

Blurred line between state, party and the president

Monitoring 2023 elections - final report - Executive summary

Campaign for December 2023 parliamentary and local elections -
Public officials' campaign and its media coverage

Transparency Serbia
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The main findings and specifics of this campaign

The campaign for the parliamentary, provincial and local elections (in 65 out of a total of 170 municipalities, cities and in-city municipalities) ¹ held on December 17, 2023 was marked by the complete dominance of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and especially its recent president, Aleksandar Vučić. The names of Aleksandar Vučić were on the lists of parties gathered around SNS at all levels.

Public Officials' campaign

Aleksandar Vučić appeared at party gatherings as the president of Serbia, and sometimes he was presented as "the president of Serbia and a member of the SNS". In his capacity as president during the campaign, he had 14 promotional activities² (twice as many as in the same, non-election period, the previous year) as well as a number of other activities that had a promotional character.

Other SNS officials contributed to this media dominance of the "Aleksandar Vučić - Serbia must not stop" list with an official campaign, especially Goran Vesić with 55, Aleksandar Šapić with 44 and Darija Kisić Tepavčević with 33 promotional activities. In total, the officials from the sample³ had 4.1 times more promotional activities during the campaign than in the same, non-election period, the previous year.



TV appearances

According to TS records, during the campaign, Vučić had 19 television guest appearances or live inclusions (longer than 10 minutes) in central news programs in the capacity of the President of Serbia and one (on RTS) in which he formally represented the list.

¹ On the same day, elections were held for deputies of the Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, which were not included in the monitoring.

² "Public Officials' campaign" is the term used by Transparency Serbia to denote the activities of public officials in the pre-election period, during the election campaign, which are presented as their "regular work", and are an essential part of political promotion. In a narrower sense, the public officials' campaign is most often manifested through the promotional activities of officials: visits to companies, schools, hospitals, courts, opening of factories, construction sites, fairs, signing of contracts and memoranda on construction and investment, scholarships, presentation of construction plans, handing out of scholarships, aid and gifts, visiting citizens, workers in the capacity of public official.

Other activities of officials can also have promotional effects, such as visits abroad, meetings in the cabinet with domestic and foreign officials, athletes, celebrities etc., meetings on the ground with domestic officials and the participation of officials in events (conferences, gatherings, round tables, formal academies, marking significant dates), but they are not included in the sum of "promotional activities".

³ The President of Serbia, the Speaker of the Parliament, the Prime Minister, 15 ministers and the President of the Provisional Authority of the City of Belgrade (ex mayor)

He used guest appearances in the prime- time slots of commercial TV stations with national coverage as the President of Serbia to promote the list of which he is the holder, attacks on the opposition, but at the same time he also spoke about the affairs of the President and Government of Serbia.

One of those appearances stands out. It is the "show" named after the list's slogan "Serbia must not stand still", in which, in addition to Vučić, other officials from the list around the SNS, were the guests. It lasted 111 minutes, broadcasted on TV Pink on the evening of Thursday, December 14, before the beginning of the election silence. The show had all the characteristics of a promotional program, but did not bear the mark of a leased slot.

Paid TV promotion

SNS also dominated in terms of paid promotion, given that it spent four times more money on advertising, on TV stations alone, than all other lists and parties together (7.3 out of a total of 8.9 million euros, in case the maximum discount was achieved in accordance with the published price lists).

TV stations – evening news

The list around SNS had the most time overall in the slots set for the equal representation of all participants in the elections within the central information programs of the five TV stations that were included in the monitoring⁴. It was, however, only additional promotion compared to the time received in the news dealing with the activities (actual regular or promotional) of public officials that viewers/voters identify with the SNS electoral list.

Reports on the activities of the President of Serbia and the recent president of the SNS, whose name is the name of the list gathered around the progressives, Aleksandar Vučić, lasted 5,121 seconds (1h 25min 21s) in the evening news of the five observed TV stations in the three days of the election campaign - November 23, December 7 and 13.



If we add to that 4,029 seconds on the activities of national and local officials from parties from the list "Aleksandar Vučić - Serbia must not stop" and 2,392 seconds for that list in "blocs for equal promotion – electoral blocs", the total is 11,542 seconds (3h 12 min 22 s). That is 2.5 times as much as all the other lists in the election blocs got together (4,487 seconds), including those that were in the ruling coalition.

It should be taken into account that the largest opposition list also had 441 seconds of "anti-campaign", i.e. presentation in a negative tone on the two monitored TV stations (Pink and Studio B), while the ruling party had 278 negatively intoned seconds on one TV station (N1).

There were also several reports in which state (or city) officials or party representatives did not appear, but they had a strong promotional, i.e. propaganda, effect. These are news in which the interlocutors, citizens, praise the Government and the President of Serbia. These "negative" seconds, as well as praises, are not included in the total time received by the election lists.

⁴ TS watched the central evening news on November 23, December 7 and 13 of RTS, TV Prva, TV Pink, TV Studio B and TV N1

None of the observed TV stations had election thematic blocks in which they would represent the participants in the elections, that is, their election manifesto or pre-election positions on certain important issues. In most cases, most TV stations broadcasted footage from rallies or statements by party representatives.

Daily press front pages

Vučić and SNS sovereignly ruled the front pages of daily newspapers. In 46 days, from the edition the day after the announcement of the election (November 2), to the edition published on the day of the election (December 17). Vučić appeared on the front pages 279 times. Out of those, 85% were in a positive tone.

The second, individually, in number of appearances is Dragan Đilas - 65, of which only 7.7% in a positive tone.

Overall, Vučić and the SNS list had 471 appearances (82.4% in a positive context), of which 145 were the main topic. List "Serbia against violence" had 145 appearances (20.7% in a positive context), of which 50 times as the main topic (46 in a negative context). Vučić or one of the other representatives of the SNS list even appeared five times on the front page of the daily sports newspaper "Sportski žurnal".



Vučić appeared on the front pages even during the election silence. The item on the front page of the tabloid "Srpski telegraf" titled "Our country is taking big steps into the future - A 10 times more powerful supercomputer is coming to Serbia" was particularly bizarre as it was illustrated with a photo of Aleksandar Vučić.

According to the TS assessment, despite all the above, the key element of this campaign were extraordinary social grants and the distribution of money to certain categories of citizens (pensioners, high school students, students, people receiving social assistance, mothers, children under 16, demented, blind, severely ill, employees of the largest state-owned company Elektroprivreda Srbije and the company Pro TENT), in

the amount of around 400 million euros.



The announcements of these payments, commentaries on them and statements, announcements and news about their realization created additional media presence for ruling party officials (public officials – ministers), but the biggest impact was achieved by the payments themselves, which TS characterized as a kind of vote buying. Such misuse of public resources is prohibited by law in two countries of the region (North Macedonia and Montenegro), and the TS has been advocating for the introduction of the same restriction in the regulations in Serbia for several election cycles.

Additional data, tables, graphs – on [TS website](https://transparentnost.org.rs/en/projects/301-monitoring-2023-elections) – Home page/Activities/Monitoring 2023 elections⁵

⁵ <https://transparentnost.org.rs/en/projects/301-monitoring-2023-elections>