

# ELECTIONS IN SERBIA AND THE REPUBLIC OF SRPSKA: THE CHALLENGES OF REPRESENTATION

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## NATIONAL MINORITIES IN LOCAL ELECTIONS IN SERBIA – HISTORY, RESULTS, AND CONSEQUENCES\*\*\*

### Abstract

This paper analyzes the participation of national minorities in local elections in the Republic of Serbia, with a particular focus on the most recent ones held on December 17, 2023, and June 2, 2024. Our primary attention is on the parties of the largest national minorities in Serbia – Hungarians, Bosniaks, and Albanians – and collectively, on the parties

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of other national minorities. This paper aims to indicate the trajectories of minority representation at the local level in Serbia. The authors use descriptive statistics to provide findings on the results of minority parties in local elections in Serbia since the restoration of multiparty politics. The main research question is whether the developments in electoral law have affected the representation of national minorities at the local level in Serbia and their broader social integration. The second question relates to the degree of homogeneity of minority communities in Serbia, given that some are territorially concentrated in certain geographical regions, while others are territorially dispersed. Also, to what extent does positive discrimination affect the number of minority parties, given the more liberal conditions for minority political organization and participation in elections?

**Keywords:** Republic of Serbia, local elections, national minorities, political parties, minority representation

## INTRODUCTION

More than three decades since the introduction of the multiparty system in the Republic of Serbia has provided a sufficient time span to observe various political phenomena that have accompanied it. This includes the participation of national minorities in local elections. The freedom of political organizing, established through the legislative framework in the early 1990s, also created a space for the political organizing of the national minorities in Serbia – especially the largest ones – Hungarians, Bosniaks, and Albanians, and others. Of course, minority representatives have pursued political representation through the majority catch-all parties (Kolarski 2021, 24–25).

The issue of minorities' political organization and representation is a significant factor in the rule of law within any political system. This is particularly evident in European countries, since numerous documents addressing minority protection have been adopted on this continent. Some authors argue that, despite the existence of formal legal prerequisites for minority representation, practice has shown an insufficient level of integration of minority communities into broader society (Đorđević i dr. 2018, 15). Furthermore, the issue has gained particular importance in post-conflict societies, and Serbia has carried this burden since the 1990s. Different systems apply varying models

of minority representation. For example, many systems use quotas or guaranteed seats in representative institutions. Thus, as many as 28 countries apply this model (Bird 2014, 12).

The aim of this paper is to point to certain trajectories of minority representation at the local level in Serbia. Local election results will be monitored in the period of more than three decades since the renewal of the multiparty democracy, with special emphasis on the most recent election terms in late 2023 and mid-2024. Some local elections coincided with parliamentary elections, while others were held separately. This provides the basis for deeper insights into the effects of local elections, with a focus on minority representation. The paper will analyze changes in electoral legislation and reforms in electoral law that have accompanied minority representation at the local level in Serbia. Using descriptive statistics, it examines the results of minority parties in local elections. The main research question is whether advancements in electoral legislation impacted on the representation of national minorities at the local level in Serbia and their broader social integration. The second question concerns the degree of homogeneity among the minority communities in Serbia, considering that some are territorially concentrated in specific geographic areas, while others are more dispersed. Furthermore, the paper will explore how positive discrimination affects the size of minority parties, given the more liberal conditions for minorities' political organizing and electoral participation.

Since the socialist period, Serbia – which, notably, includes two autonomous provinces and a population where national minorities account for one-third – has maintained high standards of respecting minority rights, in terms of preserving their ethno-cultural identity and ensuring participation of minority representatives in public and political life (Bašić i Crnjanski 2006a, 29).

This is undoubtedly a sensitive issue, as all minorities in modern society, including national minorities, possess dual awareness: an awareness of themselves as a distinct entity compared to the majority (the minority perspective), and, in a certain way, internalized stereotypes by the majority, portraying them as minority or marginal groups and as such, always subject to social pressure (Babić 2010, 218). Of course, it is the task of legislation in any democratic state to reduce this potential pressure, and numerous steps in that direction have been taken over time, including electoral legislation, in Serbia's legal framework.

A significant incentive in this process has been the European integrations process, as respect for minority rights is a condition for both the EU membership and regional stability (Raduški 2014, 114).

## **ELECTORAL LEGISLATION REFORMS AND MINORITY REPRESENTATION AT THE LOCAL LEVEL**

Within the context outlined above, we can distinguish two periods of political representation of national minorities in Serbia: from 1990 to 2008, and the second one from 2009 to the present political circumstances (Jovanović 2022, 116). Following the restoration of the multiparty system in Serbia in 1990, parties of ethnic Hungarians, Bosniaks (Muslims), and Albanians were formed in geographically concentrated areas of Serbia – Raška/Sandžak, Vojvodina, in the south of central Serbia, and in Kosovo and Metohija, where these populations reside (Orlović 2008, 313 cited in: Mijatović 2015, 84). It is also a fact that, since the early 1990s, there has been a systemic boycott in the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija by Albanians rallied around the Democratic League of Kosovo (*Demokratski savez Kosova – DSK*) and other political groups that started to act as the so-called Albanian alternative (Lutovac 1997, 148).

Alongside their participation in elections and entry into representative bodies at all levels of government, including the executive power at the local level, there was a continuous upgrade of the legislation in the area of minority rights protection – which became especially prominent after 2000, when Bosniak and Hungarian parties started to participate in the executive government at the national level.

