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Observation of the early parliamentary elections in Bulgaria

(19 April 2026)

Election observation report[1]
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1. Introduction

1. The Parliamentary Assembly has observed all parliamentary and presidential elections in Bulgaria since 1990. This report concerns the early parliamentary elections held on 19 April 2026, the eighth early parliamentary election in Bulgaria since April 2021. It follows the Assembly's reports on the early parliamentary elections of 4 April, 11 July and 14 November 2021, 2 October 2022, 2 April 2023, and 9 June and 27 October 2024.

2. Bulgaria joined the Council of Europe on 7 May 1992. It was subject to the full monitoring procedure from 1994 to 2000 and, thereafter, to a post-monitoring dialogue concerning outstanding issues relating to human rights, democracy and the rule of law. On 1 October 2025, the Assembly decided to close the post-monitoring dialogue with Bulgaria and to follow developments in the country under the periodic review procedure.[2] This was an important recognition of progress, but it did not remove the Assembly's long-standing interest in the consolidation of electoral integrity and democratic institutions in Bulgaria.

3. The Assembly particularly welcomes the fact that it was invited by the 2026 interim government to observe these elections even though, following the closure of the post-monitoring dialogue, Bulgaria was no longer under an obligation to do so. This initiative demonstrated political openness and a commendable willingness to maintain co-operation with the Council of Europe and its election observation mechanisms at a sensitive moment in Bulgaria's political life.

4. At its meeting of 2 March 2026, the Bureau of the Assembly agreed to observe the early parliamentary elections and set up an ad hoc committee (PACE delegation) of 20 members. The final composition of the delegation included 13 members. The Bureau of the Assembly appointed me as chairperson of the ad hoc committee ("head of delegation") and appointed Mr Armen Gevorgyan as vice-chairperson to take over in case of my absence (see the composition of the delegation in Appendix 1).

5. In line with the co-operation agreement signed between the Assembly and the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), on 4 October 2004, Tomáš Langášek, substitute member of the Venice Commission in respect of the Czech Republic, represented the Commission as a legal expert during this election observation mission.

6. The delegation held meetings in Sofia with the Central Election Commission (CEC), representatives of State institutions, political parties and coalitions, civil society, the media, and the Election Observation Mission of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE/ODIHR) (see the programme in Appendix 2). On election day, Assembly observers were deployed in and around Sofia and in several regions of the country.

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1. The report is drawn up under the responsibility of the rapporteur.
2. See Assembly Resolution 2620 (2025) "Post-monitoring dialogue with Bulgaria".

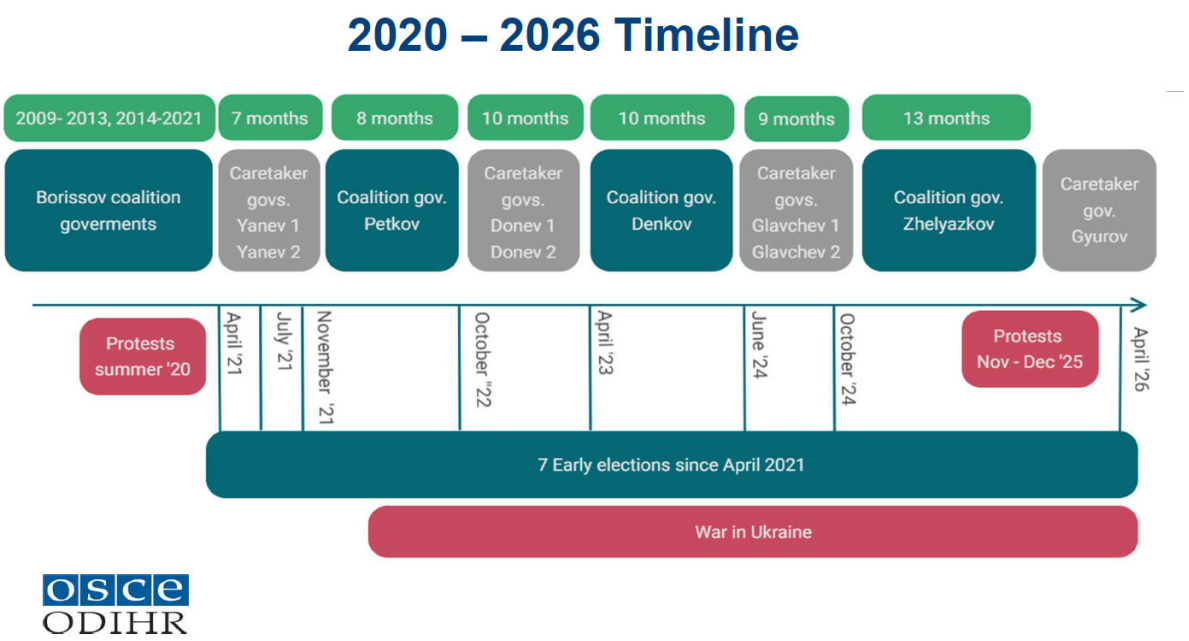
7. The PACE delegation formed part of an International Election Observation Mission (IEOM) conducted jointly with the OSCE/ODIHR. The ODIHR Election Observation Mission (EOM), led by Ms Dunja Mijatovic, had been deployed from 13 March 2026. The two delegations worked on the joint statement of preliminary findings and conclusions which were presented at press conference on 20 April 2026.[3]

8. The IEOM concluded that the 19 April early parliamentary elections, marked by an increased participation, were administered transparently and efficiently, despite gaps in the legislative framework and a last-minute amendment that undermined the stability of the electoral law. Fundamental freedoms were generally respected, but the campaign was highly polarised and marked by negative rhetoric. Online campaigning, which is largely unregulated, played a prominent role in voter engagement while also facilitating circulation of disinformation narratives, including about government activities. The existing campaign finance framework provided limited transparency and oversight. Institutional efforts to counter the risk of cyber threats and potential foreign interference were negatively affected by gaps in the implementation and co-ordination between oversight bodies. The media environment is diverse and pluralistic but was constrained by political and economic influence, self-censorship, and the prevalence of paid and pre-arranged coverage. Women remained significantly under-represented both as candidates and in elected office. Election day was generally calm and orderly, but some procedural shortcomings were noted.

9. The delegation expresses its appreciation to the Bulgarian authorities, in particular the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the staff of its Human Rights Department, the PACE delegation secretariat, the CEC, the election administration at all levels, ODIHR and all interlocutors for their co-operation and assistance to the success of this mission.

