recommendations for the Improvement of the Electoral Process was temporarily resumed in March 2024 under the caretaker government, and prepared amendments to election-related laws. However, the proposed changes have not been tabled in parliament. On 29 April, a new parliamentary Working Group for the Improvement of the Electoral Process composed of representatives from both the ruling and opposition parties, as well as civil society was established, with the stated aim to prepare amendments addressing all previous ODIHR recommendations.¹⁴ To date, the working group has not acted upon on any draft proposals.¹⁵

¹⁰ See the World Economic Forum, Gender Gap [Report](#) 2023 and the [UNDP Table 5: Gender Inequality Index](#).

¹¹ Decisions and instructions of the Republic Election Commission (REC) may also apply to local elections, if relevant. Other applicable legislation includes the 2009 Law on the Unified Voter Register (LUVR), the 2019 Law on Prevention of Corruption (LPC), the 2009 Law on Political Parties, the 2009 Law on Administrative Disputes, the 2016 Law on Administrative Procedures, and the 2005 Criminal Code.

¹² The Law on the Constitutional Court allows it to annul election results partially or fully but does not specify the grounds. The LLE prescribes a 72-hour period for filing complaints while the LEMP, regulating candidate registration complaints, sets a 48-hour deadline. The LLE does not stipulate the deadline and procedures for the nomination of PB members in the extended composition. While the LLE specifies grounds for mandatory results invalidations and for cases where results cannot be established, it additionally lists ‘serious errors’, allowing LECs to either correct or invalidate polling station results, creating a possibility for arbitrary and inconsistent decisions. The law lacks clear and objective criteria for eligibility to submit national minority lists and granting the minority status to candidate lists.

¹³ Election media regulations lack guidance for their application to local elections, resulting in non-application of some media regulations by implementing bodies. The LEMP stipulates that ballots should be printed in the printing house of the “Official Gazette” public enterprise, however, in practice, this was not done by some LECs.

¹⁴ The parliamentary working group is composed of 18 members, including 12 representing parliamentary groups, 3 from minority parties outside of these groups, and 3 from civil society, including the chairperson. Its mandate expires in September 2024. It had a deadline of 20 May to propose measures relevant to these local elections. The working group held two sessions in total, with the second session lasting five days.

¹⁵ Twenty-five proposals were submitted, most by civil society, and the majority of proposals were related to media, prevention of misuse of state resources by public officials, the UVR, campaign finance, and deadlines for the Constitutional Court decisions.

For these elections, the LLE was amended to allow for the holding of local elections on 2 June, simultaneously with the Belgrade City Assembly elections, and amendments to the Law on the Unified Voter Register (LUVR) were related to changes to voters' residence (see Voter Registration).¹⁶ While the decision to amend the LUVR was based on a political agreement to address opposition demands concerning allegations of organized voter migration related to the 2023 Belgrade elections, these late changes created confusion among implementing stakeholders and resulted in inconsistent application of the newly amended provisions.

These elections were conducted to elect councillors for the capital Belgrade and 14 other cities, 52 municipalities, and 23 city municipalities. Local councillors are elected for four-year terms through a proportional representation system with closed lists. Lists that receive over 3 per cent of all votes cast in the respective local self-government unit qualify for seats and lists representing national minorities are exempt from this threshold requirement.¹⁷

Election Administration

These local elections were managed by a two-tiered election administration, comprising 90 Local Election Commissions (LECs), one in each territorial-administrative unit where elections were held on 2 June, as well as 4,455 Polling Boards (PBs), one for each polling station. The Republic Election Commission (REC) has limited competence for local elections.¹⁸

The LECs' standing composition, comprising members nominated by political groups in the respective local assemblies, was extended by members nominated by electoral contestants. While the law requires equitable gender representation and inclusion of persons with disabilities (PwD) when nominating LEC members, this was not proactively implemented. The ODIHR Election Observation Mission (EOM) observed that women made up about 45 per cent of LEC members in the standing composition and also held 45 per cent of LEC chair positions. From 16 to 31 May, LEC members could participate in online training provided by the REC, covering the LEC mandate and technical aspects of their work.

Despite the condensed timeframe, LECs efficiently administered the elections and overall met legal deadlines. Most LECs administered elections professionally, but there were instances of diverging interpretations of the law.¹⁹ LECs published most decisions in a timely manner, increasing transparency. However, with the exception of the Belgrade City Election Commission (CEC), a lack of timely information about LEC sessions hindered the presence of observers and other stakeholders. The ODIHR EOM observed seven sessions of the Belgrade CEC; documentation was shared beforehand with all CEC members and observers, but during the sessions topics on the agenda were voted on without much discussion on the substance. Most ODIHR EOM interlocutors expressed confidence in the technical capacities of LECs but some questioned their impartiality as LECs were located in local administration premises and supported by local administration staff, among which the ruling coalition holds a dominant

¹⁶ On 9 and 16 May, two initiatives were submitted to the Constitutional Court challenging the constitutionality of the amendments. In one case, the initiator argued that LLE amendments unconstitutionally shortened the campaign period and prevented equal participation in the campaign. Another case argues that LLE amendments shorten the mandates of councillors elected in previous elections and that the LUVR amendments are discriminatory as they do not apply to voters who are candidates in electoral lists that were submitted prior to the amendment entering into force. The cases have not yet been assigned to judges.

¹⁷ If no electoral list passes this threshold, then all lists that received votes participate in the distribution of seats.

¹⁸ In practice, the REC carried out activities related to the training of election officials and voter information and made available its website for the publication of LEC decisions, complaints, and election results.

¹⁹ While most LECs were open to meet with ODIHR EOM observers, the Novi Sad City Election Commission met ODIHR EOM observers only after it had officially accredited them. Most LECs decided to print ballot papers in equal number to the total number of voters, as stated in the LEMP, while the Bečej, Čačak, and Svilajnac LECs printed reserve ballots papers, as foreseen by the LLE.

position, potentially making them susceptible to political influence and decreasing trust among the opposition.

PBs in the standing composition were appointed by LECs based on proposals of political groups represented in the respective local assemblies, and by contestants for the extended composition. While training was not mandatory for PB members, the REC, as a reaction to a previous ODIHR recommendation, launched in-person trainings for potential PB members immediately after the call for the Belgrade City Assembly elections. Initially, the REC trained about 6,000 persons nominated by the SNS and the SPS-JS in Belgrade; other political parties did not respond to the REC's invitation. After local elections were called in another 89 local self-government units, the REC certified additional trainers to be able to offer training to all PB members. ODIHR EOM observers assessed training as adequate but noted overall low participation.

Most LECs designated polling stations within the legal deadline.²⁰ To prevent overcrowding and to address a previous ODIHR recommendation, the Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government (MPALSG) advised local authorities to limit the number of voters per polling station to 1,800. This led to an increase in the number of polling stations mostly in Belgrade, Niš and Novi Sad.²¹

By law, mobile voting may be requested by sick, elderly, or disabled voters, or by other persons on their behalf, until 11:00 hrs. on election day. The current provisions lack safeguards against misuse, as they do not require justification or authorization for those submitting a request on behalf of another voter.

The election administration undertook limited voter education efforts. The Belgrade City Election Commission released two voter information spots, supported by sign language interpretation, aired by national broadcasters. On 21 May, the REC launched a voter information campaign related to voting modalities and presenting contestants on its website and Instagram channel.