Certain distortions regarding national minorities that had existed in the national-level electoral system adopted after the changes of 2000 and the October 5<sup>th</sup>, when Serbia, by consensus of all leading national majority parties, became a single electoral district with the proportional electoral model applied in parliamentary elections and a 5% threshold (often unattainable for minority parties), were partially eliminated in 2004, by the adoption of the so-called “natural threshold” for national minority parties (Zakon o lokalnim izborima 2022, Art. 62). This significant shift toward positive discrimination greatly influenced the dynamics of the party system and the political system as a whole. The fact that this reform move contributed to a broader minority representation within the national legislation and the local parliament, and locally

opened the space for a more frequent participation of minority parties in ruling coalitions at all levels of government in the Republic of Serbia.

The adoption of the new Constitution of the Republic of Serbia in 2006, which defined our country as “the state of the Serbian people and all other peoples who live in it,” along with other constitutional and legal acts, provided a broad foundation for further affirmation of national minorities in Serbia (Bašić i Crnjanski 2006b, 11–30).

Despite all these steps, it is fair to say that 2009 marks a significant milestone for the status of national minorities, with the adoption of the legislation establishing national minority councils as institutions of self-government in the fields of culture, education, information, and official use of language and script (Zakon o nacionalnim savetima nacionalnih manjina 2009). It should be noted that, although these are self-government bodies, minorities’ political parties compete for positions within them and manage their operation. Gradually, these councils have become bodies with political aspirations (Jovanović 2022, 126).

In general, the electoral rules for the 2023/24 local elections were defined by the “consolidated” Law on Local Elections from 2022 (Zakon o lokalnim izborima 2022). The main principles of this law are that elections are held using a proportional system, with the local self-government unit “(city, municipality, or city municipality) as a single electoral district, with closed candidate lists. The electoral threshold is 3%, and mandates are allocated using the D’Hondt method. All mandates are distributed according to the order on the electoral list, and in the event of termination of a mandate of a deputy elected from a coalition list, he/she is replaced by a member of the same political party” (Zakon o lokalnim izborima 2022, Art. 61, Art. 62, Art. 73 cited in: Matić i Mijatović 2024b, 204)

National minority parties enjoy a privileged status in some respects. Namely, “national minority parties are those for which the electoral commission has determined that their primary goal is to represent and protect the interests of a national minority and to promote the rights of national minority members in accordance with international legal standards. A special decision on this matter is issued by the electoral commission, which may consult with the National Council of the respective national minority” (Zakon o lokalnim izborima 2024, Art. 75 cited in: Matić i Mijatović 2024a, 204). “National minority parties are further favored in elections by increasing the electoral quotient of parties or coalition lists that received less than 3% of the vote by 35%” (Zakon

o lokalnim izborima 2022, Art. 78, cited in: Matić, Mijatović 2023b, 198–199). This form of positive discrimination of national minorities is unique in the world, as it questions the principle of vote equality.

These provisions on recognizing a national minority's party status and weighting its results – also left two “open” questions. First, there is the issue of the arbitrariness of the relevant electoral commissions in determining the status of a national minority party and the lack of clear criteria for its determination, primarily because of potential abuse. Second, the weighting of minority parties' electoral score may conflict with the constitutional principle of equal voting rights and the prohibition of discrimination (Jovanović 2022, 126).

According to Matić and Mijatović, “the normative framework for the 2024 local elections differed slightly from the part of the local elections held in December 2023. Legislative amendments involved the government's concessions regarding the slating of elections (the earliest date for slating elections was extended from 120 to 150 days before the expiration of the local assemblies' mandates). Additionally, voters who changed their residence within the past 11 months were not allowed to vote at their new address but had to vote at their previous one” (Matić i Mijatović 2024b, 203–204) – an issue that was more related to the communities with the majority, rather than national minority populations.

## **NATIONAL MINORITIES IN LOCAL ELECTIONS IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA BETWEEN 1992 AND 2022**

It is possible to observe that, since the restoration of the multiparty system, the number of national minority parties has steadily increased. Thus, between 1990 and 2000, 19 such parties were established, while in the period between 2000 and 2009, that number was 43 (Jovanović 2022, 119). This trend intensified after 2009, and by 2020, 75 out of 124 parties registered in the Register of Political Parties, or 60.48%, were minority parties (124). This is mainly due to the streamlined registration process: majority parties require 10,000 signatures, while minority parties need only 1,000 or ten times less. This indicates that the trajectory went toward liberalizing conditions for minorities' political organizing. At the same time, newly created parties include both national minority parties, as well as those representing the interests of ethnic communities.

According to Mijatović, “the first party to articulate the interests of Hungarians in Vojvodina, i.e., in Serbia, was the Democratic Community

of Vojvodina Hungarians (*Demokratska zajednica vojvođanskih Mađara* – DZVM), founded in 1990" (Mijatović 2015, 84). It actively participated in the first local elections in 1992 as the sole and relatively powerful representative of the Hungarian community (Republički zavod za statistiku [RZS] 1993).

Just two years later, in 1994, a split occurred within the DZVM, leading to the formation of the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (*Savez vojvođanskih Mađara* – SVM), which won the next local elections in 1996, securing around 60% of the Hungarians' vote at the local level (RZS 1997). Another rift within the DZVM in 1997 resulted in the creation of the Democratic Party of Vojvodina Hungarians (*Demokratska stranka vojvođanskih Mađara* – DSVM). Despite some subsequent divisions, these three parties, and primarily the SVM, have shaped the political life of the Vojvodina Hungarians. Other parties participating in the 1990s and 2000s elections included the Civic Movement of Vojvodina Hungarians (*Gradanski pokret vojvođanskih Mađara*), the Christian Democratic Movement of Vojvodina Hungarians (*Demohrišćanski pokret vojvođanskih Mađara*), and the Christian Democratic Bloc (*Demohrišćanski blok*) (Mijatović 2016, 195–196).

