

Report

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Organized Voter Migration in the Western Balkans

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Summary

Organized voter migration (OVM) is a form of election fraud that involves registering and organizing for individuals who do not reside in a particular location to vote there for a specific candidate or party, thereby illegitimately influencing election results. The Western Balkans has seen repeated allegations of OVM dating back to at least the early 2010s, mostly in connection with municipal elections. These allegations have sometimes led to serious political consequences, such as in the case of the December 2023 Belgrade municipal elections in Serbia. In the Western Balkans, OVM is not only a national issue but also often a regional one, with reports of voters “migrating” within their own country and across national borders. OVM can, therefore, erode trust in the accuracy of voter registers and in the integrity of the electoral process across multiple countries.

Organized voter migration in the Western Balkans is facilitated by state capture, in which entrenched political elites abuse state institutions to illegally create or maintain fictitious residencies for individuals who will vote for them, thereby manipulating the composition of voter registers. Interior ministries, which oversee civil registers, are often the “entry point” for such operations. Transparency regarding voter registers varies across the Western Balkan countries, making it difficult for external observers to detect suspicious registration patterns that may indicate OVM. Many of the cases that have come to public attention did so as the result of leaks or insider testimony provided to opposition parties or civil society organizations.

A full audit of the voter register is the most comprehensive way to tackle organized voter migration. In the Western Balkans, a limited audit was conducted only in North Macedonia in 2016. However, a successful audit in one country would not resolve the broader issue of dual residency across borders. To effectively address this challenge, regional sharing of data from voter and civil registers is necessary. Additional steps to prevent OVM include increasing the transparency of voter registers, while respecting personal data protection laws, and holding all municipal elections simultaneously, which would reduce opportunities for organized migration. None of these steps will be possible without clear political will and commitment to resolve this issue. The EU should make resolving voter-registration issues a clear condition in the accession process for the Western Balkan countries and actively encourage regional cooperation in addressing them.

Introduction

Organized voter migration (OVM) is a form of election fraud, also referred to as “voter tourism”¹ and voter registration fraud.² It involves organizing people who do not reside in a location to go there to vote for a particular candidate or party, therefore illegitimately influencing election results. These individuals are illegitimately and often illegally included in the voter register for the constituency in advance, which allows them to vote. One of the most common ways to include them in the voter register is through a fictitious residency. In analyses of election fraud, OVM is often grouped with manipulations of voting registers such as unjustified removal of citizens as well as with more heavy-handed transgressions of electoral rules, such as ballot-box stuffing or forgery of results tabulations.³

Organized voter migration can be regarded as a subtler form of electoral fraud as it is not immediately noticeable at individual polling stations and therefore harder to trace. They are usually not associated with consolidated authoritarian regimes but rather with regimes that hold competitive elections but fall short of the standards of liberal democracies. These regimes, variously classified as “competitive authoritarian”, “hybrid”, or “flawed democracies” usually feature elections in which the incumbent enjoys the advantage of a “tilted playing field” and abuses state institutions to enhance their chance of victory. Such regimes have become more common in the past decade as the quality of democracy has deteriorated in many regions, including Europe.⁴ Due to this trend, the likelihood of OVM may rise.

The Western Balkans region has seen repeated allegations of organized voter migration dating back to at least the early 2010s, but the issue has gained visibility following Serbia’s December 2023 local elections. Cases have been alleged in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, all of which were classified as “hybrid regimes” by Freedom House at the time.

In its report on the 2011 local elections in Albania, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE-ODIHR) noted that the opposition Socialist Party “expressed concerns that voters were illegally added to the civil registers in certain [local government units], including [Democratic Party] and [Socialist Movement for Integration]-controlled boroughs of Tirana, in order to change the balance of political power in these locations”.⁵ In 2023, the roles were reversed and the opposition Democratic Party accused the ruling Socialist Party of illegally “migrating” voters to Tirana.⁶

One of the most prominent cases was uncovered in 2015 in North Macedonia (until 2018 known as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), when the opposition Social Democratic Party released leaked telephone conversations between the members of the ruling Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization–Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) indicating that they had organized voter migration in the 2013 local elections.⁷ In one conversation, the then interior minister discussed the operation in which VMRO-DPMNE bused in ethnic Macedonians from the Prespa region of neighboring Albania, issued them with identity cards and placed them temporarily in addresses in the country until election day.⁸

A more recent case in the region involved the municipality of Šavnik in Montenegro. The local elections in October 2022 were interrupted by the opposition representatives on the polling boards responsible for conducting the vote

at a polling station, who accused the ruling coalition in the municipality of registering hundreds of new voters to influence the results.⁹ According to one expert from Montenegro, what happened was unethical but not strictly speaking illegal, as many people who went to the municipality to vote came from a neighboring one but were born in Šavnik and had family connections there. Therefore, they had some justification in requesting a residency, unlike “phantom” voters in OVM cases who were registered at the sites of uninhabited buildings. Since the population of Šavnik is small, a small number of new voters was enough to influence the result. While the illegality of what was done can be disputed, the principles for fair elections were violated.

