

UNEQUAL DEMOCRACIES

SERBIA: WHO DOES (NOT) HAVE A SEAT IN PARLIAMENT?

Dušan Spasojević and Vujo Ilić
June 2025



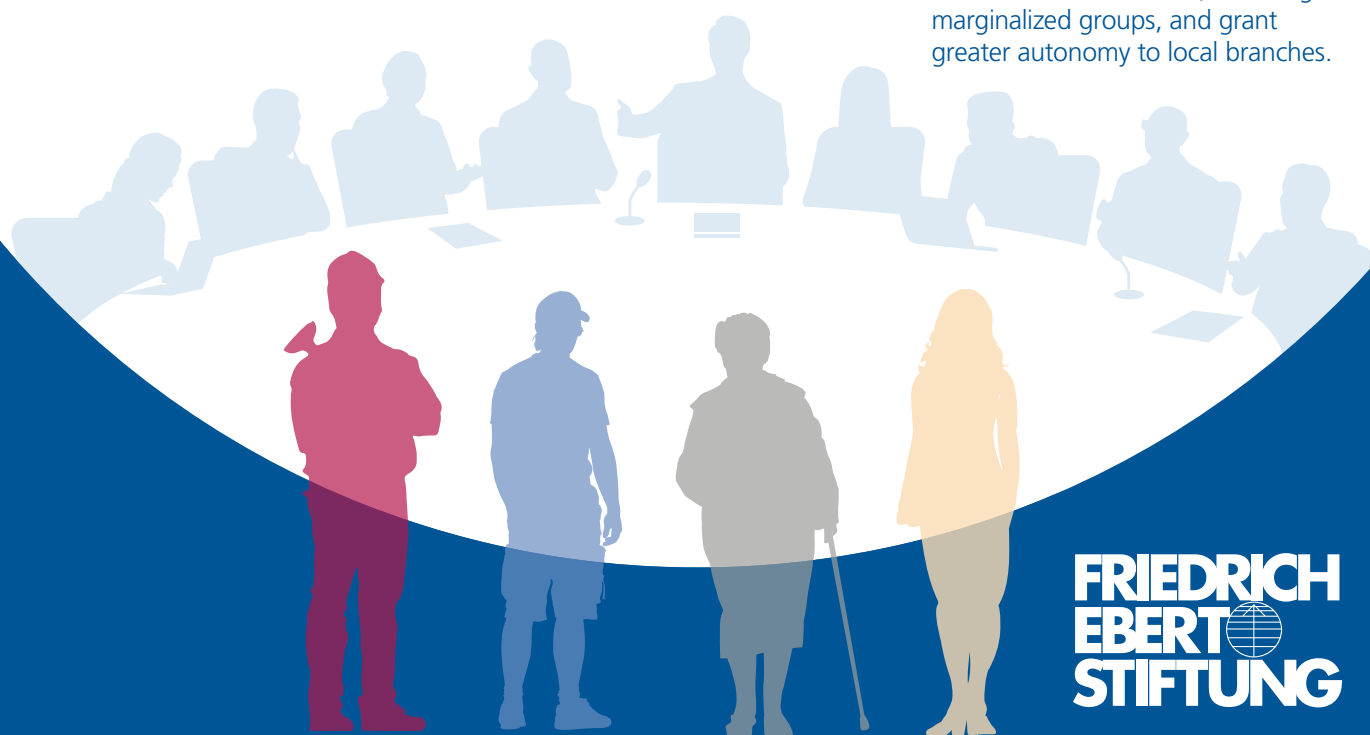
Parliaments are meant to represent different voices and interests of the people. However, they can also systematically exclude or underrepresent segments of the population. This study examines how effectively the Serbian Parliament fulfils its potential for comprehensive social representation.



The electoral system ensures good representativeness for political lists, but the parliament lacks social balance. It favours men, highly educated, middle-aged individuals, residents of Belgrade, urban populations, and the upper classes. These systemic disparities persist across all parties, indicating systemic disparities.



The electoral system should adopt preferential voting, enhance geographical representation by adding more electoral districts, and ensure MP replacements maintain gender balance. Political parties should offer more diverse candidates, including marginalized groups, and grant greater autonomy to local branches.



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1

WHY DO WE CARE ABOUT REPRESENTATION?

Parliaments are the highest representative bodies in a democracy. Their primary purpose is to gather and represent the interests and voices of the people, transforming them into debates, procedures, and laws. A parliament's ability to represent depends on electoral rules and campaigns, the distribution of seats, and institutional organization and transparency. Some parliaments prioritize representing as many interests as possible, while others cherish the ability to enable stable governments.

The elections for the Serbian Parliament employ a unique electoral system shared only with the Netherlands and Israel. It uses proportional representation to allocate 250 seats within a single electoral district, with a low electoral threshold of just 3 % (applicable even for coalitions). This system allows the Parliament to reflect the plurality of votes effectively, with only lists that fail to surpass the 3 % threshold excluded from seat allocation. However, national minorities' electoral lists are exempt from this threshold, ensuring that major ethnic minorities, such as Hungarians, Bosniaks, and Albanians, regularly gain seats in Parliament.