In the 2000 elections, SVM and DZVM partnered with the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (*Demokratska opozicija Srbije* – DOS), although they ran independently at the local level, while DSVM ran independently, SVM again prevailed (Republički zavod za informatiku i statistiku [RZIS] 2001). In the first local elections following the changes of October 5<sup>th</sup> held in 2004, the SVM won more than half the votes, while the remaining votes were split between DSVM and DZVM (RZS 2005). In the 2008 local elections, the leading Hungarian parties reached an agreement to run together as the Hungarian Coalition (SVM, DZVM, and DSVM), with only the Civic Alliance of Hungarians (*Gradanski savez Mađara*) remaining outside the coalition. The coalition captured nearly all Hungarian votes (RZS 2009). In the 2012 local elections, rivalry among Hungarian parties resurfaced (Mijatović 2015, 312). This time, the SVM won decisively, securing 90% of the Hungarian vote, while DSVM, DZVM, and the Civic Alliance of Hungarians shared the rest (RZS 2012).

In the 2016 local elections SVM also maintained its decisively predominant position. The remaining votes went to DZVM, DSVM, and the Hungarian Unity Party (*Stranka mađarskog jedinstva* – SMJ). For example, in Subotica, SVM won 22.52% of the vote and 16 council

seats; DSVM won 1.63% and one seat; while DZVM, in coalition with the Civic Alliance of Hungarians, the Croatian Democratic Community of Croats (*Demokratska zajednica Hrvata* – DZH), Bosniak Democratic Union (*Bošnjačka demokratska zajednica* – BDZ), and Slovak Party (*Slovačka stranka*), won 0.76% and no seats (RZS 2016).

Aside from its superior role among the Vojvodina Hungarians, SVM's position in the 2020 local elections was additionally facilitated due to the boycott of the elections by its rival DZVM (which was part of the then-opposition Alliance for Serbia). In this election cycle, SVM again achieved a dominant victory (RZS 2020).

From the very outset of the restoration of multiparty democracy in Serbia, SVM has accepted cooperation with the parties of the majority population at all levels (although initially, it participated in the executive government only at the local level). It partnered with DOS in 2000, and between 2004 and 2016, it collaborated intensely with the Democratic Party (*Demokratska stranka* – DS) and participated in the provincial government of the AP Vojvodina. Since 2012, and especially since 2016, SVM cooperated increasingly with the Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska napredna stranka* – SNS), eventually forming a strategic partnership.

Within the Bosniak (Muslim) national minority in the Raška/Sandžak region, the Party of Democratic Action (*Stranka demokratske akcije* – SDA) was founded in 1990 (Mnić 2023, 259), followed by the Muslim-Bosniak Organization (*Muslimansko-bošnjačka organizacija* – MBO) in 1991 (266–267). In the following years, the SDA gained an absolute primacy. Due to the radicalization of their views, both SDA and MBO boycotted the local elections in May and December 1992 (266–267, 269). Meanwhile, in Kosovo and Metohija, due to the general boycott by Albanian political parties, the Democratic Reform Party of Muslims (*Demokratska reformska stranka Muslimana*) participated in the elections in Prizren in 1992 and 1996.

According to Mijatović, “fragmentation also affected the Muslim (Bosniak) political parties. In the mid-1990s, an internal rift within the SDA caused the splinter group to leave the party and form the dissident Sandžak Coalition,” led by Rasim Ljajić (Mijatović 2015, 141). At all levels of government, even at the local level, in the 1996 elections, the SDA won a convincing victory (RZS 1997). Among the Bosniak parties, on the eve of the 2000 local elections, the “Sandžak Coalition” and the SDA actively cooperated with the Democratic Opposition of Serbia at the national level. Unlike the Sandžak Coalition (*Koalicija Sandžak*)

(renamed the Sandžak Democratic Party [*Sandžačka demokratska partija*] since 2000), the Party of Democratic Action – “List for Sandžak” (*Stranka demokratske akcije – „Lista za Sandžak”*) decided to run independently at the local level and prevailed among Bosniak voters in these local elections (RZIS 2001). After the democratic changes of October 5th, both leading Bosniak political actors continue to cooperate with the leading political parties in Serbia at the national level.

In the 2004 local elections, SDA’s dominance was challenged for the first time by the newly formed Sandžak Democratic Party (*Sandžačka demokratska partija* – SanDP), with a vote ratio of 50% for the SDA compared to SanDP’s 40%. The remaining 10% went to the People’s Movement of Sandžak (*Narodni pokret Sandžaka*) and the Party for Sandžak (*Stranka za Sandžak*) (RZS 2005). A new dynamic brought by one of the Bosniak parties on the Serbian political stage was introduced by the Sandžak Democratic Party (SanDP), which expanded its activities beyond the Raška region/Sandžak to other areas with Bosniak populations (Mali Zvornik, Loznica, Subotica, etc.). Eventually, SanDP would participate in the creation of a national party—the Social Democratic Party of Serbia (*Socijaldemokratska partija Srbije* – SDPS) (Mijatović 2016, 282–283).