The most prominent recent case, however, concerns the December 2023 local elections in Serbia, particularly in the tightly fought race in the capital of Belgrade, during and after which the opposition accused the government of denying it victory through OVM from other parts of Serbia as well as from Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹⁰

The recent cases of Montenegro and Serbia show the potential of organized voter migration to cause significant negative political consequences.

At the time of writing, the 2022 local election in Šavnik, Montenegro, still had not been concluded, even after repeated rounds of voting at the two polling stations in places where the opposition believes that new voters were illegitimately registered. The issue has been the topic of negotiations between the political parties at the national level but no solution has been found, leaving the municipality and its citizens in limbo. In the meantime, three persons have received suspended prison and/or house-arrest sentences for participating in OVM in Šavnik. In May, the Higher Court upheld the sentences against them for inducing the Ministry of Interior to certify false content, namely fictitious residencies.¹¹

In the Western Balkans, organized voter migration is not only a national issue but often also a regional one since there have been reported of voters “migrating” within their own country or across national borders.

The political consequences of the allegations of organized voter migration in Serbia in the 2023 local elections were more severe. The opposition claimed that this form of electoral fraud decisively impacted the results in Belgrade and prevented a change of power in the capital, which would have been a major breakthrough for the opposition in a political environment dominated by the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). The elections were followed by protests and by condemnations by several international actors. Some opposition parties boycotted the new elections in Belgrade in June 2024, which was won by SNS, citing their concerns about the continued presence of “phantom” voters in the register. In its report on these local elections, the OSCE-ODIHR mission noted the persisting distrust in the voter register and reiterated the organization’s recommendation to carry out a full audit.

In the Western Balkans, organized voter migration is not only a national issue but often also a regional one since there have been reported of voters “migrating” within their own country or across national borders. The former typically involves the creation of short-term fictitious residencies. The latter is more complex, as it may involve individuals holding not only dual citizenship but also residencies in different countries, which is not permitted under

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each country's legal definitions of residency. These residencies are not always established with the intention of enabling OVM—a person may have acquired residency in a country they emigrated to (or, given the region's violent history, fled to) without relinquishing residency in their country of origin, as institutions often fail to address this issue. Dual residencies can be exploited by political actors seeking to influence election outcomes through OVM. This phenomenon stems from the ethnic heterogeneity of most of the countries in the region and the salience of the issue of ethnic identity, which makes people susceptible to influence by other countries' political elites.

One notable example is the case of predominantly Serb-populated northern Kosovo, where individuals who emigrated long ago but kept their residency have been allegedly bused in from Serbia to Kosovo to vote during elections.¹² Other known cases involved ethnic Macedonians from Albania who were registered to vote in the 2013 local elections in FYR Macedonia, ethnic Serbs from Bosnia and Herzegovina who were registered to vote in Serbia's local elections in 2023, and ethnic Serbs from Serbia who allegedly voted in the local elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2024 (the latter a practice is suspected to have a longer history). There are also reports that thousands of Serbs from Serbia have been organized to vote in Montenegro's elections, influencing the results in favor of pro-Serb parties.¹³

The different cases of organized voter migration described above share several characteristics.

First, most involved suspected complicity of at least a part of state institutions that are expected to act neutrally in matters of electoral participation. In most of these cases, this was the ministry in charge of internal affairs, which is tasked with maintaining the civil register and therefore with providing the data based on which the voter registers are compiled. These cases thus are part of the phenomenon of “state capture”—the process in which political actors infiltrate state structures through clientelist networks and use them to hide their corrupt and illicit actions. Elements of state capture are present across the Western Balkans, according to multiple studies.¹⁴

Second, it was often hard to detect these cases due to the electoral legislation being underdeveloped, with ruling elites able to exploit legal loopholes. Furthermore, changes in legislation have sometimes led to an enabling environment for OVM. This was the case in Montenegro following the Constitutional Court's decision in 2020 to abolish the requirement of six-month residency in a constituency in order to be able to vote, as this was not in line with international standards. Experts welcomed this ruling but they also pointed out that it also made “voter tourism” easier, as seen during the first subsequent local elections.¹⁵

