

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

Resignation of President Vučić

President Aleksandar Vučić resigned from office on 27 September, stating that he was doing so in order to participate in the ongoing pre-election campaign without holding public office. On that occasion, he said that on the penultimate day of his term he had granted pardons to 49 individuals. Among them were 12 activists and opposition politicians from Novi Sad who had been arrested ahead of the 15 March 2025 protest. Vučić pardoned these activists despite the fact that no verdict had been issued against them. Some of the activists remain in political exile and have stated that they will not return to Serbia because they fear for their safety. In addition to the activists from Novi Sad, Vučić also pardoned 11 individuals whose identities have not yet been disclosed and who are reportedly alleged to have participated in actions against “blockaders”, a term used in Serbia to refer to participants in student-led blockades and protests. Experts have pointed to the unlawfulness of this procedure, arguing that, under the Pardon Act, the pardon procedure is initiated ex officio by the Ministry of Justice, which submits a proposal, together with the case files and its opinion, to the President of the Republic, who makes the final decision. The Ministry of Justice has stated that it did not participate in compiling the list of individuals to be pardoned in this particular case, that the 49 individuals were selected by Vučić himself, and that it will not participate in implementing the decision. This raises the question of who will notify the courts, prosecutors’ offices, and the Directorate for the Enforcement of Criminal Sanctions of the pardons. It should be recalled that Vučić has previously granted pardons to individuals who physically assaulted a female student and fractured her jaw, as well as to a woman who struck a protest marshal with her car during a demonstration, causing her serious injuries. The pardoning of both groups of individuals effectively places those facing politically motivated proceedings as a result of their public activities on the same footing as those who committed serious criminal offences.



Vučić stated that his potential debate counterparts on RTS (the Student List and CRTA) “have no arguments whatsoever.” The Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA) declined the invitation to participate in the debate, explaining that its role is as an election observer, rather than a participant in the electoral race. Vučić commented on CRTA’s decision with insults, saying that now, since he is no longer president, he could tell this civil society organization, “shame on you,” because they had been the “main participants in the color revolution.” Such unfounded statements by the former president can only make CRTA’s observation mission more difficult before and during the elections.

Pre-Election Conditions

During the pre-election and electoral process, observers and journalists have been subjected to violence, media pluralism is absent, the public sphere is visibly overwhelmed by disinformation, and the majority of public space is given to the ruling majority. These were some of the issues raised at a gathering of media and civil society organizations held in Belgrade on 29 September. Veran Matić, President of the Association of Independent Electronic Media (ANEM) and a member of the Permanent Working Group for the Safety of Journalists, pointed out that during this year the police had failed to respond to more than 60% of requests from prosecutors for information-gathering related to attacks on journalists. Vukosava Crnjanski, founder and director of the Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA), stated that attacks and acts of violence against election observers have become something that can be expected.

Ahead of the official start of the election campaign, Novosadska Television received a new studio, as well as a new program featuring members of the ruling party, while local officials promoted the new season. Novosadska Television is among the media outlets that have received the largest amounts of funding from the public budget. Saša Mirković of ANEM commented on the millions of euros in public funds being used to finance media outlets that insult opponents of the regime while turning the pre-election campaign into a series of programs across their networks, leaving virtually no funding for professional journalism.



By analyzing publicly available data on the number of voters registered at individual addresses, Radio Free Europe found that half a million voters will cast their ballots in the 25 October elections without a registered street name or house/apartment number. The most striking example is in the settlement of Ivanje in the municipality of Prijepolje. A similar situation exists in the south of the country, where journalists from the Media Reform Center found that a large number of residents have "quasi-addresses," with the voter register stating next to their names: "no street, number zero." This raises the question of whether these are phantom voters or genuine voters with technically phantom addresses, due to the failure of institutions to perform their duties and address the issue.

The Republic Electoral Commission (RIK) annulled its previous decision to approve the electoral list and ordered the "Ćale, ovo je za tebe – Petar Đurić, Prime Minister of Serbia" electoral list to rectify the deficiency within 48 hours. The list's submitters are required to provide at least 118 valid voter statements in support of the electoral list.

Freedom of Expression

The Instagram account of the Mašina.rs news outlet is currently being targeted by coordinated bot activity, with a large number of accounts following it within a short period of time. This type of activity could result in the suspension of the outlet's Instagram account, which has become an important source of information for citizens. The scale of the attack indicates an organized attempt to sabotage social media channels that have become an important source of information in an environment of captured media.

Despite the existence of legal provisions that clearly prescribe the obligations of media outlets in the 30 days leading up to elections, including the requirement that election-related programming be clearly labeled, the prohibition on reporting on campaigns conducted by public officials, and the prohibition on presenting political content covertly as news, many nationally covered media outlets continue to disregard these rules. There is often no place for the activities of the Student List in election-related coverage, unless they are presented as part of a negative campaign.



An observer from the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption was attacked in New Belgrade, near a stand operated by the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), while monitoring the election campaign in the field. Immediately before the incident, the victim explained to those present that he was taking photographs in an official capacity as part of his work for the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption. He was then attacked by several individuals, who inflicted multiple physical injuries to his head and body.

Freedom of Assembly

On Monday evening, 28 September, Tanja Mičić, a councillor from the "Kreni-Promeni" movement, was allegedly attacked by the Mayor of Belgrade, Aleksandar Šapić, while she was out walking with her husband. Councillor Mičić claims that Šapić approached her, began insulting her, and got into her face. In an attempt to prevent a physical confrontation between Šapić and her husband, the councillor stepped between the two men, after which, according to her account, the Mayor of Belgrade struck her in the face. Following the incident, she was diagnosed with a fracture of the left nasal bone and part of the upper jaw adjacent to the nose. The mayor was taken to a police station but was released shortly afterwards. The following day, the mayor held a press conference at which he denied striking the councillor and apologized, not to the victim, but to former President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić.

The evening after the attack on the "Kreni-Promeni" councillor, an incident was reported in Novi Sad in which Vukašin Đoković, a candidate on the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) list for the parliamentary elections, forcibly took away a banner expressing support for the students. The incident also involved a confrontation and verbal altercation between SNS activists who had gathered at the scene and citizens supporting the Student List. SNS activists approached citizens, attempted to take their banner away, and verbally insulted them, after which a physical confrontation broke out between the two groups. Plainclothes police officers intervened in the incident. Srdanović, the leading candidate on the Student List, was also attacked during the confrontation.

For days, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has been conducting a campaign accusing the Student List of advocating violence and sexual violence against women. However, when officials of the ruling party attack women in practice, there is no reaction. Instead, efforts are quickly redirected toward creating new confrontational situations in order to avoid accountability and shift the blame onto the victims.