

Lack of real competition and limitations to fundamental freedoms left voters without genuine choice in Kazakhstan's parliamentary elections, international observers say

NUR-SULTAN, 11 January 2021 – While preparations for Kazakhstan's parliamentary elections were efficiently run, an uncompetitive campaign and systemic de facto limitations on constitutionally guaranteed fundamental freedoms left voters without genuine choice, thus missing an opportunity to pilot the announced political reforms, international observers to the parliamentary elections said in a [statement](#) today.

The observation mission, a joint undertaking of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA), found the legal framework not yet conducive to holding elections in line with OSCE commitments for democratic elections, despite a number of revisions introduced since the country's last parliamentary elections. Numerous long-standing recommendations on issues ranging from fundamental freedoms through to eligibility to vote and stand for elections, voter registration, and the publication of election results, remain to be addressed.

"We welcome the efficient organization of the elections, especially given the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic which was rightfully not allowed to impact the exercise of voting," said Kristian Vigenin, Special Co-ordinator and leader of the short-term OSCE observer mission. "On the other hand, we remain concerned about the political environment elections took place in. OSCE principles call for unhindered pluralism and a flourishing, free and vibrant civil society: our hope is that the "listening state" concept promoted by the President will truly enable this to happen and that all citizens' voices will be valued."

Some 12 million voters were registered to take part in yesterday's elections. Preparations for the election were efficiently managed by the election commissions in line with legal deadlines. Sessions of the central election commission were open to party representatives and observers, however, decisions were made ahead of formal sessions. The appointment and composition of commissions at all levels raised concerns about their independence. Election day was generally calm but was tarnished by concerted measures to prevent some domestic observers from an effective observation.

There are still major barriers to freedom of association and there are few political options, with no new parties registered since 2013. The political landscape is heavily dominated by the ruling party, and the distinction between party and government is often blurred. As all political parties contesting the elections supported the policies of the ruling party, the campaign was not competitive, and voters had no genuine political alternatives to choose from.

Curbs on the freedom of association, of assembly and of expression had a negative impact on campaign activities, which remained low key in the run-up to election day. While public debate is shifting online, providing some additional space for a wider range of opinions, national legislation continues to undermine the rights to freedom of expression and access to information.

"Long-standing and systemic shortcomings with regard to respect of fundamental freedoms are of significant concern and restrict the political space," said Jarosław Marcin Domański, Head of the ODIHR limited election observation mission. "An election can only be truly democratic when voters have real political options to choose between, and the voice of civil society is heard and appreciated."

The international election observation mission to the parliamentary elections in Kazakhstan totalled 48 observers from 20 countries, including 41 ODIHR-deployed experts and long-term observers, and 7 parliamentarians and staff from the OSCE PA.

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