

Country Brief

Serbia

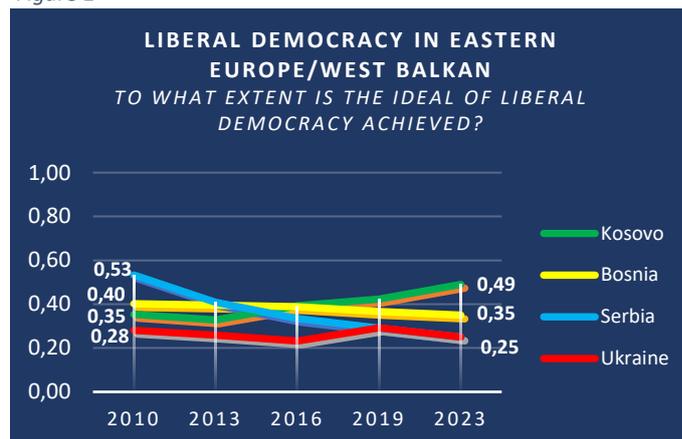
Electoral autocracy



COUNTRY INDICATORS

Population: 6.844 million (WB)
Urban population: 57% (WB)
Urban population growth (annual): -0.4% (WB)
Access to water: 95% (WHO-UNICEF)
Access to electricity: 100% (WB)
Mortality rate, under-5 (per 1,000 births): 6 (WB)
GDP (current US\$): 63.068 billion (WB)
GDP per capita, PPP (current Int\$): 21,432 (WB)
Presence of Violence: none (UCDP)
Global Freedom Status: Partly free, score 62 (FH)
Corruption Perception Index: score 38, rank 96/180 (TI)
Human Development Index: Very high (0.802), rank 63/191 (UNDP)
Local Government Association: [Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities \(SCTM\)](#)

Figure 1



Source: V-Dem Institute (2024)

Clarification: The liberal principle of democracy emphasizes the importance of protecting individual and minority rights against the tyranny of the state and the tyranny of the majority. The liberal model takes a 'negative' view of political power insofar as it judges the quality of democracy by the limits placed on government. This is achieved by constitutionally protected civil liberties, strong rule of law, an independent judiciary, and effective checks and balances that, together, limit the exercise of executive power. To make this a measure of liberal democracy, the index also takes the level of electoral democracy into account.

