



United States Mission to the OSCE

Warsaw Human Dimension Conference Plenary Session 2: Democratic Institutions

Democracy at the national, regional and local levels Democratic elections

As prepared for delivery by Chargé d’Affaires Katherine Brucker
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As we prepare for our national elections this November, the United States is pleased once again to welcome an OSCE observer mission, and others should do the same. The United States strongly supports the work of OSCE’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. It serves as a valuable resource to participating States that strive to put their democracy commitments into practice.

In 1990, participating States adopted the Charter of Paris, pledging “to build, consolidate and strengthen democracy as the only system of government of our nations.” Today, our democracy work within the OSCE is more vital than ever.

The historic democratic transformations in the aftermath of the collapse of Soviet Communism have been followed by nearly two decades of democratic backsliding including in the OSCE region. In too many nations, basic civil and political rights are under siege. Brave individuals who stand up in defense of the democratic aspirations of their fellow citizens are targets of repression.

Russia continues to go through the motions of holding elections with no real choices and no real debate in the midst of intensifying repression and censorship of civil society and independent media. March Presidential and September Parliamentary elections were no different: The outcomes were pre-determined. Non-Kremlin-approved candidates were not permitted on the ballot. Objective international observation missions were not welcome. Putin’s primary challenger Alexei Navalny died in February in custody in a remote Arctic penal colony. The Constitution has been changed to allow Putin to rule in Russia for 25 years, with possibly more to come. Russia held its elections in Ukraine’s sovereign territory without Ukraine’s consent.

Belarus has not had a free and fair election since Lukashenka was first elected in 1994. Since then, the Lukashenka regime has worked to strip Belarusians of political and civil rights to ensure unchecked power for itself. Political repression in Belarus has hit an all-time high. Presidential elections are slated for 2025, former presidential candidates and their teams are among the roughly 1,400 political prisoners. Those not jailed have been forced into exile and subjected to trials in absentia. The United States welcomes the recent release of some political prisoners over the past three months but notes that these releases have been paired with new arrests. The United States calls for the unconditional release of all political prisoners in Belarus.

Azerbaijan’s early presidential election in February was conducted in a restrictive environment hostile to dissent and was devoid of genuine competition. In its findings

following the September parliamentary elections, ODIHR concluded that they “took place in a restrictive political and legal environment that does not enable genuine pluralism and resulted in a contest devoid of competition...the legal framework for the elections does not meet international standards or OSCE commitments for democratic elections on restrictions introduced into political party and media legislation further limit fundamental freedoms.”

Türkiye continues to impose restrictions on the political opposition, including the imprisonment of former presidential candidate Selahattin Demirtaş. The government also has removed democratically elected, pro-Kurdish mayors from office in the southeast.

Following the March 2023 parliamentary elections in **Kazakhstan**, the OSCE noted that the government has not approved registration of several aspiring political parties, and deregistered others. At least three leaders of unregistered parties remained incarcerated.

We look forward to the OSCE assessment of the upcoming elections in **Uzbekistan**. ODIHR’s Needs Assessment Mission report concluded that aspects of the process that need to be reviewed included the legal framework, the work of the election commissions at all levels, voter and candidate registration, media coverage of the campaign, and the system for dispute resolution. For example, previous OSCE reports have raised concerns about the difficulty “for genuinely independent political parties to organize, nominate candidates, and campaign. The Ministry of Justice has the power to suspend parties for as long as six months without a court order.”

Serbia reran Belgrade city assembly elections in tandem with municipal elections following protests against irregularities in the first round of municipal and parliamentary elections in late 2023. These included according to ODIHR “bias in the media, pressure on public sector employees, misuse of public resources,” as well as “inconsistent application of safeguards during voting and counting, frequent instances of overcrowding, breaches of secrecy of the vote, and numerous instances of group voting.” ODIHR found the June 2024 elections were generally well administered but there were concerns about the misuse of state resources, influence on the media by the authorities, and an unaudited voter registry. Serbia formed a working group on election reform, but with little progress thus far. We urge Serbian authorities to adopt ODIHR recommendations.

Hungary employed government apparatuses, including the State Audit Office and the Sovereignty Protection Office, to target the political opposition ahead of June 2024 local and EU elections through punitive fines and smear campaigns to undermine fair electoral competition. Hungary has not taken sufficient steps to prevent the abuse of public office for campaign purposes and the misuse of administrative resources, despite previous recommendations by ODIHR.

North Macedonia’s May 2024 parliamentary and presidential elections highlighted growing public distrust of democratic processes. ODIHR noted the government respected fundamental freedoms, but pointed to an electoral process that remains poorly regulated. The expedited process to amend the Electoral Code ahead of the May elections lacked transparency and public consultation.

Moldova’s 2023 and 2024 local elections were free and fair despite Russia’s attempts to sabotage them and install Russia-backed politicians through illicit financing and vote buying. In June, along with the UK and Canada, we exposed Russia’s plans to undermine Moldova’s October presidential elections. Russia is currently illicitly supporting candidates for Moldova’s presidency. OSCE partners must remain involved in ensuring fairness in the country’s current electoral campaign, culminating in just a few weeks.

Armenia has taken commendable strides to advance democratic reforms and to address widespread corruption. More remains to be done. We remain committed to working with Armenia towards its goal of a more democratic future.

The **Georgian** government's passage and implementation of the Foreign Influence Law, voter intimidation, and recent reports of the weaponization of the Georgian Anti-Corruption Bureau to stifle domestic and international election monitoring efforts have severely undermined the country's democratic processes and institutions in advance of its October parliamentary elections. Through violent clamp downs on protests, the harassment of writers and artists, and the move to pass pernicious anti-LGBT legislation, the ruling Georgian Dream party has stifled the exercise of the freedoms of association and expression, stigmatized organizations that serve the citizens of Georgia, and impeded independent media outlets. There have also been reports of intimidation and harassment of civil society and the political opposition that have included beatings, threats to their families, the vandalism of their personal property.

As President Biden often says, democracy doesn't happen by accident. We must defend democratic principles and practices constantly. We all must confront our shortcomings, even when it's uncomfortable. Democracy remains the single most powerful tool for unleashing human potential and delivering results for people everywhere. Defending it throughout the OSCE region is an essential core mission of this organization.

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