2. Political crisis leading to the successive early elections

10. Since July 2020, Bulgaria has been confronted with a sustained political crisis rooted in public frustration with corruption, State capture, clientelism and the perceived inability of political elites to deliver stable and accountable government. Between April 2021 and April 2026, Bulgarians were called to the polls eight times for parliamentary elections, in addition to presidential and European elections. For much of this period, the country was governed by caretaker or fragile coalition governments.



Source: OSCE/ODIHR

11. On each occasion, GERB (Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria), led by former Prime Minister Boyko Borisov (2009-2013, 2014-2017, 2017-2021), has always managed to come out ahead, but this has never been enough to form a stable and lasting coalition with other government partners. The

3. See the press statement and the full text of the preliminary findings and conclusions.

October 2024 elections again produced a fragmented National Assembly comprising of a record number of nine political parties and coalitions. A minority government headed by Prime Minister Rosen Zhelyazkov was eventually formed in January 2025 by GERB-Union of Democratic Forces (GERB-SDS), Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP)-United Left and There Is Such a People (ITN), with external support from the Alliance for Rights and Freedoms (APS). However, the political balance remained fragile.

12. Several parties challenged the results of these elections before the Constitutional Court, citing concerns such as up to 5% of votes being invalid, significant discrepancies between paper receipts from machine voting and the digital records, and irregular voter turnout ranging from low percentages in some regions to as high as 80% in others. In March 2025, the Constitutional Court invalidated the results in a number of polling stations (the court declared the election of 16 members of parliament illegal) and ordered a recalculation of mandates. As a result, Velichie entered the National Assembly and several mandates were reallocated. This decision increased political tensions and reduced the governing arrangement to a minimal and vulnerable majority. It also placed renewed public attention on the quality of election-day procedures, counting and tabulation, and the importance of effective judicial remedies.

13. In late 2025, large-scale public protests broke out following the presentation of a draft budget that envisaged increases in social security contributions and State administration salaries. These protests rapidly widened into a broader expression of public distrust in State institutions, opaque networks of influence and political leaders associated with corruption and clientelism. They were particularly visible in Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna and Ruse and were widely perceived as reflecting the mobilisation of younger voters and broader social frustration.

14. The government resigned in December 2025. Following unsuccessful attempts to form a new cabinet, President Rumen Radev[4] resigned on 19 January 2026, before the end of the term (due in November 2026), with the stated intention of participating in the forthcoming elections with his newly formed Progressive Bulgaria (PB) coalition, thus bringing a new player into an already unstable party system. Vice-President Iliana Iotova assumed the role of acting president and, after consultations required by the Constitution, on 12 February, appointed Mr Andrey Gyurov, Deputy Governor of the Bulgarian National Bank, to form a caretaker cabinet until the elections.

15. The elections of 19 April 2026 therefore took place in a context of repeated elections, political fragmentation, heightened polarisation and declining trust in State institutions. At the same time, they were also shaped by a widespread demand for change, the adoption of the Euro on 1 January 2026, the budgetary crisis, concerns over the cost of living, corruption, foreign policy orientation, energy security and the integrity of the electoral process itself.

16. The caretaker government replaced all 28 regional governors and most directors of provincial directorates of the Ministry of Interior and police chiefs. It also established a Co-ordination Council for the Preparation of the Elections, appointed an adviser on elections, and introduced a temporary co-ordination mechanism to counter disinformation and hybrid threats. These steps were presented as measures to consolidate administrative control and restore public confidence in the conduct of the elections.

3. Constitutional and legal framework

17. The National Assembly of Bulgaria is a unicameral parliament composed of 240 members elected for a four-year term through an open list proportional representation system in 31 multi-member constituencies. The constituencies largely correspond to Bulgaria's administrative divisions, with Sofia divided into three constituencies and Plovdiv into two. The establishment of an out-of-country constituency has been postponed until 2028. The electoral threshold for parties and coalitions is 4% of valid votes cast nationwide. Independent candidates must meet the constituency quota calculated under the Hare-Niemeyer method. Voters may express one preference within a list; a candidate may change position on the list if the preference votes reach at least 7% of votes cast for that list in the constituency.

18. Parliamentary elections are primarily governed by the 1991 Constitution, the Election Code of 2014, the Political Parties Act, the Criminal Code and the Administrative Violations and Sanctions Act, complemented by decisions of the CEC. The Election Code has been amended many times since its adoption, and this continued instability of electoral legislation remains a structural concern.

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4. Rumen Radev, a former air force commander, was first elected president in 2016 and re-elected in 2021. He supported the street protests in late 2025. He is known for his criticism of the European Union, his reluctance regarding Bulgaria’s accession to the Eurozone and his reservations about supplying arms to Ukraine.

19. The constitutional reform adopted in December 2023 limited the President's discretion in appointing a caretaker prime minister to a small group of senior office-holders, provided that the mandate of the incumbent National Assembly terminates only when the newly elected Assembly takes office, and allowed citizens holding dual nationality to stand as candidates, subject to an 18-month residency requirement. The Constitutional Court annulled most of the judicial components of the reform in July 2024, but the election-related provisions remained in force due to a split vote.

20. The removal of the ban on dual citizens standing for parliamentary office was in line with previous Venice Commission and ODIHR recommendations. However, the 18-month residency requirement remains at odds with international standards and good practice, as it may disproportionately restrict the right to stand for election without an individualised assessment of candidates' actual ties to the country.

21. The most significant amendment before the 2026 elections was adopted in February 2026, after the early elections had already been called. It introduced a cap of 20 polling stations per non-EU country outside Bulgarian diplomatic and consular premises. Acting President Iliana Iotova imposed a suspensory veto, which the National Assembly rejected. The Ombudsman publicly criticised the amendment and considered a challenge before the Constitutional Court. The change may have had a particularly significant impact on voters in countries with large Bulgarian communities, including Türkiye (previously 168 polling stations), the United Kingdom (previously 116 polling stations) and the United States (previously 54 polling stations).

22. This late amendment raised concerns about the stability of electoral law. The Venice Commission's Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters and its interpretative declarations underline that fundamental elements of electoral law should not be changed shortly before elections and must not be changed after elections have been called. The 2026 amendment was adopted without broad consensus and after the elections had been called.