Theoretically, this system should promote pluralism and encourage a broad spectrum of ideological and programmatic positions within the Parliament. However, actual representation is influenced by more than just electoral rules. It results from a complex mix of factors, including the role of political parties, their leaders, and the critical political and social issues of the society they serve. Despite its potential, the Serbian Parliament does not fully realize its capacity for comprehensive social representation.

Since introducing the current proportional system with a single electoral district in 2000, legislators have made several adjustments to address critical challenges and fine-tune the system. A natural threshold was introduced for minority parties after they failed to secure seats in the 2003 elections. Gender quotas were implemented to increase female representation ahead of the 2007 elections. Closed lists were introduced, requiring parties to follow the order of candidates when allocating seats in 2012. The electoral threshold was lowered in 2020 to enable more lists to win seats and reduce the effects of the electoral boycott by the opposition.

This study examines the development of these electoral rules and their impact on representation in the Serbian Parliament,

with a particular focus on the convocation elected in 2023. It forms part of a larger international project and employs the same methodology (Elsässer and Schäfer, 2022). For this, we collected publicly available data on Members of Parliament (MPs), including regional and gender distribution and their educational and professional backgrounds before entering Parliament. This data allowed us to assess the Parliament's heterogeneity and its potential influence on its representative function.

Using the collected data, we categorized MPs according to Oesch's (2006) class system, which considers qualification requirements and occupational positions in the labour market. Additionally, we examined the ideological dimension of politics, classifying political parties into six broad ideological groups: green, centre-left (including social democrats and socialist parties), liberal, centre-right, regional (including ethnic parties), and others. This approach enabled us to explore the deeper ideological underpinnings of parliamentary group structures.

2

GENERAL OVERVIEW

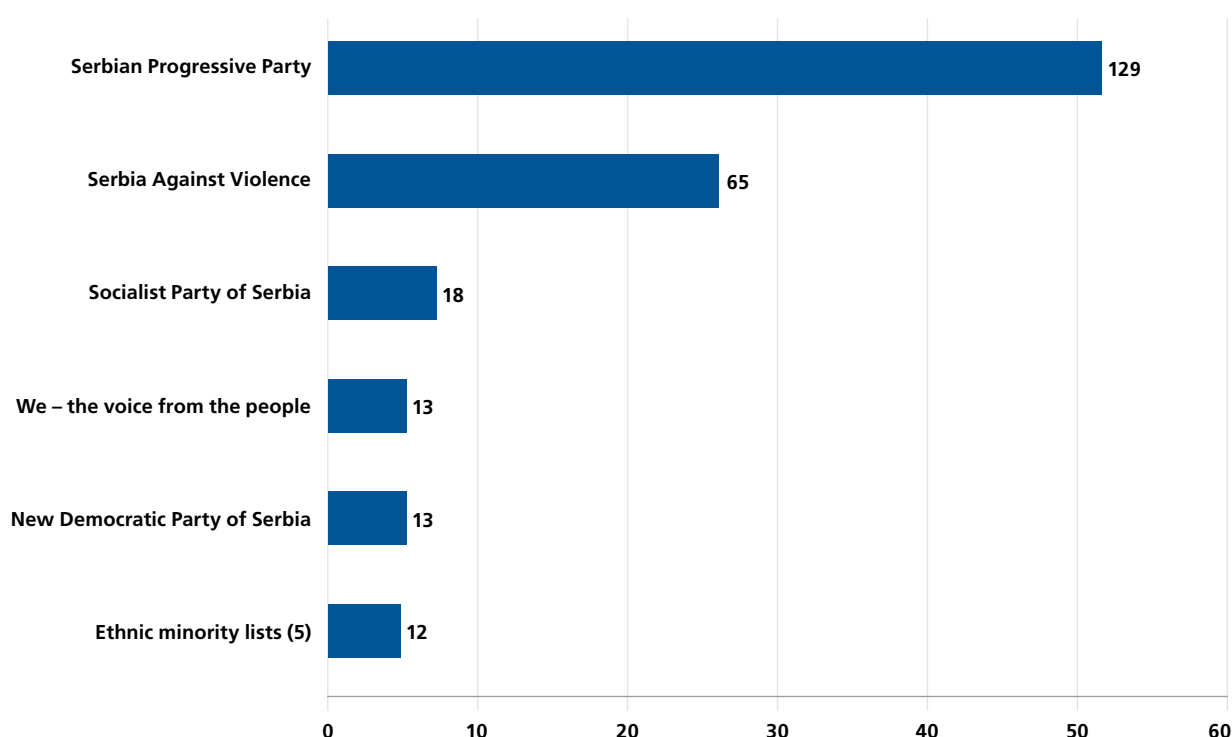
This analysis focuses on the Serbian Parliament elected on December 17, 2023, and the initial allocation of seats based on the results of the electoral lists. While some MPs later resigned to become government ministers or for other reasons, this first allocation most accurately reflects the citizens' votes. Methodologically, choosing a subsequent point in time for analysis would be challenging without introducing some bias.

