



Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights

FINAL REPORT

LOCAL ELECTIONS

FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

NOVEMBER 17, 1996

INTRODUCTION

The OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) received a formal request to observe the November 17 Local Elections in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Due to the significant number of national elections that the ODIHR was committed to observing in the same period, and the acute shortage of observers being seconded by participating states, the ODIHR was not able to mount its standard observation effort.

However, Professor Bernard Owen (France) was appointed as the ODIHR On-Site Co-ordinator to work closely with the OSCE Spillover Monitor Mission to Skopje. The Mission raised observers locally from amongst the mission, embassies and international NGOs. The ODIHR would like to thank the mission for raising the observers locally and for facilitating their deployment.

The ODIHR Co-ordinator undertook a needs assessment mission from October 23-27, and met with the President of the National Electoral Commission, the Minister of Justice, and representatives of all parties. The meetings took place in Skopje and Tetovo.

The Co-ordinator returned to Skopje from November 10-20. He provided a special training session on Saturday 16th at which time ODIHR questionnaires were issued to observers. The questions were based on the points that had been raised by the parties during the needs assessment mission, such as problems with voter identification and registration. The questionnaire was designed with assistance from the Netherlands Institute of Statistics (CBS).

Forty-five teams of observers were deployed to cover the whole country and all the new municipalities. The number of municipalities visited per team varied according to geography: Tetovo, the new central municipality, had one team, while other teams visited 3, 4 or 5 municipalities.

BACKGROUND

The municipal elections were the first to take place in the country since independence, following closely upon a major reorganisation of local government and the passing of a new local electoral law. The number of municipalities has been raised from 34 to 124, including the

City of Skopje which is to have its own mayor and council covering the city as a whole. The statistical picture was thus: 1,498, 653 registered voters were given the opportunity to elect 1,906 councillors and 124 mayors countrywide, amongst 13,500 candidates. The councils were to be elected on a proportional basis, based on party lists, and the mayors chosen under a majority system. A second round, to decide the race for mayors, is set for December 1, in cases where no candidate achieved an overall majority in the first round.

THE CAMPAIGN

As the ODIHR was not able to mount its standard long-term observation of the pre-election period, including the campaign, ODIHR Co-ordinator can only comment on limited aspects of the pre-election period. He did note concerns expressed during the campaign by some parties as to the deficiencies in the voter register. The Co-ordinator did also note with concern that the publishing of an opinion poll by a local journal on the eve of the election was not in accordance with the law. The law requires that election survey polls not be published in a two week period prior to Election Day.

ELECTION DAY

The overall positive assessment of Election Day is clearly reflected by the observers who found that in 89% of polling stations visited, the voting process was conducted properly. An important factor in safeguarding the integrity of the vote was the fact that both government and opposition party representatives were present in more than 95% of polling stations, either as members of the multi-party polling station commissions or as party designated observers.

In some polling stations the organisation could have been improved by reducing the number of voters allowed into the polling station at the same time. Issues of overcrowding could have also been addressed by providing more than two polling booths per polling station. Voters were identified with either their ID card or passport, and only 5.3% of observers noted problems with identification of voters. Only 6.4% of observers noted insufficient or wrong ballot materials.

Some voters, particularly in urban areas, were not properly informed as to which polling station was their designated station. Some parties complained that polling stations were not easy for voters to find. In fact, out of the 12 000 polling stations, only 40 were new. However, 19% of observers did find that polling stations were not easy to find.

THE VOTER REGISTER

The most contentious point raised during this election process was the integrity of the voter register and lack of public confidence in the register. There was much discussion among the parties as to how many voters were missing and whether the deceased had been taken off the register. There were also rumours such as the voters who had signed the petition for early parliamentary elections had been taken off the lists. The ODIHR Co-ordinator examined the issue thoroughly, hearing the complaints of the parties and consulting the authorities. No proof was brought forward to substantiate allegations of fraud.

What the ODIHR did find was reflected in the press statement (November 13, 1996), that in emerging democracies more publicity of electoral registers is needed than in older style democracies where facts are taken for granted. The electoral register had been open to

scrutiny by the voters who could check if their name was on the list. In fact few names were checked (60 000 all together). This fact was corroborated by all parties.

The information provided by ODIHR questionnaire was able to reveal that the number of citizens who were unable to vote, as a percentage of the total number of voters, was 8.6 %. Given the fact that some of this information was based on seemingly exaggerated claims by party observers, the actual figure was probably considerably lower.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❑ The accuracy of the voter register needs to be improved before future elections. Registration facilities should be readily accessible to the electorate, and the registration procedures clearly stated. The voter register is a public document which should be posted well in advance of the election to permit complaints about incorrect inclusion or exclusion.
- ❑ The election law could be improved by including simple and clear instructions of how the vote count is to be conducted, rather than just stating what is to be done.
- ❑ Additional voting booths could be provided in polling stations to facilitate a smooth process and reduce overcrowding of polling stations.
- ❑ The decision to provide each voter with a voter card is strongly supported, and the voting card should clearly demarcate which polling station a voter is registered to vote in with the location clearly marked.
- ❑ In relation to future parliamentary elections, an independent commission should be established to review the electoral boundaries in a transparent manner. The legislation states that the present administrative boundaries should be kept with a similar size electorate from constituency to constituency. However, the permissible difference in the size of the electorate from constituency to constituency needs to be further clarified.