23. Since 2016, voting is compulsory as of 18 years of age – except those deprived of legal capacity by a final court decision and those serving a prison sentence, irrespective of the gravity of the offence – but there is no sanction for persons who do not vote. These blanket restrictions remain contrary to European standards, Council of Europe recommendations and the case law of the European Court of Human Rights. The blanket restriction on prisoners' voting rights was challenged before the Constitutional Court in March 2026 but the appeal was declared inadmissible.

24. The preliminary voter lists comprised 6 641 768 voters, included 121 708 first-time voters. Voter lists are compiled automatically by municipal administrations on the basis of data from the National Population Register. The October 2024 amendments to the Civil Registration Act enabled citizens without a regular permanent address to be included in voter lists on the basis of an address designated by the municipality. This allowed approximately 27 060 eligible voters to be included in provisional voter lists, but this positive step was not accompanied by proactive public information campaigns. The final voter lists included approximately 6.5 million citizens.

25. The election administration is organised in three levels: the CEC, 31 district election commissions and 11 836 precinct election commissions in the country, together with polling stations abroad. The current CEC was appointed in May 2021 and is composed of 15 members. It generally enjoyed trust and operated transparently through public sessions, live-streaming and publication of decisions. However, repeated early elections, shifting parliamentary composition and legal ambiguities in appointment rules continued to complicate the full and proportional representation of parties at lower levels.

26. All in all, the legal framework provides a generally adequate basis for democratic elections, but important gaps remain. These concern the narrow definition of campaigning, the absence of comprehensive regulation of online campaigning and third-party activity, limited rules on the use of administrative resources, insufficient transparency of campaign finance, restrictive standing in election disputes, and the lack of direct avenues to challenge some election results protocols.

4. Candidate registration and major campaign issues

27. The candidate registration process was generally inclusive and transparent. In total, the CEC registered 14 political parties, 10 coalitions and one independent candidate, representing 4 786 candidates. The nine main ones, represented in the previous parliament, are:

– GERB: the centre-right coalition built around their leader and former Prime Minister Boyko Borisov. Long the dominant force, centre right, leaning towards EU and NATO; strong presence in local power in the entire country.

– PP-DB (We Continue the Change – Democratic Bulgaria): a centrist, pro-European coalition led by Assen Vassilev, focused on the fight against corruption.

– Revival (Vazrazhdane): a far-right, nationalist, Eurosceptic and pro-Russian party, led by Kostadin Kostadinov.

– DPS/MRF (Movement for Rights and Freedoms): a pro-EU and pro-Euro-Atlantic political party traditionally associated with the representation of ethnic Turkish, Muslim and other minority communities. Following its internal split in 2024, it has repositioned itself as a more socially conservative actor, while continuing to be portrayed by critics as emblematic of oligarchic influence and corruption.

– BSP (the Socialist Party) – United Left: a coalition of left-wing and socialist parties, mobilising aging, conservative, pro-Russian electorate, against arming Ukraine.

– APS (Alliance for Rights and Freedoms): another branch of the DPS, loyal to its historic founder Ahmed Dogan.

– ITN (There is Such a People): a populist party founded by the singer and television presenter Slavi Trifonov, and chaired by Toshko Yordanov.

– MECh (Sword/Morality, Unity, Honour): a far-right Eurosceptic party led by Kiril Veselinski

– Greatness (Velichie): a pro-Russian party founded and led by Ivelin Mihailov.

28. The game-changing newcomer appeared in the form of Progressive Bulgaria (PB), a new centre-left coalition led by former President Rumen Radev and composed of three center-left parties. The coalition became a central actor in the campaign and drew support across different parts of the electorate. Prominent figures and former public administration high officials figured as candidates.

29. The campaign officially started on 20 March 2026 but traditional campaigning remained relatively low-key throughout the country, moving predominantly to the social media sphere. Contestants also used rallies, meetings with voters, local events and media appearances. Fundamental freedoms of association, assembly and expression were generally respected, and political actors were able to campaign freely. Observed events were largely unobstructed and allowed direct exchanges between candidates and voters.

30. Online campaigning played a prominent role. Social networks and personal blogs, although not regulated as media services, were central to campaign strategies and to the circulation of narratives. Disinformation was used to discredit opponents, reinforce fear-based messaging, and exploit foreign policy and security issues. The implementation of the EU Digital Services Act remained incomplete, limiting oversight of systemic online risks.

31. The campaign was highly polarised and marked by negative rhetoric and personal attacks. The main themes included corruption, the influence of oligarchic networks, the cost of living, inflation, energy policy, infrastructure, foreign policy, the defence co-operation agreement with Ukraine, the rule of law and the integrity of the electoral process.

32. The legal framework contains safeguards against the misuse of administrative resources, but these remain limited and do not fully address the advantages of incumbency. The ODIHR long-term observers of the IEOM team observed that some public officials, including at local level, endorsed candidates or took part in campaign activities during working hours, blurring the line between State and party. Such practices are inconsistent with the principle of a level playing field and should be more clearly prohibited and sanctioned.

33. Allegations of vote-buying, controlled voting and voter intimidation were prominent throughout the campaign. These practices have long undermined trust in Bulgarian elections and were a major concern in the 2024 elections. In 2026, however, the interim government took more numerous, visible and proactive measures to prevent, detect and investigate electoral violations. The Ministry of Interior reported intensified operations, arrests and investigations, including in areas previously considered vulnerable. It also reported the seizure of approximately EUR 1 million during operations against vote-buying.

34. The PACE delegation commends the interim government for treating vote-buying and controlled voting as a central threat to democratic legitimacy and for acting more actively and efficiently than in previous election cycles. These efforts did not entirely restore public trust, and allegations remained widespread, but the direction was positive. Sustained action, independence of law enforcement, effective prosecution and final convictions remain necessary to demonstrate that such practices carry real consequences.

35. The government also launched initiatives to prevent, detect and respond to foreign interference, disinformation and cyber threats. A co-ordination mechanism between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Electronic Government was established, while Bulgaria requested the activation of the EU Rapid Alert System. These were useful first steps, but the methodology, public communication and co-ordination between oversight bodies remained insufficiently developed in the short period running up to the elections.

36. Women remained under-represented in political life. They accounted for approximately 30% of candidates and 24% of lists were led by women (before the elections, women represented 28.75% of members of parliament). In the Zhelyazkov government, only 1 out of 21 ministers was a woman. The interim government included 6 female ministers. There are no special legislative measures to promote women's participation, and most party platforms do not have related policies. Few parties promoted women candidates or addressed women's political participation in campaign messages. Only two major contestants addressed issues related to women electorate. The campaign period rather included gender-based attacks and smear campaigns. According to ODIHR long-term observers, women candidates from PP-DB and GERB were targets of online abuse on social media and in traditional media. Minority issues were largely absent from party platforms, while the requirement to conduct the campaign only in Bulgarian remains contrary to previous ODIHR and Venice Commission recommendations.

