

Bulgaria's competitive parliamentary elections well run, but impacted by media shortcomings and significant ruling-party advantage, international observers say

SOFIA, 5 April 2021 –Bulgaria's parliamentary elections were competitive and efficiently run despite the difficult circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and fundamental freedoms were respected. However, the massive use of state resources gave the ruling party a significant advantage, and a lack of editorial diversity was of concern, international observers said in a [statement](#) today.

The joint observation mission from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA), and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) concluded that while the legal framework is adequate for holding democratic elections, key long-standing recommendations to bring election legislation in line with international standards and good practice still need to be addressed. Observers also noted that recent amendments to election legislation, which included the use of machine voting, were adopted without meaningful consultation with relevant stakeholders.

“These elections saw strong competition among an array of parties, who were able to freely reach out to the electorate,” said Artur Gerasymov, special co-ordinator and leader of the OSCE short-term observers. “The media environment remains concerning, however. In particular, editorial diversity and analytical coverage, crucial for voters to make an informed choice, is largely lacking.”

The absence of investigative or analytical media reporting, together with political advertising in the guise of news, limited the ability of voters to make an informed choice. While public media is legally required to remain neutral and objective, public television offered little coverage of the political parties, but at the same time reported the activities of senior government officials in detail. Pressure on investigative reporters and a lack of investigation into attacks on journalists contributed to an atmosphere of self-censorship.

The ruling party gained a significant amount of exposure through a number of state investments related to COVID-19 pandemic and infrastructure projects that were launched during the election campaign. The international observers noted with concern the widespread practices of vote buying attempted in economically and socially disadvantaged communities.

“The long-term observers and many others informed the Assembly's observation delegation about some long-standing problems, such as allegations of vote-buying, ‘controlled’ voting, and voter intimidation, attempted particularly among economically and socially vulnerable groups,” said Alfred Heer, Head of the PACE delegation. “The Assembly's delegation expects the relevant Bulgarian authorities to undertake proper investigations regarding such serious cases and to be informed about the results in due course. This should take place before the next nationwide elections later this year in order to restore confidence in the democratic election process.” The Assembly, through its monitoring procedure, and the Venice Commission remain ready to cooperate with Bulgaria to improve its legal framework and electoral practices.

More than 6.7 million voters were registered to vote in yesterday's parliamentary elections. The management of the COVID-19 pandemic dominated much of the campaign, which largely focused on personalities rather than political platforms. The tone of the campaign became confrontational at times, with intolerant rhetoric noted on occasion, including against Roma communities.

On election day itself, the voting process appeared transparent and machine voting was carried out efficiently, although poorly positioned voting machines and some procedural shortcomings did not

always guarantee the secrecy of the vote. The large number of voters inside and outside the polling stations led to overcrowding in some places.

“The decision of the Bulgarian authorities to hold elections despite the challenges of COVID times, and its efforts to secure an inclusive process while ensuring the safety of all voters and election administrators, are highly commendable. I applaud the country’s determination to exercise this fundamental aspect of democracy despite the many hurdles the pandemic presents,” said Pascal Allizard, head of the OSCE PA delegation. “One important area of concern I would like to mention here is that while voter lists generally enjoy the confidence of the public, the possibility to be added to the voter list on the day of the election without strong safeguards is highly problematic.”

Public disillusionment and political polarisation pervaded the run-up to the election, which took place following prolonged street protests amidst allegations of corruption, a lack of respect for the rule of law, and the weakening of democracy.

“The lack of trust in politicians and public institutions more generally became increasingly clear in the course of the election campaign,” said Corien Jonker, who headed the ODIHR limited election observation mission. “But public trust is the beating heart of democracy. An accountable government, a vibrant civil society, and independent free media are all vital to rebuild trust not just in individual politicians, but in the entire system.”

The international election observation mission to the parliamentary elections in Bulgaria totalled 92 observers from 32 countries, made up of 27 ODIHR-deployed experts and long-term observers, 44 parliamentarians and staff from the OSCE PA, and 21 from PACE.

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