

18 December 2023

## **Preliminary report by the Centre for Free Elections and Democracy (CeSID) Election Monitoring Mission**

*Serbian Parliamentary Election, 17 December 2023*

**No major improvement to the quality of the election process has been identified relative to the previous election, and renewed efforts must be made to put into effect previous recommendations made by Serbian and international election monitors. There is also a need to build the capacity of the electoral administration, in particular, local electoral commissions and polling boards**

Fundamental civic rights were upheld in the 2023 parliamentary election, with robust political competition and a broad and varied range of political offerings, whilst the contestants confronted one another in an environment characterized by a lack of mutual trust. The Republican Electoral Commission (RIK) managed the election efficiently, effectively, and transparently and in compliance with the law. Not all contestants had the same access to the media, hindering their ability to put their views across effectively. Appearances by public officials during the campaign gave an overwhelming advantage to the ruling coalition, even though in most cases their involvement did not contravene the Anti-Corruption Law or the Law on Electronic Media. The dominant role in the campaign was played by President Aleksandar Vučić, who was not a candidate in the elections, that is possible according to the regulations but influenced the favoring of one election participant. Although opposition groups entered this campaign with their finances in healthier shape (as they had not boycotted the previous election, unlike that of 2020, and so could rely on funding from the central budget), the governing parties still enjoyed a far better starting position and spent much more money on campaigning. The election was tainted by allegations of forgery over voter support affidavits, which all groups were required to produce to be able to field candidates. This issue jeopardizes trust in the electoral process and ought to be addressed systemically (for instance, by abolishing the requirement to supply these affidavits for each election whilst maintaining a high formal voter support threshold for initial registration of political parties or allowing one person to register support for multiple electoral lists). The elections have been characterized by allegations of organized vote by the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and it is recommended of CeSID that these allegations should be investigated and verified not to further jeopardize the electoral integrity.

This is the second consecutive election that has followed the new electoral rules (introduced after Serbian legislation was aligned with ODIHR recommendations and the results of domestic inter-party dialogue), with no improvement recorded relative to the previous poll. Training for the electoral administration ought to continue (with particular focus on local electoral commissions and polling boards), as should discussions between political groups, to ensure the procedures are appropriately applied in future elections. Lastly, the public administration should consider professionalising the electoral administration, as this is the only solution for overcoming the lack of capacity shown by polling boards.

Voter turnout was high, with crowds forming at some polling stations and tensions spilling over from the polling places into the areas outside. CeSID observed a large number of irregularities, ranging from less significant ones that did not warrant the annulment of local results, to major issues that could result in a repeat of the voting at the polling station in question. Serious irregularities included indications of attempts



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to influence voters outside polling stations, ballot stuffing, assaults on election monitors, and unregistered voters being allowed to cast ballots. The CeSID monitors also found instances of parallel voter records being kept (but were unable to determine who was responsible for this), frequent procedural omissions (with polling boards failing to apply UV-sensitive hand paint to mark a person as having voted, failing to use UV lamps to ascertain whether someone had previously voted, or allowing people to vote without proper identification), group voting, and issues with how polling stations were arranged (especially early in the morning) that could have jeopardised ballot secrecy in some locations. The CeSID monitoring mission made these irregularities public. None of these issues prevented polling boards from operating or resulted in interruptions to voting at the polling stations affected, but their final impact on the election can be assessed only once full monitoring reports have been received.

As in the 2020 and 2022 elections, the Parliamentary Election Campaign Oversight Committee did not meet the expectations of either the political stakeholders or the expert community. The failure to legislate binding requirements for privately-owned broadcasters restricted opportunities for equal representation in the media. Neither the Anti-Corruption Agency (ASK) nor the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM) played a materially significant role in the campaign, and there is consequently much room for improvement in terms of their involvement and transparency.

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*The CeSID Electoral Monitoring Mission will produce a detailed and thorough assessment of the elections once all formal electoral procedures have been completed and all appeals have been heard.*