

Hungary's parliamentary elections well-run and offered distinct alternatives but undermined by absence of level playing field, international observers say

BUDAPEST, 4 April 2022 – Hungary's parliamentary elections offered voters distinct alternatives and were well run, but while competitive, the process was marred by the pervasive overlapping of government and ruling coalition's messaging that blurred the line between state and party, as well as by media bias and opaque campaign funding, 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) found that the legal framework forms an adequate basis for democratic elections to be held, but a number of key aspects fall short of international standards. Election day passed peacefully, with observers assessing the process as well-organized, orderly, and smooth. At the same time, the secrecy of the vote was often compromised, particularly in overcrowded polling stations.

The legal framework for the referendum held on the same day as the elections was largely inadequate for a democratic process and did not provide equal opportunities for referendum campaigns. Voters were not provided with objective and balanced information on the choices they had and their binding effect, which goes against established international good practice.

Following an inclusive candidate registration process, candidates were largely able to campaign freely. However, the campaign itself was characterised by a pervasive overlap between the ruling coalition's campaign messages and the government's information campaigns, amplifying the advantage of the ruling coalition and blurring the line between state and party. In a highly negative campaign, the war caused by the Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine moved to the top of the agenda, with both the ruling and opposition parties using the situation to launch personal attacks.

"For voters to be able to make an informed choice, it is fundamental that contestants have equal access to the media and run informative campaigns rather than focus on polarizing messaging and personal attacks, as has unfortunately been observed here," said Kari Henriksen, special co-ordinator and leader of the short-term OSCE observer mission. "We also observed that women were underrepresented in the campaign, as well as in political life overall. I would like to encourage political parties to include more women at all levels, and make sure they participate in developing the political decisions that have such an influence on their lives."

Election preparations were managed professionally and efficiently. The election administration, however, did not enjoy the full trust of all candidates. Some 8.2 million people were registered to vote. While political parties and civil society expressed confidence in the accuracy of the voter register, recent legislation weakened important safeguards, and different rules for out-of-country voting undermined the principle of equal voting rights for all.

"It was good to see that election day was so well managed. However, we also see many flaws in the election process, with numerous prior recommendations to strengthen legislation still unaddressed," Mark Pritchard said. "I encourage the incoming government to be more ambitious in improving its election legislation, at the very least by allowing citizens to engage in independent election observation. That would do much to improve the trust in the election process."

The transparency and accountability of campaign finance were adversely affected by the lack of disclosure requirements, extensive, unregulated spending through third parties and limited enforcement of the regulatory framework. At the same time, the observation mission noted that widespread government advertisement campaigns paid from the state budget reinforced the main

ruling party campaign messages, providing an undue advantage. While some election disputes were properly handled, in many cases no effective legal remedy was provided.

Hungary's media is sharply divided in an increasingly concentrated market. Ahead of the elections, biased and unbalanced news coverage permeated the public and many private media outlets, mostly to the benefit of the ruling party. Voters' ability to make an informed choice was limited by this as well as by the absence of debate between the main contestants.

"While it was good to see that yesterday went smoothly in most polling stations across the country, an election is far more than voting day," said Jillian Stirk, head of the ODIHR election observation mission. "Numerous shortcomings already became clear in the period running up to the vote, from the biased media through to the all-pervasive linkage of state and party. I very much hope that the government takes the opportunity offered by the presence of our observation team to work towards improving the democratic process for the future of all citizens."

The international election observation mission to the Hungarian parliamentary elections and referendum totalled 312 observers from 45 countries, consisting of 221 ODIHR-deployed experts and long-term and short-term observers, and 91 parliamentarians and staff from the OSCE PA.

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