The 14th convocation of the Serbian Parliament consists of 238 MPs elected from lists that passed the 3% electoral threshold in a single-district system and 12 MPs elected from ethnic minority lists. The seat distribution closely resembles previous convocations, except for the 2020 elections, when the number of minority MPs was unusually high (19). This anomaly was partly due to a boycott by major opposition parties (Ilić, 2022).

In the 2023 elections, ten electoral lists secured seats, five of which held minority status (Figure 1). The ruling coalition led by the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) retained power with 129 seats, complemented by 18 seats won by the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS). The strongest opposition umbrella coalition, Serbia against Violence, comprising 15 organizations spanning green-left, liberal, centrist, and centre-right ideologies, won 65 seats. They were followed by the right-wing New Democratic Party of Serbia (NDSS) with 13 seats and a newcomer to Parliament, the far-right, anti-party, fringe politics, populist movement We – The Voice of the People, which also gained 13 seats.

Eight electoral lists failed to cross the 3% threshold, including Dveri, Narodna Stranka, and Zavetnici, which had representation in the previous convocation. Approximately 7% of the votes remained unrepresented, with the majority

Figure 1
Seats won by lists in the 2023 elections



(6.3 %) coming from right-wing and far-right parties. Seats allocated to minority representatives, who are exempt from the electoral threshold, were distributed as follows: six seats to a Hungarian list, four seats to two Bosniak lists, and one seat each to Albanian and Russian lists.

Even though Serbian parliaments has been pluralistic and balanced for the first two decades since the first multiparty elections in 1990, now it is marked by the presence of a dominant party. Since the 2014 elections, the seat distribution in the Serbian Parliament has remained fairly consistent. The Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has been the dominant party since, securing about half of the seats. Its coalition partner, the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), typically gains around 30 seats. Minority parties contribute around ten seats on average. The remaining seats are divided among right-wing and populist parties, which get about one-third, and left-wing, liberal, and pro-European parties, which receive the remaining two-thirds.

3

AGE, GENDER, EDUCATION, AND GEOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION

GENDER REPRESENTATION

While gender equality was highly valued during the Yugoslav period, all former Yugoslav republics, including Serbia, still experience underrepresentation of women in their parliaments. Since introducing the current electoral system in 2000, several measures have been implemented to improve female representation (Figure 2).

The first significant step came with the 2007 elections when the law required that at least 30 % of candidates on electoral lists belong to the less represented gender (one in every four candidates). However, because political parties were free to select MPs anywhere from their candidate lists, this change initially resulted in only modest improvements. Over time, awareness campaigns helped bolster female representation.

The 2012 elections introduced closed candidate lists, requiring parties to follow the predetermined order when allocating seats. In 2020, further changes mandated that a minimum of 40 % of candidates on electoral lists be of the less-represented gender. However, this still does not

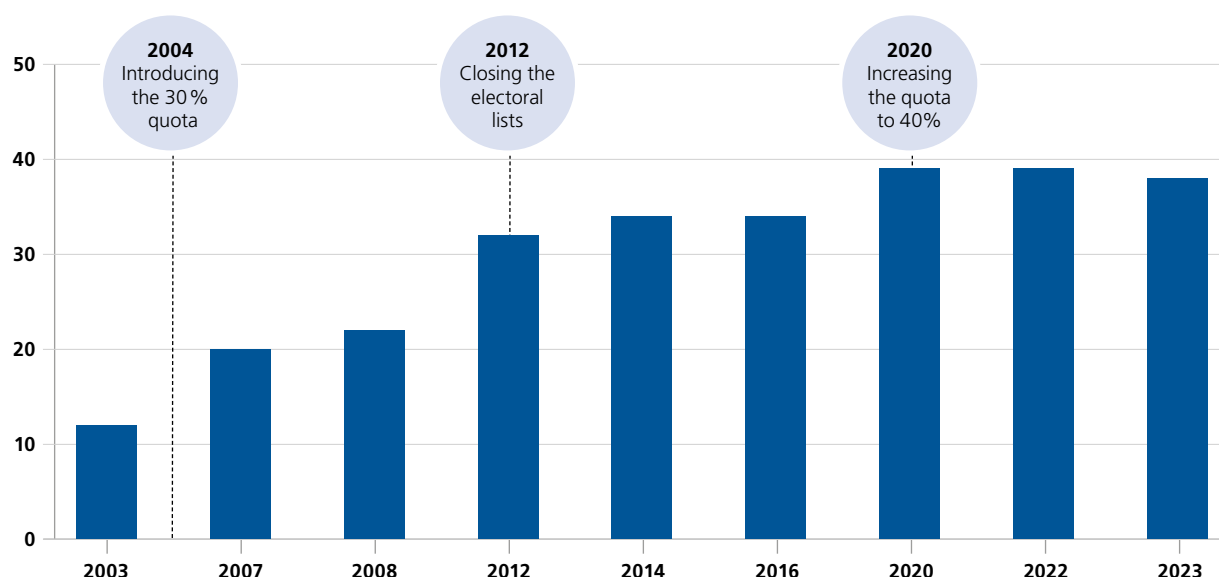
guarantee that 40 % of MPs in Parliament will be women, as several factors can reduce the ratio. For instance, if a female MP resigns, her replacement may be male, depending on the candidate's order. Additionally, the minority MPs are predominantly male.

