

## **Fundamental freedoms generally respected in competitive Bulgarian elections, but shortcomings in media environment, lack of issue-driven campaign fail to engage voters, international observers say**

SOFIA, 12 July 2021 – Bulgaria’s early parliamentary elections were competitive and fundamental freedoms were generally respected, international observers said in a statement today. The campaign environment was dominated by mutual accusations of corruption between the former ruling party and the provisional government, as well as by efforts by law-enforcement to curb vote-buying, the statement says.

The elections were conducted under a legal framework which, though overall adequate, was substantially revised shortly before the elections, straining electoral preparations and affecting legal certainty, the observers said. The technical aspects of the elections were managed efficiently, despite the compressed timeframe, the COVID-19 pandemic and the late adoption of some important procedural regulations.

“These elections have taken place amid persistent public mistrust in the political establishment, mostly stemming from widespread allegations of corruption and an unsuccessful attempt to form a government following the elections in April,” said Artur Gerasymov, Special Co-ordinator and leader of the OSCE short-term observers. “Moreover, political influence and the high concentration of media ownership had a negative effect on editorial policies and on media pluralism overall. The lack of comprehensive journalistic reporting limited voters’ ability to make an informed choice.”

The activities of the provisional government and of the former ruling part, GERB, dominated media coverage, overshadowing that of the campaign and of other contestants. The lack of investigation of attacks on journalists, coupled with the criminalization of defamation, contributes to self-censorship.

“Yesterday’s process in polling stations was well organized, but an election is not to be assessed by election day alone. The recent significant amendments, introduced very quickly and just a short time before the elections, brought mandatory machine voting, without carrying out a study on its use in the April 4 elections,” said Alfred Heer, Head of the delegation from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE). “While the use of new technologies in electoral processes can be considered as a positive development, nevertheless the PACE delegation is convinced that new technologies alone cannot restore Bulgarians’ trust in a truly democratic electoral process and cannot, on their own, exclude cases of political corruption, scandals and other long-standing problems. The Assembly, though its monitoring procedure, and the Venice Commission remain ready to co-operate with Bulgaria to improve the legal framework and electoral practices.”

Amendments to election laws in May introduced mandatory machine voting for most voters, established a new Central Election Commission (CEC), and removed limitations on establishing polling stations abroad. The change to voting only with voting machines at

polling stations with at least 300 registered voters, both in-country and abroad, was introduced as an effort to reduce the opportunity for electoral malfeasance, including vote-buying.

There were concerns, however, that the lack of timely and comprehensive voter education on machine voting might have dissuaded some elderly voters and others with limited computer literacy from voting. While machine-printed result sheets served as official results, the law does not include a mechanism for verifying the machine tallies, thus affecting transparency.

In the polling stations visited on election day, voting was generally in line with prescribed procedures. Machine voting was generally uninterrupted, with malfunctions requiring the voting to continue with the use of paper ballots reported in only 0.5 percent of polling stations.

“Despite the short timeframe for preparations, the establishment of a new Central Election Commission and the expanded use of voting machines, the elections were generally well administered,” said Elona Gjebrea Hoxha, Head of the delegation from the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. “However, with the broadened use of these technologies, there will also be a need for further voter education, in order to increase proficiency and confidence in election voting technology.”

“Responding to long-standing allegations of vote-buying, a widespread but elusive problem, has received unprecedented government attention, with the Minister of Interior providing public updates on the cases of vote-buying under investigation.” said Tana de Zulueta, Head of the limited election observation mission from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. “At the same time, legislative shortcomings and limited reporting requirements and enforcement reduced the transparency and accountability of campaign finance.”

In a generally inclusive process, the election administration registered some 5,086 candidates from 23 parties and coalitions, and 29 per cent of candidates were women. Although the election administration carried out its duties adequately and met most legal deadlines, there were some concerns that the CEC’s partisan composition and lack of institutional capacity to match its legal powers affected efficient decision-making on contentious issues.