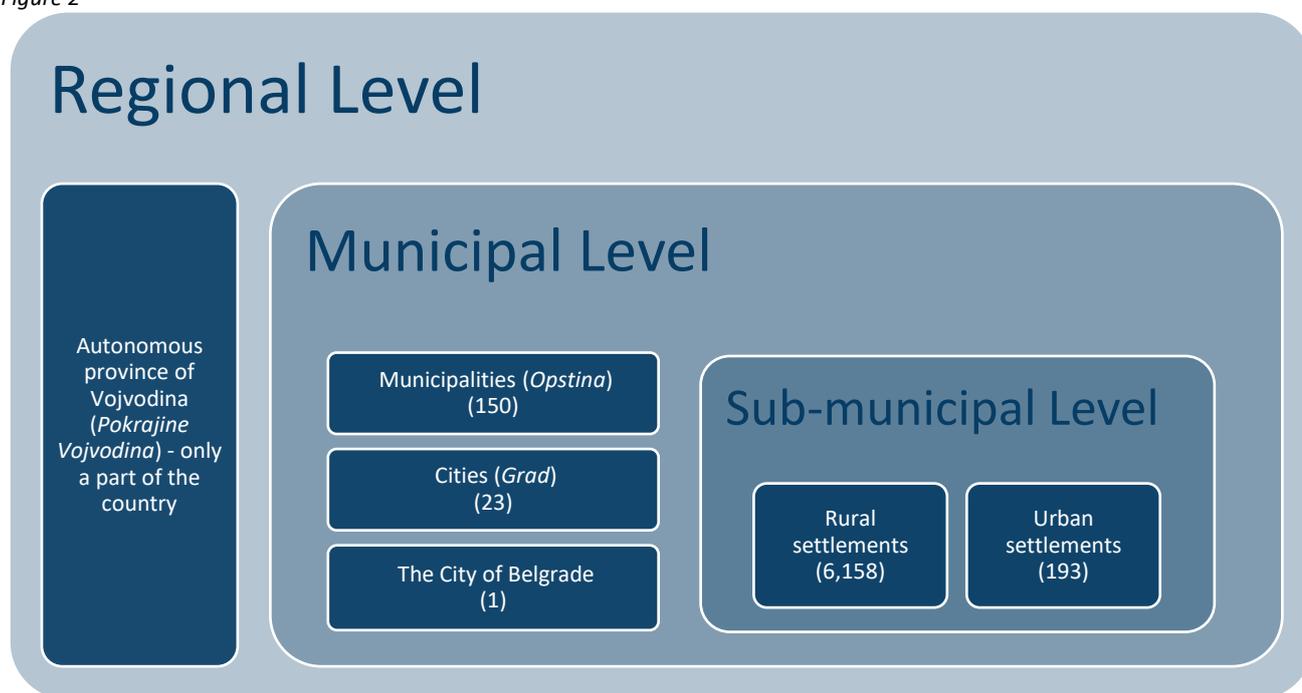
Decentralisation

Serbia is a unitary state. Local self-government autonomy is enshrined in the country's 2006 Constitution. According to Article 12, the "State power is restricted by the right of citizens to provincial autonomy and local self-government". In 2014, Serbia adopted a Public Administration Reform (PAR) Strategy which builds on previous public sector reform strategies and aimed at improving the state of public administration. The strategy includes measures to clarify the division of responsibilities between different levels of government and identifies weaknesses to be addressed such as the financing needs of local authorities. The Law on Employees in the Autonomous Provinces and Local Self-Government Units was adopted in 2016; it aims at ensuring the professionalisation of the local and provincial civil service by regulating the rights and duties of civil servants at the lower-tier governments (SNG-WOFI Serbia, 2019).

Serbia has a two-tier system of local government. At the regional level, there are 2 autonomous provinces: Vojvodina in the north, and Metohija in the south along with the disputed territory of Kosovo. At the municipal level, is divided in 150 municipalities (*opština*) and 28 Cities (*grad*), which constitute the basic entity of local government in Serbia. Each municipality/city has its own assembly (elected every four years via local elections, the last being held in April 2016), a municipal president (mayor for cities), and a budget.

The municipalities are, in turn, subdivided into *MZ (neighborhood community)*, which are sub-municipal units that enable higher participation of citizens in public decision making. There are also 29 districts that are state administrative units.

Figure 2



Source: SNG-WOFI Serbia (2019)

Local Autonomy

Mandates

The 2006 Constitution lists the competencies of the autonomous provinces and local self-government units and clarifies that additional functions may be delegated. The exact competences of the municipalities cover a number of areas. Tasks are carried out with wider discretion of the local authorities provided that they fall within the legal boundaries of existing regulations. Some of these competencies, such as primary and secondary education, as well as social care, are shared with the state, although staff wages, facilities and investment costs are taken out of budgets from municipal governments. Other shared competencies include the management of local airports and the construction and maintenance of social housing centres for the youth. Local authorities have room for manoeuvre in the implementation of delegated tasks although their actions are subject to scrutiny by central authorities.

Table 1

Main Sectors	Municipality Responsibilities
1.General public services	Municipal administration
2.Public order and safety	Protection against natural and other disasters
3.Economic affairs/transports	Construction and maintenance of local roads and other municipal facilities; Local public transport; Local tourism; Craftsmanship; Catering and commerce; Improvement and use of agricultural land
4.Environmental protection	Environmental protection
5.Housing and community amenities	Regulation of urban construction sites and business premises; Social housing for the youth (shared)

6.Health	Healthcare
7.Recreation, culture & religion	Protection of municipal cultural heritage; Sport
8.Education	Primary and secondary education (shared)
9.Social protection	Social welfare; Child welfare

Source: SNG-WOFI Serbia (2019)

Local Government Finances

Public finance of SNGs in Serbia is further regulated by the law on local self-government finance of 2006, which was revised in 2012 and 2016. Local governments do not have the right to create new taxes or fees (it can only to have some from list stipulated by law), but they have the right to decide on the tax rate (within legally defined maximal limits). Revenues of local self-government units include taxes (own-source and shared), user charges and fees, and block grants from the central government. In 2016, revenue from taxation accounted for 53.2% of their total revenue – a ratio that is highly significant, especially when it is compared to other countries in the region (38.7% for the OECD unitary countries in 2016). Grants came as the second most important revenue sources and stood at 25.7% of total revenues in 2016 (see Table 2). The share of spending undertaken by municipalities has increased over the years, reflecting the devolution of public competencies to them. Yet, it remains that the city of Belgrade in itself accounts for close to 32% of total SNG expenditure. (SNG-WOFI Serbia, 2019).

Local Democracy

State of Elections

Local elections in Serbia are held every four years. Mayors are not directly elected but are instead chosen by elected members of the local assemblies. The 2020 local elections saw a victory for the Serbian Progressive Party’s coalition, finishing on first place in most cities and municipalities. It was partially boycotted by the opposition. The next local election is set for the fall of 2024.

V-Dem’s latest Democracy Report puts Serbia as one of the most autocratized countries in the world over the past decade. This is reflected both in *Figure 1* and *Appendix 2*, showing significant drops in the both the level of liberal democracy and the fairness of elections. The ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has steadily eroded political rights and civil liberties, putting pressure on independent media, the political opposition, and civil society organisations (Freedom House Serbia, 2022).

There is a tendency that leading party or coalition at national level establish their own power in almost all local governments. Party headquarter often demands from local party leaders to follow blindly structure of established coalition from central level, often in spite of local ambience and specific needs. Having, additionally in mind that political parties often develop corruptive practice, it is obvious that without reform of political parties, democracy is permanently undercut, both on state level, or in local community.