Third, since organized voter migration was carried out with the involvement of the state and often in the absence of effective legal mechanisms to detect them, another common element was their uncovering through investigations by nonstate actors such as the opposition, civil society, and independent media. The opposition played a crucial role in uncovering OVM in Montenegro and North Macedonia, while civil society and media outlets were particularly active around the December 2023 local elections in Serbia. The Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA), an election watchdog, issued a special report listing strong indicators of OVM immediately after the elections.¹⁶ In March 2024, independent media outlets reported on the apparent continuation of the practice when residents of a village near Belgrade were transported to the capital by members

of the SNS party and taken to the local police station (where new residencies in the municipality are registered), raising suspicions of another round of OVM.

Fourth, when it comes to the type of evidence of organized voter migration, some were more direct, including the testimonies of those involved, as in the Macedonian case of leaked conversations, and media reports on large-scale logistical operations to transport recently registered voters to polling stations, which was the case in Serbia in 2023. Other forms of evidence are more indirect and rely on the analysis of the official data and electoral forensics. Suspicions have frequently been raised over large and statistically unlikely changes in the voter register in certain constituencies or polling stations, as well as over implausibly large numbers of people registered at the same address. In the leaked conversation involving the FYR Macedonia interior minister, she warned against registering too many voters at the same address because it would raise suspicion. This issue was mentioned in the OSCE-ODIHR report on the parliamentary elections in FYR Macedonia in 2014, a year before the leaked conversations that provided additional proof. Where these data were not legally available, they were leaked, as in the case of Serbia.

Finally, another common element of these cases is that there have often been neither judicial nor political consequences for the institutions or officials involved. The lack of consequences can also be interpreted as a part of the state capture that plagues the region, preventing effective mechanisms of accountability.

Overall, there have not been comprehensive institutional responses or mechanisms to demonstrate whether allegations of organized voter migration were true or false. This has increased the likelihood that trust in the integrity of the electoral process becomes further eroded. This trust is low in the Western Balkans—for example, in a 2021 regional poll, only in Montenegro did a significant majority say that government could be changed through elections.¹⁷ This effect of OVM was noticeable in Serbia, where, following the December 2023 Belgrade case, various opposition parties in other cities expressed concern that their local voter register had been manipulated as well.

Organized voter migration also impacts trust among the countries in a region that share an often difficult common history and are highly politically intertwined. The media and the public in each of the countries often pay close attention to what is happening in the others. The occurrence of OVM in one country can thus have a spillover effect and lead to increased awareness about the issue in other parts of the region. And, since all six countries are on a relatively equal level in terms of the quality of their elections, the erosion of trust in voter registers in one could lead to similar concerns in others.

OVM-Related Aspects of Electoral Legislation

Voter registration in the six Western Balkan countries is passive: citizens do not need to take any specific action to be included on the national voter register (non-citizens are not eligible to vote in elections at any level). Exceptions include citizens who vote from abroad or based on their domicile (which differs from residency since it does not

Table 1. Institutions Responsible for Residency Registration and Updating of Voter Registers

| | Registration of Residency | Updating of the Voter Register |
|-------------------------------|--|---|
| Albania | General Directorate of Civil Status (GDSC) in the Ministry of Interior | Civil status offices, monitored by GDSC and Central Election Commission |
| Bosnia and Herzegovina | Ministry of Interior (both entities) | Agency for Identification Documents, Registers, and Data Exchange (Ministry of Civil Affairs), Central Election Commission responsible for accuracy |
| Kosovo | Agency for Civil Registration (Ministry of Interior) | Central Election Commission |
| Montenegro | Ministry of Interior | Ministry of Interior |
| North Macedonia | Ministry of Interior | State Election Commission |
| Serbia | Ministry of Interior | Ministry in charge of state administration, municipal and city administrations |

represent a location where a person has settled and intends to live permanently), who need to actively register in most cases. In all six countries, residency is a necessary condition for being able to vote in all elections. There is no qualification in terms of how long an individual has been registered as a resident in order to be able to vote. Such a legal provision in Montenegro, stipulating the need to hold residency for at least six months, was struck down by the Constitutional Court in 2020. In Serbia, a one-off time qualification was introduced for the June 2024 local elections as an attempt by the government to address concerns about OVM (civil society assessed this as insufficient). Only citizens who register their residency in the civil status office of a municipality (which needs to be done actively, unlike the updates to the voter register) will be included in the section of the voter register for that municipality.