Voter Registration

Citizens who are at least 18 years old on election day have the right to vote, except those fully deprived of legal capacity by a court decision. The disenfranchisement of voters based on intellectual and psychosocial disabilities is at odds with international standards.²²

Voter registration is passive. By law, in local elections voters are allowed to vote based on their permanent residence.²³ The MPALSG maintains the Unified Voter Register (UVR), a permanent electronic database based on the civil register. Since April 2024, the MPALSG publishes the number of

²⁰ LECs in Aleksinac, Novi Bečej and Preševo did not adopt a decision to designate polling stations for the 2 June elections, arguing that there had been no changes from previous elections.

²¹ There were 67 additional polling stations in Belgrade compared to the December 2023 elections, 21 in Niš and 15 in Novi Sad.

²² Article 29 of the 2006 [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) (CRPD), which has been signed and ratified by Serbia, requires States Parties to “guarantee to persons with disabilities political rights and the opportunity to enjoy them on an equal basis with others”. Paragraph 9.4 of the 2013 [CRPD Committee's Communication No. 4/2011](#) states that “an exclusion of the right to vote on the basis of a perceived or actual psychosocial or intellectual disability, including a restriction pursuant to an individualized assessment, constitutes discrimination on the basis of disability”. Paragraph 7.3 of the 1990 [OSCE Copenhagen Document](#) provides that OSCE participating States will “guarantee universal and equal suffrage to adult citizens”.

²³ On 19 April 2024, the MPALSG published an Instruction for the Implementation of the Law on the Unified Voter Register with a provision introducing the possibility of voting from a temporary residence in local elections, in contradiction to LLE provisions which require permanent residence. The provision was amended by the MPALSG on 10 May following criticism in the parliamentary Working Group. However, during the short time period the provision was valid, 465 Belgrade voters had been assigned to vote from a temporary residence in the UVR for either the City assembly or for the municipal assembly elections; these changes have not been undone by the MPALSG. As these voters were included on voter lists of different polling stations for the two parallel elections taking place in Belgrade, they were de facto disenfranchised to vote in either of these elections.

voters per territorial-administrative unit on a monthly basis.²⁴ Citizens can consult the names and surnames of voters assigned to their polling station online. The voter registration data published by the MPALSG is inadequate for proper verification and scrutiny of the UVR.²⁵ Many ODIHR EOM interlocutors expressed a general lack of confidence in the accuracy of the UVR, based on allegations of deceased voters still recorded in the UVR and of voter migration during past electoral processes. The ODIHR EOM also recorded cases of voters included with a false address in the UVR.²⁶

On 10 May, following demands of opposition parties and CSOs, the LUVR was amended to address allegations of organized voter migration related to the December 2023 Belgrade City Assembly elections. Following this, voters were included in the voter lists for the 2 June 2024 elections according to their place of residence as of 3 July 2023. According to the MPALSG, 52,313 voters were reassigned to their old address, including 12,554 voters who were reassigned to territorial-administrative units where no elections were held this time. While some ODIHR EOM interlocutors initially welcomed the step as a measure to restore a degree of confidence in the UVR, many voiced concerns about its implementation so close to election day, the impact on the registration of candidate lists (see Candidate Registration), and the disenfranchisement of some voters. The MPALSG had agreed to give members of the parliamentary Working Group the possibility to monitor the implementation of the amendment. However, the conditions provided by the MPALSG for this verification did not allow for meaningful scrutiny, as the time was too short, and the data made available was not verifiable.²⁷

Voters could verify their records in the voter list at local administration premises or online and request corrections at their local administration from the call for elections until closure of the UVR. As of that date, 4,208,658 voters were eligible to vote.²⁸

Candidate Registration

Citizens eligible to vote had the right to stand for councillor in the territorial-administrative unit where they were registered. Political parties and coalitions, or groups of citizens could submit candidate lists to LECs, supported by signatures from eligible voters, certified by public notaries, municipal authorities, or courts.²⁹ ODIHR EOM interlocutors in several territorial-administrative units reported that voters were reluctant to sign in support of opposition lists due to confidentiality concerns and

²⁴ As provided for in the [Instruction for the Implementation of the Law on the Unified Voter Register](#) published in the Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia on 19 April 2024. Previously, the data was published quarterly. According to Speaker of the Parliament this change was implemented as a direct result of the parliamentary dialogue on the improvement of election conditions and the implementation of ODIHR recommendations.

²⁵ The UVR contains the following information for each voter: name, surname, patronymic (except for voters belonging to a national minority), 13-digit unique citizen identification number (JMBG), date and place of birth, gender, and the permanent residence address. Citing data protection concerns, the MPALSG only publishes names and surnames of voters, which does not allow for a clear identification.

²⁶ The ODIHR EOM registered cases of invitations to vote being sent to citizens unknown to the residents of the respective addresses in Belgrade-Palilula, Belgrade-Lazarevac, New Belgrade, Niš, Novi Sad, and Raška. The ODIHR EOM also received credible reports of large numbers of voters being registered in buildings in Belgrade-Savski venac and Belgrade-Voždovac that were either still under construction or inadequate to accommodate such a high number of voters.

²⁷ According to several members of the Working Group, the initial agreement with the MPALSG foresaw access to the civil register and the UVR for database queries using four search criteria (name, patronymic, family name, and address). However, access was only granted to a subset of the civil register including 52,313 voters, without clarity on how this subset was established. Voters found in the subset could then be searched in the UVR based on their JMBG to verify that the reassignment to the previous address had been undertaken. Despite several requests, the MPALSG did not provide the ODIHR EOM with relevant voter registration data that would have allowed to assess implementation of the legal amendment.

²⁸ From 18 to 29 May, voters could request changes directly at the MPALSG, which issued decisions on changes to LECs on a daily basis until 29 May. By 2 June, out of 90 LECs, 75 published final voter numbers.

²⁹ The number of required signatures is determined by the number of registered voters in the respective territorial-administrative unit.

possible negative consequences.³⁰ Opposition interlocutors reported difficulties in accessing public authorities to get their support signatures certified.³¹ Contrary to international good practice and previous ODIHR recommendations, a voter may sign in support of only one candidate list.³² Lists had to comply with a 40 per cent gender quota, requiring at least two out of every five candidates to be from the less represented gender; however, some LECs registered lists that did not comply with these legal requirements.³³ In some other cases, LECs changed their decision after receiving complaints.³⁴

The 10 May amendment of the LUVR which changed permanent residency requirements for voters specified that it does not apply to candidates running in these elections, but this exemption did not cover the full candidate registration period.³⁵ Due to uncertainty in the implementation of the change, LECs in New Belgrade and Novi Sad initially rejected some candidate lists, but reversed their decisions. In Valjevo, the LEC rejected one candidate list due to the residency requirement.

LECs received registration requests for candidate lists until 12 May. Any omissions in the submitted documents which do not constitute grounds for rejection could be rectified within 48 hours. In line with the legal deadlines, LECs published the “collective” list of contestants for their local self-government unit by 18 May. LECs registered between three and 14 lists each, with a total of 483 lists competing in the local elections. While LECs registered candidate lists in an overall inclusive manner, the process was negatively impacted by concerns about confidentiality in the handling of voters’ support signatures, difficulties in accessing certifying authorities, and uncertainty due to recent legal amendments.

