

Russian elections more transparent, but challenges to democratic commitments remain, international election observers say

MOSCOW, 19 September 2016 – The 18 September State Duma elections were transparently administered by the Central Election Commission, but challenges to democratic commitments remain. The legal framework can serve as an adequate basis for elections, but the electoral environment was negatively affected by restrictions to fundamental freedoms and political rights, firmly controlled media and a tightening grip on civil society, the international observers concluded in a preliminary statement released today.

The liberalization of the party registration process has yet to result in distinct political alternatives, and the campaign was low-key. Local authorities did not always treat contestants equally, and instances of misuse of administrative resources were noted, the statement says. Election day generally proceeded in an orderly manner, but numerous procedural irregularities were noted during counting. The Central Election Commission (CEC) reacted to the reported irregularities, including ballot box stuffing and carousel voting, and announced preliminary voter turnout at 48 per cent.

“The improved transparency and trust we have seen in the election administration are important steps, yet legal restrictions on basic rights continue to be a problem,” said Ilkka Kanerva, Special Coordinator and leader of the short-term OSCE observer mission. “If Russia is to live up to its democratic commitments, greater space is needed for debate and civic engagement.”

The CEC, under new leadership, worked in a transparent and professional manner, earning widespread confidence among stakeholders. A number of lower-level commissions lacked impartiality and independence, and their performance was criticized, including by the CEC itself. There was general confidence in the accuracy of voter registration, the observers said.

Since the 2011 State Duma elections, the electoral system has been modified from proportional to mixed, the threshold parties must pass to win seats in the parliament was lowered, and candidates were allowed to run as independents, the statement says. The legal framework is overly complex and micro-regulates the process, including through unnecessary restrictions on candidate registration, the formation of party blocks, campaigning, the media and citizen observation.

“Ella Pamfilova’s leadership at the Central Election Commission has given election stakeholders confidence that the elections can be well run, yet the low-key campaign shows an overall lack of engagement,” said Marietta Tidei, Head of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly delegation. “I hope that we will soon see more political alternatives engaging the public in proper debate.”

The number of political parties increased considerably after the 2011 elections, when the party-registration process was liberalized, but some opposition initiatives were not registered. While 14 parties ran countrywide and more than 6,500 candidates were registered, the inclusiveness of the candidate registration process was diminished by limitations on the right to stand and excessive registration requirements, particularly for independent candidates.

The campaign was low-key overall, with the ruling party generally being the most visible. Patriotism was a notable feature of the campaign discourse. The major topics of the campaign were the socio-economic situation, political stability and foreign policy issues. The four parliamentary parties continued to dominate the political landscape, but did not offer clear political alternatives, which limited voters' choice, the observers said.

In a number of regions, administrative resources were misused for campaign purposes, and the procedure for providing notification ahead of campaign events was selectively applied by local authorities to effectively deny or place conditions on granting contestants permission to hold rallies. There were also attempts by local state structures to influence voter choice and to pressure them into voting for the governing party, the statement says. The CEC publicly highlighted reports of such violations in nearly half of the federal subjects.

"Election day was orderly overall, but the long-term observation showed that challenges to democratic commitments remain, especially with regard to the media, candidate registration and legal framework," said Ambassador Jan Petersen, Head of the OSCE/ODIHR long-term election observation mission. "In our final report we will address specific shortcomings and I hope that the authorities take serious steps to improve the electoral process."

The free airtime programming provided voters with access to views of contesting parties and offered some interactive discussions. However, the OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission's media monitoring results showed that contestants did not receive equitable media coverage, with the ruling party getting more editorial coverage than other contestants. The vast majority of editorial coverage on national channels – 70 to 90 per cent – was dedicated to the president and governmental officials. Coupled with legal restrictions on campaigning in the media and self-censorship encouraged by the restrictive legal and regulatory framework, this gave undue advantage to the ruling party and limited voters' ability to make a fully informed choice.

The CEC received 1,896 'applications' concerning alleged violations of electoral legislation, and reviewed 12 complaints in collegial and transparent sessions and in observance of due process guarantees. All other complaints were considered by individual commission members in a process lacking transparency. Most complaints lodged with lower level commissions and district courts related to candidate registration, campaign activities and media-related issues. In most of the cases observed by the OSCE/ODIHR observers, the adjudication of complaints was in line with the required procedures and established deadlines.

OSCE/ODIHR and OSCE Parliamentary Assembly observers could observe without restrictions. Amendments from April 2016 introduced unduly restrictive accreditation rules for party and media representatives, and the legislation still does not provide for non-party citizen observation.

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