

## **Lack of genuine political alternatives in a restricted environment characterized Azerbaijan's presidential election, international observers say**

BAKU, 8 February 2024 – This was the first election to be held throughout the internationally recognized territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan, an issue that dominated the campaign and was echoed in public sentiment. While preparations for the election were efficient and professional, it lacked genuine pluralism and critical voices were continuously stifled. Longstanding restrictions on freedoms of association and expression were reinforced by recent legal amendments and resulted in legislation not in line with international democratic standards, international observers said in a [statement](#) today.

The joint observation mission from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA) concluded that while the election code is detailed and regulates all aspects of the electoral process, recent amendments left previous ODIHR recommendations unaddressed.

"We have witnessed a historic moment in Azerbaijan's sovereignty and territorial integrity, in this first presidential election held across the entire territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan since independence," said Artur Gerasymov, Special Co-ordinator and leader of the OSCE short-term observers. "The early presidential election was held in a restrictive environment, and while it was efficiently prepared, critical voices and political alternatives were largely absent. Regrettably, previous recommendations to bring the legal framework closer in line with international standards for democratic elections have remained unaddressed, and numerous restrictions in law and practice continue to exist."

The campaign remained low key throughout, lacked any meaningful public engagement and was not competitive. While six other candidates participated in the campaign, none of them convincingly challenged the incumbent president's policies in their campaigns, leaving voters without any genuine alternative. Civil society and opposition representatives noted that the legal framework and its implementation makes it difficult to enjoy their right to freedom of peaceful assembly and to hold public gatherings, both in the run-up to the election and outside the campaign period.

While the equal treatment of women and men is enshrined in law, there are no specific measures to promote women's participation and women remain underrepresented in all aspects of public and political life. While women are well represented at the local level, no woman has run in a presidential election since 2013.

"In observing this election, I have noticed the strong absence of an engaged and informative public campaign between political alternatives, while the media environment remained extremely constrained, leaving voters without the possibility to meaningfully inform themselves about the options on voting day," said Daniela De Ridder, Head of the OSCE PA delegation. "Women remain vastly under-represented in political life, although they shoulder the majority of the organizational work on election day. This demonstrates the need to introduce laws that guarantee equal participation in politics."

Some 6.5 million voters were registered for yesterday's election. Election day was calm and orderly overall but the observers noted significant shortcomings, mainly due to issues of secrecy of the vote, a lack of safeguards against multiple voting, indications of ballot box stuffing, and seemingly identical signatures on the voter lists. This raised serious questions about whether ballots were counted and

reported honestly. Almost 80 per cent of the polling stations observed failed to provide independent access for disabled voters.

Highly restrictive media legislation as well as recent arrests of critical journalists have hindered the media from operating freely and led to widespread self-censorship, limiting the scope for independent journalism and critical debate. Minimal coverage of the candidates and campaign reduced the opportunity for voters to learn about the contestants and their programmes in order to make an informed choice on election day.

“In this important election for the country, none of the candidates challenged the incumbent convincingly, and some opposition parties did not take part at all, claiming a lack of adequate democratic conditions,” said Eoghan Murphy, who headed ODIHR’s election observation mission. “While preparations for the election were efficient and professional, including the training of precinct commissioners, on election day important safeguards were often disregarded and we observed substantial procedural errors throughout the day.”

The international election observation mission to the early presidential election in Azerbaijan totalled 335 observers from 42 countries, comprising 256 ODIHR-deployed experts and long-term and short-term observers, and 79 from the OSCE PA.

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