5. Media landscape

37. Bulgaria's media landscape remains diverse and pluralistic, with numerous television, radio, print and online outlets. Television continues to be an important source of political information, while online platforms and social media increasingly shape voter engagement. However, media remains highly concentrated, dominated by two broadcasters bTV Media Group and Nova Broadcasting Group; and there is low level of trust in media.

38. Our interlocutors raised concerns about declining editorial independence, political and economic influence over outlets, self-censorship, and the limited capacity of voters to access impartial and comprehensive information. Criminal defamation, although not punishable by imprisonment, continues to be a concern for editorial independence and investigative journalism, even though the 2023 amendments to the Criminal Code provide for better protection of journalists in cases of alleged defamation with regard to public officials.

39. Election coverage was heavily shaped by pre-arranged agreements and paid content. This reduced the scope for genuine editorial scrutiny of candidates and their programmes. The distinction between journalism and political advertising was not always clear, and the prevalence of paid interviews and pre-arranged campaign reports weakened the informative function of the media. Debates organised by several outlets did not feature party leaders, many of whom declined to participate.

40. The public broadcasters formally met their legal obligations to provide coverage to all contestants. Nevertheless, the monitoring of the media environment indicated that formal equality of airtime does not necessarily translate into meaningful information for voters. Limited analytical reporting, fewer adversarial interviews and the reduced space for critical editorial coverage constrained citizens' ability to compare political programmes and assess candidates.

41. The online information environment was particularly vulnerable. Disinformation narratives circulated actively, including about government activities, foreign policy and alleged external interference. Fact-checking organisations and civil society monitoring initiatives played a useful role, but the overall regulatory and institutional response remained fragmented. Further safeguards are needed to protect media freedom, ensure transparency of political advertising, and maintain the distinction between editorial content and paid campaign promotion.

6. Election day observations

42. On 19 April 2026, The IEOM deployed 155 observers from 33 countries, including 142 observers from ODIHR and 13 observers from PACE. Our six teams covered Sofia, Plovdiv, Blagoevgrad, Kyustendil, Rila, Pernik and Breznik and their surrounding areas, including urban, rural and village settings. The delegation observed opening, voting and counting procedures. Its findings should be read together with those of the overall statistics of the IEOM, while taking into account the more limited statistical basis for some stages of the process.

43. According to the statistical debriefing presented after election day, the overall assessment of voting was very positive: 98% of observations were rated “very good”, only 13 cases were assessed as “bad”, and no cases were assessed as “very bad”.

44. The general impression of the delegation was that election day was calm, orderly and broadly well administered. Observers considered that voters had a genuine choice and were able to cast their ballots freely. Several members of the delegation also noted that, if serious electoral violations had occurred, they were more likely to have taken place before election day than during voting itself.

45. The opening of polling stations did not reveal major problems. Around half of the polling stations observed by the IEOM opened within 15 minutes of the scheduled time, which was considered acceptable. Some delays appeared to be linked mainly to voting machines not functioning properly at the start of the day.

46. The presence of political party representatives was high throughout the process. In most polling stations observed, all or almost all of the nine political parties were represented, mostly through their participation in precinct election commissions. This pluralistic presence created useful checks and balances and helped minimise the risk of irregularities.

47. Unauthorised persons were observed only in very small numbers and, where present, they did not appear to interfere with the process. In some village settings, the presence of international observers attracted attention from local residents, who were curious about their role and purpose. The atmosphere in such locations was generally calm, familiar and closely observed by the local community.

48. The most recurrent concern related to accessibility for persons with reduced mobility, which remains uneven. While designated accessible polling stations generally provided better access for voters with disabilities, many non-designated polling stations did not allow independent access or had inadequate internal layout. Important steps were taken for voters with visual and hearing impairments, but further adaptation is needed for voters with visual, cognitive and physical disabilities.

49. The delegation also noted some problems with polling station layout and equipment. While conditions inside polling stations were generally satisfactory, some layouts were not always appropriate, and difficulties were observed with voting machines and polling screens. In approximately 5-6% of polling stations using electronic voting equipment, the equipment was not fully operational. These problems did not appear to affect the overall validity of the process, but they contributed to delays and to the administrative burden on polling staff.

50. The secrecy of the vote was generally respected. The statistical debriefing indicated only 21 cases concerning secrecy out of around 600 voting observations, which was considered a low number. Some of these cases appeared to reflect cultural habits, including family voting or voters showing ballots to relatives, rather than organised attempts to undermine secrecy. Nevertheless, the delegation reiterates that the secrecy of the vote is a fundamental safeguard and should be protected consistently in all polling stations.

51. The delegation again observed that the combined use of paper ballots and machine-produced ballots makes the process slow and cumbersome. Several observers considered the dual system to be burdensome, particularly during counting, when results from paper and machine ballots had to be reconciled. The voting machines were often described as being used mainly as ballot printers rather than as full electronic voting machines, which limits their potential while still adding complexity to the process.

52. At the same time, our members expressed differing views on the role of voting machines in building trust. Some considered that, even when used only as ballot printers, machines may help reduce invalid ballots and provide voters with an additional choice. Others underlined that public trust in software and electronic equipment remains fragile and cannot simply be imposed. The delegation reiterates that technology can strengthen confidence only if accompanied by transparent procedures, independent auditing, clear safeguards and effective public communication.

53. Concerns were also raised about auditing, source codes and the information generated or retained by voting machines. Some participants recalled an earlier call of the PACE delegation for an international or independent audit of source codes. The delegation considers that, as long as technology is used in elections, the authorities should ensure that its functioning is transparent and understandable not only to experts, but also to election officials, contestants and the public.

54. The delegation welcomed the use of video recording and live streaming of counting, which was introduced in response to previous allegations of fraud and recount disputes. Several observers considered this measure useful for transparency and for possible subsequent checks. Also, the CEC did not report non-compliance with recording requirements. At the same time, the Election Code does not provide specific sanctions for failure to record, and this gap should be addressed.

