Resolution on the situation in Serbia following elections

2024/2521(RSP) - 08/02/2024 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted a resolution on the situation in Serbia following the elections.

The text adopted in plenary was tabled by the EPP, S&D, Renew, Greens/EFA, ECR and the Left groups.

Following the mass shootings in Belgrade and near Mladenovac in May 2023, mass protests under the slogan ‘Serbia against violence’ were organised across Serbia. On 1 November 2023, the President of Serbia cited demands by the opposition for early elections to dissolve the parliament. He scheduled early parliamentary elections for 17 December 2023. The elections unfolded amid heightened social polarisation and intense competition among contrasting political agendas. They were marked by an unprecedented level of negative campaigning and fearmongering, as well as attacks against political opponents and journalists. Voter turnout was 58.58 %, slightly higher than for the previous elections, held in 2022. The elections were, overall, conducted smoothly, but the day was marked by numerous procedural deficiencies, including the inconsistent application of safeguards during voting and counting, frequent instances of overcrowding, breaches in secrecy of the vote, numerous instances of group voting and isolated physical attacks.

Parliament deplored the fact that the Serbian parliamentary and local elections held on 17 December 2023 deviated from international standards and Serbia’s commitments to free and fair elections, owing to the incumbents’ persistent and systematic abuse of institutions and media in order to gain an unfair and undue advantage. It considers that these elections cannot be deemed to have been held in fair conditions.

The Commission is urged to launch an initiative to **send an expert mission to Serbia** to assess the situation as regards the recent elections and post-election developments in an effort to facilitate the preconditions for establishing a necessary societal dialogue to attempt to restore the public’s trust and confidence in institutions.

The resolution deplored the **lack of prosecutions and sanctions** related to offences during the elections, including serious allegations of unlawful manipulation of the voter register and voting rights, pressure and intimidation against citizens and election candidates, cases of corruption, the forging of citizens’ signatures, clientelism, the illegitimate and unlawful abuse of citizen data, abuses of state office and a lack of effective mechanisms to prevent incumbents from gaining an unfair institutional advantage in elections.

Parliament also condemned the orchestrated attacks by Serbian officials on election observers, including Members of the European Parliament and calls for a return to respectful and constructive discourse.

Serbia is called on to:

- take all necessary steps to avoid any further disinformation campaigns against election observers and to establish conditions that allow national and international election observers to effectively do their work, as well as to protect them from any violence, threats, retaliation, adverse discrimination, pressure or any other arbitrary action as a consequence of their legitimate exercise of their rights and freedoms;

- address concerns about the participation of national minorities in the electoral process, ensuring the consistent application of criteria for minority status and addressing vulnerabilities to pressure and vote buying;

- restore the electorate's confidence in the entire process, lay out fully transparent election procedures and ensure accountability on the part of authorities, whether they are conducting elections or interfering with them;

- fully and substantially cooperate with the ODIHR, the EU and the Council of Europe and to facilitate an inclusive process to shore up election-related rights and freedoms, institutions and processes, with the participation of domestic election observers and political parties; welcomes any genuine steps in this direction;

- implement the OSCE/ODIHR recommendation to conduct a comprehensive audit of the unified voter register to address concerns about accuracy, including allegations of voter migration and entries of deceased persons;

Media freedom

Parliament condemned the absence of media pluralism during the election campaign, as well as disinformation and the widespread unethical and biased media reporting in favour of the incumbents. It also noted with concern that a large number of media outlets are influenced or controlled by the government, which resulted in an uneven playing field for opposition candidates during the campaign.

The resolution urged the Serbian authorities to counter foreign interference and disinformation campaigns, to strongly improve the protection of independent journalism and to ensure a transparent media landscape. EU institutions must do more to ensure that the rights and freedoms of Serbian journalists and media are protected. Members stated that **access to pre-accession funding** should be used as a tool to stop the media freedom situation from deteriorating further.

EU accession and funding

The resolution highlighted that Serbia, as a candidate country for EU membership, lacks sufficiently implemented basic EU and international democratic standards. It called on the Serbian authorities to ensure that there are enough democratic guarantees in place to hold the next regular local elections in 2024, as well as future elections.

Parliament reiterated its position that accession negotiations with Serbia should advance **only if the country makes significant progress on its EU-related reforms**, including full implementation of the recommendations of the OSCE/ODIHR and Venice Commission. The Commission is called on to follow up thoroughly on the reports of the European Court of Auditors and to immediately start the audit of the funding provided to the Serbian Government under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance III (IPA III) and other financial instruments. If the Serbian authorities are unwilling to implement key election recommendations or if the findings of this investigation indicate that the Serbian authorities were directly involved in the voter fraud, Parliament called for the **suspension of EU funding** on the basis of severe breaches of the rule of law in connection with Serbia's elections.