

Kazakhstan's elections were technically well prepared, but took place in an environment lacking political pluralism, international observers say

ASTANA, 24 August 2026 – Kazakhstan's 23 August early parliamentary elections, while technically well prepared, took place in an environment lacking political pluralism. Political choice was reduced by the lack of distinct political alternatives, with all contesting parties supporting the incumbent President's policies, international observers said in a preliminary statement released today. The campaign was orderly and the contesting parties were provided with equal campaign conditions, but the new Adilet party had an undue advantage, the observers said.

Election-related laws and regulations, substantially revised close to the elections with limited public consultation, contain a number of provisions that do not align with international standards for democratic elections, including with respect to fundamental rights related to political participation, the statement says. Women remain significantly underrepresented. While voters had access to a number of media outlets, media pluralism remained limited, with concerns regarding restrictions on the media and pressure on journalists. The media monitored by the observers provided scarce editorial and analytical coverage of the elections, diminishing voters' ability to make an informed choice.

"After undertaking a constitutional reset of its electoral framework, Kazakhstan has held elections that provided an opportunity to see whether these changes opened space for healthy political competition," said Gábor Hajdu, OSCE Special Co-ordinator and Leader of the short-term observers. "Despite some positive aspects, however, there are few genuine opportunities for independent candidacies, limited space for civil society and independent media, and a lack of a level playing field consistent with OSCE commitments, including for women."

The elimination of the right to stand independently and the rule that candidates for the new 145-member Kurultai could only be nominated by political parties from their members limited political participation and electoral competitiveness. The legal framework gives political parties broad discretion and control over the allocation and implementation of mandates, contrary to OSCE commitments and international standards.

The newly registered Adilet party merged with the former ruling Amanat party and dominated the campaign, benefiting from the organizational structures, networks and resources inherited from Amanat. The observers received credible reports of instances of the misuse of public resources, including the involvement of public sector employees in mobilization to attend campaign events and municipal administrations' links to campaign events of several

political parties. Overall, Adilet had an undue advantage that blurred the line between state and party.

The election campaign and election day were generally calm and orderly. On election day, while the international observers assessed the opening and voting process as overwhelmingly in line with procedures, marked differences between voter activity observed and official turnout data, as well as significant procedural violations during the vote count, raised questions about the integrity of the voter turnout reporting and the counting process.

The Central Election Commission (CEC) held regular live-streamed sessions attended by most stakeholders and the media; in most sessions observed by the ODIHR election observation mission, decisions were adopted unanimously without substantive deliberations, reducing the transparency of the decision-making process. Positively, the election administration enjoyed the confidence of contesting parties, carried out an extensive voter information campaign, and made considerable efforts to ensure accessibility of polling stations and facilitate the participation of persons with disabilities.

The media market is state-dominated through direct ownership and non-transparent budgetary subsidies. These factors, along with reported concerns of state influence on editorial content constrict media pluralism, despite the large number of registered outlets. Long-standing concerns about arrests and pressure on independent journalists generate pervasive self-censorship. The constitutional guarantees for freedom of expression are constrained by several criminal and administrative provisions and their implementation, including provisions regarding the “deliberate dissemination of false information”. In general, the broadcasters and online media monitored by the ODIHR mission, covered all contestants, mostly in a neutral tone, but the combined coverage of contestants was less than that of public authorities. The monitored broadcasters and online media provided limited reporting on campaign activities and lacked analytical news or in-depth editorial coverage, diminishing voters’ ability to make an informed choice.

“Free and fair elections and independent media are deeply interconnected. Without an inclusive, credible and pluralistic media environment, political participation and representation are fundamentally limited, especially during elections,” said Sevilay Çelenk, Head of the PACE observer delegation. “The newly elected Kurultai should foster a genuinely pluralistic mainstream media environment that ensures all voices and perspectives from across society in Kazakhstan are heard and represented. By enabling informed debate and reflecting the full range of society’s views, independent media are essential to building and sustaining just and democratic societies and promoting lasting pluralism.”

Social networks played an important role in the campaign. The ODIHR mission’s social media monitoring revealed online communication by parties and candidates that was predominantly positive and policy-oriented, with a few instances of confrontational discourse, although the mission heard concerns that broadly formulated restrictions on and

removal of online content, could lead to the suppression of political expression and critical voices.

Women remain significantly under-represented in political and public life; all political parties have women's organizations, although only one party is led by a woman. Women accounted for 172 of the 545 candidates (31.5 per cent) while their participation in the campaign remained limited and uneven across regions.

“While the electoral law contains a cumulative 30-per cent candidate quota for women, youth and persons with disabilities, unfortunately it still falls short of international standards and doesn't effectively address the underlying issue,” said Lucija Tacer Perlin, Head of the OSCE PA observer delegation. “Meaningful inclusion means real influence over the allocation of mandates and genuine opportunities to compete.”

The 2026 changes to campaign finance rules increased the ceilings for contributions and expenditure. Prior ODIHR and Council of Europe's Group of States Against Corruption recommendations on campaign finance reporting and oversight remain unaddressed. Positively, a CEC resolution stipulated publication of each party's campaign finance information twice prior to election day, but the reduced scope of information provided did not allow for meaningful public scrutiny. The CEC resolution envisages final reports from contestants after the elections. The oversight mechanism lacks independent verification or fact-finding, which limits the scope and effectiveness of oversight.

The broadly and vaguely formulated 2026 amendments expanding the foreign funding prohibition to any election-related activities were interpreted by the authorities in conflicting ways, which created undue impediments for citizen observers, contrary to OSCE commitments, and rendered some reluctant to observe. Nevertheless, several organizations observed on election day.

“We had the opportunity to observe the work of election commissions at all levels, and saw that preparations were conducted professionally and enjoyed the confidence of the contesting parties,” said Ambassador Vincent Piket, Head of the ODIHR election observation mission. “On the other hand, certain significant shortcomings observed on election day raised concerns, demonstrating a clear need for improvements in line with prior ODIHR recommendations.”