55. Excessive paperwork remained one of the clearest practical weaknesses of the process. Observers repeatedly described procedures as time-consuming and administratively heavy. The process of checking identity documents, locating voters on the paper register, issuing and stamping ballots, removing ballot corners, finding voters again for signature and then allowing them to leave was described as slow and cumbersome.

56. The use of a single paper voter register also caused delays and queues in some polling stations. Observers suggested that, if paper registers continue to be used, they should at least be divided alphabetically or into several sections. Some also considered that electronic voter identification could significantly improve efficiency. The delegation notes that simplifying voter identification and reducing paperwork would make the process more efficient without weakening safeguards.

57. Counting was assessed positively overall. The main issue identified was that copies of the protocol were not always posted outside the polling station entrance: in 16 out of 45 relevant cases, this requirement was not fulfilled. Other problems appeared minor and were often linked to fatigue.

58. Overall, the delegation concluded that election day was technically sound and conducted in a peaceful environment, with strong party presence, few indications of interference and no significant disruption. At the same time, the observations confirmed several long-standing weaknesses: insufficient accessibility, underuse and contested trust in voting machines, excessive paperwork, slow counting and the administrative burden created by the dual voting system. These issues did not call into question the overall conduct of election day, but they should be addressed as part of a broader reform of Bulgaria's electoral practice.

59. The CEC received complaints and signals on election day relating to campaign silence, technical malfunctions, procedural errors and alleged election violations. The Ministry of Interior also received signals related to vote-buying and controlled voting. The handling of these cases will be important for the final assessment of the effectiveness of remedies and accountability mechanisms.

7. Election results and post-electoral developments

60. Beyond the increased turnout, the results of the 19 April 2026 early parliamentary elections revealed a significant change in Bulgaria's political landscape, as shown in this comparative table of the eight rounds of parliamentary elections held between 2021 and 2026:

Party	April 2021	July 2021	Nov 2021	Oct 2022	April 2023	Jun 2024	Oct 2024	Apr 2026
Progressive Bulgaria (PB)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	**131**
GERB – SDS	**75**	63	59	**67**	**69**	**68**	**66**	39
We Continue the Change (PP)	-	-	**67**	53	64	39	36	37
Democratic BG	27	34	16	20				
Revival (Vazrazhdane)	-	-	13	27	37	38	33	12
MRF (DPS)	30	29	34	36	36	47	-	-
MRF – New Beginning	-	-	-	-	-	-	29	21
ARF							14	-
BSP for Bulgaria	43	36	26	25	23	19	19	-
Bulgarian Rise			-	12	-	-	-	-
ITN	51	**65**	25	-	11	16	16	-
Velichie	-	-	-	-	-	13	10	-
MECh	-	-	-	-	-	-	11	-
Nr of parties in parliament	**5**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**6**	**7**	**9**	**5**
Turnout in %	50.61	42.19	40.23	39.42	40.69	34.41	38.94	50.70

61. According to the official results published by the CEC, Progressive Bulgaria won a decisive victory with 1 444 920 votes, representing 44.594% of the vote, and obtained 131 seats in the 240-seat National Assembly. It was followed at a considerable distance by GERB-SDS, with 433 755 votes, 13.387% and 39 seats; PP-DB, with 408 846 votes, 12.618% and 37 seats; the DPS, with 230 693 votes, 7.120% and 21 seats; and Vazrazhdane, with 137 940 votes, 4.257% and 12 seats. The CEC recorded 3 360 330 voters who signed voter lists and 3 240 156 valid votes cast for candidate lists.

62. Voter turnout reached 50.70%, a marked increase compared with 38.94% in October 2024 and 34.41% in June 2024. This increase should be read as a significant sign of renewed civic mobilisation after several years of voter fatigue and repeated early elections. In political terms, the result gave Progressive Bulgaria an absolute majority, while nearly one fifth of votes were cast for parties that did not pass the 4% electoral threshold.

63. The result represents a major departure from the fragmentation that had characterised the seven previous parliamentary elections since 2021. For the first time in recent years, one political force obtained the possibility to govern independently, potentially ending the cycle of weak coalition governments and repeated political deadlock. Whether this will lead to stable and effective governance will depend on the capacity of the new majority to translate its electoral mandate into concrete reforms.

64. Most parties represented in the outgoing National Assembly lost ground. GERB-SDS lost around half of its previous support, while the DPS recorded one of its weakest results in decades. The BSP-United Left alliance failed to pass the electoral threshold, leaving the Bulgarian Socialist Party without parliamentary representation for the first time since the beginning of democratic transition. With the exception of Vazrazhdane, far-right and populist parties represented in the previous Assembly also failed to enter parliament.

65. This outcome can be interpreted as a strong public demand for change, institutional effectiveness and political deliverability. The vote therefore carried not only a partisan message, but also a broader demand for cleaner governance, greater accountability and an end to the cycle of instability.

66. At the same time, the scale of the victory creates a heightened level of responsibility for Progressive Bulgaria. The new majority will be judged on its ability to stabilise prices, strengthen institutions, advance anti-corruption and judicial reforms, and restore trust in public administration. A clear majority may help overcome the institutional paralysis of recent years, but it also requires strong safeguards, parliamentary scrutiny and respect for pluralism.

67. The post-electoral process proceeded rapidly and without the deadlock that had characterised previous convocations of the National Assembly. By decree of the acting President Iliana Iotova, the newly elected 52nd National Assembly was convened for its first sitting on 30 April 2026, under Article 75 of the Constitution. On the same day, it elected Mihaela Dotsova of Progressive Bulgaria as Speaker, with 188 votes in favour out of 237 voting, with support from Progressive Bulgaria, GERB-SDS and the MRF, while PP, DB and Vazrazhdane abstained. This swift election of the Speaker contrasted with the prolonged deadlocks seen after previous elections and enabled the Assembly to complete its initial business on the same day.

68. Following the opening of parliament, on 7 May 2026, Mr Rumen Radev received the mandate to form a government. On 8 May 2026, the National Assembly approved Mr Rumen Radev as Prime Minister and approved his proposed Council of Ministers (124 in favour, 70 against and 36 abstentions). This allowed the formation of Bulgaria's first single-party government in many years and, in principle, created the possibility of a full parliamentary term until 2030.

69. The political profile of the new government will require close attention. Mr Radev's campaign centred on the fight against corruption, the dismantling of oligarchic networks, the reduction of prices and the restoration of stability. These themes correspond to the main grievances expressed during the 2025 protests and to long-standing concerns raised in previous PACE reports, including the need to strengthen the rule of law, judicial independence and the effectiveness of anti-corruption institutions.