As Table 1 shows, in all six countries, it is the Ministry of Interior or an organizational unit under its authority that is responsible for the registration and deregistration of residency in the country. The updating of the voter register following changes in residency is carried out by either the national election commission and/or the ministry in charge of administration and/or civil affairs.

In the most prominent cases of organized voter migration described above (FYR Macedonia in 2013, Serbia in 2023), the Ministry of Interior was the “entry point” of the operation. The two ministries were suspected of having registered fictitious residency for citizens in certain municipalities. The addition of these individuals to the voter register was then done automatically by the institution responsible for updating the register, as required by law. Some experts believe that electronic falsification of the voter registers by actors outside the ministries in the region is theoretically possible, but there have been no reported cases so far.¹⁸

The laws regulating the registration of residency and domicile in the Western Balkan countries mostly stipulate that the institution responsible needs to check whether the residency is real and reject an application if there is no proof that the person really lives in the municipality. Many of the cases of OVM described earlier were clear examples of the residency law deliberately not being followed by the state institutions, resulting in “phantom voters” being added to the voter register. However, there may also be instances of state institutions simply neglecting to conduct effective checks of applications for residency.

The ability of the public and of relevant stakeholders to detect instances of people being wrongly registered as residents and subsequently as voters depends on the scope of the right to access and inspect voter registers. Therefore, a crucial aspect of the electoral legislation related to the prevention of organized voter migration is the transparency of the voter registration process. If there are enough legal provisions for stakeholders to access the voter register, they will have an opportunity to detect suspicious patterns indicating the risk or instances of OVM, raise awareness of the issue, and create public pressure around it. According to the OSCE-ODIHR’s *Handbook For The Observation Of Voter Registration*, this access should be permitted during the regular maintenance of the civil or voter register, as well as during any pre-election registration and updating activities.

The ability of the public and of relevant stakeholders to detect instances of people being wrongly registered as residents and subsequently as voters depends on the scope of the right to access and inspect voter registers.

As Table 2 shows, there are varying degrees of transparency of voter registers across the Western Balkan countries. Citizens in all of them are able to check their own status once elections are called, and candidates and/or political parties get access to the whole register once elections are called. Election observers are allowed access the whole voter register only in Kosovo and Montenegro. However, inspecting the voter register only after elections are called provides only a limited opportunity to detect the potential for OVM, since the citizens and election participants are not able to track changes outside the campaign period, which is when OVM-related changes would be more expected.

The exception to this rule is Montenegro, where the Law on Voter Register (Article 17) obliges the Ministry of Interior to publish, within 48 hours of the calling of an election, an overview of the changes to the voter register since the last election. Crucially, the law stipulates that this overview should include the number of voters who gained or lost the right to vote, and on what ground either change happened (reaching voting age, registering a residency etc.). This is a useful provision as it enables observers, political actors, and citizens to detect potentially

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Table 2. Transparency of Voter Registers

| | Albania | Bosnia and Herzegovina | Kosovo | Montenegro | North Macedonia | Serbia |
|---|---------|---------------------------------|--------|------------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| During an election campaign period | | | | | | |
| Voters are able to check their own status in the register once elections are called ^a | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Whole voter register available to political parties after elections are called | Yes | No | No | Yes ^b | Yes | No |
| Whole voter register available to all candidates ^c accepted by the electoral commission ^d | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Whole voter register available to election observers after elections are called | No | No | Yes | Yes | No | No |
| Publishing of the change in the number of voters since the previous elections per municipality | No | No | No | Yes | No | No |
| Outside an election campaign period | | | | | | |
| Whole voter register available to political parties | No | Yes (twice a year) ^e | No | Yes ^f | No | No |
| Periodical publishing of the number of voters per municipality | No | No | No | No | No | Yes (once a month) |
| Voters able to check their own status in the voter register online at any point | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Whole voter register for previous elections available to citizens | No | No | No | No | No | Yes ^g |

a. Depending on the wording of the legislation, citizens can either check only their own status by providing data such as a personal identification number or they can review excerpts of the voter register for their municipality to check their status.

b. Only parties represented in parliament.

c. Candidates standing for parties and other electoral subjects (such as citizen groups).

d. In Serbia, candidates can access the data using the same procedure used by individual citizens, which implies that they can only check one name at the time.