Campaign Environment

Fundamental freedoms of expression and assembly were respected, and voters were offered a wide range of voting options representing a broad spectrum of political opinions.³⁶ However, dominance of the ruling party and fragmentation of the opposition reduced the competitiveness of elections. The use of diverse names and numbers for opposition lists, and ambivalence about its participation, several lists with similar-sounding names, allegedly registered intentionally to confuse voters affected voters’ ability to make an informed choice.³⁷ Widespread allegations of pressure on public sector employees and

³⁰ Such concerns were recorded in Požarevac and Subotica. ODIHR EOM observers reported cases of voters being intimidated for signing in support of an opposition candidate list in Gornji Milanovac and Raška.

³¹ As reported in Belgrade-Čukarica, Belgrade-Savski Venac, Belgrade-Voždovac, Belgrade-Vračar, Belgrade-Rakovica, Čačak, Novi Sad, and Srbobran.

³² Paragraph 196 of the [2020 ODIHR and Venice Commission Guidelines on Political Party Regulation](#) recommends that “a requirement that a citizen be allowed to sign in support of only one party should be avoided, as such a regulation would affect his/her right to freedom of association”.

³³ Eight LECs (Aleksinac, Bačka Palanka, Bečej, Belgrade-Lazarevac, Bosilegrad, Čajetina, Sjenica, and Valjevo) registered SNS lists that did not comply with the 40 per cent quota, and at least seven LECs (Bačka Topola, Belgrade-Rakovica, Belgrade-Surčin, Kovin, Šid, Sombor, and Vrbas) registered SNS lists that did not fully meet the placement requirements. At least four LECs (Belgrade-Barajevo, Čoka, Irig, and Šid) registered opposition lists that did not comply with the 40 per cent quota, and at least two LECs (Belgrade-Palilula and Raška) registered opposition lists that did not fully meet the placement requirements.

³⁴ LEC Ivanjica annulled a candidate list for not meeting the gender quota. LEC Belgrade-Voždovac registered a previously rejected list upon complaint. While the LEC Valjevo registered a list on which the gender quota was initially not met, based on a complaint, the LEC declared that it was compliant after one candidate changed residence. LEC Belgrade-Vračar rejected a list for not meeting the quota but registered it after receiving a complaint; the Higher Court overturned the decision due to non-compliance with the gender quota.

³⁵ Recent LUVR amendments state that the new provision on permanent residence does not apply to voters who are candidates on lists submitted before 11 May, the date of the entry into force of the amendment. The candidate registration period ended on 12 May.

³⁶ Contestants could start campaigning from the call of elections. Campaign activities and the publication of opinion polls are prohibited during the last 48 hours prior to the opening of the polls and until the closing of polling stations on election day.

³⁷ The opposition list Coalition Against Violence and several lists of Groups of Citizens Against Violence, the lists We – the Strength of the People and We – the Voice of the People, the lists *Kreni-Promeni* and *Pokrenimo-Okrenimo*, the opposition coalitions “BIRAM /I choose’ and several lists of Groups of Citizens “BIRAM”.

misuse of public resources raised concerns about voters' ability to make a choice free from undue pressure, provided undue advantage to the ruling party and coalition, and blurred the line between state and the party, at odds with paragraph 5.4 of the 1990 Copenhagen Document.³⁸

Campaign regulations fall short of ensuring a level playing field, contrary to previous ODIHR recommendations. All SNS lists bore the name of incumbent President Aleksandar Vučić;³⁹ the president and leading government officials featured prominently on campaign billboards, in television spots and in campaign meetings, promoting their achievements, including on national issues and meetings with foreign dignitaries;⁴⁰ most city lampposts in Belgrade featured a variation of the city's coat of arms with the SNS list name and number. After the call of elections, several municipalities, including the interim Belgrade City authority, offered social welfare programmes, at odds with international good practice and raising concerns about misuse of state resources to induce voters.⁴¹

The ODIHR EOM received widespread allegations about pressure on public employees to attend public events and campaign meetings and to vote for the SNS, raising concerns about voter intimidation.⁴² A significant number of candidates on SNS lists holding senior positions in public institutions and companies allegedly misused their office to exert pressure on public employees.⁴³ Several interlocutors also informed about cases of vote buying, particularly of vulnerable groups.⁴⁴

³⁸ Paragraph 5.4 of the 1990 [OSCE Copenhagen Document](#) calls for “a clear separation between the State and political parties”. Paragraph 7.7 requires OSCE participating States “to ensure that law and public policy work to permit political campaigning to be conducted in a fair and free atmosphere in which neither administrative action, violence nor intimidation bars the parties and the candidates from freely presenting their views and qualifications, or prevents the voters from learning and discussing them or from casting their vote free of fear of retribution.”

³⁹ Opposition MPs and FERKA initiated a petition, with the aim to submit it to the Constitutional Court, claiming that the president violated the Constitution due to the use of his name on the SNS lists. SNS noted that the use of the president's name on lists for local elections was an established practice. The name of the DS list for the 2008 local elections, European Belgrade – Boris Tadić, featured the name of the then-president.

⁴⁰ Including visits of the President of the People's Republic of China, officials from the United States of America, the European Union, Ukraine, the Russian Federation and other countries, and president's speeches at the United Nations General Assembly and his diplomatic activity to prevent the adoption of the UN General Assembly resolution establishing an International Day of Remembrance for the Genocide in Srebrenica.

⁴¹ The Belgrade City administration widely placed billboards advertising payments of RSD 20,000 (EUR 171) for each child in grammar school or high school and free access to municipal swimming pools. Other municipalities placed posters advertising free English-language and computer classes for the elderly and youth and free trips. Several municipalities organized one-month-long free cultural activities, which is not usual practice. Paragraph II. B. 1.3 of the Venice Commission Joint [Guidelines](#) for Preventing and Responding to the Misuse of Administrative Resources During Electoral Processes recommends that “no major announcements linked to or aimed at creating a favourable perception towards a given party or candidate should occur during campaigns”.

⁴² ODIHR EOM interlocutors claimed that public employees are often employed through SNS and are therefore loyal to the party, while those with short-term employment contracts were more vulnerable to pressure. Several interlocutors referred to the “capillary voting” whereby each public employee is required to secure a number of votes among family and friends. Cases of pressure on public employees were reported in Barajevo, Belgrade, Čačak, Kikinda, Nel Belgrade, Niš, Novi Sad, Raška, Sombor, Subotica, Vršac, and Zrenjanin.

⁴³ Including high rank employees of Social Security Services, Health Centres, Public Utility companies, and School Administration. See Paragraph 7.7 of the [1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document](#). Paragraph 19 of the UN Human Rights Committee's [General Comment 25](#) on Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states: “Persons entitled to vote must be free to vote for any candidate for election and for or against any proposal submitted to referendum or plebiscite, and free to support or to oppose government, without undue influence or coercion of any kind which may distort or inhibit the free expression of the elector's will. Voters should be able to form opinions independently, free of violence or threat of violence, compulsion, inducement or manipulative interference of any kind.” In [Brike v. Latvia](#) (2000), the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) ruled that the candidate ineligibility of civil servants constituted a proportionate response to the requirement that the civil service be independent. See also [Gitonas and Others v. Greece](#) and [Ahmed and Others v. the United Kingdom](#).

⁴⁴ Voters were allegedly offered, among others, cash and food packages featuring the name of the president, and selectively offered medical services in public health care institutions. ODIHR EOM LTOs received allegations of vote buying in Bačka Topola, Bela Crkva, Grocka, Čačak, Kikinda, Kotez, Palilula, Subotica and Zrenjanin.

