



Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights

SWEDEN

GENERAL ELECTIONS

11 September 2022

ODIHR NEEDS ASSESSMENT MISSION REPORT

31 May -2 June 2022



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ODIHR Needs Assessment Mission Report

I. INTRODUCTION

Following an invitation from the authorities of Sweden to observe the 11 September 2022 general elections and in accordance with its mandate, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) undertook a Needs Assessment Mission (NAM) from 31 May to 2 June 2022. The NAM included Kseniya Dashutsina and Keara Castaldo, ODIHR Election Advisers.

The purpose of the mission was to assess the pre-election environment and the preparations for the general elections. Based on this assessment, the NAM should recommend whether to deploy an ODIHR election-related activity for the forthcoming elections, and if so, what type of activity best meets the identified needs. Meetings were held with officials from state institutions, as well as with representatives of political parties, media, civil society, and the international community. A list of meetings is annexed to this report.

ODIHR would like to thank the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Sweden for their assistance and cooperation in organizing the NAM. ODIHR would also like to thank all of its interlocutors for taking the time to meet with the NAM and share their views.

II. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 11 September general elections will be held concurrently with county and municipal council elections. Sweden is a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary system of governance. Legislative powers are vested with the parliament (*Riksdag*), a unicameral body elected for a four-year term. Of the 349 members of parliament, 310 are elected through a proportional system with open lists from 29 multi-member constituencies, and the remaining 39 seats are proportional ‘adjustment’ seats.

The election-related legislation was most recently amended in 2022 and 2019, following public consultation processes. The changes intend to enhance the secrecy of the vote and equality of opportunity for contestants in line with prior ODIHR recommendations, including by requiring the election administration to provide ballots directly to polling stations, as well as reiterate the role of the Swedish Electoral Authority (SEA) in producing training materials and training the lower-level election administration. All ODIHR NAM interlocutors described the legal framework and its consistent implementation as conducive to democratic elections. Some indicated that provisions pertaining to the printing and distribution of ballots by political parties could be improved. Recent legislative changes did not address a number previous ODIHR recommendations, including related to providing for the presence of citizen and international observers, SEA powers to issue binding guidelines to ensure the uniform implementation of election procedures, and further measures to ensure the transparency of campaign finances.

The SEA has overall responsibility for administering the elections and is managed by a director and a board appointed by the government. At the sub-national level, elections will be administered by 21 County Administrative Boards (CABs), 290 Municipal Election Commissions (MECs) and some 6,000 Polling Boards (PBs). Several opportunities exist for voters to cast their ballot before and on election day. All ODIHR NAM interlocutors expressed confidence in the efficiency, professionalism and impartiality of the election administration bodies at all levels, although some

noted that measures to facilitate and collect data on the autonomous participation of persons with disabilities could be further improved.

Citizens over 18 years are eligible to vote. The voter register is based on a civil register and is continuously updated. As of March 2022, 7,712,103 million voters are eligible to vote in *Riksdag* elections. The SEA conducts detailed outreach to voters, including by sending a voting card to each voter which contains the voter's name and their number on the voter list, sets out the elections in which the voter may participate, and gives information on the voter's polling station and its opening hours. All ODIHR NAM interlocutors expressed confidence in voter registration procedures and accuracy of the voter lists.

All eligible voters have the right to stand as candidates, but must represent a party, even if it consists of one person. ODIHR NAM interlocutors described an accessible process to form a party and to stand. None of the parties met by the ODIHR NAM have formal internal quotas to promote the representation of women, ethnic minorities or other underrepresented groups, but several issue guidance to local chapters on ensuring fair representation in candidate lists.

The election campaign is largely unregulated, with no officially defined campaign period. Parties met by ODIHR NAM intended to use traditional and online methods of campaigning, including rallies and campaign events, door-to-door canvassing, and electronic advertising. Interlocutors expected the campaign to be active and competitive and expressed confidence in the ability to campaign freely, however, a number voiced concerns over increasing polarization on certain topics, as well as the potential use of intolerant rhetoric, especially on online platforms.

The legal framework for campaign finance remained largely unchanged since the last general elections. There are no limits on donations or on spending for parties and candidates, although ODIHR NAM interlocutors described a tradition of limited private financing of election campaigns, with a reliance on public funding. Parties are required to submit financial reports annually, which must be made public. Most interlocutors did not express concerns regarding the transparency or oversight of party or campaign financing. However, recent amendments did not address prior recommendations of ODIHR and the Council of Europe's Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) related to the transparency of campaign financing.