e. In non-election years, the whole voter register is displayed in each municipality, but only in a physically printed form.

f. Only parties represented in parliament.

g. Since 2022; only names and surnames.

suspicious patterns. Nevertheless, as reports of election observers show, it is not always implemented.¹⁹ There is a similar possibility in Kosovo, although it is not stipulated in law but as a provision in an act of the Central Electoral Commission.²⁰

In Montenegro, there is another useful provision in Article 24 of the Law on Voter Register, which stipulates that the Ministry of Interior must provide interested parties—representatives of the political parties, election candidates, and election observers—the documentation based on which decisions on changes in the voter register were made, including outside the election campaign period, such as identity cards and residency registration/deregistration. This enables tracking potentially fraudulent changes in the register based on invalid or falsified documentation.

In the Western Balkan countries, citizens are only able to check their own status in the register throughout the year, but otherwise there are limited possibilities for accessing voter registers outside the election campaign period, let alone for checking for potential patterns of OVM. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the legal changes made in 2024 stipulate that the Central Election Commission should publish provisional lists from the voter register on its website, while taking into consideration the protection of personal data. However, this had not been implemented at the time of writing, which has been justified by the controversial argument that the lists are already published twice a year for inspection, which is done only in physical form and not online.²¹ In Montenegro, voter lists are available to political parties outside the election campaign period.

**It is only in Montenegro that political parties, civil society,
and individual citizens are provided by law with
appropriate avenues to detect OVM.**

In Serbia, two relatively recent innovations were introduced in the rulebooks for the implementation of the Law on Unified Voter Register that can help detecting organized voter migration in a limited way. The first obliges the Republic Electoral Commission to publish the number of voters per municipality each month on its website. While this can help track suspicious patterns in changes in the number of voters, it is still insufficient as voters who are no longer living in the municipality but were not removed for various reasons (which is a widespread phenomenon in the region) could be removed simultaneously with the addition of “phantom” voters, thus masking the increase in the number of the latter. The second change is that, since 2022, final excerpts from the voter register for local and national elections are available to the public but only the names and surnames of voters at each polling station are published. This innovation enabled the CRTA to find names on the list for the disputed 2023 Belgrade elections that were not on the list for the 2022 ones.²² It was then able to find corresponding names in other municipalities in Serbia, indicating that, at least in some cases, the same people had two residencies. This was not sufficient to prove OVM had taken place but raised serious suspicions that it did. However, the authorities did not investigate the CRTA’s findings.

This overview of legislation shows that in the Western Balkans it is only in Montenegro that political parties, civil society, and individual citizens are provided by law with appropriate avenues to detect OVM. In Serbia, the

legislation enables this in a more limited way and should be improved to enable a more efficient combating of this practice.

Policy Measures and Proposals to Tackle OVM

While the issue of organized voter migration has been present in the Western Balkans for years, very little has been done to address it. The main reason for this is the lack of political will of the entrenched elites that benefit from it and the lack of significant public pressure. Only in Serbia in 2023 and 2024 did this issue, for a limited time, become the main political controversy, following the disputed Belgrade elections. Even then, however, public pressure only succeeded in forcing the government to vaguely promise that it would implement the OSCE-ODIHR recommendations regarding the voter register (see below). At the time of writing, these steps had still not been taken and it was uncertain whether they would be before the next elections, especially if they are held early before the end of 2025, as may be the case.

In this context, policy solutions designed to address OVM have mostly been put forward by civil society and election observer bodies.

Voter Register Audit

A full audit of the voter register is the most comprehensive way of addressing organized voter migration. If done properly, it would ensure that all controversial elements of the register have been looked into and checked for accuracy, thus restoring the trust of the public in its integrity. In the Western Balkans, a limited audit was carried out only in FYR Macedonia in 2016, amid the political crisis that engulfed the country following the abovementioned leaking of the incriminating conversations of members the ruling party a year earlier. The crisis led to an agreement on holding new elections after electoral conditions were improved under a transitional government, including the audit of the voter register. OVM and fictitious residencies created in this context were only a part of the issues addressed by the audit; it also covered problems such as allegations of deceased persons still being included in the register.