Electoral Outcomes

Table 3

Local Elections	2008	2012	2016	2020
Voter turnout	-	-	-	43,36%
Female Councillors	-	-	31,2% (2038 of 6530)	.
Female Mayors	-	-	-	.

Source: UN Women (2021)

Women's representation

With 31,2% of elected seats held by women in 2016, Serbia was ranked 45th globally in a recent comparison on female political representation in local governments (UN Women, 2021). There is legally stipulated quota for women (at least 40% of all candidates) to be elected as councillors (member of local assembly).

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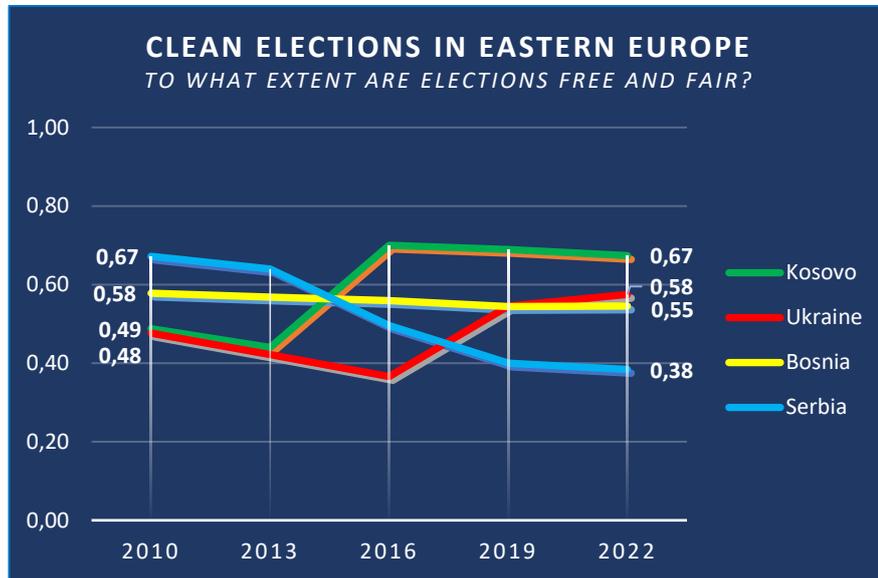
The Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) is part of the Swedish development cooperation. The mandate of the organisation is to contribute to poverty alleviation by strengthening local governments. This Country Brief is part of a publication series that investigates the state of decentralisation and local democracy in countries where ICLD programmes operate.

This Country Brief covers events up to March 2024.

Appendix 1: Clean Elections Index

Research Question: To what extent are elections free and fair? (Low to High; 0-1)

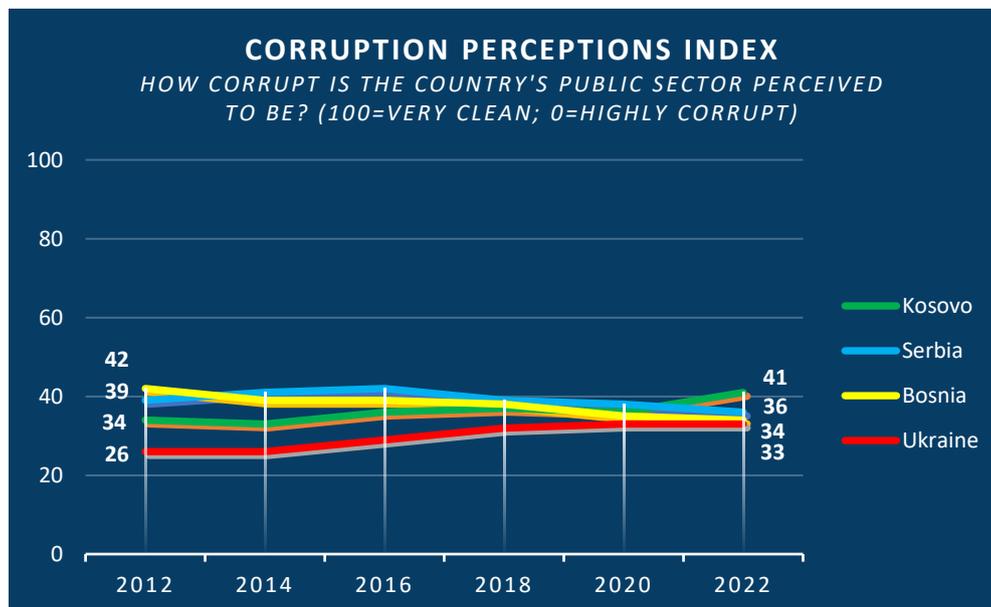
Clarification: Free and fair connotes an absence of registration fraud, systematic irregularities, government intimidation of the opposition, vote buying, and election violence.



Source: V-Dem Institute (2024)

Appendix 2: Corruption Perceptions Index

Clarification: CPI measures how corrupt each country's public sector is perceived to be, according to experts and businesspeople.



Source: V-Dem Institute (2022)