The media environment is pluralistic, with a variety of media outlets operating in the country. Media representatives met by the ODIHR NAM described a generally safe working environment for journalists, but some pointed to cases of threats and intimidation of journalists, especially online. Media coverage of the election campaign is largely unregulated. ODIHR NAM interlocutors generally expressed satisfaction with overall media access and coverage, including during election campaigns, but noted that existing oversight mechanisms and their structure could be further strengthened.

Decisions of the SEA determining the outcome of the election can be appealed by any voter or electoral contestant starting from the day after election day and until ten days after the election results have been certified; however, there are no deadlines to review the cases. Appeals received by and decisions of the Election Review Board are publicly available, and complaints can be submitted using a new online template.

All ODIHR NAM interlocutors expressed full confidence in the integrity of the electoral process and the ability of the election administration to organize elections professionally and transparently. Most ODIHR NAM interlocutors welcomed a potential election observation activity, noting the value of previous ODIHR assessments and recommendations, but expressed the view that an

observation activity for these elections would be unnecessary. Some interlocutors noted potential areas of further improvement to the regulatory framework, particularly with regard to ballot management, media oversight, and measures to trace and react to potential intolerant or violent rhetoric on the conduct of campaign. Nevertheless, these issues were not identified by electoral stakeholders as significantly impacting the upcoming elections. On this basis, the ODIHR NAM does not recommend the deployment of an election observation activity for the 11 September general elections. However, ODIHR encourages the authorities to consider the issues raised during the NAM and in previous ODIHR reports and to implement previous ODIHR electoral recommendations, and reaffirms its readiness to support the authorities in future electoral reform processes.

III. FINDINGS

A. BACKGROUND AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

Sweden is a constitutional monarchy, with a parliamentary system of governance. The monarch serves as head of state, with ceremonial functions and duties. Legislative powers are vested in the unicameral parliament (*Riksdag*) comprised of 349 deputies elected for four years. The parliament elects and holds accountable the government vested with the executive power.¹ Elections to the *Riksdag* are held every four years, on the second Sunday in September. The 11 September general elections will be held concurrently with county and municipal council elections.²

Eight parties are represented in the outgoing parliament.³ Following the 2018 elections, no party managed to form a majority government, and in 2019, the Social Democratic Party (SDP), the Green Party, the Centre Party, and the Liberals formed a coalition. In 2021, following a no-confidence vote, Prime Minister Stefan Löfven resigned, and Magdalena Andersson from SDP was appointed. Ms Andersson is the first woman to serve as prime minister.

Women are generally well-represented in national and local politics and currently hold 46 per cent of parliamentary seats and 12 of 23 ministerial positions, and represent 43 per cent of municipal councilors and only 32 per cent of mayors. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women has noted Sweden's achievements in realizing a high rate of political participation among women, but also described unequal access to participation in political parties and elected bodies, as well as alleged cases of harassment and threats against women candidates during the 2018 municipal elections.⁴

¹ Since 1993, the Indigenous Sami community has elected its own legislature, which has significant powers over community education and culture, and serves as an advisory body to the government.

² Local referendums will be held in municipalities of Halmstad, Trelleborg, and Söderhamn on the same day.

³ The Social Democratic Party (SDP) with 100 seats, the Moderate Party with 70 seats, the Sweden Democrats with 61 seats, the Centre Party with 31 seats, the Left Party with 27 seats, the Christian Democrats with 22 seats, the Liberal Party with 20 seats and the Green Party with 16 seats.

⁴ In its [2021 Concluding Observations](#), the Committee noted that “following the 2018 national, regional and municipal elections, 43 per cent of members elected to municipal councils were women. However, the Committee notes with concern that: (a) Only 43 per cent of all municipal chief executive officers, 32 per cent of mayors and 29 per cent of regional chief executive officers are women; (b) The Swedish Gender Equality Agency reported that women generally faced more barriers than men to participating in elected bodies and political parties; (c) According to the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, women politicians often receive sexist comments, and that 32 per cent of women elected to the *Riksdag* and at regional and municipal levels stated that they had received threats and were the victims of harassment during the 2018 election year”. The Committee also recommended that the authorities consider the participation of underrepresented groups of women, including Roma and women with disabilities, and take measures to counter sexist or violent rhetoric in public discourse.