Bosniak parties had the opportunity to take part at the extraordinary local elections in Novi Pazar in 2006. They ran in the elections according to their previous coalition arrangements. “List for Sandžak,” winning over half of the votes, while the “Together for Novi Pazar” („*Zajedno za Novi Pazar*“) coalition (SanDP, DS, G17 Plus) won less than a quarter. No other Bosniak party managed to cross the electoral threshold, except for the Party for Sandžak, “Bosniak Coalition – Sandžak Alternative” („*Bošnjačka koalicija – Sandžačka alternativa*“), and Sandžak Democratic Union (*Sandžačka demokratska unija*)). Likewise, in the 2008 local elections, SanDP seemed to be on the offensive, winning over 50% of the Bosniak vote. On the other hand, Sandžak’s SDA took about one-third, while the Democratic Party of Sandžak (*Demokratska partija Sandžaka* – DPS) and the “European Movement of Sandžak” (*Evropski pokret Sandžaka*) coalition also achieved some impact (Mijatović 2016, 294; RZS 2009). Following the 2008 election cycle, the fragmentation within the Bosniak political bloc continued. A new significant political option emerged – the Bosniak Democratic Union (*Bošnjačka demokratska zajednica* – BDZ).

This new split among Bosniak voters (with BDZ drawing more support from SDA's voter base) led to a situation in 2012 where three strong political parties each captured roughly one-third of the vote in local elections: SDA ("List for Sandžak"), the Sandžak Democratic Party (*Sandžačka demokratska partija*), and the newly formed Bosniak Democratic Union. The Democratic Party of Sandžak and the Sandžak People's Party (*Sandžačka narodna partija*) remained far behind (RZS 2012).

Fragmentation within the Bosniak political corpus also persisted in the 2016 local elections. SDA emerged as the individual winner, while SDP's results were obscured by numerous coalitions. In Novi Pazar, they made a coalition with SDPS, the Party for Sandžak, BDZ of Sandžak, and Liberal Democratic Party (*Liberalno-demokratska partija* – LDP), in Tutin with SDPS, in Prijepolje with SDPS and in Sjenica with SDPS. BDZ (despite suffering a split that led to the creation of a new party from its ranks – BDZ of Sandžak), gained 14,433 votes and 23 councilors. Far fewer votes went to the Sandžak People's Party, the Democratic Party of Sandžak, and the Bosniak People's Party (*Bošnjačka narodna stranka*). The 2016 local election results showed the most significant influence of three Bosniak parties: SDA, SanDP, and BDZ (RZS 2016).

The situation was similar in the 2020 local elections, with a near-even success among the Party of Justice and Reconciliation (*Stranka pravde i pomirenja* – SPP) (a faction of BDZ that formed the Bosniak Democratic Community and changed its name into Party of Justice and Reconciliation in 2017), SDA, and SanDP. It is possible to note that, among the Bosniak parties, SDA and SanDP held strong positions in Novi Pazar. At the same time, SDA dominated in Tutin (having been in power continuously since 1996, with just a two-month break), and both SDA and SPP were influential in Sjenica (RZS 2020).

Albanians from the south of central Serbia accepted the political framework of the Republic of Serbia after the restoration of the multiparty system, unlike Albanians in Kosovo and Metohija. The first Albanian party from the south of central Serbia was the Party for Democratic Action (*Partija za demokratsko delovanje* – PDD), established in August 1990. The second was the Democratic Party of Albanians (*Demokratska partija Albanaca* – DPA), also founded in 1990. Among the Albanians from the south of central Serbia, in the municipalities of Medveđa, Preševo, and Bujanovac, the dominant position in the 1992 local elections was gained by PDD, which ran in all three municipalities, while DPA, which ran in

two municipalities, also had a certain impact. PDD won about 80% of the vote and DPA about 20% (RZS 1993). In the 1996 local elections, PDD and DPA confirmed their earlier positions among the Albanians from the south of central Serbia. During these elections, PDD ran independently in three municipalities, DPA in two, and the newly formed Parliamentary Party of Albanians in one. This time, PDD won two-thirds of the vote, and DPA one-third (RZS 1997).

Among the Albanian parties from the south of central Serbia, PDD and the Party for Democratic Unification of Albanians (*Partija demokratskog ujedinjenja Albanaca*) (a dissident group which split from PDD) participated in the 2000 local elections. PDD also retained its dominance in these elections, by winning two-thirds of the vote, while the dissident Party for Democratic Unification of Albanians won one-third (RZIS 2001). The rioting in the south of central Serbia in late 2000 changed the local Albanian political scene. During this period, i.e., between 2000 and 2004, new parties were formed, including the Movement for Democratic Progress (*Pokret za demokratski progress – PDP*) (2001), which ran under this name as a citizens' group, while the Democratic Union of the Valley (*Demokratska unija Doline – DUD*) was established in 2003.

In the 2002 local elections, the leading position of the Party for Democratic Action was reasserted, as well as the status of the Democratic Party of Albanians and the newly formed Democratic Union of the Valley and of the Movement for Democratic Progress. Divisions within the political elite of the Albanian national minority spurred the proliferation of parties and the fragmentation of the party scene. PDD retained its dominant position among the Albanian voters, but it was also possible to detect the growth in influence of its political rivals – especially DPA and to a lesser extent Democratic Union of Albanians (*Demokratska unija Albanaca – DUA*) (Mijatović 2016, 248). In the 2008 local elections, PDD again achieved the best result among Albanian parties, winning nearly half of the Albanian vote. It was followed by DPA, PDP, DUD, DUA, and the National Democratic Movement (*Nacionalno-demokratski pokret*) (RZS 2009). Fragmentation of the Albanian parties continued, and in 2011, the Democratic Party (*Demokratska partija – DP*) split from PDD.