In the current Parliament, women hold 94 seats (38 %). This proportion is relatively consistent across political parties. Despite forming 52 % of the voting-age population in Serbia (according to the latest census), women remain significantly underrepresented in Parliament. The new parliament speaker is a woman, former Prime Minister Ana Brnabić. However, female MPs are still underrepresented in leadership roles within parliamentary committees, which they chair in just 37 % of cases.

AGE REPRESENTATION

In Serbia, the voting age is 18, as in most European countries. The Serbian Parliament has relatively young members, with an average age of 48. This is lower than the 2019–2024

Figure 2
Increasing number of female MPs (2003–2023)



European Parliament average (49.5 years) and the global average (51.7 years).¹ However, the current Serbian Parliament is also older than the previous two, with the average age rising from 46 in 2020 to 47 in 2022 and now to 48 in this convocation.

Regarding age distribution, the Parliament includes a small group of 5 MPs under 29 years old, followed by two large age groups, 98 MPs aged 30–44 and 111 MPs aged 45–59

(Figure 3). The remaining 36 MPs are aged 60 and older. Compared to the adult population from the 2022 census, there is a clear overrepresentation of middle-aged MPs. Although individuals aged 30–59 comprise less than half of the adult population (49 %), they account for 83 % of all MPs.

The gender structure of the Serbian Parliament highlights another global trend: female MPs are more represented among younger age groups (Figure 4). In Serbia, Women constitute 60 % of MPs under 29, half of MPs aged 30–45, 32 % of MPs aged 45–59, and only 19 % of MPs aged 60 and older. This disparity reflects that men dominate representation in older generations.

¹ Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) Global data on national parliaments, <https://data.ipu.org/age-brackets/>