ODIHR previously observed the 2018 general elections in Sweden.⁵ The final report issued in November 2018 contained six recommendations on improving the electoral process to bring it in line with OSCE commitments.⁶

B. LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND ELECTION SYSTEM

Sweden is party to major international and regional instruments related to holding of democratic elections.⁷ General elections are primarily regulated by the 1974 Instrument of the Government, the 2005 Elections Act, the 2005 Election Ordinance, and the 2017 Local Government Act.⁸ The Constitution consists of four fundamental laws.⁹ The Elections Act was most recently amended on 1 February 2022, following a public consultation process.¹⁰ The Swedish Electoral Authority (SEA) issues guidelines to ensure uniform implementation of election procedures. However, these are not binding for the lower-level election administration.¹¹

The recent amendments included some that intended to enhance the secrecy of the vote and the equality of opportunity for electoral contestants, in line with prior ODIHR recommendations, such as by requiring the election administration to place all ballots directly in the polling stations, which was previously done by the respective political parties, and to place a protection screen where ballot papers are displayed to shelter it from view and to protect the secrecy of the voter's selection.¹² The amendments also reiterated the role of the SEA in producing training materials and training the lower-level election administration and allowed the election administration to request those who disturb the order in the polling board to leave. In 2018, the new Act on Transparency of Party Financing was adopted, aimed at enhancing the transparency of political financing. The recent legislative changes did not address all previous ODIHR recommendations, including those related to providing for the presence of citizen and international observers, SEA powers to issue binding guidelines to ensure the uniform implementation of election procedures, and further measures to ensure the transparency of campaign finances.

⁵ See previous ODIHR election-related [reports](#) on Sweden.

⁶ In paragraph 25 of the [1999 OSCE Istanbul Document](#), OSCE participating States committed themselves “to follow up promptly the ODIHR’s election assessment and recommendations”.

⁷ Including the [1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#), [1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women](#), [1965 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination](#), [2003 Convention against Corruption](#), [2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#), and [the 1950 European Convention on Human Rights](#). Sweden is also a member of the Venice Commission and of the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO).

⁸ The Instrument of Government is one of four fundamental laws. Provisions of the 1972 Act of State Financial Support to Political Parties and the 2018 Act on Transparency of Party Financing are also applicable.

⁹ One of these, the 1974 Instrument of Government states that all power emanates from the people, establishes general principles of universal and equal suffrage, free, secret and direct elections to the *Riksdag* and guarantees the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms.

¹⁰ The Swedish Election Authority (SEA), Municipal Election Boards (MEB), electoral experts and other agencies and organisations were invited to submit proposals and comment on the legislative proposals.

¹¹ In the 2020 audit [report](#) of the Swedish National Audit Office (NAO) related to the work of the Government and the state electoral authorities in the conduct of elections, the NAO stated that the process of conducting elections could be more effective with more cooperation between municipalities, country administrative boards and the SEA, and noted the wishes of all levels in the election administration that the SEA should be mandated to issue guidelines for the other actors in the election administration.

¹² Each party has a unique ballot which voters must select in the polling station prior to voting. The amendment was first applied in the 2019 European Parliament elections. The law leaves implementation of the provision to the discretion of the municipalities. The SEA issued a guidance for these elections with a suggestion to use a standard way of protecting the ballots in all polling boards. According to the 2020 audit [report](#) of the NAO, different municipalities developed different solutions, and “the lack of cooperation between municipalities has emerged in a tangible way in the process of developing appropriate screens to preserve the secrecy of the ballot.”

All ODIHR interlocutors expressed confidence that the legal framework is conducive for democratic elections. Some stakeholders indicated that provisions pertaining to the printing and distribution of ballots could be improved by transferring authority solely to the election administration, as previously recommended by ODIHR. According to some ODIHR NAM interlocutors, suggestions to modify the ballot paper system were not taken into account and there is a lack of political support for these changes as parties are generally satisfied with the system.