In the 2012 local elections, PDD was the relative winner with about one-third of the vote, followed by DPA, DP, DUA, and PDP (RZS 2012). On the eve of the 2016 election term, a new political option

emerged—Alternative for Change (*Alternativa za promene* – AZP)—which further challenged PDD’s position. DPA achieved the best individual result with about one-third of the vote, while Alternative for Change and PDD each received about one-quarter. PDP, DP, and DUD received far fewer votes (RZS 2016).

In the 2017–2020 local elections, results were highly fragmented: Alternative for Change received just over 20%, PDD around 15%, and DPA and DP about 10% each. PDP, DUD, and DUA received a minimal voter support (RZS 2020). In Preševo, in the extraordinary local elections held in 2021, Alternative for Change won with 32.97% of the vote. DPA came second with 22.86%, and PDD third with 18.44%. The Reform Movement (*Pokret za reforme* – PZR) was fourth with 13.93%, followed by the SNS-led coalition with 6.69%, and the Democratic Union of Albanians with 2.41% (Dejanović 2021). Due to deep divisions between PDD and Alternative for Change, the local assembly failed to convene for nine months, leading to temporary measures and to extraordinary elections, held on June 2, 2024—one year ahead of schedule (a similar situation also occurred in 2017, when the institutions were blocked and extraordinary local elections were held, indicating a significant instability of the local political scene).

As for other national minorities, aside from those with long-standing, indigenous representation (such as the Democratic Alliance of Croats in Vojvodina (*Demokratski savez Hrvata u Vojvodini* – DSHV) for the Croatian national minority), from a chronological perspective, instability is characteristic of other minorities, with the appearance and disappearance of certain minority options at the local level.

Thus, in the 1992 local elections, alongside Hungarian, Bosniak, and Albanian parties, the Democratic Party of Roma of Serbia and FR Yugoslavia (*Demokratska partija Roma Srbije i SR Jugoslavije* – DPRS), the Social Democratic Party of Roma of Serbia (*Socijaldemokratska partija Roma Srbije* – SPRS), the Democratic Alliance of Bulgarians in Yugoslavia (*Demokratski savez Bugara u Jugoslaviji* – DSB), and the Movement of Vlachs and Romanians of Yugoslavia (*Pokret Vlaha i Rumuna Jugoslavije* – PVRJ) also participated (RZS 1993). In the 1996 elections, participants included the “Roma” of Serbia and Yugoslavia („Roma” *Srbije i Jugoslavije*)—Democratic Political Party the Roma Community of Yugoslavia (*Demokratska politička partija Zajednice Roma Jugoslavije*), the Bunjevac-Šokac Party (*Bunjevačko-Šokacka partija*), the Democratic Alliance of Bulgarians of Yugoslavia

(Demokratski savez Bugara Jugoslavije), and the Democratic Alliance of Turks (Demokratski savez Turaka) (RZS 1997). In the 2000 local elections, only the Bunjevac-Šokac Party and the People's Party of Roma (Narodna stranka Roma) participated (RZIS 2001).

In the 2004 local elections, parties that participated included the Roma Social Democratic Party (Romska socijaldemokratska partija), Democratic Party of Roma (Demokratska partija Roma), Party of Roma Unity (Partija romskog jedinstva), Roma Congress Party (Romska kongresna partija), Social Democratic Party of Roma (Socijaldemokratska partija Roma), Slovak People's Party (Slovačka narodna partija), Vlach Democratic Party of Serbia (Vlaška demokratska stranka Srbije), Bunjevac Party (Bunjevačka stranka), and the Croatian Bunjevac Party (Hrvatska bunjevačka stranka) (RZS 2005).

Participating in the 2008 local elections were also the New Democratic Party of Roma of Serbia (Nova demokratska stranka Roma Srbije), the Roma Party (Romska partija), the Roma Union of Serbia (Unija Roma Srbije), the Roma Renewal Movement (Romski pokret obnove), the Roma Unification Party (Romska partija ujedinjenja), the United Roma Party (Ujedinjena partija Roma), Alliance of the Vojvodina Romanians (Alijansa vojvođanskih Rumuna), Democratic Movement of Bulgarians (Demokratski pokret Bugara), Party of Bulgarians of Serbia (Partija Bugara Srbije), the Vlach Democratic Party (Vlaška demokratska stranka), the Vlach Democratic Party of Serbia, the Slovak People's Party, the Slovak Party, Democratic Party of Macedonians (Demokratska partija Makedonaca), Bunjevac Party of Vojvodina (Bunjevačka stranka Vojvodine), Montenegrin Party (Crnogorska partija), and Democratic Community of Croats (RZS 2009).

In the 2012 local elections, participating parties included the Roma Democratic Party (Romska demokratska stranka), Roma Party, United Roma Party, Democratic League of Roma (Demokratska liga Roma), Roma Unity Party (Romska stranka Jedinstvo), Roma Movement of Doljevac (Romski pokret Doljevac), Bunjevac Party, Vlach Democratic Party, Vlach Democratic Party of Serbia, Vlachs of Ćuprija (Vlasi Ćuprije), "None of the Above" (Nijedan od ponuđenih odgovora), Party of Vojvodina Slovaks (Stranka vojvođanskih Slovaka), Slovak Party, Alliance of Vojvodina Romanians, Rusyn Democratic Party (Rusinska demokratska stranka), Democratic Alliance of Bulgarians (Demokratski savez Bugara), Alliance of Bačka Bunjevci (Savez bačkih Bunjevaca), and Montenegrin Party (RZS 2012).

