

Event Report



Looking Ahead to the 2019 Parliamentary Elections in Uzbekistan

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Abstract

On December 9 2019, the European Institute for Asian Studies (EIAS) in cooperation with the Embassy of Uzbekistan hosted a briefing seminar titled "Looking Ahead to the 2019 Parliamentary Elections in Uzbekistan". The panel consisted of Uzbek and European experts and was moderated by EIAS CEO, Axel Goethals. The discussion was centred on the upcoming elections with the motto "New Uzbekistan- New Elections" and the propensity to push the country towards a democratic transition and unleash the potential of the nation.

The event began with a welcome speech and preliminary insights into the topic by Mr Goethals. He mentioned that these elections in December would be the first parliamentary elections under Shavkat Mirziyoyev, under whom reforms and modernisations to the electoral process and changes to the structure and function of the parliament and government itself are expected in Uzbekistan's transition towards a democratic government. New technological improvements have also been introduced as means of increasing the electoral process and ease and efficiency in voting, thereby enabling greater civil engagement in the political process.

He briefly highlighted more information on the elections this year, stating that five parties would contest this year, including an international observer presence twice as large as during the previous parliamentary elections. The opening up of the government to international observation recommendations from previous years and learning from the electoral practices and systems across the globe such as that of Belgium, indicate a positive outlook towards a democratic transition for Uzbekistan.

Mr Goethals also indicated that this event also served to commemorate the 27th Anniversary celebration of the adoption of the Uzbek Constitution, which was established on a multitude of principles and recognised norms of international law and human rights. Mr Goethals also highlighted that Central Asian countries are increasingly making progress in setting up collaborations in the region, which will also bring about a new era of opportunity for international cooperation between Central Asia and the European Union.

The floor was then opened to remarks by H.E. Dilyor Khakimov, Ambassador of Uzbekistan to the Benelux countries and the European Union. He began by stating that today we are facing a different political moment in the history of Uzbekistan, emphasising that it will be the first elections under Shavkat Mirziyoyev who was elected exactly 3 years ago.

On the elections itself, Ambassador Khakimov mentioned that they are expecting accountability and responsibility of election officials which will lead to a free, open and fair process. Most importantly, to maintain the constitutional principle of democracy and the rights of the citizens to participate and on the management of society to ensure the continuation of tremendous changes and increasing political freedom in Uzbekistan.

He stated that greater attention will be paid to the recently renewed electoral legislation. For the first time in the history of Uzbekistan a comprehensive legislative framework for the country has been developed and adopted. This important document has been analysed by more than 50 different countries and international organisations. In July this year the Central Election Commission (CEC) proposed the pre-election assessment and preparations for the upcoming elections, taking measures to ensure freedom and a democratic process. A number of innovations were apparent in this year's election campaign including those related to technological introduction of information and communication modes. New election management information systems will cover many tasks and facilities, as well as the improvement of training and professional development of the election commissions, stressing the role of control and organisation of the individuals involved in the electoral commission.

Ambassador Khakimov explained that Uzbekistan is expecting more than 20.5 million voters to vote, including 2 million young people participating for the first time in a free and open way. Youth participation is the key in Uzbekistan with 65 percent of the

population under the age of 30. In addition, 55 election precincts have been set up at the embassies and consulates around the world to cater to Uzbek citizens living abroad, including in Brussels where the Embassy has organised and set up polling stations for citizens based in the Benelux countries. The Embassy has registered approximately 800 citizens all willing to participate in the electoral process. This reinforces the statement that "every vote matters". Much effort and financial resources are being funnelled to reach out to everyone and involve every person willing to participate in the election.

Ambassador Khakimov also reflected on the 2nd consultative informal meeting of Central Asian leaders, stating that it is a new and important format initiated by the President of Uzbekistan to create a friendly atmosphere and a spirit of good neighbourliness among the five republics. He added that the regional states will continue this relationship and Central Asia will draw more attention from abroad. This displays the positive changes being made and aiming to bring different partners and commissions to understand common interests and goals of the different ongoing processes. It is not only a matter of principle for Uzbekistan, but also a matter of economic survival and future development of the region.

Mr Turkstra shared the same sentiments as that of Ambassador Khakimov, stating that the upcoming elections are one of the most demanding tasks of the Uzbekistan government, stressing that the country is ready for a democratic change. He also echoed that the new political environment and the revised legal framework would advance the electoral climate for the better. The international community also has high expectations as is evident in the number of observers and the mission of the OSCE appointed for the electoral process compared to the previous elections. The country is experiencing new reforms, such as the lifting of censorship and reforms in law-enforcement bodies etc., including the adoption of more humane processes (eradication of child labour, releasing of prisoners) as well as ensuring transparency and accountability of elected representatives and state institutions through new parliamentary commissions. The incumbent president has been successful in transforming the political culture of Uzbekistan, as well as the relationship between the state and the society, which can be highlighted as a major step along with state building which has been a priority of the President since the beginning of his term.

As a depiction of this increased dialogue, 2017 was named the "Year of Dialogue with the People and Human Interests", in which more direct communication through electronic channels, social media between state and society was demonstrated, building greater trust. For example, the National Conference on Citizen Engagement and a Virtual Reception of the President of Uzbekistan, allows the public to converse and share their complaints and thoughts more directly with decision makers and governmental agencies. This creates a better relationship between the state and society and will benefit the future successes of the nation as a whole.

