



HELSINKI COMMISSION REPORT

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IN BRIEF

Democratic Elections in the OSCE Region

Who Stays in Power the Longest and Why?

In the 1990 Copenhagen Document, the OSCE participating States adopted, by consensus, watershed commitments on free and fair elections.

They stated that the participating States:

“... solemnly declare that among those elements of justice which are essential to the full expression of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all human beings are the following:

[...]

— free elections that will be held at reasonable intervals by secret ballot or by equivalent free voting procedure, under conditions which ensure in practice the free expression of the opinion of the electors in the choice of their representatives;

[...]

— a clear separation between the State and political parties; in particular, political parties will not be merged with the State;”

Accordingly, the participating States rejected the concept of a one-party state or “modified” democracy (e.g., communist- or socialist-democracy). In a summit held later that year, the OSCE Heads of State or Government declared, “We undertake to build, consolidate and strengthen democracy as the only system of government of our nations.”²

Who are the OSCE’s Longest-Serving Leaders – and Why?

In spite of the OSCE commitment to hold free and fair elections, some OSCE participating States have demonstrated even more resistance—if not complete unwillingness—to hold free and fair elections. In a few, a transfer of power is more likely to be the result of death than an election. In some cases, a generation has come of age under a single ruler or ruling family.

Azerbaijan: Ilham Aliyev is the fourth and current president of Azerbaijan and has been in office since October 31, 2003. He succeeded his ailing father, Heydar Aliyev, who became president on June 24, 1993, after serving as the country’s senior-most communist party official for nearly 20 years.

In 2016, Ilham Aliyev forced constitutional changes through a controversial referendum³ that extended his electoral mandate, expanded his authority, and appointed his wife to the unelected position of First Vice President, paving her way to the front of the line of presidential succession. Moreover, since signing the Helsinki Final Act in 1992, Azerbaijan’s elections have not met international standards and its political system remains dogged by systemic corruption and extensive official repression.

In 2015, Azerbaijan blocked the renewal of the OSCE Mission in Baku and forced its premature closure, cutting off the office's work in all three OSCE dimensions. In the same year, Azerbaijan effectively blocked OSCE election observation through poison-pill conditions.

Belarus: In Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko—the country's longest serving head of state—has been in power since July 20, 1994. He has enjoyed essentially uncontested power throughout his presidency and none of the country's elections since 1994 have been deemed free or fair.

Following a referendum in 1996 that cemented his control, Lukashenko has manipulated the levers of government to maintain his complete political control, extending his electoral mandate indefinitely and ensuring an authoritarian system that has brooked no rivals.

Kazakhstan: Nursultan Nazarbayev is the country's first and only serving President. Prior to his assumption of the presidency, he was Kazakhstan's last Chairman of the Supreme Soviet and has dominated the country's political landscape since 1989.

Although Kazakhstan held the Chairmanship of the OSCE in 2010, no election since the country's independence in 1991 has been deemed free or fair by the OSCE. In its most recent assessment of the 2016 presidential elections, the OSCE concluded, "The legal framework restricts fundamental civil and political rights, and comprehensive reform is required. In a positive development, candidate registration was inclusive and six parties contested the elections, but genuine political choice is still lacking."⁴

Russia: Vladimir Putin has enjoyed unique and unfettered access to Russia's levers of power for nearly 20 years and is a predominant figure in Russia's political landscape. He was originally elected President of the Russian Federation on May 7, 2012, and is currently serving his second term. He served in the same capacity from 2000

to 2008 and served as Prime Minister from 1999 to 2000 and 2008 to 2012.

Though international observers have noted frequent electoral irregularities, human rights abuses, and corruption allegations during his presidency, Putin still enjoys significant support due at least in part to his complete control of television and to a Kremlin narrative that shows Putin strengthening Russia and reclaiming its place as a major world power.

With elections coming up in 2018, Putin has cracked down even further against demonstrations and opposition media outlets. Boris Nemtsov, a leading opposition figure, was assassinated in front of the Kremlin in 2015. Alexei Navalny, who is seeking to oppose Putin in the 2018 elections, has been repeatedly threatened, attacked, and arrested.

Tajikistan: Emomali Rahmon has been President of Tajikistan since November 16, 1994, and is the country's longest serving head of state.