The audit of the Macedonian voter register was carried out by the State Election Commission based on its new rulebook.²³ The object of the audit was the population data provided by the Ministry of Interior four times annually outside of election years. This data consists of a list of all adult citizens disaggregated by several categories (such as name changes or temporary residency abroad), allowing for tracking of changes in the voter register. The commission first verified the data electronically by comparing it with other registers maintained by state institutions, which were also delivered to it. The purpose of this was to determine whether there were persons in the voter register who should not have been there for any reason. After that, the commission carried out statistical analyses of data based on the voter register. The purpose of this step was to determine whether there were anomalies or statistically unlikely data in the voter register. After these two steps were carried out, the commission initiated field checks to clarify the data that remained problematic even after the first two steps. The field checks

involved two groups—controllers and interviewers—appointed by the commission. Interviewers carried these out on the ground, using predetermined questionnaires, and controllers coordinated their activities. The aim of the field checks was to determine whether the persons registered at a certain address really lived there.

According to the OSCE-ODIHR report on the 2016 elections in FYR Macedonia, the audit, which was observed by the four main political parties, led to a limited number of deletions, mostly of entries for deceased people.²⁴ In addition, 39,502 voters were identified as having “questionable registration” data and were required to re-register, and 171,500 voters were considered as temporarily residing abroad and were moved to a separate register of out-of-country voters. The final number of registered voters in the 2016 elections was 1,784,416. The OSCE-ODIHR concluded that the audit somewhat improved the accuracy of the voter register, but also that it deprived some citizens of the opportunity to vote. The problem was that, contrary to international standards and good practice, these voters had no possibility to appeal and be reinstated in the voter register. Another problem was that the State Election Commission could not check the validity of the data received from the state institutions in the phase of checks and analyses as it did not have direct access to their databases and documents. In conclusion, even this audit of the voter register, carried out under extraordinary political circumstances, had limited results and produced some controversies. Ultimately, the 2016 elections resulted in a change of government following more than two years of political turmoil.

In Serbia, following the controversial December 2023 local elections, the ruling SNS party agreed in May 2024 to the formation of a parliamentary Working Group for the Improvement of the Electoral Process.

In Serbia, following the controversial December 2023 local elections, the ruling SNS party agreed in May 2024 to the formation of a parliamentary Working Group for the Improvement of the Electoral Process, comprising members from the majority and the opposition as well as of civil society, to address the OSCE-ODIHR recommendations, including one concerning the need for a full voter register audit. The EU subsequently made the implementation of these recommendations one of the obligations for Serbia under its Growth Plan for the Western Balkans and a requirement for further progress in the country’s accession process, creating some political pressure on the government to deliver on them. The OSCE-ODIHR recommendation that the working group focused most on in 2024 was the one referring to the need to increase the trust in the voter register through an audit, supposed to be implemented through changes in the Law on Unified Voter Register. Two draft laws were proposed during the meetings of the working group: one by the SNS member of parliament in the group, which was backed by the ruling majority and one by the CRTA representative in the group, which was backed by the majority of the parliamentary opposition. There was no agreement on a single proposal, and the majority of the opposition and civil society representatives left the working group in early 2025, citing the lack of political will of the governing majority to implement genuine change. At the time of writing, the proposal submitted by the SNS had been presented in several public hearings, but it was not known when it might be adopted by the parliament, or when its provisions regarding the voter register would be implemented.

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The SNS and CRTA draft laws alike envisage a new commission rather than the State Electoral Commission, as in the Macedonian case, for auditing the voter register, which would be accountable to the parliament. Both would also enable similar activities to the ones carried out in FYR Macedonia in 2016, though the methodology of the audit would only be adopted after the commission is formed.

However, the SNS and CRTA draft laws differ in several significant aspects.²⁵ First, in the SNS proposal the commission's mandate would be time-limited to between nine and 14 months, whereas in the CRTA one there would be a permanent commission for the oversight of the voter register to ensure continuous monitoring. The SNS proposal is for the commission to have ten members, five of whom would be nominated by the governing majority, three by the opposition, and two by civil society. In the CRTA proposal, the commission would have nine members: three each nominated by the governing majority, opposition, and civil society. The SNS proposal does not give the commission authority to verify the integrity and security of the voter register's software infrastructure, which the CRTA proposal does. Finally, the CRTA proposal includes the possibility of public oversight over the commission's work, unlike the SNS proposal.

The OSCE-ODIHR was invited to comment on the proposals emanating from the working group. Commenting on the SNS draft law, the OSCE-ODIHR recommended that it should enable conducting the voter registration audit together with an audit of the civil register and adding additional areas to be audited (which was also lacking in the Macedonian case). It also said that the law should introduce a permanent mechanism for the periodic audit of the Unified Voter Register or mandate the commission to conduct periodic audits.²⁶ The SNS draft law is only one likely to be adopted by the parliament, but it was still not finalized at the time of writing. It is not possible to predict when a new law might be adopted and subsequently how long it would take to form the commission for the audit of voter register, and whether it would be able to function properly.

