

ELECTIONS

UNDER THE MAGNIFYING GLASS



days
until the
elections

Civic Initiatives will continuously monitor and record cases of violations of freedom of expression, assembly and association during the pre-election campaign. We will point out all omissions and illegal actions during the election campaign, including cases of abuse of: public resources and public office for campaigning. We will report on all these issues on a weekly basis to the interested public.

Introduction

The United Serbia Electoral List Campaigns Without Restrictions

The BBC World Service uncovered dozens of Facebook pages that had published paid political advertisements targeting the student movement with unverified allegations over the previous month. Although political in nature, the advertisements did not clearly disclose who had paid for them, despite this being a requirement under the rules of Meta, the company that owns Facebook. In addition to the fact that Serbia's Law on the Financing of Political Activities prohibits foreign funding of political advertising, the BBC found that all the advertisements had been paid for in Romanian currency as of 16 October, amounting to at least 29.437 Romanian lei, or approximately €5.500. According to Meta's data, at least three advertisements were paid for by a Romanian company, while most of the pages were created on 9 and 10 September, when the elections were called. As of 2026, pages promoting content related to elections in Serbia that are not directly affiliated with political parties must register with the Anti-Corruption Agency if they plan to spend more than one-quarter of the average monthly salary, or approximately €300. The BBC reported that it had identified at least four pages that had exceeded this threshold. The profile pictures used by these pages had been generated by artificial intelligence, while their names gave no indication of their political content. One video, which had attracted millions of views, focused on the Muslim faith of Sanela Ramadanović, a female candidate. Hundreds of comments containing hate speech were posted beneath it. According to the BBC, the rector of the University of Belgrade, Vladan Đokić, was also targeted by these campaigns.

Rodoljub Šabić, a lawyer and member of the Council of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM), stated in a written statement that Stevica Smederevac, President of the REM Council, had scheduled an electronic session for Friday, 16 October. The agenda included 13 proposals to initiate investigative proceedings against media outlets for which there were reasonable grounds to suspect violations of the standards established by the Law on Electronic Media. Šabić added that some REM Council members had voted against initiating investigative proceedings against all 13 media outlets, despite the submission of documented and substantiated complaints. He assessed that these members had once again demonstrated their complete unwillingness to contribute to the independent functioning of REM or to uphold the standards established by law. Of the 13 cases in question, 10 concerned TV Informer, whose monitoring report on its coverage had been rejected at the REM session held on 28 September. In the reports concerning Informer, the expert service had documented numerous examples of covert election campaigning, the dominance of and favourable coverage given to Aleksandar Vučić's electoral list, negative campaigning against the Student List, violations of the rights to privacy and personal dignity, as well as failure to comply with the obligation to clearly label pre-election content.

The Bureau for Social Research (BIRODI) stated that television channels with national coverage had turned the election campaign into a promotion of the Aleksandar Vučić – United Serbia electoral list and an effort to discredit the Student List. According to BIRODI's analysis, the Law on Electronic Media and the Rulebook on the Protection of Human Rights in the Provision of Media Services are being violated in a systematic and sustained manner. The analysis states that, out of a total of 25.595 minutes monitored, the "United Serbia" electoral list, led by Aleksandar Vučić, received a total of 12.878 minutes of coverage, of which 12.330 minutes, or 96%, were positive in tone. The Student List received a total of 10.024 minutes of coverage, of which 9.514 minutes (95%) were negative in tone, according to a 24-hour monitoring period covering five television channels with national coverage. BIRODI emphasised that REM's statutory obligation is not merely to compile statistical records as a basis for studies of media coverage, but to place the collected data in the context of indicators of violations of media laws and regulations and to impose sanctions on media service providers.

The investigative news outlet KRIK obtained a series of videos recorded by Serbian citizens living in Vienna, documenting how voter registration in the city is being manipulated. Vienna is home to one of the largest Serbian communities in the diaspora. An association of Serbs in Austria with close ties to the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) is unlawfully registering citizens to vote in the upcoming parliamentary elections. KRIK explains how the association effectively operates as an extension of the Serbian Embassy in Vienna, using the registration process to recruit its members to vote for Aleksandar Vučić, offering gifts and SNS political campaign materials. KRIK also discovered that a popular Serbian bakery in the neighbourhood was helping the association with these activities. Meanwhile, the Serbian Embassy in Austria made it more difficult for some members of the diaspora to register to vote, or even rejected their applications, forcing them to turn to the association for assistance. Experts interviewed by KRIK said that these activities violated several laws, thereby jeopardising the electoral process among Serbian voters in the diaspora.