The campaign picked up after the end of candidate registration but overall remained low-key, with limited paid advertising, with the exception of the SNS campaign. Traditional in-person campaign activities included campaign stands, small meetings, billposting, distribution of leaflets and party paraphernalia, and door-to-door canvassing. Some contestants did not campaign, raising concerns among many ODIHR EOM interlocutors about their genuine intention to contest the elections. Opposition representatives complained about insufficient coverage by the nationwide TV channels.

The tone of the campaign became increasingly negative, with personal attacks and some isolated instances of inflammatory speech.⁴⁵ Campaign topics included the local infrastructure, schools, environmental issues, corruption, while in Belgrade, the lucrative public tenders for infrastructure projects ahead of EXPO 2027 also featured. The political discourse, both online and offline, was overshadowed by national issues, with the incumbents promoting their diplomatic efforts pertaining to Kosovo,⁴⁶ the UN draft Resolution on Srebrenica, and keeping a geopolitical balance. Opposition actors also focused on the election conditions and the need to enhance the integrity of the election process.

The campaign featured few women politicians, while issues related to gender equality, youth and persons with disabilities received limited attention in the campaign discourse. In the limited number of campaign events held, which were observed by the ODIHR EOM, women accounted for around 37 per cent of the speakers and half of the audience.⁴⁷

Campaigning on social media is not regulated. Contestants were active on social networks, including Facebook, X and Instagram, promoting their electoral programmes through videos and posts.⁴⁸ Those calling for boycott continued to criticise the president and the authorities using the same tools.⁴⁹ Some incumbent mayors posted campaign materials on official social network accounts. Most campaign messages promoted candidates and programmes in a neutral tone, but the tone became increasingly critical closer to election day. Between 1 May and election day, the Facebook and X accounts of eight actors from the ruling SNS had jointly the highest level of online engagement (some one million interactions). The accounts of the twelve most prominent opposition actors jointly had 228,00 interactions. The ODIHR EOM noted at least one instance of disinformation, namely a deep fake video featuring a panel discussion on TV, used to discredit a candidate for Mayor of Belgrade.

Campaign Finance

Campaign financing is primarily regulated by the 2022 Law on Financing Political Activities (LFPA) and the 2019 Law on Prevention of Corruption (last amended in 2022). Previous long-standing ODIHR recommendations relate to campaign expenditure limits, rules on campaigning by third parties, effective oversight mechanism, system of dissuasive sanctions, and effective disbursement of public funds. Overall, the legislative shortcomings and the limited enforcement of the regulatory framework diminish transparency and accountability of campaign finances and undermine a level playing field.

⁴⁵ Inflammatory speech was noted in relation with the assassination attempt against the Prime Minister of Slovakia, with comments that President Vučić would be next and Mr. Vučić linking the assassins to “Slovakia Against Violence”.

⁴⁶ All references to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, in this text should be understood in full compliance with the United Nations Security Council [Resolution](#) 1244.

⁴⁷ The ODIHR EOM observed 16 campaign events of 8 lists and endorsing parties and movements in 7 locations.

⁴⁸ According to the Facebook Ad Library, from the calling of elections to 31 May, the contestants spent approximately EUR 113,000 on advertising, including some EUR 78,000 by SNS and some EUR 14,000 by the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians and some EUR 7,000 by the *Biram* coalition. Two organizations, *Pristojna Srbija* and *Ponosna Srbija*, spent some EUR 12,000 reposting SNS-produced content praising its achievements and videos critical of the opposition.

⁴⁹ The ODIHR EOM is following the social media of major contestants and the leaders of major parties, and the official accounts of selected municipalities. The ODIHR EOM is conducting a qualitative analysis of hate speech, inflammatory language or derogatory comments, or presence of disinformation narratives in social networks.

Political parties represented in parliament or in local self-government units are entitled to annual public funding in proportion to their results in the previous elections; this funding can also be used for campaigns. Submitters of electoral lists can use public funding for campaigning, amounting to 0.07 per cent of tax revenues of the annual budget of the respective local self-government unit.⁵⁰ Public funding is allocated proportionally to all contestants who obtain 1 per cent of the votes. Contestants may receive a 40 per cent advance, if they submit a deposit equal to the amount of the first instalment. In some places, the amount of public funding available to each list was reduced due to the high number of registered lists, including some whose genuine intention to contest was questioned by many ODIHR EOM interlocutors. Contrary to a previous ODIHR recommendation, the distribution of the second instalment is not contingent on verifying lawful campaign financing.

Contestants may finance their campaign activities through monetary and in-kind donations, membership fees, their own funds, credits, and loans; donations from various sources are prohibited.⁵¹ At odds with a previous ODIHR recommendation, ceiling for donations from legal entities remains high.⁵² Most ODIHR EOM interlocutors reported that regular party funds, rather than donations, are the main source of campaign funds and that donors are hesitant to make campaign donations, due to fear of repercussions.⁵³

The Agency for Prevention of Corruption (APC) is mandated to oversee political finance and prevent the misuse of state resources. By law, interim campaign finance reports were due on 26 May, covering the period from the calling of elections until 15 days prior to election day, excluding most campaign activities. These reports were published on the APC website.⁵⁴ Final reports must be submitted within 30 days of the publication of election results. Furthermore, the APC is only required to publish its conclusions on interim and final campaign finance reports within 120 days after submission, reducing transparency and not in line with international good practice.⁵⁵ Despite a previous ODIHR recommendation, there are no sanctions for inaccurate reporting.⁵⁶ For these elections, the APC deployed 44 field monitors to collect data on campaign expenditures. Several ODIHR EOM

⁵⁰ The total amount of public funding allocated for Belgrade City elections is around RSD 76 million (EUR 638,400). Forty per cent of that amount was distributed equally among the 14 registered lists in the first instalment.

⁵¹ Donations from anonymous, foreign, and state-funded sources, non-profit organizations, trade unions and religious organizations, the gaming industry, or through third parties are prohibited. Legal or natural persons with public procurement contracts may not donate during the validity of the contract and for a period or two years after the contract's termination.

⁵² The donation ceiling for individuals and legal entities is 10 and 30 average monthly salaries, respectively. In election years, these limits double, with the ceiling for legal entities reaching RSD 5,647,500 (around EUR 48,000) for 2024. In February 2024, the average monthly salary was RSD 94,125 or around EUR 800. Donations exceeding one average monthly salary must be disclosed on the website of the list submitter, within eight days of receipt. See the 2022 ODIHR and Venice Commission [Joint Opinion](#) on the Constitutional and Legal Framework Governing the Functioning of Democratic Institutions.

⁵³ The LFPA prescribes that donors may be subject to tax controls but lacks clear criteria for them, potentially discouraging donations.

⁵⁴ By 1 June, 287 reports were uploaded on the APC website. Only few lists reported donations; the reporting period excludes the final campaigning phase, and the majority of contestants did only report expenditures related to signature verification.

⁵⁵ Upon a complaint from Transparency Serbia, alleging that the SNS did not report on a number of expenditures during the reporting period, the APC stated that they will only look into these after election day during the review of the preliminary and final reports. Paragraph 263 of the [2020 ODIHR and Venice Commission Guidelines on Political Party Regulation](#) states: "Transparency in reporting requires the timely publication of parties' financial reports; the reports need to remain public for an appropriate amount of time, to allow for proper public scrutiny". Paragraph 265 states that "[r]ecords, as well as the oversight body's findings and conclusions, should be available for public review for an extended period of time to allow for proper public scrutiny, possibly even in a central state database".

