

Campaign Watch 2012.

Newsletter 01



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The „Biljana Kovačević-Vučo“ Fund has embarked on a project aimed at monitoring the 2012 election campaign in Serbia with a view to alert on violation of democratic principles and rules governing the electoral process.

Purpose of the Project. To set up a data gathering and reporting system on the conduct of contenders in the Serbia 2012 parliamentary and local elections, with the aim to alert on the infraction of democratic values, election rules, standards and practices and fair play, as well as of human rights and abuse and misuse of state and social institutions and funds. Special attention will be paid to occurrences of hate speech, discrimination, breaches of fair play and internationally accepted standards of conduct in the election process.

Campaign Watch 2012 will gather, systematize and document facts on the violation of above mentioned democratic values, principles and standards. The Project will embrace the territory of Serbia (excl. Kosovo*).

A new *People's Assembly* (Parliament) of the Republic of Serbia is to be elected on May 6, 2012. Local elections in over 160 municipalities and in the city of Belgrade will take place on the same day. A decision on whether a (snap) presidential election will also take place on May 6th is pending. Months before the elections were scheduled a (pre)election campaign has begun to gain momentum. It is largely due to the extremely volatile political and economic situation in the country, that the campaign will be dominated by several topics that cause both vivid interest and some concern both in Serbia and abroad:

- Kosovo has (again) surfaced as an issue Serbia's present and future hinge on: the country's political and intellectual elites persist in absolutizing the Kosovo myth and insisting that it should be given priority in relation to all other problems burdening the society;
- Notwithstanding the recent granting of the EU membership candidate status to Serbia, there is much sluggishness in the country's advancement towards European integrations, as well as lack of her elites' sincerity regarding their commitment to European values;
- Dramatic developments in the nation's economy, which is only partly a consequence of the world's economic and financial crisis.

It is against the background of these developments that the Serbian society still suffers from increased intolerance and discrimination (against ethnic, sexual and other minorities, the ill, senior citizens, persons with special needs, etc.) often accompanied by violence, gender-based bias and inequality, hate speech and other practices reflected on a daily basis in Parliament, the media, the education system and indeed in everyday life.

In view of the magnitude of the crisis and aware that their hitherto performance in combating it has not met expectations, political parties are likely to shape up the election campaign along the lines of blaming others for their own failures rather than offering articulate, realistic and viable programs of measures aimed at resolving the issues on the agenda. Bearing on mind that fair play has never played an outstanding role in Serbian politics in general and in election campaigns in particular, it is to be expected that the 2012 campaign will be no exception – on the contrary, considering the gravity of the situation.

Faced with the probability of a low turnout or a large number of invalid ballots at the polls as a result of growing popular moroseness, Serbian political parties run the risk of enjoying diminished legitimacy whereby the next legislature will suffer endless political tugs-of-war instead of serious efforts to address burning issues.

Based on this, it is necessary to develop a system of monitoring the election campaign, which would detect, identify, document and expose attempts to use, misuse and abuse election competition for the promotion of ideas and practices alien to a society aspiring to join the family of free and democratic nations. The aim is to expose the background, sources, public proponents, mechanisms, directions and aims of such violations of basic principles inherent to an open society based on functioning democratic institutions, respect of human rights and the rule of law.

The project will focus on the election campaign on the territory of Serbia (excluding Kosovo*), where reports from a network of civil society organizations, human rights and democracy groups will be published and widely disseminated by means of a bi-weekly newsletter which will be sent to hundreds of thousands of recipients in Serbia and abroad. Alerts on the appearance of each issue, as well as on especially characteristic cases and incidents will be carried by online social networks. In addition to that, press conferences will be held periodically with the aim to alert the media on the findings gathered on the ground. The monitoring process will not end with the closing of polling stations in the evening of May 5th: in view of the expectation that the ensuing negotiations on the formation of a new Government will also be accompanied by events and tendencies that cast a shadow of insufficient transparency, unfair practices and similar features irreconcilable with a due democratic process, the post-election period will also be subject to monitoring and regular reporting.

After the completion of the electoral process and the formation of the new Parliament and Government an evaluation conference will take place where participants in the monitoring and reporting effort will analyze the process, assess it from the viewpoint of adherence to democratic principles and standards, and draw up a set of recommendations to be made available to authorities, relevant institutions and civic sector at home and abroad.