



Early parliamentary elections in Serbia offered voters a genuine choice and respected fundamental freedoms, say international observers

BELGRADE, 17 March 2014 – The 16 March 2014 early parliamentary elections offered voters a genuine choice, were conducted on a sound legal basis, and fundamental freedoms were respected throughout the campaign, international election observers said in a statement issued today. The observers also highlighted the need for some further legal reform and increased media pluralism.

“Serbia conducted truly democratic elections, with a wide range of options for voters and effective procedures. The inclusive and transparent manner in which this vote was conducted is praiseworthy,” said Roberto Battelli, the Special Co-ordinator who led the short-term OSCE observer mission. “Voters and representatives of political parties, alike, expressed a high degree of trust in the electoral process – something all citizens can be proud of.”

Election commissions at all levels performed their duties efficiently and professionally and met legal deadlines, and the Republic Election Commission (REC) adopted its decisions in sessions that were open to the media and accredited observers.

“We were particularly impressed that the high standard of election day procedures was in evidence not only in Belgrade and other large cities, but also in villages and rural areas,” said Luigi Compagna, the head of the OSCE PA delegation. “This uniformity is crucial for democratically administered elections and for the enfranchisement of all voters.”

The media landscape is diverse, with a large number of public and private outlets, but the range of opinions offered was limited by the influence exerted on media by political parties in power, including through public funding. The lack of transparency in media ownership remains a concern. Both public and private television stations offered extensive coverage of the elections in a variety of formats, mostly in a neutral tone, but critical analytical reporting and voter education content were lacking.

“Fighting corruption was one of the main issues of the election campaign and major concern for the citizens. The newly elected parliament should take tangible measures to address this problem,” said Pedro Agramunt, the Head of the PACE delegation. “The media environment was pluralistic, but lacked journalistic independence and transparency in media ownership.”

The legal framework is in line with OSCE and Council of Europe commitments, and other international standards, although certain recommendations from previous elections remained unaddressed. Some aspects were improved through by-laws issued by the REC, the statement said.

“I hope this election allows the Serbian authorities to develop the political will needed to proceed with reforms necessary to bring legislation further in line with OSCE commitments and recommendations,” said Ambassador Boris Frlec, the Head of the OSCE/ODIHR

Limited Election Observation Mission. “The next four years should give the authorities ample opportunity to move forward.”

In general, the campaign was low-key and peaceful, although isolated incidents of election-related violence were reported. Some concerns were raised that different parties in power misused state resources at the local level, and there were credible reports of cases of intimidation of voters, especially public sector employees.

While the political finance law provides an adequate framework for party activities, the lack of transparency of sources remains a concern. The legal framework establishes limits on annual private contributions for the campaign, but not for campaign expenditures.

A number of national minority parties registered their electoral lists either in coalitions with other minority parties or jointly with national parties and coalitions. Some safeguards were introduced to prevent the abuse of affirmative measures by political entities that do not represent national minorities, in line with previous recommendations.

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