

## **EVENT REPORT**

### **EIAS Briefing Seminar on the Upcoming Elections in Uzbekistan**

*2 September 2021, EIAS, Brussels*

On 2 September 2021, EIAS hosted a briefing seminar on the upcoming presidential election in Uzbekistan. The discussion was chaired by EIAS Director, Ms Lin Goethals, with opening and welcoming remarks by the Ambassador of the Republic of Uzbekistan to the Kingdom of Belgium, H.E Mr Dilyor Khakimov and EIAS CEO, Mr Axel Goethals. Dr Gulnoza Ismailova, a member of the Central Election Commission (CEC) of Uzbekistan and Deputy Director of the University of the World Economy and Diplomacy was invited as the Keynote speaker for the event. The briefing seminar was centred around electoral legislative reforms undertaken by the Uzbek government as well as further challenges for the country's process of democratization and development. Presentations were followed by a Q&A session with the audience. Hosted in accordance with the latest COVID-19 regulations, this was the first in-person event for EIAS since September 2020. The following report is a brief summary of the discussions.

Prior to Dr Ismailova's address, H.E Mr Dilyor Khakimov stressed the growth of informal contacts between the EU and Uzbekistan and the importance of the European Parliament as a synonym of democracy. Highlighting the ongoing political reforms and processes in Uzbekistan, the election on the 24th of October marks a new beginning in the electoral process, with a focus on technical matters. Mr Goethals remarked on his experience as an independent election observer in the voting and counting procedures during the Uzbekistan Parliamentary election in 2019. He commented on the improved engagement of voters as well as the 'positive evolution' of electoral reforms, fostering greater transparency and participation. Mr Goethals concluded by quoting possible policy recommendations as outlined in the [EIAS Election Observer Report](#), including mandatory voting and amendments to the tabulating procedure, emphasising that the peoples' right to vote also brings along civil responsibilities. After this, Mr Ilhan Kyuchyuk, Member of the European Parliament and the Standing Rapporteur on Uzbekistan in the European Parliament shared his perspectives and introductory remarks, shedding light on the latest developments and reforms in Uzbekistan and its relations with the EU.

The floor was then given to the Keynote Speaker, Dr Ismailova, who opened by outlining the progress Uzbekistan has made in its 30 years of independence, especially in the past five years since President Mirziyoyev took office. This included highlighting the improvements made for greater participation and representation of minorities as well as greater numbers of both domestic and international observers. Women are currently represented by 40% in the Central Election Commission (CEC), consisting of 21 members. The policy of the new Uzbekistan is pushing toward gender equality in decision-making processes, and is opening the country to foreign experts and observers. Openness is considered one of the main priorities for the October 2021 Presidential election, shifting Uzbekistan towards an open democratic society, with its people serving as the sole source of state power, implementing international electoral standards. These advancements reflect not only a greater level of public and international engagement but also wider processes of democratisation, while the previous six election laws have now been gathered into a single one.

Dr Ismailova laid out the international recognition Uzbekistan has been given by accredited observers such as the OSCE / ODIHR in the wake of such reforms. As an OSCE member state, Uzbekistan establishes that the ‘will of the people, freely and fairly expressed through periodic and genuine elections, is the basis of the authority and legitimacy of the government’. In this regard, the Final Report by the OSCE / ODIHR on the 2019 Parliamentary election stated: ‘the CEC made a great effort to prepare the parliamentary elections in an improved manner. Noteworthy changes included restricting the constituencies to ensure equal suffrage, compiling a completely new countrywide voter register, adopting numerous resolutions to operationalise the Election Code, improving access for persons with disabilities, training thousands of polling officials and conducting an intensive voter information campaign’.

A further four examples of amendments and additions to the Electoral Code were addressed, beginning with the changes to the election date – now on the third Sunday of October. Second was a mention of the introduction of the inclusion of voter lists for those who live abroad. Next, Dr Ismailova outlined the amendments made to facilitate more transparent financial records and payment procedures for parties, candidates, campaigns, and the CEC, which now have been published for the first time, as well as greater auditing power for the Accounting Chamber. Finally, Dr Ismailova closed on highlighting the importance of the implementation of a unified voter registration (the Electoral Management Information Systems (EMIS) and the Unified Election Voter List (EESI)) based on the principle of ‘one vote, one voice’. As a result, more than 21 million voters have been included in the EESI.

