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Tidei and Bekkevold: Comprehensive election reform needed in Kazakhstan



Marietta Tidei and Geir Joergen Bekkevold at an Astana polling station, 20 March.



Meeting with Foreign Minister Erlan Idrissov in Astana, 17 March.



The panel of the post-election press conference in Astana, 21 March.

The 20 March early parliamentary elections were efficiently organized, with some progress noted, but they indicated that Kazakhstan still has a considerable way to go in meeting its OSCE commitments for democratic elections, observers said in a preliminary statement delivered Monday by Marietta Tidei (MP, Italy), Special Co-ordinator and leader of the short-term OSCE observer mission. The legal framework restricts fundamental civil and political rights, and comprehensive reform is required, the observers concluded.

"It is clear that Kazakhstan still has a long way to go towards fulfilling its election commitments, although some progress was noted. The ruling party had a clear advantage over others in these elections and, while the parties were generally able to campaign freely, genuine political choice remains insufficient," said Tidei. "Significant legal reform is required to protect citizens' rights, and we hope that the newly elected parliament will find the political will to engage in a thorough reform process, which we are ready to support."

Observers noted that contestants were generally able to campaign freely throughout the country, despite legal restrictions on the holding of public assemblies. The participation of six parties provided voters with some alternatives, although most contestants did not directly challenge the ruling party, thus limiting genuine political choice. The dominant position of the ruling party at all levels of government for many years has effectively blurred the distinction between state and party, observers said.

"For the authorities to fulfil their stated commitment to holding democratic elections, comprehensive legal reform is required, including reforms related to restrictions on voting rights and the freedoms of assembly and expression," said

Geir Joergen Bekkevold (MP, Norway), Head of the OSCE PA delegation. "Specific progress in these areas will go a long way towards ensuring greater political pluralism, and I stand ready to work with my colleagues in the newly elected parliament to support this process."

The authorities invited international observers in an open and unrestricted manner. On election day, the observers noted serious procedural errors and irregularities during voting, counting and tabulation. While the observers noted that the laws regulating elections aim to guarantee fundamental civil and political rights, reform of the legal framework is necessary for it to fully meet the international obligations and standards to which Kazakhstan has committed.

The OSCE PA delegation consisted of 63 observers, including 46 parliamentarians, and worked closely with colleagues from PACE, led by Jordi Xuclà (MP, Spain), and the OSCE/ODIHR, led by Ambassador Boris Frlec. From the International Secretariat, the PA delegation was supported by Director of Elections Andreas Baker, Programme Officer Maria Chepurina, Programme Officer Loic Poulain, Operations Officer Iryna Sabashuk, and Office Assistant Farimah Daftary. The PA has observed parliamentary elections in Kazakhstan in 1994, 1995, 1999, 2004, 2007 and 2012, as well as presidential elections in 2005 and 2011.



OSCE PA Vice-President Christine Muttonen (second from left) with polling station committee members in Almaty, 20 March.

OSCE PA leadership to meet in Copenhagen next month

The OSCE PA Bureau will meet in Copenhagen on 10-11 April. Hosted by the Danish Parliament, the meeting is expected to be addressed by OSCE PA President Ilkka Kanerva (MP, Finland) and Head of the OSCE PA's Danish Delegation Peter Juel Jensen. It will include reports by Treasurer Doris Barnett (MP, Germany) and Secretary General Roberto Montella, as well as presentations by the rapporteurs of the OSCE PA's

three general committees.

The meeting in Copenhagen serves as an opportunity for rapporteurs to hear feedback from Bureau members on the preliminary reports and draft resolutions being developed for the Annual Session, this year taking place in Tbilisi, Georgia, from 1-5 July under the theme "25 Years of Parliamentary Co-operation: Building Trust Through Dialogue."