

## **Kazakhstan's Parliamentary Elections Offered Voters Increased Choice, although Limitations on Fundamental Freedoms and Participation Remain, International Observers Say**

ASTANA, 20 March 2023 – The 19 March early parliamentary elections were held in the context of reforms introduced to bring Kazakhstan closer to holding elections in line with international standards and OSCE commitments, as legal amendments addressed several previous recommendations and provided increased choice for voters. However, limits on the exercise of fundamental freedoms remain, and some political groups continued to be prevented from participation as parties in elections. Further changes to the legal framework are needed to provide a sufficient basis for conducting democratic elections, the international observers said in a statement released today.

While the elections introduced elements of competitiveness to the political arena, diverse administrative obstacles negatively affected the equality of campaign opportunities for some self-nominated candidates, and the practice of deregistration created uncertainty for candidates over their continued participation in the contest.

“Democracy is a process that requires constant attention and dedication. We have noted some welcome improvements, including related to election laws, but Kazakhstan will only achieve the stated political goal of democratic development if far reaching reforms continue,” said Irene Charalambides, OSCE Special Co-ordinator and Leader of the short-term observers. “In particular, greater attention to protecting everyone’s fundamental freedoms is needed. Most notably, the restrictive media space and limited campaign coverage did not match candidates’ efforts to engage in a more dynamic contest.”

Overall, contestants campaigned actively and freely. Party platforms and messages addressed a wide range of social and economic issues but were generally supportive of the president’s reform agenda. The campaign was more dynamic and generated higher engagement in the majoritarian contests in the main cities, as well as online, with some self-nominated candidates offering alternative programmes. Most television channels monitored provided equitable, but only superficial coverage of the campaign activities of political parties in one joint news item. This, combined with the limited news, investigative and analytical coverage did not facilitate voters’ ability to make an informed choice.

“The increased competition, particularly with self-nominated candidates, is a significant development. However, legal and practical hurdles continue to detract from a fully open race among equals,” said Reinhold Lopatka, Leader of the delegation from the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. “In the future, the publication of results for each polling station will be important for improved transparency and public confidence.”

Prior ODIHR recommendations related to fundamental freedoms of peaceful assembly, of expression and of the media have yet to be implemented. Undue administrative hurdles, broad discretionary powers during the party registration process and a lack of judicial remedy all remain of concern. Freedom of expression and the media, guaranteed by the Constitution, are undermined by a restrictive legal framework, which deters independent critical reporting and contributes to widespread self-censorship.

“Recently, the registration requirements for political parties were eased, partly addressing a previous ODIHR recommendation,” said Eoghan Murphy, Head of the election observation mission from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. “Still, the fact that there are those who continue to be prevented from participating in elections as political parties remains of concern and is not in line with international standards for democratic elections. On election day, which was calm, with voting organized in a smooth manner, significant procedural irregularities were observed during the counting and tabulation process.”

The electoral preparations were administered efficiently, and the Central Election Commission held regular live-streamed sessions and published its decisions promptly. However, the fact that outcomes were discussed in advance of formal sessions detracted from the transparency of the decision-making process. Several welcome initiatives to facilitate access for persons with disabilities to the electoral process were implemented. The observers noted concerns about the impartiality and independence of the work of lower-level election commissions, based on the perception of a prevalence of members of *Amanat* in their composition.

While voting was organized in a smooth manner overall, significant procedural irregularities were observed during counting and tabulation and important safeguards were often disregarded, undermining the transparency of the process. Observers consistently noted discrepancies between the number of voters casting their ballots and the officially reported preliminary turnout figures.

Women remain underrepresented, and measures to promote women’s participation in public and political life are limited. Women made up 29 per cent of the candidates in the proportional contest and 20 per cent in the majoritarian ones. Gender issues did not notably feature in the campaign and, while a number of well-known women stood as self-nominated candidates, party attempts to promote prominent women candidates were limited.

Overall, the accreditation of citizen and international observers was inclusive, although meaningful observation was not always ensured, due to restrictions during the counting and tabulation processes.