



INTERNATIONAL ELECTION OBSERVATION MISSION The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia – Municipal Elections, 24 March 2013

STATEMENT OF PRELIMINARY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Skopje, 25 March 2013 – This Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions is the result of a common endeavour involving the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe (Congress).

Ambassador Geert-Hinrich Ahrens is the Head of the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission (EOM), deployed from 25 February 2013. Mr. Jüri Landberg leads the delegation of the Congress.

The assessment was made to determine whether the elections complied with OSCE commitments and Council of Europe standards, as well as with domestic legislation. This statement of preliminary findings and conclusions is delivered prior to the completion of the electoral process. The final assessment of the elections will depend, in part, on the conduct of the remaining stages of the electoral process, in particular the tabulation of results and the handling of possible post-election day complaints and appeals. The OSCE/ODIHR will issue a comprehensive final report, including recommendations for potential improvements, some eight weeks after the completion of the electoral process. The Congress Report will be adopted at its Plenary Session in October 2013.

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

The 24 March 2013 municipal elections were efficiently administered and highly competitive. Although the campaign was active, partisan media coverage and a blurring of state and party activities did not always provide a level playing field for candidates to contest the elections. Inter-ethnic tensions overshadowed the campaign. Election day was calm, although some procedural irregularities were observed.

Elections were held against the background of a recent parliamentary boycott and announced electoral boycott of the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) that ended on 1 March through a European Union brokered agreement between the leaders of SDSM and the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE).

The electoral legal framework is comprehensive. In addition to amendments in November 2012, the Electoral Code was further amended in the weeks before the election to extend the deadline for candidate registration. While it is not a good practice to amend the legal framework less than one year before an election, the latter amendment enjoyed cross-party consensus. Further reform is necessary to address gaps in the Electoral Code.

The State Election Commission (SEC) functioned efficiently and transparently and met electoral deadlines. Nevertheless, the SEC voted along ethnic lines to allow the withdrawal of candidate lists, negatively impacting on its impartiality and collegiality. While SEC sessions were open to election observers and the media, some Municipal Election Commissions did not announce their meetings in advance and took decisions in informal working groups thereby reducing the transparency of their work.

Overall, the candidate registration process was inclusive and provided voters with distinct choices. However, the decision to extend the candidate registration deadline did not apply to groups of voters. This is at odds with the principles enshrined in paragraphs 7.5 and 7.6 of the 1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document, which require authorities to respect the rights of all candidates to compete for political office without discrimination.

In line with legal requirements, one in each consecutive three places on candidate lists was generally reserved for the less represented gender. While there were previously no women mayors, 32 women stood as mayoral candidates in these elections and 2 were elected in the first round and 1 will contest the second round. The gender representation criteria were respected in election administration bodies.

Candidates were able to campaign freely and access to public space was provided without limitations. The campaign was active. Candidates generally targeted voters from their respective ethnic communities. Allegations of voter intimidation and misuse of state resources persisted throughout the campaign. The OSCE/ODIHR EOM observed several cases of campaign materials displayed on state property as well as government officials attending campaign events during working hours and using government vehicles. The blurring of the line between state activities and party campaigning is inconsistent with paragraph 5.4 of the 1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document.

Some 119,000 citizens were removed from the voter lists prior to these elections as they did not possess a biometric identification card or passport. This cleansing of the voter lists enjoyed the support of all major parties. Despite enhanced confidence in the accuracy of the voter lists some complaints persisted, including on election day. The procedures for compiling and maintaining the lists would benefit from further improvement.

The number of complaints filed with the courts was minimal and many stakeholders told the OSCE/ODIHR EOM that they lacked confidence in the complaints procedures and the courts. The SEC did not act on over 400 complaints related to early campaigning received before election day. The absence of clear procedures for handling pre-election complaints by the SEC does not guarantee effective redress as provided by paragraph 5.10 of the 1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document.

Although the media monitored by the OSCE/ODIHR EOM provided extensive campaign coverage in the news, the public broadcaster and several private broadcasters displayed bias in favour of the governing coalition. Broadcast media largely failed to distinguish between state activities and party campaigning. While the public broadcaster allocated free airtime to candidates and created a special programme to cover campaign activities, these were broadcast outside of prime time, limiting their potential viewership.