In the 2016, participants in the local elections also included: Democratic Union of Roma (*Demokratska unija Roma*), United Roma Party, Roma Union of Serbia, Roma Unity Party, Roma Party, Russian Party (*Ruska stranka*), Russian Democratic Party (*Ruska demokratska stranka*), Party of Russians of Serbia (*Stranka Rusa Srbije*), Serbian-Russian Movement (*Srpsko-ruski pokret*), United Russian Party (*Jedinstvena ruska stranka*), Democratic Party of Bulgarians (*Demokratska partija Bugara*), Democratic Party of Bulgarians (*Demokratska stranka Bugara*), Rusyn Democratic Party, Vlach Party (*Vlaška stranka*), Vlach Democratic Party, “None of the Above,” Alliance of Bačka Bunjevci, Bunjevci Party (*Stranka Bunjevci*), Citizens of Serbia (*Gradići Srbije*), Democratic Community of Croats, Alliance of Bačka Bunjevci, Slovaks Forward! (*Slovaci napred!*), Party of Vojvodina Slovaks, Slovak Party, Democratic Movement of Romanians in Serbia (*Demokratski pokret Rumuna Srbije*), Montenegrin Party, and Democratic Party of Macedonians (RZS 2016).

The following parties ran in the 2020 local elections: Democratic Union of Roma, United Roma Party, Roma Unity Party, Russian Party, Party of Russians in Serbia, Serbian-Russian Party “Wolves” (*Srpsko-ruska partija Vukovi*), United Russian Party, European Green Party (*Evropska zelena partija*) (representing the Russian minority), Democratic Party of Bulgarians (*Demokratska partija Bugara*), Vlach Party, Vlach Party (Bridge) (*Vlaška stranka [Most]*), Truth – Adaviera (*Istina – Adaviera*), Vlach People’s Party (*Vlaška narodna stranka*), Slovaks Forward!, Green Party of Serbia (*Zelena stranka Srbije*) (representing the Slovak minority), Republican Party (*Republikanska partija*) (representing the Hungarian minority), Democratic Party of Macedonians, Bunjevci – Citizens of Serbia (*Bunjevci – građani Srbije*), and the Montenegrin Party (RZS 2020).

All these data clearly indicate a continuous increase in the number of national minority parties participating in local elections in the Republic of Serbia. Accordingly, the number of their representatives in local parliaments has also grown.

## PARTICIPATION AND RESULTS OF NATIONAL MINORITY PARTIES IN THE MOST RECENT LOCAL ELECTION CYCLE OF 2023 AND 2024

In the most recent local elections in the Republic of Serbia, held on December 17, 2023, and June 2, 2024, national minority parties participated in a total of 60 local self-governments (9 out of 66 in December 2023 and 51 out of 89 in June 2024) (RZS 2024). As expected, the most prominent were the participation of the largest national minorities – Hungarians, Bosniaks, and Albanians. There was a clear continuation of the trend of Hungarians' political unity around the SVM, and a more or less pronounced fragmentation among the Bosniak and Albanian political actors (Lončar 2020, 864).

The context of these elections among the Hungarian parties clearly favored the SVM. In addition to strategically strong bilateral relations between Serbia and Hungary, SVM's position within its strategic partnership with the SNS was unchallenged. Separate campaigns in predominantly Hungarian areas showed SVM's willingness to cooperate in broad coalitions with SNS and other Hungarian options (DSVM, SMJ). SVM's opposition was embodied in DZVM, which ran either independently or as part of the “I Choose to Fight” (*„Biram borbu“*) coalition (*Narodni pokret Srbije – NPS*). Among other issues, DZVM criticized SVM of forming an “unprincipled coalition with Šešelj”, referring to SVM's participation in the Belgrade city elections in a coalition around SNS that included the Serbian Radical Party (*Srpska radikalna stranka – SRS*) (Beta 2024a).

However, Bosniak parties remained divided. SanDP (through strategic cooperation with SDPS and SNS) and SPP were in a coalition arrangement with SNS at the national level. Yet, this did not positively impact on local rivalries, especially in Novi Pazar. At the national level, however, the SDA ran openly as an opposition party and officially supported the ProGlas document for improving electoral conditions in Serbia, signed in March 2024 by the still-active “Serbia Against Violence” (*„Srbija protiv nasilja“*) coalition and the NADA coalition (Beta 2024c).

The fractures in local governments preceding the elections – such as in Tutin (Novosel 2024) – along with independent party campaigns, along with a large number of local citizens' groups linked to the parties'

dissident circles, created a rather confusing pre-election atmosphere in the Raška/Sandžak region.

However, the most complex pre-election situation was that among the Albanians in the south of central Serbia, characterized by a high degree of party fragmentation and internal conflicts (Popović 2024). Elections were held in Medveđa in December 2023, regular elections in Bujanovac in June, and early elections in Preševo (due to temporary measures introduced in April 2024). The campaign revealed extremely tense political relations. The Albanian political bloc was internally divided and in conflict with local Serbian parties, which had been excluded from the majority Albanian local assemblies in Preševo and Bujanovac by the “All-Albanian Agreement” back in 2020. This was in response to Serbian parties forming the local government in Medveđa in 2019 without Albanian participation—breaking a two-decade tradition of joint executive government in the three southern municipalities (Lazić 2021). Other minorities’ parties were far less represented in the elections and dispersed across Serbia.