What stands out from the analysis of the Macedonian voter audit and the proposals for the voter audit in Serbia is that several elements are crucial: the composition of the institution conducting the audit and the rules for its decision-making; the timeframe in which the voter register audit is carried out and whether it is a regular or an ad hoc activity; and the extent of the competences of the commission, particularly whether it has access to civil registries in addition to the voter register.

Regional Audit To Eliminate Multiple Residencies

A successful voter register audit in one Western Balkan country might eliminate fictitious residencies within it, but it would not solve the problem of dual residencies in two countries. In order to tackle this problem, there needs to be sharing at the regional level of data from voter and civil registers. Multiple experts have pointed out that, were this to take place, the persons holding dual residencies would be relatively easy to detect, at least between Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia, which account for a large part of the suspected organized voter migration in the region.²⁷ This is because the Unique Master Citizen Number, an identification number that was used in the then state of Yugoslavia is still used in all of its successor states except Croatia. Since no two citizens in these countries share the same identification number (with part of the number determined by the part of the former Yugoslavia in which the citizen was born), it would be easy to find the ones who have dual residency.

Resolving the issue of dual residency in different countries would also probably require legislative changes to forbid it. In some sensitive cases, such as when individuals were forced to leave a country due to war, this would create controversies since access to some rights (such as ownership rights) is determined by residency, and people could lose them together with their residency. Due to the circumstances in which some of them were forced to leave, this could be perceived as unjust. The solution would be to allow vulnerable groups of citizens to access those rights without the requirement of residency.²⁸

Resolving the issue of dual residency across the Western Balkans is also relevant in the context of the EU accession process of the countries in the region. If they become member states at some point, the fact that many people in the region have dual residency could create problems for the political system of the EU, as the right of EU citizens to vote in a constituency for the European Parliament elections is determined based on residency rather than nationality. Dual residency would potentially enable a person to vote twice in these elections. This is why the Centre for Monitoring and Research, a civil society organization from Montenegro, proposed in 2024 an initiative for Western Balkan countries to share their dual-residency data, which was supported by the CRTA and the Centre for Free Elections and Democracy from Serbia.²⁹ This could be carried out within the Berlin Process or some other regional initiative related to EU integration, but it would require political will among the countries of the region that would be hard to secure given the current political constellation there.

Maximizing the Transparency of Voter Registers

A full audit of voter registers in all the countries of the Western Balkans would increase the trust in them. Maximal transparency of the voter registers so that citizens can access the largest possible scope of data and track changes in it over relatively short periods is the best way to build trust. As described above, the countries in the region have varying degrees of transparency regarding their voter registry. In Serbia, both competing draft laws coming out of the parliamentary working group included a section on expanding the public's access to the voter register. Their almost identical provisions go a step further than the current regulations in the Western Balkans.

Currently, legal and sub-legal acts enable citizens in Serbia to access the list from the voter register for every polling station in the country once the voter register for a certain election is finalized, but, as noted, these lists only include names and surnames. Adding the name of an individual's parent would make comparing lists much easier and help detecting people who can vote at two or more polling stations.³⁰ Additionally, both competing draft laws stipulate that a separate list containing the number of persons per address across the country should be published, which is intended to help detect abnormally large numbers of people registered as living in the same property, which is a sign of potential manipulations. Finally, the draft laws propose that the current provision that municipalities should publish the number of voters on their territory once per month should be changed to once per week, with the inclusion of the number of changes and the legal basis them.

In its comments on the competing draft laws coming out of the parliamentary working group, the OSCE-ODIHR stressed the need to safeguard personal data protection when implementing the provisions on increasing transparency, positively assessing the requirement in the SNS draft law of using two-factor authorization to access this data. In a general recommendation, the OSCE-ODIHR proposed adding explicit

provisions that would eliminate ambiguities about compliance with the Personal Data Protection Law. It also urged including the provision of legal guarantees to ensure that the information is used only for the intended purpose of presenting voter registration to the public, and that the law could further regulate any restrictions on the use of the data and require a legal disclaimer specifying the scope of rights and obligations that may be exercised and enforced by parties. According to the OSCE-ODIHR, consideration could be given to maintaining a log of stakeholders accessing the voter register data and requiring their consent to the policies regulating the use of the data.