Figure 3
Age cohorts in the voting-age population and MPs

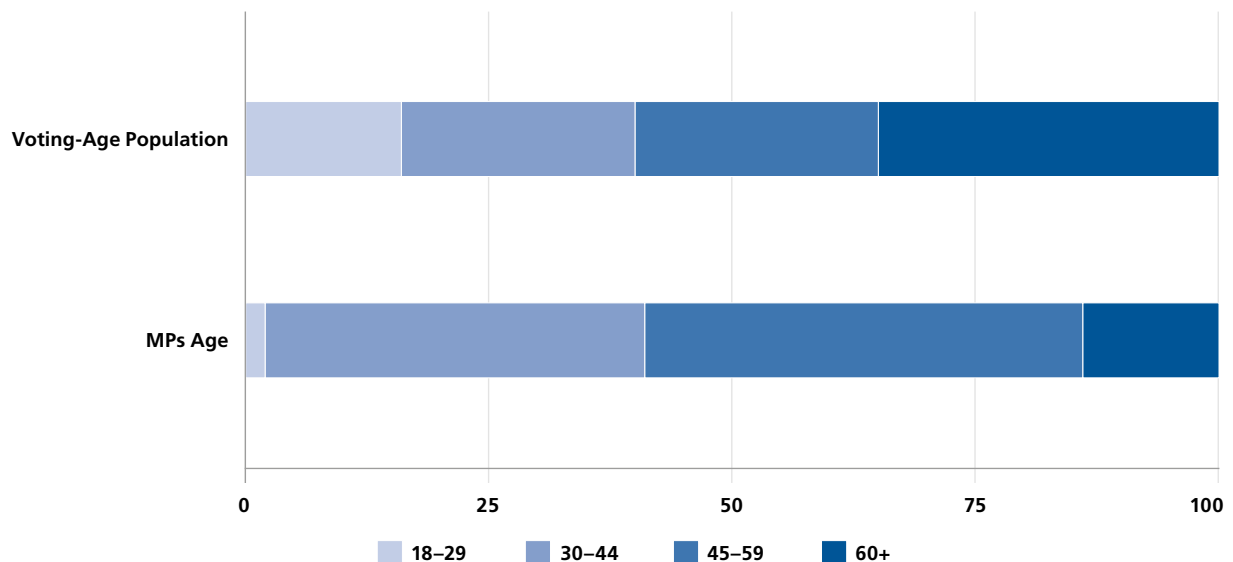


Figure 4
Gender and age cohorts in the Serbian parliament

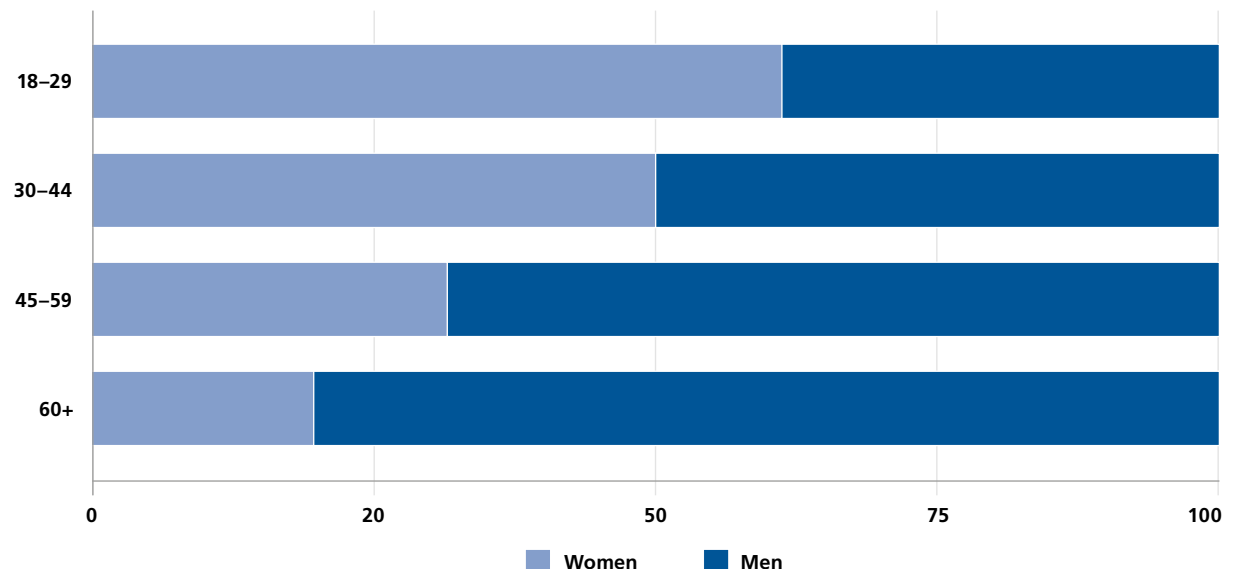


Figure 5
Levels of education in the population and MPs

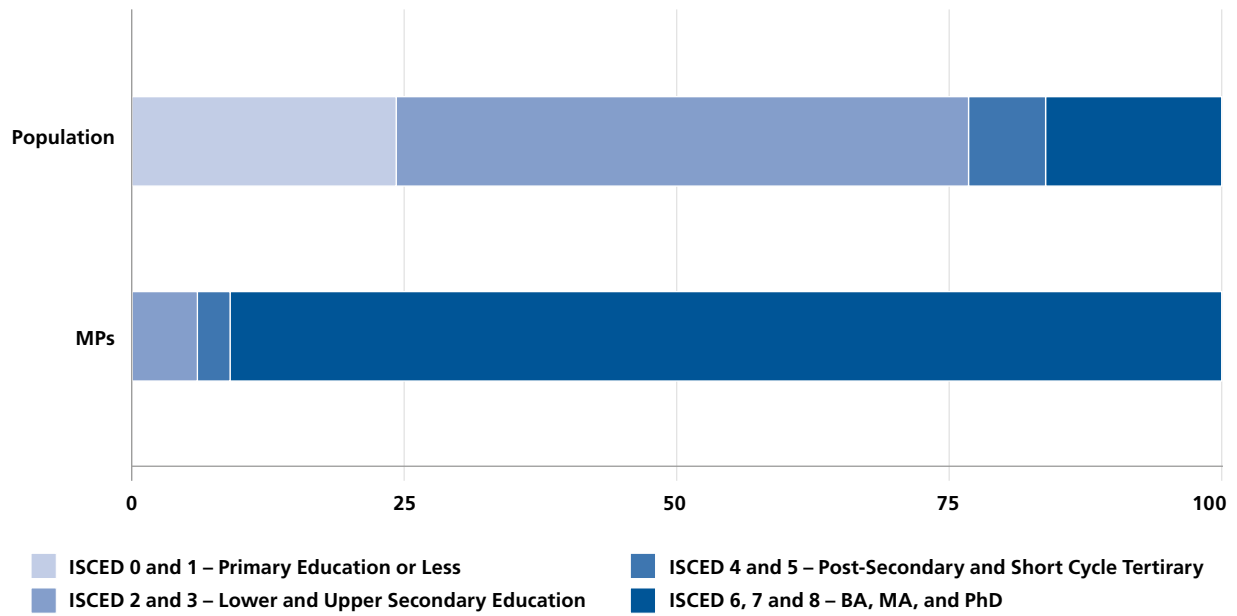


Figure 6
Percent of voters and MPs from Serbian regions (excluding Belgrade)