In December 2023, elections were held in three municipalities in the Raška Region/Sandžak – Novi Pazar, Priboj, and Prijepolje – with Bosniak parties participating (SanDP, SPP, SDA in all three towns/municipalities, and Bosniak Civic Alliance [*Bošnjački građanski savez* – BGS] and GPS in one). In southern and southeastern Serbia, the Democratic Party of Bulgarians (*Demokratska partija Bugara*) ran in two municipalities (Dimitrovgrad), and the Democratic Party of Macedonians in Vranje and Vranjska Banja (Matić i Mijatović 2024a, 202).

Among the Bosniak minority parties in December 2023, SanDP won 20 seats, SPP 19, SDA 12, DPS and Bosniak-Serb Alliance (*Bošnjačko-srpski savez* – BOSS) 3 seats each. In Novi Pazar, the new-old coalition of SanDP–SDPS and SNS–Socialist Party of Serbia (*Socijalistička partija Srbije* – SPS)–SRS formed the government (Bakračević 2024).

Also, in this election cycle, the Democratic Party of Bulgarians (*Demokratska partija Bugara*) won 3 seats, while the Albanian Democratic Party won 2. Among other national minority parties, the Montenegrin Party, in coalition with the movement “Boris Kovačević Forest – My World Kragujevac! Šumadija Bloc 21” („*Boris Kovačević Šuma – Moj svet Kragujevac! Šumadijski blok 21*“) won one seat (Matić i Mijatović 2024a, 202–204).

In the June 2024 election cycle, among the national minorities' parties, out of all Hungarian parties, SVM ran in the most municipalities (23), followed by DZVM (11), and DSVM and SMJ (2 each). Among Bosniak parties, SPP ran in six towns and municipalities, BGS in four, BOSS and SDA in two each, and SanDP in one. Among the Albanian parties, PDD, DUA, and AZP ran in two municipalities. In contrast, PDP, PZR, DPA, DP, and Alternative for the Valley (*Alternativa za Dolinu – AZD*) ran in one local self-government each (RZS 2024).

According to Matić and Mijatović, “among other national minorities: Croatian Democratic Alliance of Croats in Vojvodina (DSHV) ran in two municipalities and DZH in one. The Russian Party ran in 15 municipalities, while the Russian minority’s European Green Party ran in 12, and BUNT–True Serbia in two. Among the Roma parties: DUR ran in six municipalities, URS in two, and the Roma Unity Party in one. The Vlach People’s Party, Vlach Party, and Vlach Party – Truth/Adaviera each ran in one municipality. The Slovak Green Party of Serbia ran in seven municipalities, and the Slovak Democratic League in two. The Montenegrin Party – SCG ran in four municipalities, and the Montenegrin Party ran in one municipality. The Civic Party of Greeks in Serbia ran in six municipalities and the Yugoslav Party in one” (Matić i Mijatović 2024b, 210).

The results showed that among the Hungarian parties, SVM won 156 seats, DZVM 2, and DSVM 1. Among the Bosniak parties, SDA won 25, SPP 17, and SanDP 10 seats. Among the Albanian parties: PDD won 16, AZP 11, DPA 8, PDP 8, DUA 6, DP 6, PZR 6, and Alliance for the Valley 3 seats. The other national minorities’ score was as follows: the Russian Party won 13 seats, the Russian European Green Party (EGP) 5, Croatian DSHV 5, DZH 1. The Montenegrin Party won 1 seat, the Slovak Democratic League also 1, etc (Matić i Mijatović 2024b, 213).

Among the national minorities overall, the situation was the clearest for the Hungarians, with SVM as the sovereign winner. Its participation in government at all levels alongside SNS was confirmed by the Coalition Agreement for joint programmatic action and participation of SVM in the Government of the Republic of Serbia, signed on September 13, 2024, by the presidents of SNS and SVM (Srpska napredna stranka i Savez vojvodanskih Mađara 2024).

This dominance is not so clear-cut in the case of Bosniak parties, as Raška/Sandžak has three relatively strong options—SanDP, SDA, and SPP—as re-confirmed in this election cycle. In Novi Pazar, SanDP

was victorious and formed the local government with the SNS–SPS coalition; in Tutin, it was the SDA (*Radio Televizija Novi Pazar* 2024a); and in Sjenica, SPP, SNS, SPS, New Democratic Party of Serbia (*Nova demokratska stranka Srbije* – NDSS), and Group of citizens (GC) “No Discrimination” (*Grupa građana „Bez diskriminacije“*) formed the local government (*Radio Televizija Novi Pazar* 2024b).

The highly fragmented Albanian party landscape in the south of central Serbia led to a reversal in Bujanovac—the former ruling PDD and DP lost, while the hitherto opposition coalition Front for Change (AZP and DUA) and PDP won (*Bujanovačke* 2024). On the other hand, in Preševo, the previously ruling Alternative for Change also lost, while PDD achieved the best result. Furthermore, the initial post-election reactions confirmed the apparent affinity of the provisional self-government institutions in Priština (represented by the Self-Determination Party [*Stranka samoopredeljenje*]) for the Albanian political leaders in the south of central Serbia—especially those from the ranks of PDD (*Beta* 2024b). In Bujanovac, a multiethnic government was formed by the Front for Change led by Arben Pajaziti, SNS, the Bosniak-Roma SPP, Citizens’ Group Dejan Stojanović, and the opposition NPS councilor Saša Arsić, who was expelled from his party for this decision (Canić Milanović 2024). In Preševo, the government was formed by PDD–DPA–DUA (Stevanović 2024).

