

Centre for Free Elections and Democracy (CeSID) Election Monitoring Mission

Preliminary Report

Elections for the Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Niš city legislatures, 2 June 2024

Limited progress was observed with the quality of the election process relative to the December 2023 elections, as political dialogue produced some success in reducing the extent of systemic irregularities on election day. CeSID recommends continued robust activities to implement the recommendations of both international and local election monitors, coupled with greater engagement by the governing coalition. Capacity-building is required for local electoral commissions and polling boards, and any doubts over the accuracy and up-to-dateness of the voter register also ought to be dispelled.

The 2024 electoral process respected fundamental civic rights, whilst political competition was restricted as the elections were boycotted by a number of political groups, with the consequences of this decision being at their most visible in Belgrade. Some improvement was identified in the performance of city electoral commissions, in particular that of Belgrade, which demonstrated greater transparency and made video recordings of its meetings publicly available. The elections were well organised from a technical point of view but doubts once again emerged as to the authenticity of signatures collected by the contestants to meet the statutory requirement for public support. As such, responsibility for the signature collection process ought to be given back to notaries public, in contrast to the current arrangement whereby these signatures are certified by local governments. CeSID has learnt that four people were nominated as non-core members of polling boards (by a variety of electoral lists) without their knowledge or consent.

Unequal access to the media once again hindered the balanced representation of election contestants. Appearances by public officials during the election campaign massively favoured the governing coalition, even though many of these cases were formally not violations of the Anti-Corruption Law or Law on Electronic Media. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić played a key role in the campaign: whilst his engagement was not barred by any regulations even though he did not stand as a candidate, it did benefit only one group that contested the election.

The elections were preceded by a series of discussions between the government and opposition groups, which was also attended by civil society organisations following the election process. This dialogue resulted in agreement that all voters who changed their permanent registered addresses after 3 July 2023 would have the change annulled, which helped build trust between political parties to some extent and contributed to ensuring a fairly peaceful run-up to the elections with no major confrontations. Nevertheless, significant concerns as to the up-to-dateness of the voter register remained unaddressed by either these changes or scrutiny of the voter register by the Working Group tasked with improving the electoral process. The Working Group's findings did nothing to enhance electoral conditions, since it operated for only three weeks following its creation in early May 2024 before its efforts stalled due to a lack of decision-making quorum to vote on the 25 recommendations for improvements (as the governing coalition withdrew its members claiming it needed more time to consider the proposals).

Election day was marked by significantly lower turnout than in the December 2023 poll, which reduced overcrowding at polling stations and expedited vote counting. CeSID identified more than 100 irregularities, from minor procedural omissions to serious infringements. Major violations included suspected attempts to pressure voters outside polling stations, individuals keeping parallel voter records in the vicinity of polling stations (with their identity remaining unknown), voters casting ballots on behalf of others, and failure to sign control sheets. CeSID observed frequent procedural omissions, group voting, and issues with how polling stations were laid out. CeSID's election monitors made the

irregularities public. None of the irregularities were systemic or interrupted polling board operations, but CeSID will be able to make a final assessment of their impact on the outcome of the elections only after the complete set of our monitors' reports is available.

Three incidents occurred on election day, two in Belgrade (one outside a central restaurant and another at a government-run sports centre in the suburb of Banjica) and one in Novi Sad (at the city's public fairgrounds). Opposition groups accused the governing party of using these locations as staging areas for organised voting and exerting pressure on voters, whilst the ruling party responded the sites were call centres. CeSID did not deploy monitors to these locations and cannot confirm any of these allegations with any certainty. In this regard, more clarity may emerge once the Anti-Corruption Agency and the prosecution service have formally responded to these cases.

The CeSID Election 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.