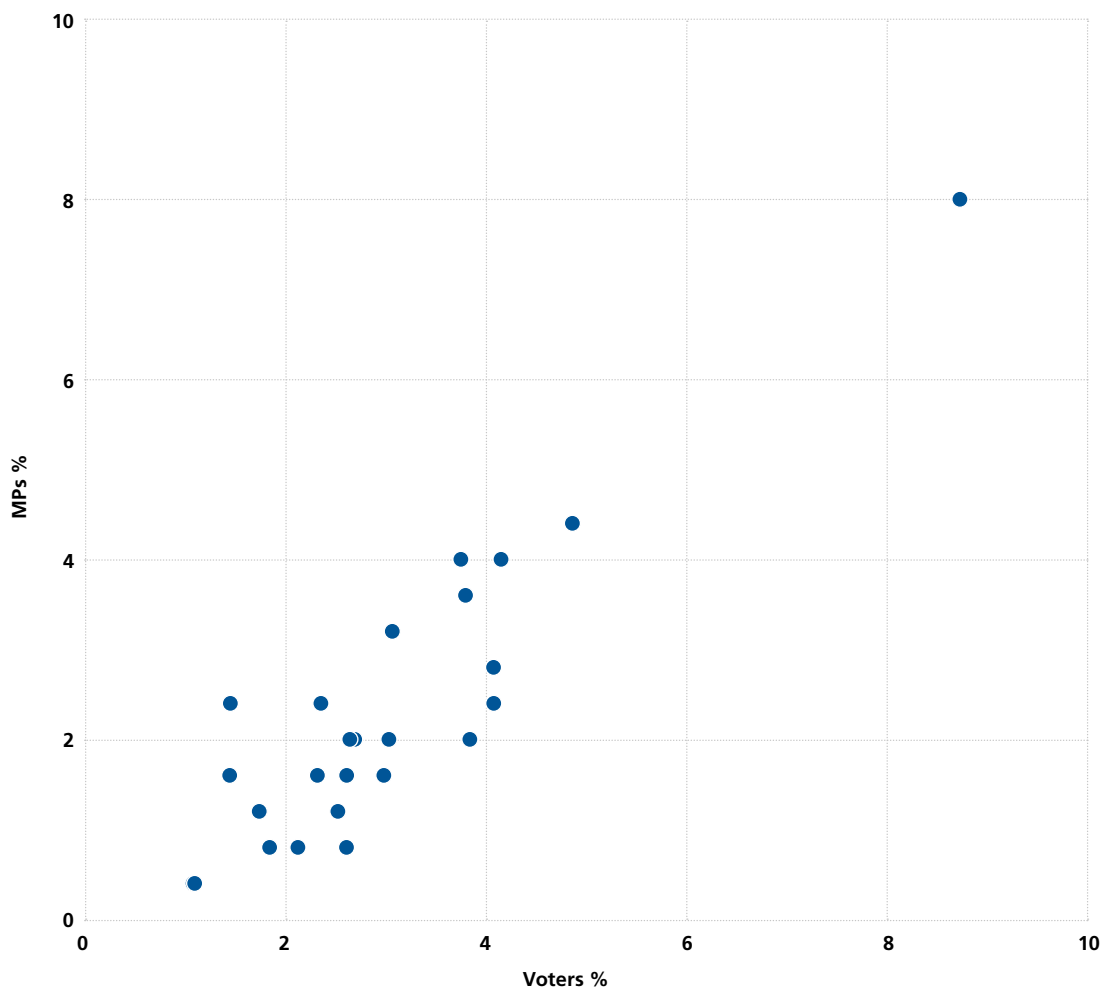
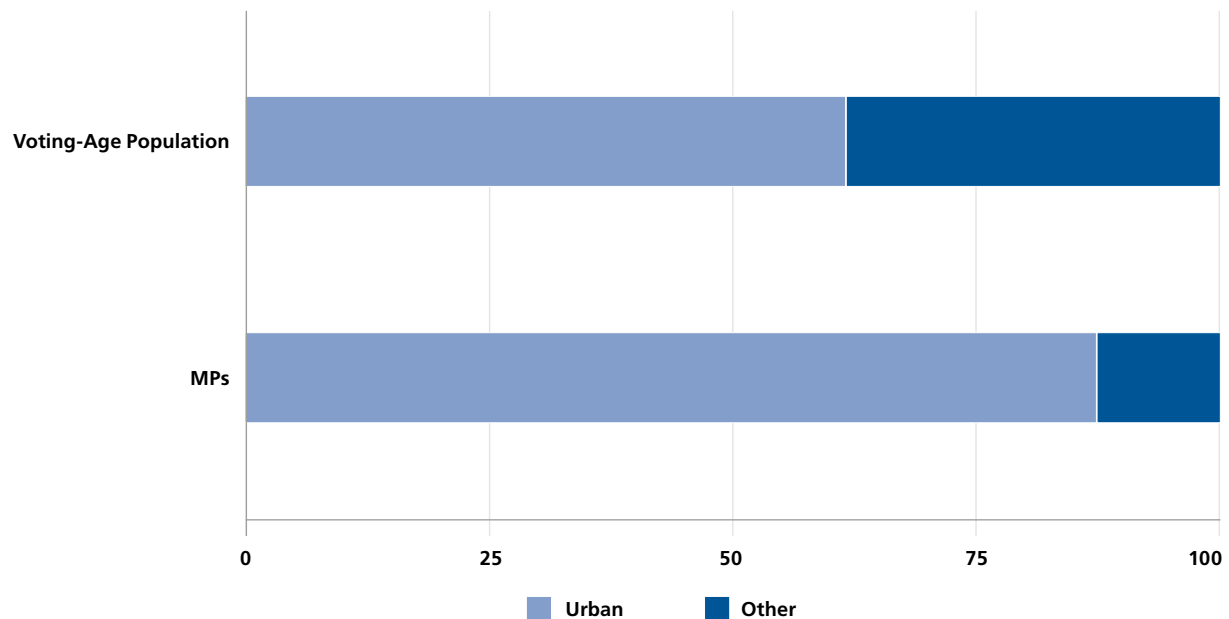


Figure 7
Types of settlement in the voting-age population and MPs



The youngest parliamentary group in the current convocation is Serbia Against Violence, with an average age of 45. This is likely due to the coalition's inclusion of several newer parties with younger MPs. Conversely, the far-right, anti-party movement We, the Voice of the People, is the oldest group, with an average age of 56. The ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) traditionally includes younger MPs, contributing to the overall lower average age of Parliament. Larger electoral lists tend to have more diverse MPs, while smaller lists, which aim for fewer seats, often lack diversity.