## CONCLUSION

Through its electoral legislation, the Republic of Serbia has fully provided the conditions for the participation of national minorities in elections at all levels of government. Minority parties—especially Hungarian, Bosniak, and Albanian—have actively participated in national, provincial, and local elections. This was also the case in the most recent local election cycle, which, for the first time since the restoration of the multiparty democracy, was held in two parts—on December 17, 2023, and June 2, 2024. The main conclusion from this election cycle, aside from the high level of participation, is also the fact that some national minorities rallied around a single political option (Hungarians), some around three (Bosniaks), and others around several of them (Albanians).

Regarding other national minorities and their participation in elections, there were no greater impacts as they generally ran in a

small number of local governments. However, heightened pre-election tensions, local elections in major cities, and anticipated close results in certain areas brought to light the emergence of the so-called “phantom lists.” These often bore names similar to opposition lists and were formally backed by citizens’ groups or formal minority parties. For example, the Russian European Green Party ran in Surčin, Grocka, and Lazarevac under the uniform name “I am Surčin/Grocka/Lazarevac, You are Surčin/Grocka/Lazarevac – Start the Change” („Ja sam Surčin/Grocka/Lazarevac, Ti si Surčin/Grocka/Lazarevac – Pokreni promene”), which closely resembled the opposition list “Start the Change” („Kreni promeni”). A similar case involved the Green Party of Serbia, formally a party of the Slovak national minority, which ran in the Belgrade municipalities of Vračar and Savski Venac.

However, the most controversy was stirred by the Russian Party’s participation in about ten local self-governments, where it won a number of mandates. Due to its close ties with SNS, specifically in Niš and New Belgrade, its votes were decisive and drew criticism—both for being seen as an extension of the ruling party and for its formal basis, given that, according to the 2022 Census, Russians make only 0.16% of Serbia’s population and in major cities, like Belgrade and Niš, the party won 1–2% of the votes (RZS 2023). This raised suspicions about the nature of the list and whether it was a “phantom” list created to benefit the ruling party by siphoning votes from other political actors. The liberalization of election conditions definitely led to widespread political organizing among minority parties in Serbia’s political system. The candidates on minority lists were often members of the majority population, which raised issues regarding the integrity of minority representation in the Republic of Serbia.

These ambiguities reopened the issue of sufficient regulation of minority representation established by the 2020 electoral reforms, in terms of the criteria for the recognition of a national minority party status, to prevent potential abuses. There is a need to re-examine the creation of certain minority parties, given that they now account for more than half of all registered parties in the Republic of Serbia.

Findings show that electoral reforms in minority representation have aimed to ensure a more balanced representation of minority communities in the local representative bodies. This especially applies to parties representing minorities that are not territorially concentrated. Many of these changes were driven by the process of European integration and became more pronounced after 2000.

It is also evident that positive developments in minority representation have affected on the participation of minority parties in coalitions at both national and local levels. This is particularly true for the Hungarian minority, and, to a lesser extent, for the Bosniak minority. This dynamic is also influenced by other contextual factors, such as Serbia's relations with the home countries of certain minorities and their involvement in government formation at all levels of the political system hierarchy.

Regarding possible future research on minority representation at the local level in Serbia, there is room for deeper quantitative and qualitative analyses of the direct and indirect factors that influence this process. Some research should also focus on identifying which parties genuinely represent national minorities and what reforms are needed to ensure adequate minority representation.

In both domestic and broader academic literature, few studies research minorities' participation in elections at the lowest level of government. This opens space for broader insights and incoming analysis into this area of the political system. The issue of minority representation is especially important in post-conflict societies like Serbia, and the local level of government provides fertile ground for their inclusion in active political life.

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## НАЦИОНАЛНЕ МАЊИНЕ НА ЛОКАЛНИМ ИЗБОРИМА У СРБИЈИ – ИСТОРИЈАТ, РЕЗУЛТАТИ И ПОСЛЕДИЦЕ\*\*\*

### Резиме

Овим радом анализирамо учешће националних мањина на локалним изборима у Републици Србији, са посебним акцентом на оним последњим, одржаним 17. децембра 2023. и 2. јуна 2024. године. У првом плану биле су странке најбројнијих националних мањина у Србији – Мађара, Бошњака и Албанаца, а збирно и странке осталих националних мањина. Активно учешће мањинских партија на изборима, као и фаворизовање националних мањина у изборном законодавству Србије створило је погодне основе за њихово представљање у локалним парламентима и улазак у власт у локалним срединама где чине већину. Као део коалиционих аранжмана са странкама већинског народа оне учествују у власти и у другим срединама. То је, коначно, до чињенице да странке националних мањина узимају учешћа у власти у неколико десетина општина и градова широм Републике Србије. Настављајући тренд претходних изборних циклуса странке националних мањина узеле су активног учешћа у локалним изборима 2023 и 2024. године. На њима су наступале у складу са својим програмским афилијацијама – у сарадњи са странкама власти или опозиције, или пак неутрално, комбинујући самосталне и коалиционе наступе. Након одржаних избора мањинске странке, као и након ранијих избора, ушле су у локалне извршне власти. Позитивна дискриминација је довела до

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адекватног представљања националних мањина на локалном нивоу у Србији. Њихови представници учествују у владајућим коалицијама на свим нивоима власти, од централног, преко покрајинског до локалног.

**Кључне речи:** Република Србија, локални избори, националне мањине, политичке странке, мањинско представљање

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