Of the 349 members of parliament, 310 are elected through a proportional system with open lists from 29 multi-member constituencies.¹³ The remaining 39 seats are proportional ‘adjustment’ seats.¹⁴ To be awarded a seat, a political party must either obtain 4 per cent of the votes cast nationwide or 12 per cent of the votes cast in at least one constituency. Votes are cast for party lists in which voters may express a preference for individual candidates.¹⁵ On 8 April 2022, the SEA decided on the distribution of permanent constituency seats for these elections based on the number of eligible voters as of 1 March, 2022.¹⁶

C. ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

All ODIHR NAM interlocutors expressed confidence in the efficiency, professionalism and impartiality of the election administration bodies at all levels. The SEA has overall responsibility for administering the elections and is managed by a board, consisting of a director and eight members, appointed by the government. Its competences include constituency delimitation, registration of parties and candidates, delivering voter cards to voters, production of ballot papers and declaring the election results. The Tax Agency provides administrative support to the SEA, including IT development, infrastructure, and communication services.

The SEA has no oversight power over the lower-level election bodies. At the sub-national level, elections will be administered by 21 County Administrative Boards (CABs), 290 Municipal Election Commissions (MECs) and some 6,000 Polling Boards (PBs). CABs are regional branches of government and their competencies in the election process pertain to the registration of candidates, district delimitation at the county level and final counting of votes. MECs are elected by the municipal councils and are responsible for recruitment and training of PBs, setting up of polling stations and distribution of equipment and material. The law does not contain eligibility criteria for election commission members nor for selection of the chairperson, however, in February 2022 the SEA issued guidance underlining that members of the election administration should be impartial, and recommended that those standing as candidates in these elections should not serve

¹³ These are called permanent seats. The constituencies generally correspond with counties. Stockholm, Skåne, and Västra Götaland are divided into smaller units due to population size. Each constituency has between 2 and 34 seats and the number of seats is revised prior to each election by the Election Authority, based on the number of eligible voters.

¹⁴ The calculation for these seats is made based on the difference between the permanent seats and the number of seats that the party would have won in a proportional contest held in a single, nationwide constituency. The constituencies to which these seats are allotted depends on the party scores following allocation of the ‘permanent’ seats.

¹⁵ Voters can use three different ballots to indicate both party and candidate preference: (1) with printed party name and rank-ordered list of candidates where the voter can mark the preference next to a single candidate, (2) with printed party name, (3) a blank ballot paper where a voter can write in the party and a candidate’s name. To be elected on a basis of personal votes, a candidate must receive at five eight per cent of the party votes in the respective constituency.

¹⁶ Stockholm and Uppsala constituencies have been assigned an additional fixed mandate each, and Västra Götaland East and Västerbotten were decreased by one mandate. In other constituencies, the number of permanent seats remained unchanged.

as members of polling boards. According to the SEA, many municipalities conformed to these guidelines in the selection of the polling boards members.

Voters can vote in advance in designated polling stations during the 18 days before election day. Voters abroad can vote either in person at diplomatic representations starting 24 days before election day or by mail 45 days before election day.¹⁷ Home-bound voters or voters with limited mobility can opt to vote by using a special, sealed envelope via a courier. The SEA is undertaking efforts to facilitate voting at polling stations for persons with disabilities, including the potential introduction of assistive technologies in future elections.¹⁸ ODIHR NAM interlocutors indicated that additional data collection should be introduced on the participation of voters with disabilities in polling stations, including by mainstreaming this data in incident reporting structures.

Preparations for the forthcoming elections are ongoing; the SEA has begun to conduct trainings for election officials and media, and has produced voter information materials focusing on election day procedures, advance voting, and voting abroad. For these elections, SEA issued 17 guidelines to ensure uniform implementation of election procedures, including related to party and candidate registration, ensuring secrecy of the vote, voter information, order of the ballot papers, campaign on election day, correction in the results protocols, and other issues. Moreover, the SEA produced three handbooks on election procedures and updated 25 manuals.