70. However, the foreign policy orientation of the new government remains one of the main issues to be observed. Mr Radev has previously expressed Eurosceptic and Russia-friendly positions, including criticism of aspects of EU policy and of Bulgaria's euro adoption. Some analysts have therefore described the result as potentially opening a period of "euro-cooling" in Bulgaria's external positioning. Such assessments should be approached with caution, as Bulgaria's institutional framework, EU and NATO membership, full Schengen integration and entry into the eurozone on 1 January 2026 create strong structural anchors. Nevertheless, the balance between a «pragmatic foreign policy» and Bulgaria's existing Euro-Atlantic commitments will be an important test for the new government.

71. All in all, despite the new Prime Minister's high public profile, relatively little is known about the inner workings of his political circle or the policy instincts of his closest advisers. Thus the new political configuration offers both an opportunity and a risk. It offers an opportunity because a stable majority may finally allow Bulgaria to move from crisis management to long-delayed reform, including in areas repeatedly identified by the Assembly, the Venice Commission and GRECO. It also carries risks if the concentration of power weakens parliamentary oversight, marginalises opposition voices, or slows Bulgaria's commitment to European standards.

72. These elections appear to have produced a clear and workable parliamentary majority after years of instability. However, that stability is not an end in itself. The new authorities should use their mandate to strengthen democratic institutions, ensure effective checks and balances, combat corruption, safeguard media freedom and minority rights, and maintain Bulgaria's commitments as a member State of the Council of Europe.

8. The ways forward

73. The renewed political stability should also be used as an opportunity to move from repeated diagnosis to concrete reform. The roadmap identified in the previous PACE election observation report remains relevant, but it now requires updating and implementation in light of the 2026 experience.

74. The Assembly, together with the Venice Commission, stands ready to assist the Bulgarian authorities in addressing outstanding recommendations. Reform should be inclusive, evidence-based and not conducted under the pressure of imminent elections. The guiding principle should be simple: electoral rules must strengthen trust, not become instruments of short-term partisan advantage.

8.1. Addressing electoral malpractices

75. Vote-buying, controlled voting and intimidation remain among the most serious threats to electoral integrity in Bulgaria. The proactive measures taken by the interim government in 2026 were welcome and should become a permanent, institutionalised approach. Law enforcement operations should be non-selective, transparent and followed by prompt investigations, effective prosecution and final judicial outcomes. Voters should also be encouraged to report unlawful pressure through safe and accessible channels, accompanied by public information campaigns explaining their rights and available safeguards.

8.2. Combating corrupt practices

76. Electoral integrity cannot be separated from the broader fight against corruption. Bulgaria should fully implement outstanding GRECO recommendations, especially those concerning campaign finance, integrity in public office and law enforcement. The National Audit Office should have adequate powers, resources and independence to oversee political finance effectively. Public officials and members of parliament should be subject to meaningful conflict of interest rules and regular substantive checks of asset declarations.

8.3. Electoral legislation and system reform

77. Substantial changes to the Election Code should be prepared through an inclusive and transparent process, with sufficient time for consultation, implementation, training and voter education. Late amendments, such as the February 2026 changes on out-of-country polling stations, should be avoided. Any reform of the electoral system should aim to improve governability while preserving pluralism and equal suffrage. The authorities should seek the opinion of the Venice Commission and ODIHR on major reforms before adoption.

8.4. Voter registration and disenfranchisement

78. The blanket disenfranchisement of persons under judicial interdiction and prisoners should be abolished and replaced by rules that respect proportionality and individual assessment. The inclusion of citizens without a permanent address in voter lists was a positive step, but it should be accompanied by proactive information and outreach. Out-of-country voting arrangements should be assessed to ensure that restrictions do not disproportionately affect citizens abroad.

8.5. Enhancing ethical standards

79. Political parties and coalitions should adopt and enforce codes of ethics applicable to candidates, elected officials and party representatives. These codes should address conflicts of interest, intimidation of voters, hate speech, gender-based attacks, disinformation and the misuse of public office. Ethical standards should be supported by training, internal enforcement mechanisms and clear consequences for violations.

8.6. Preventing misuse of administrative resources

80. The legal framework should more clearly regulate campaigning by public officials, including at local level, and prevent the use of public office, public premises, social benefits or public-sector employment to influence voters. Sanctions should be timely, proportionate and dissuasive. A clear separation between State and party is essential to a level playing field.

8.7. Voting methods and technology

81. The role of electronic voting machines should be reconsidered through an independent evaluation. If machines are retained, they should serve a clear purpose, be supported by independent certification, transparent audits and adequate institutional capacity within the CEC. The result management system should be independently certified. Video recording and live streaming should be preserved and strengthened, including by introducing sanctions for failure to record where legally required.

8.8. Enhancing voter participation

82. The increase in turnout in 2026 was encouraging, but it should not be taken for granted. Restoring participation requires stable institutions, credible reform and visible accountability. Civic and voter education should target first-time voters, citizens abroad, disadvantaged communities and voters with disabilities. Political actors should avoid rhetoric that deepens cynicism and should engage citizens through substantive debate.

8.9. Inclusion of women and minorities

83. Women remain under-represented as candidates and elected officials. The authorities and political parties should consider temporary special measures, internal party targets, placement rules and capacity-building programmes to improve women's representation. Minority participation should also be encouraged. The prohibition on campaigning in languages other than Bulgarian should be reviewed in light of international standards and previous recommendations.

8.10. Media freedom and election coverage

84. Legislative and practical measures are needed to protect journalists from intimidation, abusive litigation and undue political or economic pressure. The distinction between editorial content and paid political advertising should be made clear. Public service media should be given sufficient editorial freedom to provide analytical election coverage, debates and interviews, rather than merely formal equal airtime.

8.11. Transparency in parliamentary work

85. Transparent law-making is essential for public trust. Parliament should ensure adequate timelines for bills, meaningful consultation with civil society and experts, publication of amendments in due time, and careful scrutiny of electoral legislation. Fast-track procedures should not be used for changes affecting fundamental electoral rights unless strictly necessary.

8.12. Stability of institutions

86. Bulgaria needs stable institutions capable of implementing long-term policies. Frequent changes to electoral rules, repeated elections and temporary administrative arrangements have undermined legal certainty. The new authorities should use the parliamentary majority responsibly to consolidate institutions, not to centralise power. Stability must go hand in hand with checks and balances, transparency and respect for Council of Europe standards.

