

Post-Election Statement

Italians vote under new electoral system in elections held in line with democratic traditions, say international observers

ROME, 5 March 2018 – The 4 March parliamentary elections in Italy were a vibrant display of competitive democracy in which voters could readily inform themselves about their political options and could freely cast their ballots, concluded international observers from the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly today following their first-ever election observation mission in the country. The elections offered voters a multitude of parties to choose from, and benefitted from extensive media coverage, with diverse and critical analysis of many aspects of the campaigns. In a welcome effort, concerns about ‘fake news’ were taken seriously by authorities and media companies during the campaign. On election day, time-consuming procedures resulted in some delays and long queues for voters.

“Italian voters were once again offered the opportunity to vote in democratic elections overall in line with international commitments,” said Margareta Cederfelt, Head of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly’s limited election observation mission. “While the election offered plenty of opportunities to engage in serious debate, migration topics seem to have played an outsized role during the campaign, and may have come at the expense of discussion on many of the other challenges facing society.”

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Parliamentary Assembly’s (OSCE PA) limited observation mission to the elections in Italy followed an invitation by the Italian Government. The invitation to observe was in line with commitments that all OSCE countries have undertaken. The mission, headed by Margareta Cederfelt (MP, Sweden), included parliamentarians from 19 OSCE countries. Following meetings with election officials, party representatives, and other experts including from the OSCE’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR), on election day observers visited some 190 polling stations in several cities and regions.

The political landscape in Italy is quite fractured, with personalities at times playing a more important role than ideology in some parties, said the observers. A broadly inclusive approach to candidate registration enabled a plethora of parties or movements to compete in the election, fielding more than 12,000 candidates in a transparent and inclusive process. Contrary to the 1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document, independent individuals are not eligible to stand for election, and can only be nominated by parties or movements.

The observer team noted that there appeared to be broad disillusionment by citizens with the functioning of politics in Italy – a concerning tendency previously noted in other European countries. Candidates particularly used digital means of campaigning, with social media playing an important role in voter outreach. Certain key divisive topics, such as immigration, played an outsized role in the campaign, and came at the expense of debate on other important issues facing the country, said the observers. A reported increase in cases of hate-speech was noted as an issue of concern. A few isolated incidents of violence during the campaign were noted, and the observers urged investigation, stressing that such actions have no place in political debate.

The election took place under a new electoral law that establishes a combination of majoritarian and proportional systems. While the legal framework is complex, consisting of dozens of laws and regulations, it appeared to be understood by practitioners and was generally professionally implemented. The observers concluded that the legal framework overall provides a solid basis for a

competitive process, founded on the respect for fundamental freedoms and equal treatment of contestants. One party stated that the new electoral system disadvantages parties that do not form coalitions. The inclusion in the new electoral legislation of quotas to promote more balanced gender representation was welcomed by the observers. The observers noted that the Ministry of Interior's election administration service benefits from significant experience in running democratic elections.

“The frequent changes to Italy's electoral system in recent decades appears more oriented towards the benefit of politicians than the public, and has created challenges for the administration of elections. Greater stability moving forward would be in the interests of the country overall,” said Cederfelt.

Legislation governing party campaign financing has been substantially amended since the last parliamentary elections, eliminating public funding. No reporting on financing is required prior to the elections, which observers said detracted from the intended transparency of public reporting on campaign spending. Voters should be able to inform themselves of parties' financial ties, the observers said.

Italy has a tradition of strong and independent journalism and a pluralistic media environment, providing candidates numerous outlets to convey their messages to voters through broadcast, print and online formats. Broadcast media are subject to strict regulation ensuring equitable treatment of electoral contestants. While debates between senior political contestants did not take place, which would have facilitated voters' comparisons, extensive in-depth interviews helped to inform voters. In a welcome effort, authorities took a number of steps, in co-operation with news outlets, to counteract 'fake news' and misinformation campaigns from impacting the campaign. Freedom of expression is supported by state authorities, including through police protection for some 20 journalists.

Commenting on election day, Ms. Cederfelt said that “Poll workers went to great efforts to facilitate voting yesterday, but at times faced significant challenges with the procedures, resulting in delays and long lines. The new security mechanisms are very welcome, but I hope that simplified procedures can be found to ensure consistency and efficiency.”

In the limited number of areas observed, the elections were generally well administered, however poll workers' knowledge of procedures appears to have varied throughout the country, and observers were not always granted access to polling stations. The ability for political parties to have representatives in polling stations provides an important measure of transparency for contestants, said the international observers. Strong anti-fraud counter-measures, including a unique ballot-numbering system were in place for the elections, yet observers noted that they were not consistently implemented on election day. While the high turnout indicates overall interest, some voters expressed confusion regarding voting procedures. Observer teams noted long queues in several regions, as officials worked to accommodate a high number of voters. Both observers and media reported on technical problems in a limited number of polling stations, related particularly to ballot printing and delivery.

The election observation mission of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly included parliamentarians from Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Portugal, Romania, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, the Netherlands, Russia and the United Kingdom. Following briefings with electoral authorities, political party representatives, journalists and analysts, on election day the observers visited a limited number of polling stations in several cities in Italy. The observers thank the authorities and people for their hospitality and co-operation. The OSCE PA observers look forward to the final report of the OSCE/ODIHR Election Assessment Mission deployed for the Italian elections.

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