In total some 650 million ballots are printed for the election day, including for all types of elections.¹⁹ The 2022 amendments transferred the responsibility of placing the ballots inside the polling stations from political parties to members of polling boards. While welcoming this change and noting its smooth introduction during recent municipal elections, some ODIHR NAM interlocutors from the election administration raised concerns about possible logistical challenges related to the distribution of the large number of ballots, and possible queuing due to a new requirement of collecting the ballots behind a protective screen, to ensure the secrecy of the voter's choice, as each party has a separate ballot.²⁰

D. VOTER REGISTRATION

Citizens over 18 years are eligible to vote. The voter register is drawn from the civil register compiled by the Tax Agency, which is continuously updated. Citizens living abroad are kept on the list for 10 years after their departure.²¹ The Tax Agency provides the voter list to the SEA, which produces separate lists for each polling station 30 days before the elections, during which

¹⁷ All votes from diplomatic missions are sent to the SEA, where they are sorted and forwarded to the relevant election committee. It is not possible to vote on election day abroad.

¹⁸ The government has requested the SEA to work with the state research institute Research Institutes of Sweden to develop assistive technologies for people with visual impairments to facilitate autonomous voting. However, possible solutions will only be implemented starting the next elections.

¹⁹ Parties that received one per cent of the vote in one of the two last legislative elections have the right to print ballots with the party name at the expense of the state and to request the distribution of these ballots to all polling stations. Other parties contesting the elections are themselves responsible for delivery of the ballots to the election administration.

²⁰ The 2020 NAO audit [report](#) stated that “The audit shows that at the same time the screens complicated the work of the voting clerks in overseeing the ballot papers and preventing sabotage of various kinds. In the 2019 European elections, in as many as nine out of ten municipalities voters took a long time at the ballot paper stands (sometimes in order to prepare their vote there) and caused queues”.

²¹ Following this period, they must notify the Tax Agency at least 30 days before an election to be included. If one day prior to the election day the SEA receives a vote from a voter who is no longer registered, the voter is added to the voter list.

time voters may check their data through the local tax office.²² As of March 2022, 7,712,103 million voters are eligible to vote in *Riksdag* elections.²³

No later than 18 days before an election, the SEA sends out a voting card to each voter. The card contains the voter's name and their number on the voter list, sets out the elections in which the voter may participate, and gives information on the voter's polling station and its opening hours.²⁴ Voters not known to the polling board must present a proof of identity at the time of voting. Citizens who have not received voting cards can submit a written request to the county administrative board no later than 12 days before election day. All ODIHR NAM interlocutors expressed confidence in voter registration procedures and in the accuracy of the voter lists.

E. CANDIDATE REGISTRATION

All eligible voters have the right to stand as candidates, however, they must represent a party, even if it is a party of one person. Parties are required to declare their intention to contest the elections no later than 12 August, 30 days before the election day, and must provide the SEA with candidates' statements of consent by three days before the election day. Parties are not required to register, but can do so to brand the name. Applications to register a name are submitted to the SEA by the last day of February of the election year.²⁵ ODIHR NAM interlocutors described a highly accessible process for the formation of political parties with few legal or administrative requirements.

None of the parties met by ODIHR NAM described formal quotas or other internal mechanisms to promote representation of women, minorities or other underrepresented groups.²⁶ All noted that serious consideration is given to achieve balanced representations in the lists and that due to the decentralization of the nomination process, local party chapters are provided guidance on principles of fair representation of women and minorities, and that internal gender quotas are often established voluntarily.

F. ELECTION CAMPAIGN

The election campaign is largely unregulated, with no official campaign period defined. The Constitution guarantees freedoms of association, assembly, and expression. Parties met by ODIHR NAM intend to use diverse methods of campaigning, including rallies and larger campaign events, door-to-door canvassing, various printed materials, and placing campaign materials online; smaller parties described a particular reliance on online campaigning. NAM interlocutors expect the campaign to be active and to be primarily focused on topics of the security, foreign policy, NATO membership, environment, healthcare, and migration.

All stakeholders met with by ODIHR NAM expressed confidence in the ability to campaign and convey political messages freely. However, a number of ODIHR NAM interlocutors voiced concerns over increasing polarization on certain topics, and in the potential use of harsh and divisive rhetoric, including xenophobic hate speech, especially on online platforms.

²² According to the Tax Agency, 621,143 requests for changes in the civil register were received in the period of January-May 2022.

²³ In addition, 8,141,439 people are eligible to vote in municipal elections and 8,092,109 people are eligible to vote in regional council elections.

²⁴ For out of country voters, the SEA issues an expatriate voting card which is sent no later than 50 days before election day. The expatriate voting card contains the voter's name, the election in which the voter may participate and information about the voting places where the voter lives.