Mr Turkstra also stressed seven main developments in Uzbekistan's democratisation process. Firstly, the implementation of new laws on parliamentary controls and accountability, which made it obligatory for Parliamentarians to visit their regions for at least 10 days and part take in the concerns of the public. Secondly, the important role played by the younger Uzbek generation in the electoral process. People aged 24 or younger consist of 40 percent of the population. Young people born into an independent Uzbekistan will play a major role in transforming the political and economic environment in the future Uzbekistan and have a growing sense of empowerment. Thirdly, the

electoral code, which outlines the introduction of information and communication technologies, such as, to improve voter registration, combat electoral fraud etc.

Moreover, he went on to highlight that the Central Election Commission introduced a new platform, a mobile application known as 'Saylov'. It was designed specifically for the December elections and consists of practical guides on voting procedures and locations of polling stations to encourage voters to participate. Other changes to the code include the allocation of a 30 percent quota for women, indicating a significant improvement in the gender balance among candidates. For example, this year's candidates list includes 310 women out of the 750 contestants - a 10 percent increase vis-a-vis the last parliamentary elections - which is a huge leap in the direction of inclusiveness and democracy for Uzbekistan.

Mr Turkstra also touched upon the bottom up governance and clear separation of powers between the legislative and executive branches of the government. Previously, this separation of power was undermined, which was against the maximisation of public interests. The institutional and operational capacity of the parliament also lacked incentives and resources to operate independently from the executive branch. In short, the legislature and judiciary effectively served as instruments of the executive branch. Mr Turkstra highlighted three steps through which President Mirziyoyev is proposing to decentralise Presidential power. First, transferring Presidential powers to the Parliament to approve members of the Cabinet of Ministers. Second, to increase the power of local legislative bodies. And thirdly, to increase the decision-making powers of governors to have greater autonomous regional control.

Lastly, he highlighted the importance of shifting from a top down process to a bottom up process in this transition to a democratic system of governance. This delegation of power to local and regional levels would propel Uzbekistan into a modernised and liberalised regional power with greater efficiency and sustainability.

The final speaker was Mr Frantescu, co-founder of Vote Watch Europe, an organisation that focuses more specifically on the electoral processes in the European Union. He listed the Vote Watch Europe would focus on theory and practice, at the legislative frameworks and how these elections are going to develop into practice. He mentioned that similarly, his home country Romania, also experienced a transition to democratic institutions and has witnessed the emergence and development of democratic institutions in the 1990s.

He stressed that the focus will be directed mainly towards the substance of the five parties competing in the elections, how much competition there is, the nuances between the proposals of these political parties and finally the competition in the policy proposals of each party. Furthermore, it will be important to assess the extent to which there is fair access to information and resources, especially the communication of resources, i.e. to what extent these parties are capable of, have the means and knowledge to communicate to a broad audience in the country and the manner in which these said proposals are being introduced and transmitted to the general public.

He continued to add the interest and curiosity displayed towards the shape of the new electoral system, and what it will bring about, as well as the type of Parliament this will introduce. Mr Frantescu added that personally he is in favour of proportional electoral systems, but stated that each country needs to adopt a system adopted to the situation of their government that fits them best. Reiterating Mr Turkstra's remarks he questioned

the efficacy of the Parliament. In particular, how the Parliament will play a role in the life of the citizens and how the parliament intends to hold the executives accountable for their actions. Additionally, he stressed on investigating other actors in the society, especially the emerging civil society, as politics does not only involve political parties, but society as a whole, highlighting that proposals should not be limited to decision makers and political parties only. To sum it up, Mr Frantescu stated that Vote Watch Europe will be observing the civil society, the press, access of these parties to (social) media, to identify the main means of communication and the electoral campaign. Further, Vote Watch Europe will be examining the profiles of the candidates, their (professional) backgrounds, including their demographic profile. He recognised that most contenders were young, and expressed curiosity as to how many young candidates will make it to the Parliament, to make it as representative as possible of the young Uzbek society.

Mr Frantescu also noticed the involvement of the Uzbek diaspora, who are allowed to vote for the first time and identified this as a tremendously positive action in moving forward. The diaspora can play a vital role in the political organisation of a country. He emphasized that most importantly, Vote Watch Europe will be interested and observe closely the actions that will follow the elections, when politicians are expected to deliver on their promises. To what extent the parliamentarians will be held accountable and how, will depend on the level of transparency of the institutions, as well as the accessibility of information to citizens pertaining to the activities of the Parliamentarians. As a final comment he added, that Vote Watch Europe's intention to sustain a longer-term relationship with Uzbekistan and despite the range of parties being small, expressed the hope to train people on the ground, resulting in a broader range of pluralism.

The panel ended with a Q&A session. A question was raised on the importance of the young people voting and the differences by age groups. The Ambassador responded by quoting the percentages of the young generations participating in the elections this year for the first time as mentioned previously. Voting begins at 18 and 65 percent of the population is under the age of 30. Also stressed was the growth rate of the population and the increasing share of people born into an independent Uzbekistan without any memories of the Soviet time. Mr Turkstra added that young people are definitely the key in an independent Uzbekistan, how they understand politics, greater exposure to the affairs around the world making these 2 million voters key, as well as expatriates voting for the first time.

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