



Keeping Focus: Reporting development in Serbia

Government and Protesters at a Stalemate as Local Elections Highlight the Balance of Power

Key points:

- ⊕ In the first two local elections since the start of the student protests, opposition significantly increases its vote share while the ruling party wins narrow majorities amid accusations of vote-buying
- ⊕ Under financial pressure from the government, universities resume online courses, with students continuing their protests
- ⊕ Ruling majority starts implementing outstanding reforms agreed with the EU, but criticisms over lack of genuine will to reform persist

Local elections show encouraging trends for the opposition

Local elections held on 8 June in the town of Zaječar and the municipality of Kosjerić drew national attention, despite involving less than 1% of the total electorate. These were the first elections since the start of months-long, student-led protests in the country, and were widely seen as a potential indicator of shifting public opinion.

While the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) managed to retain the majority according to the preliminary results, the student-backed opposition significantly reduced the strong advantage of SNS from previous elections. This was especially visible in Kosjerić, where the united opposition list trailed SNS by just 0.7% of the vote. Political commentators generally interpreted the results as encouraging for the opposition and the student movement, given the fact that SNS invested vast resources in these two local elections and only managed to score narrow victories. The mobilization of opposition supporters rose significantly, with an intense door-to-door campaign, leading to record-high turnouts.

The elections, however, were once again fought in unfair conditions, with the ruling party abusing public offices and state resources in the campaign. Numerous allegations of vote-buying were reported and, in the days after the election, several citizens of Zaječar [stated](#) for independent

media that they were offered money to vote for SNS. On election day itself there seemed to be fewer irregularities in Kosjerić than Zaječar, where the opposition accused the ruling party of abusing the voting outside the polling stations (available to senior citizens and persons with disability). Election watchdog CRTA [assessed](#) that elections were neither free nor fair and that, in Zaječar, the results do not reflect the will of the citizens because, on 19% of polling stations there were serious irregularities. The atmosphere was tense in both areas, though there were no serious incidents. The opposition lists announced that they would appeal the results.



Elections in Kosjerić, Photo FoNet

Violence and arrests continue

In the days surrounding the elections in Kosjerić and Zaječar, arrests and violent incidents continued to occur. Among the several individuals arrested on 11 June were the dean of the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Novi Sad and several professors from the same university. Two high school students from Kosjerić were also detained. While the charges varied—the dean and her colleagues were accused of abuse of office and tax evasion, while the students were charged with assaulting a journalist from a pro-government television outlet—the seemingly coordinated arrests were widely interpreted as an attempt at intimidation. As of 13 June, most of those arrested had either been released or placed under house arrest.

A week earlier, more than 20 students were arrested after an incident involving an attack on a group of students aligned with the ruling party, who are protesting against university blockades. This group, informally known as “Students 2.0” or “Students Who Wish to Study,” has been consistently critical of the blockades, often in coordination with the SNS and pro-government media. As a result, they have been viewed very negatively by students participating in the blockades. The incident occurred on 5 June at the Belgrade student campus, where members of “Students 2.0” were pelted with beer cans and doused with water, but were not seriously injured. Many of the students who were later arrested had merely been present at the scene and did not actively take part in the assault, leading to public

criticism of the arrests as repressive. Three students were charged with violent behavior and were issued restraining orders.

A day after the attack on “Students 2.0,” YouTuber Neven Krstić released a video showing him being physically assaulted by unidentified people in the “Students 2.0” camp, located in one of the Belgrade’s central parks. Since the camp was established in March, numerous indications suggest that the majority of those present are not students, but are believed to be activists affiliated with the ruling party—some allegedly linked to hooligan or even criminal circles. The fact that the assault on Krstić occurred before the incident at the student campus (the video was only uploaded a day later) raised suspicions that “Students 2.0” may have deliberately gone to the campus to provoke an incident that could be used to deflect attention from the earlier attack on Krstić.

The second half of May was marked by the case of six prisoners from Novi Sad, activists of the opposition Free Citizens Movement party and student organization Stav. They were imprisoned on 14 March after their recorded conversation was leaked on pro-government television stations. For their discussions of possible scenarios on 15 March, the day of the biggest student protest in Belgrade, which included a potential incursion in the parliament, they were charged with an attempt of the violent overthrow of a constitutional order. Their lawyers argued that the recording was made illegally and that there were no elements of a criminal act in the conversation. In May, students and the citizens started blocking the building of the court building in Novi Sad. Following a dramatic hunger strike of one of the arrested activists, Marija Vasić, the first three persons were released from prison on 21 May and ordered a house arrest. The remaining activists received the same ruling on 28 May.

