

Poland's parliamentary elections were competitive but marked by misuse of public resources and public media bias, international observers say

WARSAW, 16 October 2023 – Poland's parliamentary elections were characterized by record high voter participation with a wide choice of political options and candidates able to campaign freely, but the campaign was tarnished by notable overlap between the ruling party's messages and government information campaigns. Together with distorted and openly partisan coverage by the public broadcaster, this provided a clear advantage to the ruling party, undermining the democratic separation of state and party, international observers said in a [statement](#) today.

Yesterday's elections took place in a highly polarised atmosphere and were regarded by many as critical to Poland's democratic future. The joint observation mission from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA) and Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly (PACE), found that the legal framework provided a sufficient basis to hold democratic elections. While recent legal amendments incorporated some previous recommendations made by ODIHR, their adoption occurred shortly before the elections and without meaningful public consultation.

"This Sunday's parliamentary elections, while offering Polish voters different political alternatives, took place in a complex and polarized political environment," said Special Co-ordinator Pia Kauma. "This translated into a campaign dominated by a highly confrontational tone, with regular use of inflammatory rhetoric and personal attacks against the main party leaders."

Over 29 million voters were registered for yesterday's elections, including over 600,000 who applied to vote abroad. The national election commission prepared for the elections efficiently and despite some questions being raised about their impartiality, generally enjoyed public trust. All sessions were closed to the public, resulting in a lack of transparency in their decision-making process. Election day itself was calm, and the process was efficient and well organized in the polling stations visited by observers. However, the secrecy of the vote was frequently compromised by overcrowding, voting booths not being spacious enough to conceal large ballots, and voters marking ballots outside the booths. While concerns about independence of the judiciary remain, the handling of election-related cases by the Supreme Court was transparent and supported greater observer participation.

"We witnessed a polarized campaign environment where heightened rhetoric, recent changes to the legal electoral framework and serious concerns over the judicial system undermined citizens' trust in the institutions," said Azadeh Rojhan, alternate head of the PACE delegation. "Nevertheless, the historic high turnout demonstrated the commitment of citizens to upholding democracy in Poland."

While freedoms of association and assembly were respected in a pluralistic campaign, it was marred by the misuse of state resources. The overlap between the ruling party's campaign messages and government information campaigns as well as state-controlled companies and their foundations, including on the referendum, gave a further significant advantage to the ruling party. In addition, the lack of detailed campaign finance reporting ahead of election day as well as ineffective regulation for the referendum had a negative impact on the accountability of political party and campaign finance.

The run-up to the election remained peaceful overall. However, the campaign was highly confrontational and often negative, with candidates repeatedly using intolerant, misogynistic and discriminatory language, including anti-migrant narratives from some parties that were at times xenophobic. Personal verbal attacks against the main party leaders were widespread.

"While the elections in Poland were competitive, we noted the erosion of checks and balances to gain further control over state institutions by the governing party, including the courts and the public media," said OSCE PA head of delegation Pere Joan Pons. "This tilted the playing field, which meant the opposition did not have fully equal opportunities."

While Poland’s media landscape is diverse, the purchase of most regional daily newspapers and many other regional media outlets by a state-controlled energy company, attempts to limit foreign media ownership, and protracted license renewal processes indicate increasing political control by the government. The observer mission found that while public television gave free airtime to all contestants, its political coverage clearly promoted the ruling party and its policies and at the same time demonstrated open hostility towards the opposition. Most monitored private media adopted a critical editorial line against the ruling party, while some clearly favoured the opposition.

“Equality, inclusiveness and transparency are key to good election administration and vital for an election to fully meet democratic standards,” said Douglas Wake, head of the ODIHR limited election observation mission. “But while Poland’s election administration performed efficiently, transparency was regrettably limited. More troublingly, we observed that the ruling party and its candidates gained a clear advantage from the misuse of state resources, undermining the separation between state and party.”

The international election observation mission to the Polish parliamentary elections totalled 154 observers from 44 countries, consisting of 33 ODIHR-deployed experts and long-term observers, 94 parliamentarians and staff from the OSCE PA, and 27 from PACE.

Media contacts:

Katya Andrusz, ODIHR: +48 609 522 266 or katya.andrusz@odihr.pl

Anna Di Domenico, OSCE PA: +45 60 10 83 80 or anna.didomenico@oscepa.dk

Ivi-Triin Odrats, PACE: +33 6 07 06 77 73 or ivi-triin.odrats@coe.int