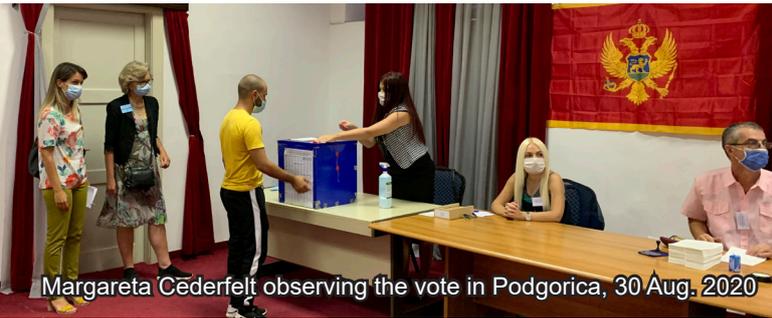


PA observes elections in Montenegro, in first physical activity since COVID



Margareta Cederfelt observing the vote in Podgorica, 30 Aug. 2020

OSCE PA Vice-President Margareta Cederfelt (Sweden), leading the short-term observers to the 30 August parliamentary elections in Montenegro, announced on Monday that the elections were managed transparently and efficiently, but the widespread abuse of office and state resources gave the ruling party an undue advantage. The elections were conducted against a backdrop of an intensely polarized debate over issues of church and national identity, international observers said in a statement of preliminary findings and conclusions.

In the OSCE PA's first physical activity since the COVID-19 outbreak, observers deployed in Podgorica as part of the Special Limited Election Observation Mission. Working together with the OSCE/ODIHR, the PA observers 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," Special Co-ordinator Cederfelt said.

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 observers said.

The elections took place amid concerns over patchy compliance with the constitution, according to the statement. 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.

The international election observation mission for the parliamentary elections in Montenegro totaled 30 observers from 19 countries, composed of 25 ODIHR-deployed experts and long-term observers, and five parliamentarians and staff from the OSCE PA. The mission was supported by Andreas Baker, Hana Dogovic, and Dimitrije Todoric from the International Secretariat.

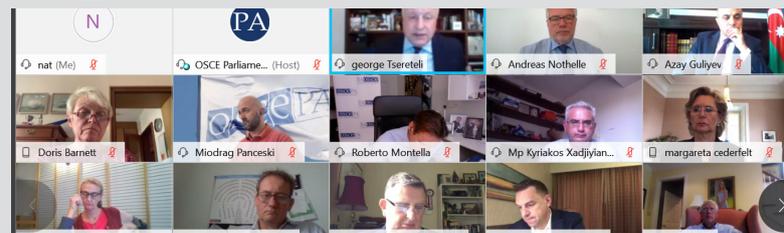
PA leaders meet online for discussions and welcome Ambassador Zannier to staff

In an informal leadership meeting on Wednesday, the OSCE PA's President, Secretary General and several Bureau members discussed developments in the OSCE area and PA activities. President George Tsereteli (Georgia) and Vice-President Margareta Cederfelt (Sweden) reported on the PA's election observation in Montenegro.

The President addressed issues related to the pandemic, discussed the continuous illegal borderization in Georgia, and touched on the escalation of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as the situation in eastern Ukraine.

Members discussed unrest in the United States, the COVID-19 situation, economic recovery, and avenues for engagement with Belarus. Vice-President Azay Guliyev (Azerbaijan) highlighted a number of letters he has sent to President Tsereteli and several Heads of OSCE PA Delegations seeking support for a just resolution to the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict.

Members raised today's announcement by Germany that it has "unequivocal evidence" that Russian dissident Alexei Navalny was poisoned by a chemical nerve agent from the Novichok group. Third Committee Vice-Chair Michael Link (Germany) called upon Moscow to not further criminalize political opposition in Russia and to open up for a serious



investigation of Navalny's poisoning.

Secretary General Roberto Montella provided an update on the institutional crisis within OSCE. Montella reported that former OSCE Secretary General and High Commissioner on National Minorities Lamberto Zannier has joined the staff of the PA to help build support for the OSCE among governments and parliaments.

Ambassador Zannier said that it is important to turn initiatives into political processes. Members of the PA can help reach the ministers, he said, and to help determine the top priorities.

OSCE PA leaders welcomed Zannier to the PA and expressed support for Secretary General Montella's initiatives to engage the governmental side at a high political level in order to increase the attention paid to the Organization.