Prior to assuming to the presidency, he was the country's last Chairman of the Supreme Soviet and has enjoyed absolute authority ever since. He heads a *de facto* single party state, and Tajikistan elections are repeatedly criticized as neither free nor fair by observers.

Rahmon has also forced constitutional changes that lengthen his electoral mandate, theoretically in perpetuity. The country's main opposition party, the Islamic Renewal Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), was banned in 2015 and Tajik authorities declared it a terrorist organization, arresting many of its leaders, as well as the lawyers who tried to defend them.

Turkey: Current Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan was elected in 2014 and previously served as prime minister from 2003 to 2014. Since assuming the presidency, Erdogan has greatly expanded the authority of the formally ceremonial presidency, undercutting the consti-

tutional primacy of the prime minister and the independence of the parliament and judiciary.

In 2017, he initiated a controversial constitutional referendum that narrowly approved the country's transition from a parliamentary to an "executive presidential" system, effectively codifying the expanded authorities he had exercised *de facto* since 2014.

Under the revised constitution, which goes into effect in 2019, President Erdogan will be eligible for two more five-year terms as president and could rule even longer, depending on interpretations of the constitution's allowance for early elections called by the president.

Turkmenistan: Gurbanguly Berdymuhammedov is the current and second President of Turkmenistan. He has been in power since death of his predecessor, Saparmurat Niyazov (also known as "Türkmenbaşy"), who was in office from 1985 until his death in 2006. Berdymuhammedov became the acting president despite constitutional provisions according to which

the speaker of parliament should have become acting president, and was formally elected in February 2007 in a one-party race. He has been reelected twice with no competition.

Though less eccentric than his predecessor, he has abused the levers of government for his own personal gain and leads a regime of absolute authority. International observers frequently criticize Turkmenistan's elections, governance, and shameless displays of personality cults pertaining to the country's leadership.

The OSCE has never held a full election observation mission in Turkmenistan, partially due to the lack of either a democratic environment or a multi-party system. The OSCE did deploy a limited assessment mission for the 2017 presidential elections, which concluded that "the presidential election took place in a strictly controlled political environment," and that "the predominant position of the incumbent and the lack of genuine opposition and meaningful pluralism limited voters' choice."⁵

Uzbekistan: Does Succession Signal a New Path?

In Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev has been in power since December 4, 2016, succeeding Islam Karimov as the second President of Uzbekistan. Karimov came to power in 1989, during the Soviet period, and held absolute power from the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 until his death in 2016, thus exemplifying the phrase "president for life." Mirziyoyev was first named interim President in September and then elected President in December 2016.

The OSCE previously declined to observe most Uzbekistan elections because of the absence of the fundamental prerequisites for political pluralism. However, in light of some very tentative political improvements in advance of the elections, the OSCE chose to observe the December 4, 2016, elections in which Mirziyoyev won the Presidency.

OSCE observers noted the lack of true choice in Uzbekistan's election and declared it neither free nor fair. In his short time in office, Mirziyoyev has already made positive changes; it remains to be seen whether they will continue and create an environment in which the presidency can be meaningfully contested. Presidential elections will be held again in Uzbekistan in 2021.

About the Helsinki Commission

The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the U.S. Helsinki Commission, is an independent agency of the Federal Government charged with monitoring compliance with the Helsinki Accords and advancing comprehensive security through promotion of human rights, democracy, and economic, environmental and military cooperation in 57 countries. The Commission consists of nine members from the U.S. Senate, nine from the House of Representatives, and one member each from the Departments of State, Defense, and Commerce.

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¹ Document of the Copenhagen Meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE, Copenhagen 1990, para. 5. <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/14304?download=true>

² Charter of Paris for a New Europe, Paris 1990, p. 3. <http://www.osce.org/mc/39516?download=true>

³ "Azerbaijan's Constitutional Referendum Creates Crisis of Legitimacy," Press Release, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, Sept. 15, 2016. <https://www.csce.gov/international-impact/press-and-media/press-releases/azerbaijan-s-constitutional-referendum-creates>

⁴ Republic of Kazakhstan Early Parliamentary Elections 20 March 2016, OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report, Sec. I, Executive Summary, p. 1.

⁵ Turkmenistan Presidential Election 12 February 2017, OSCE/ODIHR Election Assessment Mission Final Report, Sec. I, Executive Summary, p. 1. <http://www.osce.org/odihr/316586?download=true>