⁵⁶ Paragraph 272 of the 2020 [ODIHR and Venice Commission Guidelines on Political Party Regulation](#) states that sanctions should be applied against political parties found to be in violation of relevant laws and regulations and should be dissuasive in nature. Moreover, in addition to being enforceable, sanctions must at all times be objective, effective, and proportionate to the specific violation."

interlocutors voiced a lack of trust in the APC, due to limited efforts to address alleged violations proactively.⁵⁷

Media

The election campaign unfolded in a lively yet polarized media environment, marked by systemic challenges to media freedom. Numerous media outlets compete in a relatively small advertising market, many constrained by financial fragility.⁵⁸ Content diversity is hindered by political and economic influences.⁵⁹ Long-standing concerns include threats and intimidations of journalists, impunity for crimes against them, strategic lawsuits against investigative journalism, media ownership concentration, and inconsistent enforcement of legislation.⁶⁰ ODIHR EOM interlocutors noted that a deteriorating media environment leads to self-censorship in critical coverage and tabloid-style journalism.⁶¹

The legislation safeguards freedom of expression, media freedom, diversity, and media pluralism, and it prohibits censorship and incitement to hatred and discrimination. Despite amendments adopted to align with EU directives, the October 2023 legislative changes to media laws have raised some concerns among journalist associations. These concerns stem from the failure to mandate a new election of Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM) Council members despite a revised appointment mechanism, the absence of provisions enforcing ethical standards for media receiving public funding, and provisions allowing for state co-ownership of private media.⁶²

On 7 May, the REM approved a new Rulebook for election media coverage, which took effect on 18 May, less than two weeks before the elections. This rulebook includes few changes from the previous version, as over three quarters of the proposed changes were rejected during the public hearing.⁶³ Positively, the Rulebook now applies to all broadcasters, not just to public-service media. The REM has not issued its 2024 monitoring plan or a specific plan for the current elections, despite legal deadlines.⁶⁴

⁵⁷ On 18 March 2024, the UN Human Rights Committee, in its concluding observations on the [fourth periodic review](#), expressed regrets about the lack of information provided by Serbia on mechanisms guaranteeing the independence of the Agency and about the lack of information provided on cases involving corruption by high-public officials, and recommended strengthening the mandate and independence of the APC.

⁵⁸ On 13 May, the Ministry of Information and Telecommunications [disclosed](#) that 42 local governments failed to set legally required public tenders for media projects. Some local media voiced concerns to the ODIHR EOM regarding the opaque allocation of public funds, which may result in reduced critical coverage to avoid losing such funds.

⁵⁹ In 2022, the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM) renewed the terrestrial licenses for commercial televisions *TV Pink*, *TV Happy*, *TV Prva* and *TV B92*, while the allocation of a fifth license is still pending. The European Commission in its [Serbia 2023 Report](#) noted that the fifth license “has still not been awarded, without credible justification”.

⁶⁰ The [fourth periodic report](#) on Serbia by the UN Human Rights Committee expressed concerns “about the reported rise in intimidation, smear campaigns and attacks on human rights defenders, activists, opposition leaders, and journalists, including by means of strategic and unwarranted lawsuits”. On 30 May, the Safe Journalist Network, MFRR partners, and the Coalition for Media Freedom condemned ongoing pressures and attacks on journalists in Serbia, following a recent attack in Belgrade and strategic lawsuits against investigative reporters.

⁶¹ According to [Freedom House’s Nations in Transit](#), the rating of independent media dropped from 4.00 in 2014 to 2.75 in 2024. In Reporters Without Borders’s 2024 [World Press Freedom Index](#), Serbia ranked 98th out of 180 countries, down from 54th in 2014. The Council of Europe [Safety of Journalists Platform](#) recorded six active alerts in 2024, including attacks on journalists’ physical safety (2), harassment (2), detention (1), and impunity (1). While the 2023 report from the Permanent Working Group for Safety of Journalists [indicates](#) slight improvements in assaults and processed cases, in early 2024, the Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia [recorded](#) 52 attacks and an increase in strategic lawsuits against journalists.

⁶² The Media Freedom Rapid [Response](#) expressed concern over a provision that could facilitate the return to state co-ownership of private media, diverging from the 2020 Media Strategy adopted by the government.

⁶³ On 5 April, the REM initiated a [public hearing](#) to review 15 regulations, including the Rulebook for election coverage.

⁶⁴ The Law on Electronic Media requires the REM to adopt its annual supervisory plan by 20 December of the previous year and to update it within ten days of the calling of elections. The REM informed the ODIHR EOM that the timeframe for implementing these plans was insufficient due to the new law’s adoption in November 2023.

ODIHR EOM media monitoring shows that nationwide media mostly focused on national, regional and international issues, with marginal local coverage.⁶⁵ ODIHR EOM interlocutors noted that a few local media outlets covered the local elections. Nationwide media frequently broadcast pre-recorded campaign material from political parties, overshadowing editorial content. The media published price lists for paid political advertisement, offering discounts benefitting those who could buy more ads. Only paid ads from the ruling parties were broadcast in the monitored media.⁶⁶ Overall, nationwide media extensively covered the activities of the president and the government, further tilting the playing field.⁶⁷

The public service media *Radio-Television of Serbia (RTS)* and *Radio-Television of Vojvodina (RTV)* did not provide free airtime to electoral contestants. *RTS* and the REM informed the ODIHR EOM that they do not consider obligations to provide free airtime applicable to the current local elections, arguing the impracticality of presenting all parties and coalitions in local elections.⁶⁸ However, on 28 May, *RTSI* positively aired an electoral debate featuring four representatives from major competing lists in Belgrade and, since 20 May, broadcast some interviews with major candidates in Zrenjanin, Čačak, Sremska Mitrovica, Požarevac, and Belgrade. *RTSI* allocated most coverage to the president (30 per cent) and the national government (26 per cent), mostly in a neutral tone. The SNS-led coalition received 18 per cent of often positive coverage, while opposition parties received 24 per cent, neutral or positive in tone. *RTV* offered mostly neutral coverage to the president (21 per cent), the national government (37 per cent) and the regional government (12 per cent), with opposition parties receiving a combined 8 per cent of neutral or positive coverage.⁶⁹

Monitored private broadcasters showed different patterns. *Pink TV* devoted 37 per cent of mostly positive coverage to the president, 19 per cent to the national government, 33 per cent to the SNS-led coalition, and 7 per cent to opposition parties, largely negative in tone. *Happy TV* and *TV B91* provided extensive and often positive coverage of the president (37 and 65 per cent, respectively), the national government (24 and 14 per cent), and the SNS-led coalition (34 and 16 per cent), with less than 5 per cent to opposition parties. *TV Prva* devoted mostly positive coverage to the president (36 per cent), the national government (15 per cent), and the SNS-led coalition (30 per cent), with 8 per cent to all opposition parties combined. Conversely, *NI* and *Nova S* provided substantial coverage of opposition parties (37 and 62 per cent, respectively), in a generally neutral tone, with limited and critical coverage of the president (15 and 5 per cent), the national government (9 and 15 per cent), and the SNS-led

⁶⁵ Between 6 May and 2 June, the ODIHR EOM monitored the political coverage of six television channels with national terrestrial coverage (*RTSI*, *RTV1*, *TV Pink*, *TV Happy*, *TV Prva*, *TV B92*), daily between 18:00 and 24:00 hrs., and the prime-time news programmes of two cable television channels (*NI* and *Nova S*).