Possible Electoral Manipulation

Eighteen electoral lists are participating in the parliamentary elections on 25 October, approximately 50% of which have the status of national minority lists. Some have links to the SNS, while others take advantage of the preferential status granted to minority lists or have little to no visible political activity. BIRN is investigating how their representatives may influence important decisions concerning the conduct of the elections. The law grants minority lists preferential treatment in that they are not required to pass the three-percent electoral threshold. They are also required to collect fewer supporting signatures to register an electoral list: 5.000 instead of 10.000. It is therefore important to establish whether minority lists genuinely represent the interests of the communities they claim to represent, or whether there are cases in which this preferential status is used in ways that raise questions about their authenticity. Among the minority lists are political organisations with a longstanding presence in elections. At the same time, newer political organisations are also participating, some of which have no members—or almost no members—of the minority community they claim to represent on their lists. Certain lists also include candidates who previously appeared on the SNS electoral list. Sofija Mandić, a member of the Republic Electoral Commission (RIK), considers the high proportion of minority lists suspicious from the standpoint of the regularity of the electoral process. She identifies the conduct of RIK as an additional concern, arguing that the RIK does not substantively examine whether certain lists genuinely aim to protect the rights and interests of national minorities, despite being legally obliged to do so, in her interpretation of the law.

The election observation mission of the Centre for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA) reported that residents of Subotica and other Serbian cities were receiving polling notifications addressed to people they did not know and who, according to the residents' knowledge, did not live at their addresses. This could indicate outdated records, administrative errors, or possible manipulation of the voter register. Residents of a building at 2A Petefi Šandor Street in Subotica reported receiving polling notifications addressed to unknown individuals, listing floor zero and apartment zero, even though no such floor or apartment exists in the building. Vladimir Erceg, deputy member of CRTA's Commission for the Audit, Verification and Control of the Accuracy and Updating of the Voter Register, cautioned that such cases do not automatically indicate electoral manipulation, as they may result from unreported changes of residence, incomplete address information, or errors in the records.

Freedom of Expression

The Inability to Report Safely from SNS Rallies

The Association of Independent Electronic Media (ANEM) condemns the continued practice of preventing independent journalists from reporting on rallies organised by the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). At a rally held in Novi Sad by the "Aleksandar Vučić – United Serbia" electoral list, a reporter from Mašina who was attempting to ask a question of the former president was roughly shoved aside. Žarko Bogosavljević, editor of the Razglas News portal, was confronted by an SNS supporter among the crowd, who struck his phone while shouting profanities at him. ANEM expresses particular concern over an incident in which plainclothes police officers singled out a contributor to the Pazovačke portal from the crowd during the SNS rally, escorted him away from the gathering, searched his backpack and took down the details from his identity card. Of particular concern is the fact that most independent journalists covering the ruling party's pre-election rally in Novi Sad chose not to wear press insignia or display their accreditation prominently, fearing for their own safety while carrying out their professional duties.

The Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (NUNS) and the ANEM condemned the obstruction of a Mašina journalist's work at an SNS rally in Surčin, as well as the denial of access to journalists from Bečejski mozaik and Webinfo to a panel discussion in Bečej attended by national and local officials and pensioners. They stressed that these incidents constitute an unacceptable restriction on the public's right to information, particularly with less than a week remaining before the elections. Following a rally organised by the Student List in the centre of Surčin, the SNS held its own rally accompanied by a concert. A journalist from the Mašina portal, who had filmed several shots, was subsequently prevented from continuing to record. Meanwhile, journalists from Bečejski mozaik, based in Bečej, and Webinfo, based in Novi Bečej, were denied permission to attend a panel discussion in Bečej involving national and local officials and pensioners, even though their newsrooms had received invitations to the event and accredited their representatives.