The voting process was calm and peaceful, although procedures were not followed in some polling stations visited. Instances of group voting persisted and the secrecy of the vote was not always respected. Most vote counts observed were assessed positively, although procedural omissions were at times noted. Tabulation was assessed positively in all but five of the MECs observed. The SEC announced a preliminary voter turnout of 67 per cent.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Background

Following the forced ejection of opposition members and media from the parliament during an annual state budget vote on 24 December 2012, the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM)

and several of its coalition partners began a boycott of the parliament. On 2 January 2013, SDSM announced that it would also boycott the municipal elections, unless a number of demands were met.¹ The governing Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) and the SDSM were not able to find a compromise to end the ensuing political crisis. The boycott of parliament and the municipal elections only ended on 1 March when the European Union mediated an agreement between the leaders of the two parties.²

The three largest ethnic-Albanian parties represented in the parliament, the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA), and the National Democratic Revival (NDR) did not join the boycott and from the outset announced their intention to contest these elections.

As a result of the political crisis, the elections assumed a political significance beyond their municipal scope. The leader of the VMRO-DPMNE coalition described the elections as a referendum on the country's future, while the SDSM chairperson argued that the results of the elections would determine whether or not early parliamentary elections should be held. In addition, the elections were widely viewed as an important test in the context of the shared ambition of all mainstream political parties to promote the country's Euro-Atlantic integration.

The 2013 elections were the first to be held after a merger of five municipalities into the single municipality of Kičevo. The reduction in municipalities and changed demographic profile of Kičevo led to an increase in inter-ethnic competition in the race for the mayor and council.

Legal Framework and Electoral System

The legal framework for municipal elections is regulated mainly by the Constitution and the Electoral Code. In addition to amendments in November 2012, the Electoral Code was further amended in the weeks before the elections to extend the deadline for candidate registration.³ While it is not a good practice to amend the legal framework less than one year before an election, the latter amendment enjoyed cross-party consensus.⁴ The remaining deadlines in the Electoral Code, including the start date for the campaign, were not changed to reflect this extension, resulting in confusion on when it was legal for candidates to start their campaign.

Although there have been several recent reforms of the Electoral Code responding to OSCE/ODIHR and the Council of Europe's Venice Commission recommendations, remaining gaps and ambiguities should be addressed, including provisions on campaign finance, candidate registration, and complaints and appeals. The International Election Observation Mission (IEOM) welcomes the agreement of the two main political parties to continue with the process of electoral reform after these elections.

Mayoral and municipal council elections are held every four years in the second half of March. Each of the 80 municipalities and the City of Skopje elects a mayor and a council. Mayors are elected

¹ These included: a call for early parliamentary elections, reform of the Electoral Code, extensive revision of the voter lists, and resignation of the Ministers of Finance, Interior, and Justice, and the Executive Director of the public broadcaster Macedonian Radio and Television (MRT).

² The text of the agreement can be found at http://ec.europa.eu/commission_2010-2014/fule/headlines/news/2013/03/20130301_en.htm.

³ The November 2012 amendments were adopted by a slim majority in parliament (66 of 123 members), with opposition parties abstaining from the vote.

⁴ Venice Commission Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters recommends that "the fundamental elements of electoral law...should not be open to amendment less than one year before an election". <http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/CDL-AD%282002%29023rev-e.aspx>.

through a majoritarian system consisting of two rounds. If no candidate receives more than 50 per cent of the vote in the first round, a second round is held within two weeks between the two candidates who received the highest numbers of votes. There is also a one third turnout requirement of registered voters in the first round for the election to be valid.

Municipal councillors are elected by a proportional representation system with closed lists and no turnout requirement. The number of councillors elected per municipality depends on the population in each municipality. The number cannot be less than 9 or more than 33, except in the City of Skopje where the number is set at 45.

Election Administration

The municipal elections were administered by a three-level election administration, comprising the State Election Commission (SEC), 80 Municipal Election Commissions (MECs) and the Election Commission for the City of Skopje, and 2,976 Electoral Boards (EBs). The SEC president and two members were nominated by the parliamentary opposition parties while the vice president and three members were nominated by the governing parties. MECs are professional bodies whose five members were randomly selected from civil servants. EBs were composed using a mixed professional-political model, with one member nominated by the governing political parties, one by the opposition parties, and three members randomly selected from civil servants. In line with the Electoral Code, the ethnic and gender composition of the MECs and EBs was observed.⁵

In general, the SEC functioned efficiently and transparently and met all electoral deadlines. The SEC sessions were open to election observers and the media and decisions and minutes of sessions were published on the SEC website, in line with a prior OSCE/ODIHR recommendation. On 8 March, however, the SEC voted along ethnic lines to allow the withdrawal of candidate lists in the ethnically diverse municipalities of Kičevo and Struga, negatively impacting on SEC impartiality and collegiality.