⁶⁶ The SNS-led coalition purchased 8 hours and 53 minutes. The monitored cable TV channels *NI* and *Nova S* chose not to broadcast paid political advertisement.

⁶⁷ During the 30 days preceding election day, media are prohibited from reporting on the inauguration of public infrastructure projects if public officials who are also candidates participate in such events. However, on 18 May, *TV Prva* and *TV Happy* covered an event where Siniša Mali, Minister of Finance and candidate for the Belgrade City Assembly and for Belgrade-Zvezdara municipality, presented plans for new museums to be built or reconstructed in Belgrade. On 13 May, Mr. Mali and president Vučić visited the works at the EXPO 2027 site (*TV Pink*). On 20 May, Mr. Mali announced the completion of pile installation for the Expo complex and the start of work on the National Stadium (*RTSI*, *TV Prva*). On 22 May, Mr. Mali said a new factory in Čačak, which will employ 800 people, will soon have its foundation stone laid (*TV Galaksija 32*). On 25 May, Milun Todorović, mayor of Čačak and candidate, attended the opening of a museum and discussed new openings (*TV Prva*).

⁶⁸ The REM rulebook on election media coverage reiterates that public service media must present all electoral lists in free and equal airtime slots, as stipulated by Article 144 of the LEMP. Additionally, the Law on Public Service Media defines public interest to include “free and equal presentation of political parties, coalitions and candidates with confirmed electoral lists for republican, provincial or local elections during the election campaign”.

⁶⁹ Within the opposition parties, *RTSI* devoted 7 per cent of its coverage to *Biram Borbu*, 5 per cent to Go-Change and to We - the Strength of the People, 4 per cent to United for Free Novi Sad, and 1 per cent to We - the Voice of the People. *RTV* allocated 3 per cent to United for Free Novi Sad, 2 per cent to *Biram Borbu*, and 1 per cent to Go-Change.

coalition (24 and 13 per cent). Women in politics received minimal media coverage, averaging 10 per cent across the monitored media, reflecting their marginalization in political life.

The REM oversaw media compliance with the laws, acting only upon complaints. During the election period, it received seven media-related complaints but has not yet responded. The REM monitored eight broadcasters but did not release its findings, indicating ongoing problems in effectively overseeing media coverage and providing timely remedies. Many ODIHR EOM interlocutors expressed lack of confidence in the REM.

Participation of National Minorities

The Constitution and the law recognize national minorities and foresee special measures to ensure their political participation and representation. Of the 121 currently registered political parties, 72 represent national minorities.⁷⁰ In the current parliament, 12 MPs were elected from national minority lists, and some other MPs who are members of national minorities were elected with mainstream parties. Three members of the new government belong to national minorities. Several mayors are members of minorities, nominated both by minority lists and by mainstream parties.⁷¹

Candidate lists representing national minorities need a lower number of support signatures to register and a lower number of votes to receive public funding and are exempt from the three per cent threshold. The law lacks clear and objective criteria for election commissions to determine whether a candidate list represents a national minority. In total, over 100 national minority lists were registered.⁷² Many ODIHR EOM interlocutors alleged that several lists registered as representing national minorities aimed to use the preferential terms for national minority lists to gain representation more easily.

The law prescribes that in municipalities where a national minority accounts for over 15 per cent of the local population, the ballots and electoral documents must also be produced in the language of the respective minority. Several national minority parties registered lists to contest the upcoming elections in municipalities with significant minority populations.

Election Dispute Resolution

The law provides for expedient dispute resolution but additional safeguards are required to ensure full access to effective remedy.⁷³ Complaints against decisions, actions, or inactions of the election administration are handled by the LECs, whose decisions may be appealed to the Higher Courts. The law provides broad legal standing to list submitters. However, the possibility to file complaints by other

⁷⁰ The Bosniak minority is represented by 13 parties, the Albanian, Roma, Russian and Slovak minorities by 7 parties each, the Hungarians by 6, Bulgarians and Vlachs by 4 parties each, Macedonians and Bunjevci by 3 parties each, the Croat, Rusyn, Montenegrin, Romanian and Greek minorities by 2 parties each, and the Gorani by 1 party.

⁷¹ Including the mayor of Novi Pazar (Social Democratic Party; SDP) and the presidents of the municipalities of Ada (SNS), Bačka Topola (Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians), Bosilegrad (Bulgarian party “That we are – Vladimir Zaharijev”), Bujanovac (DS), Dimitrovgrad (SNS), Kanjiža (SVM/VMSZ), Kovačica (SNS), Preševo (Alternative for Change), Senta (SVM/VMSZ), Sjenica (SDP), Tutin (“Tutin in First Place”), and Žagubica (SNS).

⁷² Of them, 27 Hungarian minority lists were registered in 24 municipalities; 13 Russian minority lists in 11 municipalities; and eight Albanian minority lists in two municipalities. Four of the 14 lists in Belgrade City represented national minorities, two of the 11 in Nis, and three of the 14 lists in Novi Sad.

⁷³ The deadlines for filing and resolving complaints range between two and three days; appeals must be filed within three days, with the appeal body having three days to decide.

interested parties depends on the subject matter.⁷⁴ Limitation on the types of cases that can be brought by stakeholders is contrary to OSCE commitments and international standards.⁷⁵

Most LECs reviewed complaints in public sessions; but holding a public hearing is at the discretion of the courts, and Higher Courts so far adjudicated appeals in closed sessions. Lack of transparent decision-making is at odds with international standards and good practice and previous ODIHR recommendations.⁷⁶ The Constitutional Court can annul the election results if irregularities significantly impacted the results. However, the law does not list the grounds for such annulment and the court is not bound by expedited deadlines, negatively impacting timely dispute resolution.⁷⁷ Some cases from previous elections are still pending at the Constitutional Court.⁷⁸ Many ODIHR EOM interlocutors professed a lack of trust in the impartiality of the adjudicating bodies.

The REC maintains a public database of complaints filed with LECs and courts, contributing to transparency. Some ODIHR EOM interlocutors reported difficulties in filing complaints due to the limited working hours of LECs or non-availability of LEC members at the administration facilities, and the law lacks clarity if complaints can be filed electronically.

Prior to election day, 180 complaints had been uploaded to the REC website, mostly related to the registration of candidate lists. Of these, 78 complaints argued that the use of President Vučić's name on the SNS-led coalitions' candidate lists is incompatible with his constitutional role and constitutes a conflict of interest; all of these complaints were rejected as unsubstantiated.⁷⁹ Some complaints were related to the newly adopted provisions in the LUVR, arguing that some candidates in the lists submitted on 11 and 12 May were not eligible to stand as they did not have permanent residency in the respective locality; some LECs provided varied interpretation of these provisions;⁸⁰ the remaining complaints were mainly related to candidate list not meeting the required 40 per cent gender quota, alleged forgery of support signatures in registration documents, and the granting of national minority status to candidate

⁷⁴ Citizen observers can only complain about their right to observe the printing and handover of ballots. Complainants can appeal LECs' rejections or dismissals, but appeals against decisions granting complaints are limited to direct violations of the complainant's legal interests.

⁷⁵ Paragraph 5.10 of the [1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document](#) states that everyone shall have an effective means of redress against administrative decisions, so as to guarantee respect for fundamental rights and ensure legal integrity. Article 2.3(a) of the ICCPR states that "any person whose rights or freedoms as herein recognized are violated shall have an effective remedy...". Guideline II.3.3.3.f of the [Code of Good Practice](#) provides that "all candidates and all voters registered in the constituency concerned must be entitled to appeal".

