



Fundamental freedoms generally respected in competitive Bulgarian elections, but process marked by voter fatigue, international observers say

SOFIA, 03 October 2022 – Bulgaria’s 2 October early parliamentary elections were competitive and fundamental freedoms were generally respected, although allegations of vote-buying and pressure on voters negatively affected parts of the process, international observers said in a statement today. Despite a late start to the preparations and the limited technical and administrative capacity of the election administration, the elections were organized adequately, the statement says.

Contestants were able to campaign freely in elections that took place amid voter fatigue from the holding of three early parliamentary elections in less than two years. The campaign was competitive, with a range of contestants representing different views. It was often negative in tone, however, and marked by mutual accusations among the parties of corruption or wrongdoing.

“It appears that political compromise is needed to ensure long-term stability in Bulgaria,” said Thorhildur Sunna Aevarsdottir, Alternate Head of the delegation from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE). “After the low turnout we saw yesterday, it is clearly now the responsibility of the newly elected parliamentarians to do their utmost to regain the electorate’s trust.”

The statement notes that the accuracy of the voter list for the elections was diminished by the exclusion of undocumented residents, and Roma in particular, and that limited reporting and oversight reduced the transparency of campaign finances. Contestants were provided substantial coverage in the mainstream media, but inadequate journalistic scrutiny of their policies and of their records in office limited voters’ access to comprehensive information. Election day was generally calm, and voting proceeded smoothly.

Repeated allegations of vote-buying, pressure on public and private sector employees and voters’ dependence on local employers in economically vulnerable communities raised concerns about voters’ ability to make their choice free of fear of retribution. The legal framework for elections does not sufficiently address campaigning by high-level public officials, and such instances raised concerns over the misuse of public resources and ensuring a level playing field.

“While many aspects of the election were conducted smoothly, it is clear that improvements are needed to the election-related legislation and procedures,” said Nina Suomalainen, Head of the election observation mission from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). “ODIHR will provide recommendations in its final report on these elections, and we hope these will aid the government in introducing the needed improvements.”

The media environment is vibrant, and freedom of expression is constitutionally guaranteed. The concentration of media ownership and close ties between some media and political parties reduce pluralism and decrease public trust in journalists’ work. Recent cases of protracted civil and criminal litigation against independent investigative media highlight journalists’ vulnerability to pressure through the courts and prompt self-censorship. Prime-time newscasts focused on the provisional government and the president, whose critical statements often disadvantaged parties

they blamed for current socioeconomic problems, although some broadcasters provided additional journalistic scrutiny.

While many of those with whom the observers spoke expressed trust in the use of voting machines, citing the positive effect on the accuracy of the vote count and reduced opportunities for malfeasance, some noted that their use might dissuade some elderly voters or those who distrust the technology from voting. The voting machines were not equipped with accessibility functions to enable voters with certain disabilities to vote independently. Moreover, the law does not address possible instances of discrepancies between the machine and manual count.

The legal framework provides an overall adequate basis for the conduct of democratic elections but contains provisions inconsistent with a number of international standards, and ambiguous provisions and shortcomings that adversely affected several aspects of the electoral process. Several longstanding concerns remain to be addressed, including those related to passive and active suffrage rights, the prohibition against campaigning in languages other than Bulgarian, and limitations on the opportunity to challenge election results.

Overall, the underrepresentation of women as candidates and in the campaign demonstrated the need for greater commitment to ensuring their adequate participation. There are no legislative or other measures to promote women's participation in elections, and most political parties did not include any policies for the promotion of women in their platforms. Some 30 per cent of candidates were women, and of the 867 candidate lists registered, only 208 were led by women.

The Constitution guarantees the right to self-identification but does not define national minorities. Issues related to minorities rarely featured in the campaign, and most political parties and coalitions did not include policies for persons belonging to minorities or for Roma integration in their electoral platforms. There were several instances of inflammatory rhetoric against Roma and other ethnic communities. The observers were told that Roma voters are still vulnerable to intimidation and attempted vote-buying.