



Joint Preliminary Statement

The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 19 October 1998

This is the preliminary statement of the International Election Observation Mission for the 18 October 1998 Parliamentary Elections in The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. This assessment is based upon the reports of 14 long term observers from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and 179 Short Term Observers, including 26 from the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. An 11-member delegation from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe also participated. On election day observers reported from over 1,300 polling stations in all 85 election districts.

The Observation Mission was led by Mr. Tekin Enerem (Turkey), Vice-President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and Representative of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office and by Mr. Henning Gjellerod (Denmark), Head of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Delegation. The observation was co-ordinated by Mark Power-Stevens, Head of the ODIHR Election Observation Mission, which has been present in the country since 17 September.

This statement is preliminary and is issued prior to the publication of the final results and prior to the conclusion of the complaints period. It should also be noted that the election will only be completed once the second round of voting has been successfully undertaken. The OSCE/ODIHR will issue a final report after the completion of the whole process. The Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly will also issue a report.

SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS

- **The first round of the 1998 elections for the parliament of The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia represents a significant improvement on past elections.**
- **An important aspect of this improvement is that the new election law enjoyed a wide political consensus when adopted by the parliament, though some parties expressed a number of concerns.**
- **The campaign was well conducted by the parties. A number of violent incidents were reported as were some violations of the campaign silence, but these appear to have been isolated cases.**
- **The media gave a full and extensive coverage of the campaign. There was also some innovative special programming. Analysis does show some bias in the news programming of some media.**
- **Parties did raise some concerns regarding the voter registers and voter cards. Some related problems were noted on election day and need to be rectified for the second round. It is also important that election authorities are more open to party concerns.**

- **The voting and counting processes were largely carried out according to the law. Some irregularities were reported, and all complaints resulting from these should be dealt with through the appropriate legal mechanism.**
- **To ensure the transparency of the process and continued confidence in the second round of elections any claims against irregularities during the first round must be promptly dealt with. Political parties must be given full access to the breakdown of results at all levels.**
- **In conclusion, the Observation Mission found that the overall electoral process was well conducted. The political consensus existing on the election law was built upon by the active involvement of political parties as election commission members and as party observers. A number of incidents were noted and these should be accordingly dealt with. Subject to the successful completion of the second round and the processing of complaints, the 1998 elections appear so far to have been generally well conducted in accordance with OSCE Commitments and Council of Europe standards.**

The Electoral Framework and Procedures

The Election Law and Law on Election Districts were passed in parliament with an overwhelming political consensus. This is very important for the legitimacy of the electoral process. However, it is clear that some election districts are designed to reflect ethnic identities rather than a straightforward grouping of the population. In principle, election districts should not be drawn as a method for segregating the electorate on an ethnic basis or for political advantage.

Three political parties reported to the observation mission that some of their candidacy applications were unfairly rejected. The official reason for the rejection was that the individuals concerned missed the deadline for opening a giro account for campaign expenditure or had missing documents. Appeals against these decisions were dealt with by appropriate Courts of Appeal and by the Supreme Court. The courts made different decisions as a result of differing interpretations of the law. Whilst the proper legal process was followed it is unfortunate that the result was inconsistency in application of the election procedures.

Opposition parties raised concerns regarding the voter registers, the distribution of voter cards and the use of serial numbers on the ballot papers. As the law stands, sufficient safeguards for the voting process do exist, particularly with the formation of multi-party commissions and the ability of parties to have representatives present at all levels. In light of this concern, however, the election authorities should have been more forthcoming in their willingness to address points raised by parties, increasing the general confidence of parties in the electoral procedures and the transparency of the process.

The Election Campaign and Media

The conduct of the election campaign represented a qualitative improvement from past elections, with parties holding well organised, well attended rallies. Despite the fact that in the final days of the campaign a more negative tone was evident, political parties should be congratulated for entering into a more substantive debate.

There were a limited number of violent incidents reported, often involving rival party supporters. Incidents of violence are always highly regrettable, but it is important to note that such incidents were isolated and did not represent a pattern of intimidation.

There were reports on election weekend that there had been infringements of the campaign silence by some candidates and some media. Such incidents brought to the attention of the election authorities need to be dealt with in the appropriate manner.

During the campaign it was claimed that some candidates were trying to use their senior position in companies to influence voters. Election authorities and parties should ensure that candidates do not exert undue influence against vulnerable voters.

Given the large number of national and local newspapers and TV stations in the country, major parties received wide coverage during the campaign. This coverage was increased by the ability of parties to take out paid advertising, which parties with the financial resources did utilise extensively.

Analysis carried out by the European Institute for the Media (EIM) shows that some media gave preferential news coverage to the party linked to their owner or management, particularly at the local level. MTV, the

national broadcaster, which as a public service broadcaster has a special responsibility, exhibited some bias towards the incumbent party.

Voter education on TV was well produced and served to increase voter awareness. The presence of TV programming in minority languages also served to increase access of voters to information on the campaign.

The Voting and Counting Processes

The overall national observation on election day shows that the voting and counting processes were largely carried out in general accordance with the law. A number of irregularities were observed, such as in some polling stations in Studenicani District, where apparent multiple voting and a lack of control of voters was observed. Any irregularities must be fully addressed by the election authorities.

Elsewhere, observers noted some isolated problems with voter registers and voter cards. There were also reports of some instances of proxy, open and particularly family voting. These need to be prevented in future elections, as stipulated in the law. It is also important that effective multi-party election boards are ensured in all areas. However, observers were generally impressed with the work of polling station officials and reported that voting was largely carried out in an orderly manner.

Given the importance the law gives to voter cards it was of course necessary that all voters had access to their card, and it was observed that people were largely able to collect their cards on the Saturday and Sunday, though some localised confusion was noted.

Some concern was expressed regarding the procedures for ensuring the ballot serial numbers remain unknown to all except the voter at the time of issuing. If serial numbers are to be used on the ballot then the procedures for issuance need to be strictly adhered to.

It was noted that polling stations only received as many ballots as they had registered voters. Such a practice does not allow for the possibility of a voter spoiling their ballot paper, which should always be provided for.

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