Simultaneous Holding of Local Elections

One of the circumstances facilitating organized voter migration in Montenegro and Serbia is the fact that in these countries all local elections do not take place at the same time. In the other countries of the region, they do so simultaneously every four years, except in extraordinary circumstances. In Serbia, about 150 out of 170 local elections were synchronized until December 2023, when 66 local elections that were supposed to take place in June 2024 were called early, while the rest of took place six months later. The government did not give a reason for this separation of local elections into two cycles, but the decision was later interpreted by many as meant to facilitate OVM as persons who voted for the ruling SNS in one municipality in December 2023 could potentially vote in another one in June 2024. In Montenegro, the abovementioned case of Šavnik can also be partially explained by the fact that the local elections were held in two halves at different times. Legislating a single date for all local elections would limit the possibility of OVM as it would restrict considerably the ability to organize for people to vote in more than one municipality. This measure would not eliminate all forms of OVM, though, especially the ones taking place across national borders.

Conclusion

Organized voter migration regularly occurs in the Western Balkans, and there are no signs that this will subside in the foreseeable future. Other forms of electoral irregularities usually overshadow it, but in some instances it is perceived as the main factor in determining election outcomes, such as in the 2023 Belgrade elections, which is when it causes significant political controversy. Even when the impact of OVM is not at that level, it still is a form of electoral fraud that should be eliminated. The efforts to improve the situation in this regard are limited by the frequent lack of political will, the lack of pressure from the public, the regional dimension of the problem and the need for coordination among governments, and the fact that the state capture and the deficiencies of the rule of law in the region's countries enable the practice. Nevertheless, multiple legal and policy measures can be implemented to address the OVM under the right political circumstances and with the presence of the political will.

Recommendations

Amend laws to add or improve safeguards against falsifying a residency. In each country of the region, there should be an analysis of the effectiveness of the existing safeguards. Improvements might include additional requirements regarding the documentation that should be submitted to prove a residency, the obligation of the responsible institution to check the facts on the ground, and sanctions for persons who take part in the falsification of residency.

Increase the transparency of voter registers to the maximum extent possible without violating personal data protection standards. Citizens should be able to regularly track changes in the number of voters in a constituency, together with the information on the legal grounds for these changes. Introducing provisions regarding verifying the number of voters per property would also be useful. The rights of political parties and registered election observers to access the full voter register should be expanded as well.

In cases of ambiguities, legally eliminate the possibility of dual (or more) residency in different countries. In cases in which losing a second residency would deny citizens access to certain rights in one country, a legal way should be found for them to continue accessing those rights without the requirement of a second residency.

Conduct a full voter register audit and regular follow-up checks. This should consist of cross-referencing the data, statistical analysis, and targeted and random field checks. The institution conducting the audit should have the right to access other registries relevant to the compilation of the voter register as well as to initiate criminal proceedings. The work of this institution should be open to public scrutiny. Persons removed from the voter register should have effective means to appeal the decision. Data from these audits relevant to the voter registration process should be shared among governments in the region to eliminate multiple residencies in different countries.

Safeguard the integrity of the voter register by improving the software used to maintain it. The primary goal of this change should be to prevent any outsider interventions on the voter register. Also, access to the register should be limited by solutions such as two-factor authorizations and other policies related to personal data protection. While there has been no report in the region of such software being compromised, it is an obvious area of potential vulnerability, which has been raised by the CRTA in Serbia.

Civil society actors should carry out regular analyses of changes in the voter register based on the available data. Tracking the changes in the number of voters per constituency should help detect potentially suspicious activities. If these are detected, state institutions and the public should be alerted.

Civil society actors should raise awareness among citizens of the rules regarding voter registration. Citizens should be made aware of the legal framework for residency changes and voting rights, as well as steps they can take to rectify potential falsehoods in the voter register. They should also advocate the above-described legal changes and policy measures.

Organized Voter Migration in the Western Balkans

The EU should make resolving the issues surrounding voter registration a clear condition in the accession process. The progress of candidate countries in the Western Balkans to the latter stages of the process should depend on making their voter register transparent and ensuring that their accuracy is trusted by stakeholders and the public.

The EU should encourage regional cooperation in addressing the issues of cross-border voter migration through formats such as the Berlin Process or other forms of regional cooperation supported by the EU.

The EU and other international partners of the Western Balkan countries should support the abovementioned actions by national parliaments and governments (where there is political will for cooperation) as well as civil society through the provision of expertise and funding.

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