Repression and Targeting of Citizens, Journalists and Media Outlets

Una Branković, a Green-Left Front (ZLF) councillor in Smederevo, stated that her car had been vandalised again, this time with red spray paint, exactly one year after it was damaged with acid. The ZLF described the incident as an act of intimidation and persecution linked to her activism. This interpretation is supported by Branković's account that, a week earlier, the word "blockader" had been written at the entrance to her apartment building, accompanied by an arrow pointing towards her flat. Radomir Lazović, co-president of the ZLF, said that attacks on and intimidation of activists were unacceptable in a democratic society. He called on the competent authorities to investigate the case, prosecute those responsible and identify the perpetrators.

TV Forum, a television station based in Prijepolje, announced that its signal on Supernova channel 596, where it had been available for years, was changed on 19 October, with content from a television station rebroadcasting TV Informer's programme airing in its place. According to a statement published on social media, the name TV Forum remains listed as channel 596, but the programme currently being broadcast has no connection whatsoever with the station. TV Forum stated that it had contacted the operator but had received no concrete answers. While awaiting official information from the operator, the station advised viewers that they could continue watching its programme via an antenna, on channel 596 on IPTV, as well as through other platforms.

ANEM condemned another threat of physical violence against Žig info editor-in-chief Željko Matorčević, following the publication of an article about so-called “phantom voters” registered at the address of a funeral home in Grocka. The editor of Žig info filed a criminal complaint against Vesna Dušić for endangering security, under Article 138 of the Criminal Code, urging the prosecution and police to investigate the matter urgently and take appropriate action. Matorčević stated that he felt deep fear and concern for his own safety and that of his family. These concerns are particularly justified in light of the attack in October 2018, when the Žig info editor sustained serious bodily injuries.

Nemanja Šarović, leader of the “Love, Faith, Hope” movement and a journalist with KTV, reported that he had been attacked in Belgrade while working on a report about secret SNS call centres. In a post on his X account, Šarović stated that an unidentified assailant had attacked him from behind and knocked his mobile phone out of his hand with a blow. Šarović added that he had subsequently received treatment at the Emergency Centre and then provided a statement at a police station.

New Cases of the Use of Illegal Spyware

In a post on the University of Belgrade’s official Instagram account, Đokić stated that Citizen Lab, in cooperation with the SHARE Foundation, had confirmed that spyware had been found on his mobile phone. He said the discovery pointed to a serious attack on his privacy, security and the integrity of his office as rector. The post also stated that this was not merely an attack on him personally or in his capacity as rector of the University of Belgrade, but also a violation of the privacy of his data, contacts and communications.

Rade Bajić, an assistant prosecutor at the Public Prosecutor’s Office for Organised Crime, stated that he believed he had been targeted by illegal spyware solely because he had been part of the prosecutorial team that conducted an investigation on behalf of the Public Prosecutor’s Office for Organised Crime into suspicions that decisions adopted by the Serbian Government on 14 November 2024 had unlawfully revoked the protected cultural heritage status of the General Staff and Ministry of Defence buildings in Belgrade, in violation of the Constitution and a number of laws. He added that, given the broad consensus among experts that the Pegasus spyware and similar malicious software are effectively weapons of repression, the only conclusion he could draw was that society was living through a period of widespread violence against all segments of society, which he attributed to the country’s ruling establishment.

Freedom of Association

Students participating in the university blockades announced that searches of premises had begun, allegedly with the aim of arresting students. The first target was Lazar Mišić, as police searched premises they claimed he allegedly used. His lawyers have already become involved in the proceedings and confirmed that Mišić has not been detained so far. His lawyer, Marko Drašković, added that it was troubling for a public prosecutor from the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade to be directing what he described as an unlawful search. Student Luka Pešić published a video showing a group of police officers at the "4. juli" floating river venue in Zemun, noting that students had used the venue in recent weeks. The students stated that these actions would not intimidate them, silence them or force them to give up.

Freedom of Assembly

A verbal altercation, followed by a physical confrontation, broke out between supporters of the Student List and the SNS at protests organised by both sides in Čačak. The confrontation between the two opposing groups of citizens began when SNS supporters seized a flag from supporters of the Student List. At one point, SNS supporters were also pelted with eggs from a moving car. The police prevented the situation from escalating further by forming a cordon that successfully separated the opposing groups.