

Serbia's elections provide alternatives but marred by ruling party advantage, observers say



Reinhold Lopatka and Farah Karimi at a polling station in Belgrade, 17 Dec. 2023

A joint observation mission of the OSCE PA, the OSCE/ODIHR, APACE, and the European Parliament found that the 17 December early parliamentary elections in Serbia offered voters a choice between political alternatives, but pressure on voters as well as the decisive involvement of the President and the ruling party's systemic advantages undermined the election process overall. The legal framework is adequate to carry out democratic elections, observers said, but there are still numerous issues to address, including the lack of separation between the official functions and campaign activities. There were also cases of intimidation and vote buying, observers pointed out.

The statement of preliminary findings and conclusions was delivered at a press conference in Belgrade by OSCE PA Vice-President Reinhold Lopatka (Austria), who was appointed by the OSCE Chairman-in-Office as Special Co-ordinator and leader of the short-term OSCE observer mission "While the elections were technically well-organized, they unfolded in the midst of a socially and politically divided landscape," Lopatka said. "The decisive involvement of the President dominated the electoral process, and the use of his name by one of the candidate lists, together with bias in the media, contributed to an uneven playing field."



Farah Karimi and Reinhold Lopatka at press conference in Belgrade, 18 Dec. 2023

OSCE PA Head of Delegation Farah Karimi (Netherlands) noted: "Serbia has conducted its third parliamentary election in just under four years, a frequency that has diminished the public's trust in the democratic process and the institutions governing it, and the election campaign has been marked by extreme divisiveness."

Observers noted that the election administration prepared for voting day efficiently and transparently, but the frequent number of early elections in recent years have undermined trust in the country's democratic institutions. Election day was smooth overall, but there were a number of procedural deficiencies, including frequent cases of overcrowding, violations of the secrecy of the vote, and numerous instances of group voting. The elections took place against the background of high polarization. In the run-up to the election, a number of concerns were voiced about the intimidation and harassment of civil activists, human rights defenders, and journalists.

The PA's observation mission consisted of 71 observers, including 51 members of parliament from 24 countries. From the International Secretariat, the mission was supported by Secretary General Roberto Montella and Deputy Secretary General Gustavo Pallares, as well as Sherif Abdili, Anastasiya Griadasova, Pauline Hennings, Freyja Koci, Stephanie Koltchanov, and Nat Parry.

Save the dates: 2024 OSCE PA statutory meetings

Dates and locations for next year's statutory meetings have been set. Further information will be communicated in due time.

- WINTER MEETING: Vienna, Austria: 22-23 February 2024
- ANNUAL SESSION: Bucharest, Romania: 29 June - 3 July 2024
- AUTUMN MEETING: Dublin, Ireland: 2-4 October 2024

Season's Greetings from OSCE PA Secretary General Roberto Montella

As 2023 draws to a close, I offer my sincere gratitude to all the OSCE parliamentarians and staff who have contributed to another successful year of Assembly activities. Special thanks go out to the hosts of statutory meetings, in particular Armenia and Canada, as well as Denmark and Austria for providing invaluable support to the OSCE PA.

These are challenging times for the OSCE but one thing that I am certain of is that with the continued engagement of our parliamentarians and the capable support provided by our staff, the Assembly will remain strong.

With war continuing to rage in Ukraine and other conflicts breaking out, I am inspired by your unshakable dedication to principles of peace, security and democracy, and I look forward to keeping on serving you for the years to come together with my very professional team of experts at the OSCE PA International Secretariat.

I also continue to look to the promises made nearly 50 years ago in Helsinki as perhaps the best hope for our region and for the world as a whole. To paraphrase US President Gerald Ford upon signing the Helsinki Final Act in 1975, history will judge us



not by what we say, but by what we do – not by the promises we make, but by the promises we keep.

In that spirit, I look forward to the new year with hope, optimism and a renewed commitment to deliver results for the sake of the more than one billion citizens of the OSCE area. Happy holidays to you all and best wishes for a peaceful and prosperous new year.

- Secretary General Roberto Montella

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