Following the keynote address an interactive Q&A session with the audience took place. Many of the questions asked were technical ones about Uzbekistan and the upcoming election, including topics centred around *democracy in Uzbekistan*, *environmental concerns*, *mindset of the electorate*, and *further challenges and recommendations for Uzbek electoral integrity*. which Dr Ismailova addressed in turn.

In response to whether independent candidates are allowed to stand for election, Dr Ismailova explained that contrary to international norms, independent candidates are not allowed to stand for election in Uzbekistan. Instead “each party is represented by a candidate” who requires the signatures of at least 1% of the population (~800,000) with no more than 8% from one specific region. Prior to the election, voters are no longer restricted to support candidates from different parties, after which it is up to them to vote for the best candidate at the ballots. It is as such that the ecological party first participated in the 2019 Parliamentary Election, winning 15 seats in Parliament. Furthermore, female representation is growing and the Uzbek parliament is now listed among the world’s top 50 in this regard. Of the five participating candidates running for the 24 October 2021 Presidential elections four are male and one female. It is thereby the parties who decide by whom they will be represented.

Addressing a question on how Uzbekistan has tried to build its own electoral model and the evolution of elections in the country, the question is also what democracy means for Uzbekistan. This is as stated in the constitution, stipulating that “the sole source of the state is its population”. One can vote in Uzbekistan, the media are open, and there is a growing interest of international observers, parties’ observers and mass media. Uzbekistan has a “hot and competitive” campaign coming up and there is an irreversibility of the reforms, building a sense of community and society, by including one’s neighbourhood, thereby increasing the involvement in society.

As regards the languages in which the ballots are printed and the inclusion of ethnic languages in the electoral process, although the OSCE stated in the 2019 Election Observer Mission Final Report: ‘Ballot papers were printed in Uzbek, Russian and Karakalpak... no ballots for the parliamentary elections were printed in other languages even though minority languages are widely spoken in certain areas’. Ms Ismailova stated that in the upcoming presidential election, election materials would be available in Uzbek, Russian, Karakalpak, Tajik and Kazakh. Nowadays, Uzbekistan’s youth speaks more English than Russian but the ballots will be available in Uzbek and Russian and in some cases in the local languages of the minorities.

The most important for Uzbekistan is the need to change the mindset of its people, which needs to shift away from “it is my duty to vote” towards a genuine interest and engagement, corresponding to the principle of “one vote, one voice”. The minimum voting age in Uzbekistan is 18 years, as outlined in the constitution. Out of 21 million eligible voters, roughly one-third of them (seven million) are young adults (18-30). Dr Ismailova stressed the importance of social networks and social media (especially for young people) and given Uzbekistan’s 157th place in the democratic index, there is still work to do on election processes.

She outlined the successful reforms and steps taken by the CEC and Uzbek government to further democratize since the previous election while underlying the present challenges to advance greater participation and representation. The proactive developments taken by Uzbekistan under President Mirziyoyev should not be understated. In the past five years, Uzbekistan has enjoyed an expansion of electoral rights, transparency and representation for minorities and females. However, many recommendations to further meet international standards remain. Election day observations including the presence of illegal proxy voting, ballot box stuffing, and unauthorised personnel handling ballots were witnessed by the OSCE in the 2019 parliamentary election. Outside of election day observations, special efforts should be made to address issues such as following the recommendations of the OSCE such as restrictions on the fundamental freedoms of association, assembly and expression, suffrage rights, citizen election observation and restriction of political parties.

This EIAS briefing seminar provided useful insight into the upcoming merits and hurdles faced by the Uzbek government and wider society. The roundtable discussion served as a platform to inform interested parties and create a meaningful discourse on the expectation and situation in Uzbekistan in preparation for the presidential election next month. The event concluded with a networking reception for further questions to be asked and the opportunity to try Uzbek delicacies.