

Post-Election Statement – German Parliamentary Elections, 24 September 2017

Highly competitive German elections a demonstration of faith in democracy, say international observers

BERLIN, 25 September 2017 – The 24 September parliamentary elections in Germany were a strong demonstration of the country’s commitment to democratic processes and provided an opportunity for voters to freely express their will, concluded international observers from the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly today following their first-ever election observation mission in the country. The efficiency and professionalism of the election administration, as well as a high level of public confidence in the overall integrity of the electoral process, contributed to the conduct of democratic elections.

“Germany has once again demonstrated that its commitment to democracy is undiminished,” said George Tsereteli, Special Co-ordinator for the mission. “Highly competitive and well-run, these elections were an opportunity for voters to express their choice in a process that benefits from and is based on broad trust among society.”

The observer team, composed of Members of Parliament from 25 countries, noted that the culture of debate in Germany – as across Europe – was changing; sharper rhetoric and increased polarization are concerning trends for society, they said. They noted that the emotionalization of certain key topics, such as migration, came at the expense of debate on other important issues facing the country. Reported instances of hate speech are being investigated by authorities. Observers regretted that foreign interference in election campaigning, noted during the German elections, was on the rise internationally.

“This was the first time we’ve deployed a full observer team to Germany, and the welcome of our mission by all German officials and political parties that we met is a positive signal that the country is ready to pay continued attention to democratic processes,” said Head of Mission Isabel Santos. “Changing political cultures in many countries and new challenges such as cyber attacks mean that we must all dedicate time and effort to preserving democratic systems.”

In early September hackers demonstrated vulnerabilities in software used for communicating election results, serving as a reminder that electoral processes require constant attention and investment in all countries, said the observers. While the reported vulnerability did not affect election results, misinformation can undermine confidence in an election, observers said.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA) deployed an election observation mission to the German elections following an invitation from German government. The invitation to observe was in line with commitments that all OSCE countries have undertaken. The mission included 45 parliamentarians, and was headed by OSCE PA Vice-Presidents George Tsereteli (MP, Georgia), who was appointed as Special Co-ordinator of the short-term OSCE observer mission by the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office, and Isabel Santos (MP, Portugal) who served as Head of the OSCE PA observer mission.

Following meetings with election officials, party representatives, and other experts including from the OSCE’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR), on election day observers visited some 260 polling stations in several cities and regions. In the limited number of

polling stations visited, the elections were well administered, and observers were warmly welcomed by election board workers.

With more than 4,800 candidates running, and numerous strong political parties, Germany's 61 million voters had a wide range of options to choose from, observers said. Women represented slightly less than 30 per cent of candidates, but have played a prominent role in leadership positions in parties' campaigns. While many parties have internal quotas to promote gender balance, consideration of legal mechanisms could promote greater balanced representation in politics. Extensive use was made of media and social media as well as more traditional tactics of rallies and door-to-door campaigning to reach out to voters. Observers said that the legal framework provides a solid basis for a competitive process, founded on the respect for fundamental freedoms, and applauded the efforts of authorities to ensure equal campaign conditions for candidates and parties. The observers regretted cases of apparent intolerance toward political debate by some in the public, which resulted in isolated instances of physical violence and certain limitations on abilities for some to campaign.

The framework for party financing allows political parties to compete with each other on the basis of equal treatment before the law and by the authorities. However, further consideration of campaign finance provisions would be welcome, observers said, as the lack of timely reporting on financing can limit the intended transparency of public reporting on campaign spending. Voters should be able to inform themselves of parties' financial ties, they said.

Legal provisions enabling public access to all polls is a unique and welcome tool for transparency and confidence-building. The observers noted that faith in the electoral process is strong and political parties typically do not feel the need to have representatives in polling stations, a widely used mechanism in many countries. One party announced its intention to have their representatives present in polling stations on election day.

Complaint mechanisms benefit from general trust among stakeholders. The observers noted however that the fact that certain complaint and scrutiny processes and decisions are overseen by Members of the German Parliament themselves may result in questions related to conflicts of interest. While decisions can be appealed to the court system, timely and effective redress by an independent body are important democratic principles, observers said. In this regard, clarity regarding deadlines on complaints processes could help ensure the timeliness of decisions.

The pluralistic media environment provides numerous outlets for candidates to convey their views, enabling voters to inform themselves about their political options. Observers noted that the high journalistic standard in the country was generally effective in limiting any impact of 'fake news'.

The election observation mission of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly included parliamentarians from Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Finland, Georgia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Kazakhstan, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, the Slovak Republic, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, and Ukraine. Following briefings with electoral authorities, political party representatives, journalists and analysts, on election day the observers visited a limited number of polling stations in several cities in Germany. The observers thank the authorities and people for their hospitality and co-operation. The OSCE PA observers look forward to the final report of the OSCE/ODIHR Election Expert Team deployed for the German elections.

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