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## **PRESS CONFERENCE Statement by Mr Thijs Reuten**

### **Head of the European Parliament election observation delegation**

#### **Parliamentary and Presidential elections in Serbia – 3 April 2022**

Ladies and gentlemen, Good afternoon,

My name is Thijs Reuten and I am honoured to address you on behalf of the European Parliament election observation delegation. We observed these elections together with members of national parliaments, as part of the OSCE/ODIHR international election observation mission.

Our delegation from the European Parliament comprised seven Members representing six political groups.

Our delegation subscribes fully to the statement of the preliminary findings and conclusions of the international election observation mission. I would like to express our thanks to Douglas Wake, the Head of the ODIHR IEOM, and his team for their outstanding support and cooperation, and to the other heads of parliamentary delegations and their colleagues.

Yesterday, Serbian citizens went to the polls and exercised their right to choose their representatives. With their vote, they have shown their attachment to pluralism and democracy in a difficult time, by coming out to vote in higher numbers than the last time.

This last year has been challenging for Serbia. Political tensions have been having an undesired, divisive effect on society.

The unprovoked aggression by the Russian Federation against Ukraine has also posed a huge challenge to all European countries, including Serbia, and makes us realise even more how important it is to work together to preserve security, freedom and democracy within our European family.

#### **Election day**

On Sunday, our delegation observed the vote and the count in the wider Belgrade area, Novi Sad and Jagodina.

We met many attentive and dedicated members of the polling boards. Key procedures for voting, counting and tabulation were followed. However, in some of the polling

stations we visited, the voting booths in particular did not always ensure the secrecy of the vote. We also observed missing seals on two ballot boxes in one polling station. Regrettably, we also received reports about some incidents, including the use of violence against opposition candidate Pavle Grbovic. In addition, there were several issues brought to our attention regarding voters from minority communities, including ethnic Albanians from the Presevo valley who were denied their vote and citizens from the Romanian minority who allegedly experienced difficulties with the voting procedure.

Unlike former elections, Serbs from Kosovo were unable to cast their votes close to their homes with OSCE assistance, as has been the case previously. We regret Pristina's lack of cooperation on this matter. However, we positively note efforts from Kosovo enabling the smooth transfer to polling stations for some eligible voters.

### **Dialogue**

We welcome the extensive participation of parties and candidates from both majority and opposition in these elections, resulting in a more diverse and pluralistic Assembly.

The European Parliament, through all its activities and, in particular, via the Inter Party Dialogue, has always endeavoured to support political pluralism and reinforcement of an inclusive election environment.

Now, in this new political environment, genuine efforts are needed to address jointly and, in a spirit of collaboration, some long-standing flaws in the electoral process.

### **Media and civil society**

The dominant role of the governing majority has been and still is a matter of serious concern. The abuse of administrative resources gave the ruling coalition a significant advantage. This is also reflected for example in the largely uncritical overexposure in the media of the incumbent president and others supporting the ruling coalition. The majority of nationwide media outlets - private and public - often served as tools of disinformation, media freedom and pluralism, journalists' safety and ample access to different opinions and sources of information are essential for a well-functioning democracy.

Media representatives and civil society organisations have also reported a systematic vilification of critical voices during the campaign.

### **Pressure**

The International EOM received many credible reports regarding pressure on voters to support the ruling coalition. Of particular concern are allegations of intimidation and pressure on citizens working in the public sector.

Alleged widespread vote-buying attempts are also serious flaws that need to be properly investigated and addressed.

We regret that the Unified Voter Register is still inaccurate and contains a significant number of deceased persons. Moreover, there were reports ahead of the elections of mass registration in Belgrade of voters from abroad, specifically to enlarge the electorate there.

Many of the concerns were already expressed in the previous OSCE-ODIHR reports. We now call on the newly elected authorities to deliver on these crucial issues shortly.

The European Parliament - and the European Union in general - will closely follow the post-electoral developments in Serbia and will be ready to support the political parties in implementing reforms that strengthen democracy in your country. The Serbian citizens have made their choice. Now it is up to their new representatives to act in the interest of the people.

In conclusion, I would like once again to congratulate you, the people of Serbia, for your turning out in high numbers on Sunday.

Thank you for your attention.

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