



Election observation and Serbian democracy

Welcoming the commitment of all stakeholders in Serbia to make sure that key recommendations made by ODIHR are fully implemented, ODIHR Director Matteo Mecacci in an opinion article published ahead of his two-day visit to Belgrade this week is highlighting the importance of a genuine and result-oriented dialogue on all key aspects of the electoral process to increase transparency and trust in the run-up to the upcoming elections. See the article in Serbian [here](#).

Almost 12 years have passed since I first observed elections in Serbia.

Back in May 2012, as the OSCE's Special Coordinator for parliamentary and early presidential elections, I witnessed first-hand the importance that Serbian citizens and institutions placed on the process and their awareness of the impact that elections would have on their country's future.

Fast forward to December 2023, and the importance the people of Serbia attach to elections has not faded away. The decisions made at the ballot box can have far-reaching implications on the economic well-being and security of Serbia, as well as on their human rights and civil liberties.

With all this at stake, elections can lead to heightened tensions between political leaders and among citizens, where mistrust and allegations of abuse can question the legitimacy of the results, and even threaten the stability and security of the country.

Over 30 years ago, in an effort to promote greater trust and ensure more transparent and democratic elections, the countries of the OSCE agreed to establish the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and to independently observe each other's elections. They also agreed to do it based on some of the most advanced democratic standards in the world, to ensure both that political parties and candidates could actively participate and that citizens could cast their vote secretly, safely and free from pressure and intimidation.

Impartial international observation has proven crucial to building confidence in elections. At the international level, it shows other countries that the commitment to democratic standards is genuine, and that democratic values are actively enforced. Domestically, independent election observation serves as a deterrent against potential abuses of power, helping to reassure the general public and political parties in opposition that an additional level of scrutiny is in place.

ODIHR has observed elections in Serbia 17 times, most recently in December 2023. As always, our assessment was based on a comprehensive analysis by ODIHR experts of all key aspects of the election process, such as the election laws, campaign practices and finance, access to the media, and candidate and voter registration. The findings of our long-term observers as well as those of hundreds of short-term observers on election day completed the overview that we presented the day after the elections. In our assessment, we highlighted that these



elections were technically well managed and offered voters a choice of political alternatives, but were also dominated by the decisive involvement of the President, which together with the ruling party's systemic advantages created unjust conditions.

While the post-election environment in Serbia has been tense and we have heard much harsh rhetoric, over the last weeks I have also seen the focus shifting to the importance of making sure that the recommendations made by ODIHR at the end of February are fully implemented.

Over the last few months we have continued our dialogue with the Serbian authorities - who have the main responsibility for implementing these recommendations - and we welcomed their expressions of openness and readiness to discuss them in detail and proceed to their practical implementation.

ODIHR assisted the authorities with its unique expertise, including through its project to support electoral reform in the Western Balkans that is funded by the EU and the Austrian Development Agency.

ODIHR recommendations are regularly developed with a longer period in mind for their implementation. But progress is now possible in Serbia as solutions are within reach even in areas such as ensuring better transparency around voter lists, or improving the independence and oversight of the media, and others.

At the same time, we have been urging a fully inclusive and transparent process, with the establishment of a new dedicated working group following the appointment of the new government that must involve all relevant actors, including civil society organizations.

A genuine and result-oriented dialogue among stakeholders, supported by citizen observers, can play an important role in increasing transparency and trust. While disagreements may and do arise as in any democratic society, critical voices should not be undermined but carefully listened to.

In this context, I was particularly encouraged by recent discussions within the National Assembly collegium. The expressions of willingness by both sides to engage in constructive dialogue was promising and needs to continue, in order to genuinely improve the electoral process in a spirit of consensus and responsibility by all sides for the benefit of the Serbian people.

As we are preparing to deploy an election observation mission for the upcoming 2 June elections, I will travel to Belgrade in the coming days, to meet the authorities, political parties, civil society and other interlocutors to reaffirm ODIHR's commitment to supporting progress towards an election process fully in line with international standards - and also to learn more about the plans and concerns that continue to exist.

An open dialogue about the rules that govern democratic elections is the best recipe for overcoming political polarization and mistrust, and ODIHR will continue to do just that in Serbia and beyond.

Matteo Mecacci, Director of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)