

Montenegro's parliamentary elections were competitive and efficiently managed, but abuse of state resources gave ruling party an unfair advantage, international observers say

PODGORICA, 31 August 2020 – While Montenegro's parliamentary elections were managed transparently and efficiently, the widespread abuse of office and state resources gave the ruling party an undue advantage against the backdrop of an intensely polarized debate over issues of church and national identity, 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), concluded that while the elections were competitive, the ruling party profited unjustifiably through various forms of misuse of office and state resources and dominant press coverage. The president and other high-ranking officials were extensively involved in the campaign, blurring the line between the state and the ruling party.

"This was a hard-fought campaign, but the ruling party benefited from an uneven playing field. COVID's impact on the campaign and yesterday on election day was undeniably strong, but even this took a back seat to the major debates related to church and national identity," said OSCE PA Vice-President Margareta Cederfelt, who is special co-ordinator and leader of the OSCE short-term observers.

A total of 540,026 voters were registered to vote in yesterday's early parliamentary elections. The legal framework generally allows democratic elections to take place, but needs to be improved, as legislative gaps and ambiguities undermine legal certainty and make it easy to sidestep the rules. Election day was orderly and the process was generally transparent and well administered, while health protocols were not implemented consistently.

The campaign was peaceful despite a frequently confrontational tone, and in the face of health restrictions candidates were still able to reach out to the voters and convey their messages via online and social media, campaign busses and small gatherings. At the same time, the fact that campaign coverage footage was overwhelmingly produced by the candidates themselves, together with the lack of independent editorial coverage, lowered the quality of information available to voters. More generally, dependence of the media on politically affiliated business interests limits editorial autonomy and media pluralism.

Yesterday's elections took place amid concerns over patchy compliance with the constitution. Not only were the elections called early without shortening the parliament's mandate, but the pandemic-related restrictions on fundamental freedoms, including a ban on public gatherings and political rallies, were introduced without the declaration of a state of emergency by parliament. Since the last elections there were criminal proceedings and arrests of several MPs although their parliamentary immunity had not been removed, contrary to both national legislation and international standards.

"It is most regrettable that the gaps in the legislation and lack of independent media scrutiny make the misuse of office and state resources possible," said Tamás Meszerics, head of ODIHR's limited election observation mission. "Strong political will is needed across the political spectrum to improve the law and practice of elections through an inclusive reform process."

The international election observation mission for the parliamentary elections in Montenegro totalled 30 observers from 19 countries, composed of 25 ODIHR-deployed experts and long-term observers, and 5 parliamentarians and staff from the OSCE PA.

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