²⁵ A total of 1,500 signatures are required for parties aiming to compete in general elections to brand its name.

²⁶ Five minorities are officially recognized in Sweden (Roma, Jewish, Sami, Swedish Finns, and Tornedalers).

Several interlocutors praised the inclusiveness of political debate in the country, particularly the visibility of women politicians and candidates. However, a few mentioned a lack of efforts by parties to include ethnic minorities in election campaigns, both in party structures as well as in voter outreach strategies.²⁷ A few parties described targeted outreach strategies to promote inclusion of ethnic minorities and other underrepresented segments of the electorate.

G. PARTY AND CAMPAIGN FINANCE

The 1972 Act on State Financial Support to Political Parties and the 2018 Act on Transparency of Party Financing provide the legal framework for political financing.²⁸ The latter limited the size of anonymous donations, requiring every anonymous donation above a stipulated threshold to be returned to a donor or, when the donor's identity cannot be determined, to the state.²⁹ The legislation remained largely unchanged since the last general election, and recent amendments did not address ODIHR and the Council of Europe's Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) recommendations related to the transparency of campaign financing.³⁰ ODIHR NAM interlocutors were generally satisfied with the current system of campaign financing, and described relatively low levels of private financing in election campaigns.

There is no distinction between political and campaign financing, except additional reporting requirements for parties that participate in the elections.³¹ Parties can receive private and public funding. Public funding is allocated according to the number of votes obtained in the previous elections and the share of seats in the *Riksdag*.³² Most parties met by the ODIHR NAM stated that they rely heavily on public funding.³³ Private financing can be provided by membership fees, donations, including in cash, publications and income from property. There are no limits on donations to and spending of parties and individual candidates.

Parties are required to submit financial reports annually to the Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency (*Kammarkollegiet*) which are made public. Reporting during the election campaign is not required. According to *Kammarkollegiet* they only verify submitted documents. The Act on Transparency of Party Financing introduced new disclosure

²⁷ The [2018 Concluding Observations](#) of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination raised concern about "reports that racist hate speech against Afro-Swedes, Jews, Muslims and Roma continues in the State party, particularly during election campaigns, as well as in the media and on the Internet".

²⁸ Certain provisions of the Election Act, the 1999 Act on Support for the Parliamentary Work of Members of the *Riksdag* and Parliamentary Party Groups, and the 2010 Act on the State Support to the Parliamentary Women's Organizations regulate aspects of the parties financing.

²⁹ The threshold for anonymous donations amounts to 5 per cent of the price base. The price base is calculated in accordance with provisions of the 2010 Social Security Act on annual basis, and amounts to 48,300 SEK for 2022.

³⁰ See [Recommendation Rec\(2003\)4](#) of the Committee of Ministers to member states, and the GRECO Evaluation and Compliance [Reports](#) on transparency of party funding.

³¹ State funding is available for political parties, and the state budget for the year 2018 envisions 50 million SEK (some 5 million EUR) for voter education and voter information projects to ensure more equal representation of different groups of voters. Political parties may apply for the funding in order to reach out to politically less active groups of voters.

³² Eligible for public funding are all parliamentary parties as well as those that received at least 2.5 per cent of the votes in one of the last two general elections.

³³ In addition to the state support based on the election results and the representation in the *Riksdag*, parties represented in the municipal and county councils are also entitled to public financial support. According to the parliament [website](#), annual financial support to parliamentary parties from the state budget and the *Riksdag* amounts to about SEK 498 million (EUR 47,6 million).

requirements.³⁴ Most ODIHR NAM interlocutors did not express concerns regarding the transparency and oversight of party and campaign financing.

H. MEDIA

Media freedom is constitutionally guaranteed by the 1949 Freedom of the Press Act, the 1991 Freedom of Expression Act and the 1996 Radio and Television Act. The Radio and Television Act was amended in 2020 to reflect requirements of the European Union's Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD). The media environment is pluralistic, with a variety of media outlets operating in the country.³⁵ However, ODIHR NAM interlocutors noted that ownership is concentrated, and there is a lack of specific rules for transparency of media ownership.³⁶ In 2020, the budget for media support was increased to address the negative economic effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on media and journalists. Media representatives met by the ODIHR NAM described a generally safe working environment for journalists, with unhindered access to information; some, however, pointed to cases of threats and intimidation of journalists, especially online.

