

Anatomy of an Engineered Election

DEMOCRACY SERBIA

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As Serbia heads to elections on 25 October, the EU must acknowledge that the contest is already unfair, and that the election-engineering methods perfected in Belgrade could spread well beyond the Western Balkans.

On 27 September, Aleksandar Vučić resigned as president of Serbia. He had held the office for almost ten years, and he and his right-wing Serbian Progressive Party have occupied every position of power in this Western Balkan country for almost fifteen. **He did not step down to leave politics: he resigned so that he can run for prime minister.** Ana Brnabić, the outgoing speaker of parliament and a close ally, is now acting president. Within the next two

months Serbia will hold parliamentary elections, already set for 25 October, and presidential elections, which have yet to be called. Elections would be a reasonable way out of the institutional crisis, if Serbia were not Europe's champion of election engineering.

EU Parliament, in February 2024, concluded that Serbia's last parliamentary elections, held in December 2023, **deviated from international standards and from the country's own commitments to free and fair elections.**

The reason, it said, was the incumbents' persistent and systematic abuse of institutions and media to gain an unfair and undue advantage. The most recent report on Serbia by ODIHR, the OSCE's election-monitoring office, made 25 substantial recommendations to fix the electoral process.

Geopolitically, the Western Balkans have never been closer to EU accession. Russia's aggression against Ukraine pushed the EU institutions, especially the European Commission, to rethink enlargement and speed it up at the same time. **Enlargement is no longer treated simply as a technocratic process but as a question of European security,** even as Brussels continues to insist that accession remains merit-based.

The Western Balkans joining the EU would be great news if the Serbian authorities had not used the accession process to pull the country off the European path, free and fair elections included. They did it by adopting EU standards on paper, while in practice building a different reality dominated by **corruption, clientelism, heavy media propaganda, pressure on the judiciary, denial of basic human rights, and institutional and physical repression of political opponents.**

Over time, **the term "political opponent"** came to mean any citizen who, directly or indirectly, opposed state capture.

In the past two years, since the student-led protests that began when [the collapse of a canopy at Novi Sad railway station killed 16 people](#), most of them young, the category has grown to include almost everyone: the people on the streets, their families, their friends. Hundreds of thousands of people. **Free and fair elections were the first democratic institution to be torn down in Serbia.**

Slowly but surely, different elements of democratic elections were gone. Secrecy of voting became breached through different tactics, mainly circular voting and photographing ballots. Voters, especially from vulnerable groups and among public-sector employees, were intimidated or paid to vote for the ruling party. The single voter register was filled with people who do not belong in it, producing an electorate larger than the country's population. **Local elections were compromised by a Serbian version of gerrymandering: voter migration, with people registered in municipalities where they do not live and brought in to vote.** The misuse of public resources became a core element of officials' campaigns. The media spread disinformation and hate speech against the ruling party's opponents. Ballots were crowded with so-called phantom lists, which distort the result and sway the decisions of election commissions. Courts and prosecutors are being instrumentalised to keep silent on major election fraud and to enable impunity.

This is how almost everything in Serbian elections became fake: the competitors, the voters, the information, the legal decisions and the results. None of it happened overnight.

It was done step by step, little by little, until the cumulative effect became visible. As the parliamentary and presidential elections approach, Serbian citizens need the European institutions to acknowledge that the game is already unfair. Official reaction to such a game must be extremely careful and evidence-based. But that is only one layer of the problem. The other problem, potentially more serious for the EU institutions and even more so for EU citizens, is that after a decade of mastering electoral manipulation, the Serbian authorities have built a detailed set of tools and mechanisms to export a complete election-engineering package ready for export. European countries with populist or far-right governments could be quite vulnerable to it. We must be aware that some political movements believe in democracy only when it benefits them, and not when they have to obey its rules.

A week ago, we heard that the United States had not invited OSCE to observe the November midterm elections, the first time since 2002 that Washington has done without its observers. This news did not sink well in a world shaken by permanent crises and lack of trust in state institutions, including those in charge of election administration (let us remember the US Capitol events on 6 January 2021).

We can interpret lack of midterm election observers as a warning sign of electoral decline.

It would be a weak and inaccurate consolation to say that only young democracies can fail the test of free and fair elections. In a world full of conflict, instability and far-right populism, it is not impossible for established democracies to fail it too. This is why a close look and careful reaction to post election developments in Serbia is a matter of principle and of support for European values in a country on the EU's doorstep. But it is more than that. Watching closely and reacting adequately could be a safety belt for free and fair elections around the world, old democracies included.

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