⁷⁶ Higher Courts apply the Law on Civil Procedures for proceedings initiated by an appeal. Paragraph 12 of the 1990 [OSCE Copenhagen Document](#) provides that "proceedings may only be held in camera in the circumstances prescribed by law and consistent with obligations under international law and international commitments". Paragraph 100 of the Explanatory Report of the Venice Commission's [Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters](#) states: "The appeal procedure should be of a judicial nature, in the sense that the right of the appellants to proceedings in which both parties are heard should be safeguarded".

⁷⁷ Guideline II.3.3.g of the Venice Commission's [Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters](#) provides that "time-limits for lodging and deciding on appeals must be short (three to five days for each at first instance)". "It is, however, permissible to grant a little more time to Supreme and Constitutional Courts for their rulings".

⁷⁸ The Constitutional Court informed the ODIHR EOM that to date, it has approximately 41,000 pending cases and is currently composed of 11 judges (out of 15 foreseen by the Constitution). Some 15 cases, including appeals against the results, related to previous elections are pending. The court informed the ODIHR EOM that it is not publishing original appeals and may only publish some decisions it considered on merits.

⁷⁹ The majority of these complaints were filed according to the same template, which was a part of the campaign of the organisation FERKA (Campaign for Fair Elections), calling on citizens to file complaints related to this issue. The majority of LECs noted that the use of the President's name did not violate any provisions of LLE and LEMP, and LECs' competences regarding decisions on candidate registration are exhausted by applying the LLE and LEMP; LECs are not competent to determine the compliance of the legal provisions governing election procedures with the constitution.

⁸⁰ The LEC in New Belgrade rejected the list of "We Choose New Belgrade" following such a complaint, but the LEC in Sombor allowed for rectification of deficiencies in the "I Choose Sombor Without Violence" candidate list.

lists.⁸¹ Thirty cases were dismissed on technical grounds as incomplete, untimely or submitted by unauthorized persons. Twenty complaints were upheld. The remaining cases were rejected as unsubstantiated or are pending. Out of 28 appeals to the Higher Courts, nineteen upheld the LECs' decisions, and in two cases overturned.⁸² The Supreme Public Prosecutor reported receiving eight complaints related to vote buying; some cases related to the last election are still pending.⁸³

The APC receives complaints against misuse of public resources and office by public officials and political entities in campaigns and violations of campaign-finance regulations.⁸⁴ While the APC can also review cases *ex officio*, many ODIHR EOM interlocutors noted that it does not proactively investigate violations. Under the LFPA, the deadlines for adjudicating complaints are unclear.⁸⁵ The APC can issue warnings and has exclusive power to refer cases to the Misdemeanour Court. Despite previous ODIHR recommendations, some APC decisions related to reports against public officials cannot be appealed as they are adopted as 'notifications' rather than administrative decisions.⁸⁶

Up to election day, the APC received some 30 complaints, most against public officials for the alleged abuse of state resources. Some complaints argued that SNS violated the LFPA by offering free legal services or Serbian classes, donating wheelchairs, or using state resources to promote the party. The APC decided on eight complaints, rejecting four as unsubstantiated; four complaints were upheld. The APC issued four warnings to SNS local branches to take down a post on social media offering free services to citizens, and warned SNS not to share activities of public officials on their social media. Despite a prior ODIHR recommendation, under the LPC, APC decisions are published only after the conclusion of the administrative appeal process.⁸⁷

Election Observation

The LEMP provides for unhindered citizen and international observation of all stages of the electoral process. Civil society organizations registered with a statutory purpose related to elections may nominate observers until seven days before election day. Only one citizen observer from the same entity may be present at a given election commission or polling station at the same time. International observers must request accreditation at least ten days before election day.⁸⁸

⁸¹ In these cases. LECs stated that they do not check the authenticity of signatures.

⁸² Belgrade Higher Court overturned the decision of LEC Belgrade-Vračar registering candidate list due to the lack of compliance with gender quota requirement and residency requirement. Niš Higher Court overturned the decision of LEC rejecting candidate list noting that the reasoning of the LEC was unsubstantiated.

⁸³ Three of these were dismissed and in other cases more information for requested. For prior elections, the Public Prosecutor Office reported 125 cases; many cases are still pending, including cases related to giving and accepting bribes. Some interlocutors reported lack of proper investigation by the police.

⁸⁴ The APC reviews cases in closed sessions as it is not required by law to hold public sessions. Decisions of the APC related to campaign finance violations under the LFPA may be appealed to the Administrative Court; however, the court has no expedited deadline to decide on such cases.

⁸⁵ In general, the APC has five days to decide on complaints. By law, the APC must notify the political entity against which proceedings are initiated within 24 hours of receiving a complaint. However, the deadline on deciding complaints is counted from the moment contestants are notified of the proceedings against them. In addition, the APC may request information from state bodies, banks, legal and natural persons, who are required to forward requested information within three days, which may further prolong the process.

⁸⁶ Paragraph 5.10 of the 1990 [OSCE Copenhagen Document](#) states that "everyone will have an effective means of redress against administrative decisions", and paragraph 5.11 states that "administrative decisions [...] should be fully justifiable".

⁸⁷ The law provides that only information that a procedure has been initiated against a public official shall be available to the public. In the APC's interpretation, this provision requires it to provide information upon request.

⁸⁸ The LLE does not regulate accreditation of observers but states in Article 8 that "[the] provisions of the Law governing the election of Members of Parliament shall accordingly apply to local elections in matters not specifically regulated by this Law". Under the LEMP, the REC is charged with accrediting observers.

The Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA) observed the campaign period and election preparations with a team of 15 long-term observers and 10 media monitors. On election day, CRTA deployed observers to 450 polling stations in Belgrade. The Center for Free Elections and Democracy (CeSID) deployed observers to 547 polling stations in Belgrade, Niš and Novi Sad and conducted a parallel vote tabulation. Both organizations reported no difficulties in getting their observers accredited by the election administration.

The ODIHR EOM was informed by several interlocutors of climate of pressure and a diminishing space for civic activities.⁸⁹ After the December 2023 elections, CRTA had published reports pointing towards organized voter migration related to the Belgrade City Assembly elections. Following these publications, state authorities and pro-government media accused CRTA of destabilizing the country's constitutional order, which raises concerns about citizen observers' ability to conduct their activities free from intimidation. This is contrary to OSCE commitments and international good practice.⁹⁰

Election Day

Election day proceeded smoothly overall but was negatively affected by issues related to the secrecy of the vote, numerous procedural problems, claims of pressure and vote buying, and isolated instances of violence.⁹¹ Media reporting and viral social network posts on election day expressing distrust in the integrity of the election process may have impacted voter turnout. Women constituted 54 per cent of PB members in polling stations observed and chaired 45 per cent of PBs observed. The REC started posting scans of PB results protocols, at around 20:30 hrs. on election night, contributing to transparency, but did not announce overall turnout figures.

The polling stations observed generally opened on time, and the opening process was assessed positively in 41 of the 45 polling stations observed. Opening procedures were generally followed, but ODIHR EOM observers reported several instances of procedural errors, including five instances when the PB chairperson did not show to everybody present that the ballot box was empty, and ten cases where the ballot box was not sealed properly.