EDUCATIONAL STRUCTURE

The Serbian Parliament aligns with the concept of “diploma democracy” (Bovens and Anchrit, 2017), where highly educated individuals dominate political representation. However, unlike many other parliaments, Serbia still includes representatives with only a high school education. Specifically, 16 MPs hold only high school qualifications (ISCED 2 and 3), and seven MPs possess additional education below the graduate level (ISCED 4 and 5).²

In contrast, 132 MPs have bachelor's degrees (ISCED 6), 58 MPs hold master's degrees (ISCED 7), and 37 MPs have earned doctoral degrees (ISCED 8). Among these, there are 14 university professors and two researchers. The most common fields of study among MPs with graduate and post-graduate degrees are law, economics, and political science, followed by engineering and medicine.

This educational disparity is stark compared to the general population (Figure 5). According to the 2022 census, only 16 % of Serbia's population aged 15 and older has a university education, yet 91 % of MPs hold a university degree. Conversely, about three-quarters of the population with only primary or secondary education are represented by just 6 % of MPs. Notably, highly educated MPs are evenly distributed across genders and political lists.

GEOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION

Previous studies consistently show that large cities, particularly Belgrade, are overrepresented in the Serbian Parliament. This phenomenon stems from the centralizing effects of Serbia's electoral system and broader political centralization at both the systemic and party levels. Like its predecessors, the current Parliament exhibits significant “metropolization.” Half of all MPs (125) are from the two largest cities: Belgrade, which accounts for 107 MPs (43 %), and Novi Sad, which contributes 18 MPs (7 %).

Since Belgrade represents only 25 % of Serbia's voters, MPs from the capital are disproportionately represented. However, when Belgrade is excluded, the Parliament achieves a surprising balance in regional representation (Figure 6). MPs are drawn from all 24 administrative regions of Serbia, including Kosovo, and their numbers correlate strongly and positively with the voter population in each region.

Despite this regional balance, representation within individual regions reveals significant urban bias. MPs predominantly come from large cities, leaving villages and small towns underrepresented. While 38 % of Serbia's voting-age

² UNESCO, International Standard Classification of Education, <https://uis.unesco.org/en/topic/international-standard-classification-education-isced>

population lives in villages or small towns (according to the latest census, excluding Kosovo), only 31 MPs (13 %) represent these areas (Figure 7).

The ruling coalition parties, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) contribute most significantly to rural representation, with 24 MPs from villages and small towns. In contrast, opposition lists, SPN, NADA, and We, the Voice of the People, primarily draw MPs from urban areas, with 83 urban MPs compared to just seven representing non-urban settlements.

4

CLASS STRUCTURE

The class structure of the Serbian Parliament reveals significant homogeneity, with 221 MPs (88 %) belonging to the Higher-Grade Service Class, as defined by Oesch's classification system (Table 1). Among this dominant group, most MPs are higher-grade managers and administrators (157), followed by socio-cultural professionals (49), self-employed professionals (8), and technical experts (6). This overrepresentation of socio-cultural and managerial expertise contrasts with the underrepresentation of technical expertise.

Table 1 Class structure of the Serbian parliament

The Lower-Grade Service Class accounts for only 18 MPs (7 %), dominated by socio-cultural semi-professionals (11, mostly artists), with smaller numbers of technicians and lower-grade managers and administrators. Small business owners are represented by seven MPs, all of whom employ others. Just four MPs represent the Skilled Worker Class, all sports officials or retired athletes.

Notably, the Unskilled Worker Class is absent from the Serbian Parliament. This lack of representation reflects the absence of MPs without secondary education and highlights the political landscape, where traditional leftist parties have declined. Instead, Serbian politics over the last three decades has been shaped by identity issues, EU membership and the status of Kosovo (Spasojević, 2022).

MPs outside the Higher-Grade Service Class are proportionally distributed between the ruling majority and opposition parties. Skilled workers, for example, are primarily aligned with the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), with three out of four MPs from this group belonging to the ruling coalition. A similar trend is observed in the lower-grade service class, where 11 (out of 18) MPs are SNS members. Small business owners are evenly split between the ruling coalition and opposition parties. Technicians, however, all belong to opposition parties.