Academic community puts pressure on the government ahead of negotiations

By the first weeks of June, the staff of most faculties in Serbia had adopted plans to complete courses from the interrupted first semester and to continue those from the second semester. As a compromise with the students participating in the blockade, tuition has not fully returned to normal and is being conducted online, similar to the arrangements during the COVID-19 pandemic. Attendance in the online courses has varied, and none of the plenaries (the main decision-making bodies of the protesting students) have decided to suspend the protest or the blockade of their respective faculties. Some student plenaries have opted to completely block access to university buildings, rejecting online tuition altogether.

A major factor influencing universities' decision to resume some form of teaching activity is believed to be a

regulation amended by the government in March, which redefined the work obligations of faculty staff at state-owned universities. Previously, the government required that faculty members divide their time equally between teaching and research. Under the new amendment, faculty members are now officially considered to spend the vast majority of their time—nearly 90%—on teaching, even though this does not reflect the actual workload. This redefinition has given the government legal grounds to cut university staff salaries by up to 90% in some cases, exerting significant economic pressure on professors.

Since 9 June, many university professors and researchers have been camping outside the seat of the Serbian government in Belgrade. Among their demands are the reversal of the regulation amendments that limit their salaries and the approval of enrollment plans for the new generation of students. They have also called for the dissolution of the government working group established in May to draft a new Law on Higher Education. It is widely believed that the goal of this proposed law is to reduce universities' autonomy from the state. On 11 June, the Serbian government announced that it had dissolved the working group, meeting one of the protesters' demands. However, statements from government officials, including President Aleksandar Vučić, have suggested that efforts to amend the law may still continue. As of 17 June, the protest in front of the government building remains ongoing.



Academics protests in front of the Government, Photo FoNet

EU pressure spurs government reforms, though controversies continue

After months of increased pressures from the EU officials, the ruling majority started implementing outstanding policy reforms it had pledged to in order to open the new Cluster of chapters with the EU and receive funding from the EU's Growth Plan for the Western Balkans. The first out of three measures – adoption of revised media laws – was completed on 16 June. While journalist associations raised concerns over the lack of transparency in the process of the adoption of these laws, their adoption was described

as an “encouraging step” by Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos.

The second measure expected from the Serbia, the election of the new Council of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM), turned out to be much more controversial. REM has broad authority to regulate and shape Serbia's media environment and, in the ongoing polarized political climate, its role has frequently been at the center of public debate, with opposition and civil society accusing the government of having illegitimate influence on REM's decision-making.



Photo FoNet

The REM Council consists of 9 members, elected by the National Assembly of Serbia. Each member is nominated by a different group of authorized “proposers”, i.e., organizations representing various sectors of society—such as journalist associations, religious communities, universities, electronic media publishers, national minority councils, etc.

The first open call to elect a new REM Council was issued in November 2024, but it was canceled in April 2025 following the pressure from the EU and the protesting students. According to an [analysis](#) by the NGO Civic Initiatives, 17 of the 34 candidates and 32 of the 121 proposers did not meet the legal requirements to participate in the process. Critics argued that some candidates close to the ruling party were ineligible from the start. Moreover, certain proposers were accused of being “GONGOs” (government-organized NGOs) established to outvote independent organizations during the internal selection process.

Despite the cancellation of the first open call, according to [Civic Initiatives](#), the second one has been even more problematic. According to its newest analysis, 91 proposers and 26 candidates again failed to meet the legal criteria but were not excluded. This has led to the withdrawal of 78 proposers and 16 candidates on 13 June, before the phase of selecting two nominees per group was completed. The future of the process remains uncertain.

The final measure the Government of Serbia pledged to last year is the adoption of the revised Law on Single Electoral Roll, which is supposed to address the lack of trust in the voter registry. This trust deteriorated significantly following the December 2023 elections, marked by accusations of organized voter migrations carried out by the ruling party to influence election results. A parliamentary working group established to draft the new version of the law fell apart in January 2025 after a majority of opposition and civil society representatives withdrew, citing procedural violations and lack of political will of the ruling parties to implement genuine reforms. With the Speaker of the parliament announcing that the revised law will be put on the agenda in July, disputes over its content continue. In its opinion, OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) assessed that some of its recommendations remain unaddressed.

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