



PRESS RELEASE

INTERNATIONAL ELECTION OBSERVATION MISSION

Kazakh election flawed despite some administrative improvements

ASTANA, 5 December 2005 – Despite some improvements in the election administration prior to election day, the 4 December presidential election in Kazakhstan did not meet a number of OSCE commitments and other international standards for democratic election. While candidate registration was mostly inclusive and gave voters a choice, undue restrictions on campaigning, harassment of campaign staff and persistent and numerous cases of intimidation by the authorities, limited the possibility for a meaningful competition.

These are the preliminary conclusions of the International Election Observation Mission for the presidential election. Some 460 observers from 43 countries observed the election day in a joint undertaking of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the Parliamentary Assemblies of the OSCE and Council of Europe, and the European Parliament.

The voting was generally calm and peaceful, but the process deteriorated during the count, which was viewed as bad or very bad in one out of four counts observed. Unauthorised persons interfering in polling stations, cases of multiple voting, ballot box stuffing and pressure on students to vote were observed during voting and during the count, observers saw tampering with result protocols and a wide range of procedural violations.

"Regrettably, despite some efforts which were undertaken to improve the process, the authorities did not exhibit sufficient political will to hold a genuinely good election that is in line with international standards, said Bruce George, President emeritus of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and the Special Co-ordinator for the short-term observers.

State media largely met their legal obligations to provide free airtime to candidates but overall media bias in favour of the incumbent and legal restrictions on freedom of expression and dissemination of information diminished the possibility for electors to make a fully informed choice. Statements by the authorities alleging plans for violent actions by the opposition increased tension.

The Head of the delegation from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Tadeusz Iwinski, said: "The active participation clearly shows the interest and hopes of the Kazakh people in the development of a democratic society. However, the high attendance caused in some cases overcrowding in polling stations hindered the voting process and the secrecy of the vote."

Struan Stevenson, Head of the European Parliament delegation added: "We witnessed some improvements in the electoral process and were encouraged by these signs. Nevertheless we are of the view that much work remains to be done if Kazakhstan's embryonic democracy is to grow and mature."

The Central Election Commission administered the election in a generally transparent manner, taking into account a number of previous ODIHR recommendations regarding election administration. However, none of the 2004 ODIHR's recommendations suggesting changes to existing election legislation has been implemented to date.

Ambassador Audrey Glover, Head of the OSCE/ODIHR's long-term observation mission, expressed

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regret that the Kazakh authorities did not provide “a level playing field for a democratic election, whereby the candidates enjoyed equal treatment and opportunities to campaign so that voters could make an informed choice. This is despite assurances from the president that the election would be free and fair.”

The observation mission noted positive elements of the pre-election process, including a change in the electronic voting systems, which has made it more user-friendly. A debate among presidential candidates was broadcast live, although the incumbent chose not to participate and thereby reducing the value of the event for the electorate.

Shortcomings included restrictions on campaigning; meeting and advertising space and disruption of campaign events. The application of the law on protection of the honour and dignity of candidates limited political discourse and freedom of expression. There was evidence of pressure exerted on students to vote in favour of the incumbent and the certification and testing of the electronic voting system was non-transparent, undermining public confidence in the system.