9. Conclusions

87. The PACE delegation commends the Bulgarian election administration and the many officials who organised the 19 April 2026 early parliamentary elections in a professional and transparent manner. The elections were administered efficiently, and election day was calm and orderly. Fundamental freedoms were generally respected, and voters were offered a genuine choice.

88. After years of political instability and repeated returns to the polls, Bulgarian citizens defied expectations and voted in strong numbers to give the country a chance for stable government. The responsibility now lies with Bulgaria's political leaders to respect that message and turn this vote into effective and credible governance.

89. The clearest message of this election is that Bulgarian citizens asked for change. The results reflected the spirit of the demonstrations at the end of 2025, driven by public frustration over the perception of state capture, the influence of oligarchic networks, the slow pace of anti-corruption reform, and concerns over public spending and the budgetary crisis. In that context, these elections became central to restoring political legitimacy.

90. They also confirmed a trend already noted by the Assembly: the continued erosion of traditional mainstream parties that have increasingly failed to meet public expectations. This points to a deeper crisis of confidence in parties that have not delivered sufficient reform, integrity and stability.

91. The delegation remains seriously concerned by persistent suspicions of vote-buying and controlled voting ahead of these elections. It therefore commends the interim government for its proactive and efficient efforts to address these practices and to put in place measures against foreign malign interference. Such threats remain a serious challenge to public trust and to the integrity of the democratic process and need to be tackled seriously.

92. Measures such as the streaming of vote counting appear to have increased transparency and confidence. The continued use of voting machines also shows that election procedures must evolve with the times. But technology can build trust only if it is supported by transparent procedures, independent audits, institutional capacity and clear safeguards.

93. At the same time, outdated administrative practices still slowed parts of the process. If Bulgaria wants elections that are both efficient and trusted, reform must address both new technology and old habits. More broadly, these elections once again show the need for a serious revision of electoral law and practice. The revised roadmap offers a clear blueprint to move to action.

94. The Assembly will continue to follow developments in Bulgaria under the periodic review procedure. The closure of the post-monitoring dialogue in October 2025 was a recognition of progress, not an end point. The 2026 elections show that Bulgaria has the institutional capacity to conduct orderly and transparent elections, but also that the quality of democracy depends on the political will to tackle entrenched practices that weaken public confidence.

95. The new authorities should therefore treat electoral reform not as a technical exercise, but as part of a broader effort to restore trust in democratic institutions. This requires serious follow-up to observation recommendations, transparent parliamentary work, independent oversight institutions, meaningful media freedom and a clear separation between public authority and party interest.

96. The Parliamentary Assembly, together with the Venice Commission, stands ready to work with the new authorities to further strengthen Bulgaria's electoral framework and democratic standards.

Appendix 1 – Composition of the ad hoc committee

Based on the proposals by the political groups of the Assembly, the ad hoc committee was composed as follows:

Chairperson: Mr Chris SAID, Malta

Vice-Chairperson: Mr Armen GEVORGYAN, Armenia

Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group (SOC)

– Mr Jone BLIKRA, Norway
– Ms Bisera KOSTADINOVSKA-STOJCHEVSKA, North Macedonia
– Mr António MENDONÇA MENDES, Portugal

Group of the European People's Party (EPP/CD)

– Mr Chris SAID, Malta

European Conservatives, Patriots & Affiliates (ECPA)

– Mr Armen GEVORGYAN, Armenia
– Mr José María SÁNCHEZ GARCÍA, Spain

Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)

– Mr Bertrand BOUYX, France
– Ms Marijana PULJAK, Croatia
– Ms Rian VOGELS, Netherlands

Group of the Unified European Left (UEL)

– ZZ

Venice Commission

– Mr Tomáš LANGÁŠEK, Substitute member of the Venice Commission in respect of the Czech Republic
– Ms Tone SØRFONN MOE, Legal advisor, Venice Commission Secretariat
– Mr Domenico VALLARIO, Legal advisor, Venice Commission Secretariat

Secretariat

– Ms Ivi-Triin ODRATS, Deputy Head of the Elections Division
– Ms Carine ROLLER-KAUFMAN, Assistant, Elections Division

Appendix 2 – Programme of the meetings of the PACE Electoral Observation Mission

Friday, 17 April 2026

14:00-15:00 PACE delegation meeting
- welcome remarks by Mr Chris Said, Head of the PACE delegation
- presentation on the political environment by Mr Dimitar Betuhovski, Assistant, Consultant to the delegation
- presentation on legal aspects by Mr Tomáš Langášek, Substitute member of the Venice Commission in respect of the Czech Republic
- briefing on practicalities by the Secretariat

15:00-16:30 Presentation by the ODIHR Election Observation Mission
- Welcome and overview of the EOM's work – Ms Dunja Mijatović, Head of Mission
- Political Background, Contestants and Campaign – Ms Jelena Stefanović, Political Analyst
- Media Landscape and Campaign – Ms Adeline Marquis, Media Analyst
- Legal Framework and Complaints – Mr David Ghonghadze, Legal Analyst
- Election Administration, Voter and Candidate Registration – Mr Xavier Noc, Election Analyst

16:45-18:15 Exchange of views with representatives of NGOs active in the field of election observation
- Ms Nadezhda Gologanova, Civic Initiative for Free and Democratic Elections
- Mr Svetoslav Malinov, Center for the Study of Democracy
- Ms Iva Lazarova, Institute for Public Environment Development
- Ms Bilyana Wegertseder, Bulgarian Institute for Legal Initiatives
- Ms Zlatina Todorova, European Dialogue for Civic Education and Culture

18:15-19:15 Exchange of views with representatives of the media
- Mr Alexandar Detev, Deutsche Welle (DW)
- Mr Lyudmil Iliev, journal "Sega"
- Mr Lyubcho Neshkov and Mr Velislav Iliev, BGNES
- Ms Genka Ivanova, BTA
- Maria Cheresheva, Association of Bulgarian journalism
- Ms Gabriela Naplatanova and Kadrinka Kadrinova, Union of Electronic Media

Saturday, 18 April 2026

09:00-11:50 Consecutive meetings with leaders and representatives of political parties and coalitions:

09:00-09:30 Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) – UDF
- Georg Georgiev
- Yordanka Fandakova
- Hristo Gadzhev

09:30-10:00 We continue the change – Democratic Bulgaria (WCC-DB)
- Mr Nikolay Denkov
- Ms Alexandra Sterkova