Media coverage of election campaigns is largely unregulated. While requirements of impartiality, only apply to public service broadcasters, requirements of accuracy and privacy, and prohibitions on discrimination apply to all media. Media outlets have editorial independence. Several private outlets implement voluntary rules to ensure equitable and fair representation of contestants, which entail special guides for journalists on how to cover the election period and journalists are bound by ethical and professional codes. During the campaign period, the public Swedish Radio and Swedish Television intend to broadcast a number of election-related programmes on the national and regional level, including content in minority languages such as Arabic and Finnish, as well as content to enhance youth engagement in electoral processes. The public broadcasters plan to organize debates with party leaders, including from small and new parties that were previously excluded, and with prime ministerial candidates.³⁷ Contestants are allowed to purchase airtime on private television channels. Most ODIHR NAM interlocutors expressed satisfaction with overall media access and coverage, including during election campaigns, although some raised concerns related to potential disinformation efforts during the election process.

The Swedish Press and Broadcasting Authority (SPBA) oversees radio and television. The SPBA is headed by a director with legal experience who is appointed by the government.³⁸ The Swedish Broadcasting Commission (SBC) is an independent decision-making body within the SPBA. It consists of seven members and three deputies, appointed by the government.³⁹ The 2020 amendments to the Radio and Television Act specified that a member of the government, parliament or an employee of the government offices cannot be appointed as a SBC member. The

³⁴ The parties on a state level and their affiliated organizations are always required to submit a report. Non-governmental and non-profit associations within a party or that are receiving party support are also obliged to report. Political parties on a regional and local level are excluded from the requirement to submit a report if their income is below a threshold amount. The threshold amount varies from year to year and is 0,5 or 50 per cent of the price base. Entities with an annual income below SEK 23,800 (some 2,279 EUR) are exempted from reporting. According to *Kammarkollegiet* in 2019, 320 entities submitted their revenue statements, in 2020 some 415, and in 2021 some 340.

³⁵ In Reporters Without Borders's 2021 World Press Freedom Index, Sweden ranks 3 out of 180 countries.

³⁶ Five media companies own a majority of all newspapers. The audiovisual sector is concentrated, and market is dominated by four television and three radio groups. The Government has proposed amendments to the Radio and Television Act aiming at enhancing the transparency of media ownership.

³⁷ The SVR and the SVT have 25 and 26 regional stations, respectively. All *SVT* shows are subtitled.

³⁸ The SPBA budget for 2021 was increased by eight per cent.

³⁹ The Chairperson must be a judge. Following 2020 amendments, members of the SBC are appointed for a term of four years, and that the head of the SPBA is appointed for a fixed term of six years.

SBC holds its meetings once or twice per month and publishes all the decisions on its website within a week following the meeting.

Complaints to the SBC can be filed by the general public or by the authority, and the SBC determines whether a specific broadcast has complied with provisions of the Radio and Television Act and with licensing conditions. The SBC cannot initiate its own investigations, which limits its practical oversight authority, although it can react to complaints or at the initiative of SPBA; some ODIHR NAM interlocutors noted that its authority could be strengthened. Complaints can be submitted within three months when the event took place, but there are no deadlines for decisions on these cases. The SPBA informed the ODIHR NAM that they aim to deal with cases within 180 days. Some interlocutors stated that while they do not believe any SBC decisions are politically motivated, the composition of the media oversight body could benefit from further review to exclude possible bias and fully ensure its independence.

I. COMPLAINTS AND APPEALS

Complaints against the election results are submitted to the Election Review Board (ERB). The ERB is composed of seven members, appointed by the parliament. The chairperson of this board must be a qualified judge and may not be a member of parliament. Decisions of the county administrative board or the Election Authority may also be appealed with the ERB within legally prescribed deadlines.⁴⁰ Decisions of the Election Authority determining the outcome of the election can be appealed by any voter or electoral contestant starting from the day after election day and until ten days after the election results have been certified. However, there are no deadlines to review the cases. Decisions made by the ERB are final and cannot be appealed. Appeals received by and decisions of the ERB are publicly available on its website.

