Serbia's early parliamentary elections saw high turnout amid a polarized environment and unequal campaign opportunities, international observers say

BELGRADE, 26 October 2026 – Serbia's 25 October early parliamentary elections saw active citizen engagement, with high voter turnout and vigorous competition between two main contenders, but unfolded in an atmosphere of profound polarization, with equality of campaign opportunities seriously compromised, international observers said in a preliminary statement released today. Entrenched advantages enjoyed by the ruling party, including the grave misuse of public resources, together with intimidation and pressure on voters, alongside disruptions of campaign activities, further marred the electoral environment, the statement says.

"The high turnout we witnessed on 25 October sends an important message: despite concerns about the electoral process and wider public mistrust, citizens in Serbia continue to turn out to make their voices heard," said Gilles Baum, Special Co-ordinator and Leader of the OSCE short-term observer mission. "This commitment to democratic participation must be matched by sustained efforts to strengthen public confidence in elections, ensure a level playing field for all contestants and guarantee that every voter can freely express their choice in a transparent and accountable process."

"Through their extraordinary participation, Serbian citizens have brought about historic change – they have expressed a clear desire for change," said Piero Fassino, Head of the PACE election observation delegation. "These elections open a new chapter for Serbia and send a powerful message: The Serbian people want to play an active role in shaping a democracy grounded in the rule of law and respect for human rights. We call on the newly elected authorities to live up to the trust placed in them."

Election preparations were managed efficiently and candidate registration was inclusive, with the Republic Electoral Commission generally operating transparently and within legal deadlines, although politically influenced decision-making raised concerns about its impartiality and consistency. In the consideration of complaints, the formalistic approach and restricted legal standing of voters impacted access to effective legal remedies. At the local level, transparency and co-operation varied, while distrust in the impartiality of election commissions persisted. Out-of-country voting arrangements lacked clear, objective criteria, and disproportionately inconvenienced some voters.

Election day saw high voter engagement, reflecting citizens' commitment to exercising their democratic rights. The observers positively assessed all stages of the election day process in the vast majority of polling stations observed although procedural shortcomings and issues of transparency in the tabulation of results were noted. Nevertheless reported incidents of physical violence, including against polling staff, citizen observers and journalists, raised serious concerns. Citizen observers were present in nearly half of polling stations observed, contributing to transparency. Regrettably, independent access for voters with physical disabilities was not provided in 60 per cent of the 1,485 polling stations observed.

Widespread distrust in the integrity of the voter register persisted, compounded by inadequate public explanations from the authorities. Voters were given sufficient opportunity to verify and correct their records. Positively, a new Voter Registration Audit Commission was established that includes representatives of civil society, but delayed and restricted access to relevant data hampered its ability to conduct a comprehensive audit before the vote.

Overall, the election-related laws and regulations provide an improved basis for the conduct of democratic elections. Extensive amendments adopted in 2025 and 2026 addressed several ODIHR recommendations. However, significant ODIHR and Council of Europe Venice Commission recommendations, including priority ones, remain unaddressed. Despite substantial amendments to campaign finance legislation, shortcomings in the framework and its implementation continued to undermine transparency, effective oversight, and accountability. Further, there was a lack of transparency in the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption's handling of complaints on the misuse of public office. Shortcomings in agency's enforcement limited the effectiveness of electoral remedies.

Along with the misuse of public resources, announcements of substantial financial benefits blurred the distinction between state and party. The disruptions of campaign activities, instances of intimidation and confrontations, inconsistent police responses and allegations of pressure on public-sector employees and vote-buying raised concerns about contestants' ability to campaign freely and voters' freedom to choose without undue influence.

"These elections took place in a context of deep polarization and general mistrust in public institutions," said Federica Onori, Head of the OSCE PA election observation delegation. "Nevertheless, the massive participation in the elections marked the willingness of the Serbian people to change the direction of the country. Now, the new authorities will need to work to ensure much greater transparency of decision making, rebuild trust among citizens, and put the country on a solid democratic path."

"This exceptional peaceful mobilization is a testament to the historic significance of these elections and to the determination of Serbian citizens to have their voices heard and to play an active role in shaping the future of their country," said Andreas Schieder, Head of the EP election observation delegation. "May Serbia seize this moment to accelerate its path towards European Union integration and build a future grounded in democracy, freedom and European values."

Pervasive political and economic pressure undermined media editorial independence and, together with attacks, threats and harassment against journalists, contributed to self-censorship. Despite opportunities for contestants to present their programmes, ODIHR media monitoring found pronounced imbalances in coverage, with public and private broadcasters favouring "United Serbia" and predominantly portraying the "Student List" negatively, contrary to the public broadcaster's legal obligations and mandate. Overall, most monitored broadcasters failed to provide voters with the substantive and impartial information necessary to make an informed choice.

Online campaigning was extensive but remained largely unregulated, with no dedicated oversight mechanism and inadequate safeguards against information manipulation. The broader online environment was marked by divisive and inflammatory rhetoric, harassment and threats, as well as reported cyber-security incidents and co-ordinated inauthentic activity and disinformation. Reports of unlawful digital surveillance, including the alleged use of Pegasus spyware, remained unresolved, while widespread distrust of law enforcement and security institutions raised concerns about the protection of privacy and other fundamental rights.

"We have seen that the legal basis has been strengthened and observed that the election administration efficiently prepared these elections," said Eoghan Murphy, Head of the ODIHR election observation mission. "But there were serious shortcomings in the process, a profound bias in the media and a failure to protect the online space from manipulation limiting voters ability to make an informed choice."

All candidate lists met the 40 per cent gender quota, with women accounting for 47 per cent of candidates. Women were visible in campaigns, but gender equality received limited attention, while violence and alleged threats against women, including online, were instrumentalized in partisan exchanges.

Recent amendments expanded citizen observers' rights, and civil society conducted election observation without significant restrictions, contributing to transparency. However, growing hostility and accusations of foreign influence by senior political figures risked undermining public confidence in citizen observation and discouraging participation.