10:00-10:20 Movement for Rights and Freedoms – New Beginning (DPS-NN)
- Ms Atidje Alieva-Veli
- Ms Elena Yoncheva
- Ms Iskra Mihaylova-Koparova
- Mr Stanislav Anastasov
- Mr Taner Kabilov
- Mr Hamid Hamid

10:30-10:50 Progressive Bulgaria
- Mr Petar Vitanov
- Ms Mihaela Dotsova
- Mr Anton Kutev

10:50-11:10 “There is such a People” (ITN)
- Mr Dimitar Gurdev

11:10-11:30 United Left (BSP)
- Ms Natalia Kiselova
- Mr Enyo Savov

12:00-12:45 Presentation by the ODIHR EOM on the E-day procedures
- Election Day Procedures – Mr Xavier Noc, Election Analyst
- STO Reporting – Ms Anders Eriksson, Statistical Analyst
- Security – Ms Katarzyna Witt, Security Expert

13:00-13:45 Meeting with the Chairperson and members of the Central Election Commission
- Ms Kameliya Neykova, Chairperson

14:00-15:45 Meeting with ministers of the caretaker government responsible for running the elections
- Mr Radi Naidenov, Deputy Foreign Minister
- Mr Ivan Anchev, Deputy Minister of Interior
- Ms Ivelina Dundakova, Chief of the Cabinet of the Minister of Interior
- Mr Nikolay Saykov, Chief of the Cabinet of the Minister for Regional Development and Public Works
- Mr Ivan Naydonov, Permanent Secretary to the MFA
- Ms Maria Spassova, Ambassador at Large and Head of the Working Group on Countering Disinformation and Combating Hybrid Threats.
- Ms Elitsa Videnova, Director of the Public Relations and Protocol Directorate at the Ministry of E-Government and member of the Election Observation Coordination Team
- Ms Hristiana Grozdanova, Director Human Rights Directorate, MFA
- Mr Ivan Madzharov, Deputy Director General Directorate National Police
- Ms Milena Ivanova, Head of Department, Human Rights Directorate, MFA

16:00 Meeting with drivers and interpreters

Sunday, 19 April 2026

06:30 Departure to observe the opening of polling stations

07:00-20:00 Election Day – observation in polling stations

20:00-23:00 Observing the closing and counting in polling stations

Monday, 20 April 2026

08:30-09:30 Meeting of the delegation (debriefing and preparation of a statement)

15:00-16:00 Joint press conference with the ODIHR EOM

Appendix 3 – Press release of the International Election Observation Mission

Bulgaria's early parliamentary elections offered voters a genuine choice, but were marked by high levels of polarization and negative rhetoric, international observers say

SOFIA, 20 April 2026 – Bulgaria's 19 April early parliamentary elections were marked by an increase in participation and were administered transparently and efficiently, despite gaps in the legislative framework and a last-minute amendment on the number of polling stations abroad, that undermined the stability of the electoral law and the inclusiveness of the process, international observers said in a preliminary statement released today. Held against a backdrop of repeated elections and prolonged political instability, the authorities undertook measures to safeguard electoral integrity, including efforts to address persistent allegations of vote buying and intimidation.

Fundamental freedoms were generally respected, but the campaign was highly polarized and marked by negative rhetoric, the observers said. Online campaigning, which is largely unregulated, played a prominent role in voter engagement, while also facilitating the circulation of disinformation narratives, including about government activities. Key policy issues such as energy, foreign policy, corruption, the rising cost of living, the rule of law, and infrastructure dominated campaign messaging.

"The process we have observed offered voters a genuine choice, but in an atmosphere of significant political polarization and campaign rhetoric that was often negative", said Dunja Mijatović, head of the election observation mission from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. "Fundamental freedoms were respected and the process was generally well administered. At the same time, work remains to be done, including in addressing issues such as alleged vote-buying, disinformation, and limited transparency in many aspects of the campaign."

"After years of political instability and repeated returns to the polls, Bulgarian citizens defied logic and voted in strong numbers to give the country a chance for stable government," said Chris Said, Head of the delegation of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. "The responsibility now lies with Bulgaria's political leaders to respect that message and turn this vote into effective and credible governance."

The legal framework provides a generally adequate basis for democratic elections, although a number of prior ODIHR and Council of Europe Venice Commission recommendations remain unaddressed, including those concerning the residency requirement for candidates, the effective investigation and sanctioning of electoral violations, legal avenues to challenge results, and measures to enhance the participation of women and minority groups.

The media landscape is pluralistic, yet concerns were raised about political and economic influence, widespread self-censorship, and limited analytical reporting, limiting voters' access to impartial and comprehensive information. While legal guarantees for freedom of expression and access to information exist, criminal defamation and unimplemented safeguards under the European Media Freedom Act remain concerns for editorial independence. ODIHR media monitoring indicated that, despite formal compliance with airtime rules, a reduced scope of editorial and critical news coverage on the part of private media outlets weakened voters' ability to make informed choices.

Although government authorities established mechanisms to address disinformation, the risks of cyber threats, and foreign interference, gaps in the implementation of the EU Digital Services Act and delays in co-ordination between oversight bodies negatively affected their effectiveness.

The election administration met legal deadlines and managed preparations efficiently across all levels, although late resignations of lower-level commissions strained the process. Election day was generally calm and orderly. While the vast majority of polling stations operated smoothly, some procedural shortcomings were noted, including isolated cases of ballot handling and failure to ensure the secrecy of the vote or to follow proper voter verification procedures.

Women remain underrepresented in public and political life, and few parties promoted women candidates or addressed women's political participation in their campaigns. There were several instances of gender-based attacks and smear campaigns, however, including in the use of AI-generated content to defame a woman journalist. Positively, women featured as prominent speakers in more than half of the campaign events observed.

The legal framework that governs party and campaign finance continues to leave prior ODIHR recommendations unimplemented, including those on the lack of pre-election reporting and limited oversight by the National Audit Office. The legislation does not regulate third-party campaigning, and online political

advertising is not subject to comprehensive disclosure, creating potential loopholes for unregulated spending. In some instances, campaigning by public officials during working hours blurred the line between state and party.

Election dispute resolution is provided for through both election commissions and administrative courts, with expedited procedures for filing and adjudicating some complaints. Gaps in the legal framework, including restrictive standing, the inability to challenge election results protocols directly, and lengthy sanctioning and enforcement processes, limited access to effective legal redress and undermined due process.