According to the 2005 Elections Act and the 2017 Administrative Procedure Act, election authorities and other bodies which are involved in the preparation and conduct of elections should provide the ERB with information and statements upon its request. The Board can order a witness hearing at a district court if it considers questioning a witness necessary. Following the 2018 general elections, the ERB reviewed 723 complaints. The ERB informed the ODIHR NAM of plans to recruit additional staff for the upcoming elections to handle an increased load of cases in a timely manner. To facilitate submission of complaints and avoid technical errors, the ERB prepared a new template for complaints, which is publicly available on its website, and is planning to publish voter information on the process of filing complaints.

J. ELECTION OBSERVATION

The Elections Act states that counting at all levels is public but contains no explicit provision for observation of voting or other procedures, nor does it contain specific provisions on international observation. Most ODIHR NAM interlocutors stated that due to the high level of public trust in the election administration and other state institutions, there is no need to systematically observe the elections. Some civil society organizations met by ODIHR NAM noted plans to follow certain aspects of the process, including persons with disabilities in the election administration and accessibility of the polling boards, the participation of minority groups in the campaign and in relation to voter turnout.

⁴⁰ For example, appeals regarding voter registration should be submitted not later than on the Wednesday prior to election day, regarding the division of electoral districts and the constituency seats allocation not later than within three weeks from when the decision was made public, regarding the registration of party denomination within three weeks from the date when the appellant received the decision.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

All ODIHR NAM interlocutors expressed full confidence in the integrity of the electoral process and the ability of the election administration to organize elections professionally and transparently. Most ODIHR NAM interlocutors welcomed a potential election observation activity, noting the value of previous ODIHR assessments and recommendations, but expressed the view that an observation activity for these elections would be unnecessary. Some interlocutors noted potential areas of further improvement to the regulatory framework, particularly with regard to ballot management, media oversight, and measures to trace and react to potential intolerant or violent rhetoric in the conduct of campaign. Nevertheless, these issues were not identified by electoral stakeholders as significantly impacting the upcoming elections. On this basis, the ODIHR NAM does not recommend the deployment of an election observation activity for the 11 September general elections. However, ODIHR encourages the authorities to consider the issues raised during the NAM and in previous ODIHR reports and to implement previous ODIHR electoral recommendations, and reaffirms its readiness to support the authorities in future electoral reform processes.

ANNEX: LIST OF MEETINGS

Ministry for Foreign Affairs

Johan Frisell, Head, Department for European Security Policy
Ludvig Bontell, Deputy Director OSCE Affairs, Department for European Security Policy
Greta Brandimarti, Secretary, Department for European Security Policy

Ministry of Culture, Division for Democracy and Civil Society

Dennis Wiklund, Desk Officer

Election Review Board

Annika Sandström, Chairperson

Ministry of Justice

Benny Lindholm Närlinge, Legal Advisor

Swedish Tax Agency

Christina Henryson, Chief Financial Officer
Susann Jatko, Head of Unit
Johannes Hummerdal, Senior Advisor

Swedish Election Authority

Anna Nyqvist, Director

Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency (*Kammarkollegiet*)

Emma Ström, Legal Expert
Henrik Wilhelmsson, Desk officer
Pontus Ekstedt, Head of Unit

Swedish Press and Broadcasting Authority

Anna Dingertz, Deputy head of division & Legal advisor
Johannes Wik, Senior Advisor
Tove De Vries, Research Officer

Political Parties

Robert Lisborg, Deputy Secretary Christian Democrats
Lova André Nilsson, Chief of Staff, Green Party
Kalle Larsson, Chief of Staff, Left Party
Sanna Sjögren, Coordinator Sanna Sjögren, Left Party
Helena Storckenfeldt, MP, Moderates
Björn Söder, MP, Sweden Democrats
Joakim Johansson, Head of Organization, Social Democratic Party

Civil Society

Anders Pettersson, Executive Director, Civil Rights Defenders
John Stauffer, Legal Director John Stauffer, Civil Rights Defenders
Mia Ahlgren, Policy Officer Disability Rights, Funktionsrätt Sweden
Ola Linder, Human Rights Lawyer, Funktionsrätt Sweden

International Community⁴¹

Representatives of diplomatic missions of Lithuania, and the Russian Federation.

⁴¹ The ODIHR NAM extended an invitation to representations of all OSCE participating States resident in Sweden.