Table 1
Class structure of the Serbian parliament

The Five Classes		MPs	%	Occupations	MPs	%
I	Higher-grade service class	221	88	Higher-grade managers and administrators	157	63
				Socio-cultural professionals	49	20
				Self-employed professionals	8	3
				Technical experts	6	2
				Large employers	1	0
II	Lower-grade service class	18	7	Socio-cultural semi-professionals	11	4
				Technicians	4	2
				Lower-grade managers and administrators	3	1
III	Small business owners	7	3	Small business owners with employees	7	3
				Small business owners without employees	0	0
IV	Skilled workers	4	2	Skilled service	4	2
				Skilled clerks	0	0
				Skilled manual	0	0
V	Unskilled workers	0	0	Low-skilled manual	0	0
				Unskilled clerks	0	0
				Low-skilled service	0	0

When viewed through an ideological lens, the class distribution shows little variation. Higher-Grade Service Class MPs comprise 87 % of Green parties, 89 % of Center-Left parties, 86 % of Center-Right parties, and 90 % of Radical-Right parties. Smaller parties, such as Liberal, Regional, and Other, consist entirely of Higher-Grade Service Class MPs.

A closer look at the largest class, higher-grade managers and administrators (157 MPs), shows three distinct subgroups. The first subgroup comprises the highest level of the political elite, including leaders of the executive and representative branches and political party leaders. The second group consists of mid-range politicians, such as members of local councils or parliaments, often holding additional appointments in public institutions or companies. This group highlights the importance of local politics and the public sector as stepping stones in political careers. The third subgroup is heterogeneous and includes directors primarily from the public sector, such as hospitals, elder-care institutions, and retirement funds, illustrating further the connection between politics and public administration.

The class structure of the Serbian Parliament shows an overrepresentation of professional politicians and the political elite, as well as the influence of Serbia's spoils system, where political appointments play a significant role. This structure also demonstrates the durability of Serbia's political elite, many of whom frequently transition between roles in different branches or levels of government. Studies show that some politicians change party affiliation to align with parliamentary majorities, thereby maintaining their positions and influence. While this adaptability enhances their experience and understanding of the political process, it also limits the influx of new actors into the political arena (Lončar, Spasojević & Vučićević, 2022).

5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Serbian Parliament benefits from its proportional electoral system, achieving notable representativeness for political lists participating in elections. However, its social representation is skewed, favouring men, middle-aged individuals, highly educated residents of Belgrade, urban populations, and the upper classes. These biases persist across all political parties, indicating systemic rather than party-specific disparities.

Women occupy 94 seats in the current Parliament (38 %), reflecting an improvement in female representation. However, women remain underrepresented, with no significant differences between parties. While the average age of MPs is comparatively young at 48, slightly lower than the EU Parliament and the global average, middle-aged MPs dominate. Younger and older cohorts are underrepresented, and female MPs are concentrated in younger age groups, highlighting the persistent dominance of older men in Parliament.

In terms of education, Serbian MPs are significantly more qualified than the society they represent. While only 16 % of Serbia's population holds a university degree, 91% of MPs are university-educated. This high level of education is evenly distributed across genders and political lists. Geographically, the Parliament is heavily centralized, with exactly half of all MPs coming from Belgrade or Novi Sad. This overrepresentation of urban areas comes at the expense of villages and small towns, which are significantly underrepresented.

The class structure of the Parliament is highly homogeneous. Only 12 % of MPs do not belong to the Higher-Grade Service Class, with a marked overrepresentation of socio-cultural and managerial expertise compared to technical expertise. The absence of MPs from the unskilled worker class further underscores the lack of class diversity in the Parliament.

Recommendations for Electoral System Reforms:

1. Closed Electoral Lists with Preferential Voting

Maintain closed lists to ensure order-based seat allocation but allow voters to influence candidate selection through preferential voting. This change would encourage parties to nominate better candidates while giving voters more control over who represents them. Candidates, in turn, would be incentivized to engage with constituencies, become more accountable, and reduce dependence on party leadership.

2. Improved Geographical Representation

Instead of a single district, introduce multiple electoral districts to balance regional representation while maintaining proportionality. This could vary from several to 250 electoral districts, requiring parties to nominate candidates for specific districts. This would ensure better alignment between MPs and their constituencies.

3. Regulate MP Replacements to Protect Gender Representation

Gender quotas should be maintained, but when MPs resign, they should be replaced by a candidate of the same gender on the list from the same party. This measure would prevent the erosion of female representation through attrition.

Recommendations for Political Party Reforms:

4. Diversity in Candidate Selection

Parties should strive for greater gender and age diversity on their electoral lists. They should also implement equality measures wherever possible, including appointing leaders for parliamentary committees and other key positions.

5. Decentralization and Local Autonomy

Reduce centralization by granting local party branches more autonomy in selecting candidates for local parliaments and forming coalition agreements. This would help mitigate the current overrepresentation of urban elites.

6. Focus on Underrepresented Groups

Parties should actively include candidates from underrepresented classes and groups, such as those from rural areas or lower economic backgrounds. Building stronger connections with civil society organizations, trade unions, and agricultural communities could facilitate this effort.

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In the series **Who does (not) vote?** we investigate election turnout levels across the parameters gender, age, social class and education in European democracies.

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SERBIA: WHO DOES (NOT) HAVE A SEAT IN PARLIAMENT?



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