

Pia Christmas-Moeller leads OSCE observers, including 49 from the PA, to elections in Tajikistan



Tajikistan's Foreign Minister Hamrokhon Zarifi receives members of the OSCE PA mission on 1 March

The parliamentary elections in Tajikistan on 28 February took place peacefully, but despite certain small positive steps the elections failed to meet many key OSCE commitments contained in the OSCE 1990 Copenhagen Document. Serious irregularities took place on election day, including high incidence of observed proxy and family voting, despite the stated aim of the authorities of Tajikistan to hold more democratic and transparent elections.

In a positive development, the higher-level election commissions were more inclusive than in previous elections, international observers concluded in the preliminary post-election statement issued at a press conference in Dushanbe on 1 March by OSCE PA Vice-President Pia Christmas-Moeller.

"I'm happy that election day took place in a generally good atmosphere, but I'm even more disappointed that these elections failed on many basic democratic standards. Such serious irregularities weaken genuine democratic progress. There is still a long way to go, and hopefully the new parliament will take up this challenge," said Ms. Christmas-Moeller.

Over 250 short-term observers from 41 OSCE participating States were deployed, with 49 members from the OSCE PA and 12 from the European Parliament, in addition to ODIHR's long-term mission, which was headed by Latvian MP Artis Pabriks. Voting was observed in over 600 polling stations and the vote count was observed in some 76 polling stations across many electoral districts. Notably, the authorities of Tajikistan readily accommodated international observers, and there were observers from opposition parties in almost every polling station.

Ms. Christmas-Moeller appointed Vice-President Wolfgang Grossruck (Austria), a veteran election observer, as Deputy Head of the PA's observation mission as well as a consultancy group which included Claudio D'Amico (Italy), Morten Hoeglund (Norway), Pawel Poncyłjusz (Poland), Johann Widmer (Switzerland), Alaattin Buyukkaya (Turkey), and Simon Burns (U.K.).

The mission further stated that the election law has not been substantively amended since 2004 and significant shortcomings

remain. In areas with significant minority populations, ballots were printed in minority languages.

The pluralistic participation of several parties and candidates provided voters with political alternatives. There were, however, credible reports regarding several instances of violations of campaign regulations by local authorities and law enforcement agencies. This hindered the establishment of a level playing field for all candidates. The pre-election working environment for the media has become less controlled than in the past, but journalists also reported self-censorship. All this limited the information available to voters to make informed choices in these elections.

The vote process was assessed positively in three-quarters of the polling stations, but observers noted some serious irregularities, including cases of ballot box stuffing. Observers also noted some serious shortcomings with the counting of votes.

On Monday, 1 March, Foreign Minister Hamrokhon Zarifi received Ms. Christmas-Moeller and mission members Morton Hoeglund and Pawel Poncyłjusz. The delegation was accompanied by the Head of the OSCE Office in Dushanbe and PA staff. According to the minister, there have been "objective reasons" for the existing shortcomings, and all proposals and recommendations of observers would be taken into account.

The PA mission worked in close co-operation with the European Parliament delegation and the OSCE/ODIHR. The OSCE PA's Special Representative, Ambassador Andreas Nothelle, Presidential Advisor Andreas Baker, Programme Officer Anna Chernova and Logistics Officer Petra Jezkova supported the mission.

Soares and Lennmarker visit the Caucasus next week

A high-level delegation from the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, led by President Joao Soares and the Special Representative on Nagorno-Karabakh and Georgia, President Emeritus Goran Lennmarker, will visit all three countries in the Caucasus next week.

The visit will take place from 9 to 16 March. It will begin in Georgia, 9 and 10 March, and continue to Armenia from 10 to 13 March, before ending in Azerbaijan 13 to 16 March. Mr. Soares and Mr. Lennmarker will be accompanied by Deputy Secretary General Tina Schoen and Liaison Officer Marc Carillet.

The visit is Mr. Soares's first official visit to the region as President of the OSCE PA. The talks in the three countries will focus on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and on the situation after the 2008 war between Georgia and Russia.