ODIHR EOM observers assessed voting negatively in 7 per cent of polling stations observed, a high number which is of concern. Negative assessments were attributed to numerous problems with the secrecy of the vote, including due to the layout of the polling stations, and procedural shortcomings.⁹² In addition, in 22 per cent of polling stations observed, not all voters marked their ballot in secrecy, and in 6 per cent, secrecy was compromised by ballots that were not folded properly. ODIHR EOM observers reported seven cases of voters taking photos of their ballots.

⁸⁹ UN Special Rapporteurs have flagged their “profound concern regarding the widespread discrediting statements and smear campaigns against election observers raising concern about potential fraud in Serbia, including by the highest-ranking politicians of the country”. See the [Communication](#) sent to the Government of Serbia on 20 February 2024 by the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion, and the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association. The European Commission's [Serbia 2023 Report](#) noted “verbal attacks and smear campaigns against CSOs”.

⁹⁰ Paragraph 8 of the 1990 [OSCE Copenhagen Document](#) states that “the participating States consider that the presence of observers, both foreign and domestic, can enhance the electoral process for States in which elections are taking place”. Section 4.1 of the [ODIHR Election Observation Handbook](#) lists minimum conditions for the effective, credible and professional observation, which, among others, include “to have a secure environment in which to operate for a meaningful election process”.

⁹¹ The ODIHR EOM is aware of some 10 reports submitted to the police regarding alleged vote buying in New Belgrade, Belgrade-Obrenovac, Belgrade-Palilula, Belgrade-Zvezdara, and Vršac, and carousel voting in Belgrade-Rakovica. Some ten complaints have been submitted with the LEC in Novi Bečej by the *Biram* coalition, alleging vote buying and abuse of mobile voting requests.

⁹² In 12 per cent of polling stations observed, the layout did not ensure secrecy of the vote, while the design and placement of polling booths did not ensure the secrecy of the vote in 9 and 22 per cent, respectively.

ODIHR EOM observers noted several instances of serious irregularities, including cases of vote buying and pressure on voters. They reported tension outside two polling stations observed, and signs of pressure or intimidation of voters from outside 1 per cent. ODIHR EOM observers reported 6 cases of vote buying. In 2 per cent of polling station observed, people other than PB members were keeping track of voters who had voted, and in 2 per cent, attempts to influence voters who to vote for were noted.

Inking procedures, an important safeguard against multiple voting, were not always respected.⁹³ In 4 per cent of polling station observed, voters' identity documents were not always checked, and in 2 per cent, not all voters signed the voter list. In 17 per cent of polling stations observed, one or more voters were turned away because they were not on the voter list of that polling station or could not produce a valid ID.

Additional procedural shortcomings noted by ODIHR EOM observers included group voting (15 per cent) proxy voting (1 per cent), and series of seemingly identical signatures on the voter list (1 per cent). In 18 per cent of polling stations observed, the ballot boxes were not properly sealed. ODIHR EOM observers noted in 1 per cent of polling stations observed that the same person was assisting numerous voters. ODIHR EOM observers reported indications of ballot box stuffing from five polling stations.

The layout of the polling stations was not adequate for voting in 7 per cent of observations, and overcrowding was noted in 3 per cent of observations. Despite the legal requirement for accessibility of polling stations for voters with disabilities, 60 per cent of polling station where voting was observed did not provide for independent access for voters with physical disabilities, and in 18 per cent, the interior layout was not suitable for such voters.

Extended PB members were present in 99 per cent of polling stations observed, while citizen observers were present in 20 per cent.⁹⁴ Unauthorized persons were identified in 1 per cent of polling stations observed. ODIHR EOM observers reported only one case of a non-PB member interfering in the work of the PB.

Throughout election day, there were numerous claims that SNS "call centers", frequently located in public property such as the Banjica Sports Centre in Belgrade-Voždovac and the Novi Sad Fair, were being used to pressure or entice citizens to vote. SNS officials refuted the accusations of improper activities. The Novi Sad Fair call center was vandalized during a physical clash following an attack by opposition activists. Physical altercations between activists of opposing political camps were also reported from other places.

The majority of the 46 vote counts observed by ODIHR EOM observers were assessed positively, with no instances of tension or disruptions reported. However, the EOM assessed the counting negatively in 10 polling stations observed, due to lack of adherence to prescribed procedures and procedural errors or omissions, at times significant. Fourteen PBs did not count all signatures on the voter list before opening the ballot box. In 5 counts, ballots were not counted accurately, and in 1 count ODIHR EOM observers noted evidence of falsification of the results. During nine counts, not everybody present could clearly see the marks on each ballot. The determination of ballot validity was not in line with the law in 3 cases, and not consistent in 4 cases. In addition, ODIHR EOM observers reported other significant procedural errors or omissions from nine counts. In 10 counts, the PB had problems reconciling the results in the results protocol, 6 protocols had been pre-signed, in 6 cases not all PB members signed the protocol, and 11 PBs did not post a copy of the protocol at the polling station entrance, negatively

⁹³ In 10 per cent of polling stations observed, not all voters were checked for traces of indelible ink, and in 6 per cent, not all voters were marked with ink before receiving a ballot.

⁹⁴ With the highest number of observers (39 per cent) in polling stations observed in Belgrade, Niš and Novi Sad.

impacting transparency. Eight PBs did not properly pack and seal the ballots and other election material before transporting them to the LEC.

Tabulation was assessed positively in all but three reports submitted by ODIHR EOM observers, most of whom described it as efficient and well-organized. Negative assessments were mainly due to a lack of transparency, often a result of the layout of the tabulation premises. In one LEC, ODIHR EOM observers were not allowed to follow all stages of the tabulation process. Observers reported from 15 LECs that one or more PB protocols contained discrepancies, necessitating corrections of minor errors by the LEC.

*The English version of this report is the only official document.
An unofficial translation is available in Serbian.*

MISSION INFORMATION & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Belgrade, 3 June 2024 – The assessment was made to determine whether the elections complied with OSCE commitments and other international obligations and standards for democratic elections and with national legislation.

ODIHR has endorsed the 2005 Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation. This Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions is delivered prior to the completion of the electoral process. The final assessment of the election will depend, in part, on the conduct of the remaining stages of the electoral process, including the handling of possible post-election day complaints or appeals. ODIHR will issue a comprehensive final report, including recommendations for potential improvements, some eight weeks after the completion of the electoral process.

Ambassador Lamberto Zannier is the Head of the ODIHR EOM, deployed from 30 April. The ODIHR EOM includes 12 experts in the capital and 18 long-term observers deployed throughout the country. On election day, 126 observers from 28 countries were deployed by the ODIHR EOM. Women constituted 46 per cent of ODIHR observers. Opening was observed in 45 polling stations, and voting was observed in 512 polling stations across the country. Counting was observed in 46 polling stations, and the tabulation in 43 LECs.

The ODIHR EOM wishes to thank the authorities for the invitation to observe the elections, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for their assistance, and the Local Election Commissions around the country for providing accreditation documents and for their assistance. The ODIHR EOM wishes to also express its appreciation to other state institutions, political parties, candidates, media, civil society organizations, and international community representatives for their co-operation.

For further information, please contact:

Ambassador Lamberto Zannier, Head of the ODIHR EOM, in Belgrade (+381 61 697 9802);
Katya Andrusz, ODIHR Spokesperson (+48 609 522 266), in Warsaw; or
Kseniya Dashutsina, ODIHR Election Adviser, in Warsaw (+48 603 793 786).

ODIHR EOM Address:

Vračar Business Center, 3rd floor
Makenzijeveva 37
11000 Belgrade, Serbia
tel: +381 61 697 9802; email: office@odih-serbia.org