Some MECs did not announce their meetings in advance and decisions were often taken in working groups that were not public, thereby undermining transparency. Most MECs encountered financial problems due to failure to receive the necessary funds in a timely manner, and in some cases MEC members used their personal funds.⁶ The MECs conducted trainings for EBs in line with their legal obligation. Voter education undertaken by the SEC was limited.

Voter Registration

The SEC is responsible for maintaining voter lists based on information extracted from the permanent civil register kept by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. All citizens who are 18 years or older on election day, have residency in their respective municipality, have a valid biometric identification card or passport, and have not been deprived of their legal capacity by a court decision are eligible to be registered and vote.

Some 119,000 citizens were removed from the voter lists prior to these elections as they did not possess a biometric identification card or passport. This cleansing of the voter lists enjoyed cross-

⁵ According to Article 21 of the Electoral Code, ethnic communities that constitute more than 20 per cent of the population in a municipality should be represented in the MECs and EBs, while at least 30 per cent of members in all election commissions should come from each gender.

⁶ The SEC informed the OSCE/ODIHR EOM that, since September 2012, they have sent more than 20 letters to government, parliament and mayors to request financial support for 25 municipalities. The MECs in Delčevo, Demir Hisar, Dolneni, Gostivar, Lipkovo, Rankovce, Studeničani, Šuto Orizari, and Vrapčiste informed the OSCE/ODIHR EOM that they had not received money from municipalities.

party support. Despite enhanced confidence in the accuracy of the voter lists some complaints persisted, including on election day. The procedures for compiling and maintaining the lists would benefit from further improvement.

Citizens could check voter lists between 26 January and 9 February at SEC regional offices or through an internet-based search programme. Electoral contestants were able to request copies of the voter lists from the SEC in paper or electronic format. In total, some 1,743,403 citizens were registered to vote for these elections.

Candidate Registration

Candidates must be eligible voters and resident in the municipality where they will contest the election. Municipal elections may be contested by candidates nominated by registered political parties, coalitions of political parties, or by independent candidates nominated by a group of voters. In total, 350 lists for mayor and 480 lists for councils were submitted by 16 political parties, 8 coalitions and 97 groups of citizens by the revised registration deadline of 8 March.⁷ In line with legal requirements, one in each consecutive three places on candidate lists was generally reserved for the less represented gender. While there were previously no women mayors, 32 women stood as mayoral candidates in these elections and 2 were elected in the first round and 1 will contest the second round.

Overall, candidate registration was inclusive and provided voters with distinct choices. However, the extension of the candidate registration deadline only applied to political parties and coalitions and not to groups of voters.⁸ This is at odds with the principles enshrined in paragraphs 7.5 and 7.6 of the 1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document, which require authorities to respect the rights of all candidates to compete for political office without discrimination.⁹

Despite otherwise confrontational relations, VMRO-DPMNE and the SDSM agreed to submit a joint list of candidates in Kičevo and Struga, where close races between ethnic Albanian and Macedonian contestants were expected. The agreement to submit a joint list was made after VMRO-DPMNE had already registered candidate lists, which led the party to request the SEC to allow them to withdraw their lists in these two municipalities. The SEC decision to allow the withdrawal of lists was not accepted by the two MECs and they subsequently rejected the lists submitted by SDSM because they contained candidates already on the verified VMRO-DPMNE lists.¹⁰ The SDSM appealed the rejection of its lists to the Administrative Court, which overturned the decisions of both MECs on 9 March. DUI and DPA questioned the legality of the court's decision stating that the SEC did not have the authority to approve the withdrawal of lists once verified by MECs. In Kičevo, DPA publicly supported the candidate lists of DUI.¹¹

⁷ Several political parties who had previously been denied registration because of late filings were able to register under the new deadline.

⁸ The OSCE/ODIHR EOM is aware of at least one case in Čučer Sandevo municipality where a group of voters whose list was originally rejected for late submission and was refused registration under the new deadline.

⁹ Paragraph 7.5 of the 1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document provides that participating States “respect the right of citizens to seek political or public office, individually or as representatives of political parties or organizations, without discrimination.” Paragraph 7.6 further stipulates that participating States should “respect the right of individuals and groups to establish, in full freedom, their own political parties or other political organizations and provide such political parties and organizations with the necessary legal guarantees to enable them to compete with each other on a basis of equal treatment before the law and by the authorities.”

¹⁰ Article 57(2) of the Electoral Code prohibits any candidate from appearing on two different lists. The OSCE/ODIHR EOM was informed that the SDSM lists in Struga and Kičevo contained 12 and 13 candidates, respectively, that were already on the VMRO-DPMNE list.

¹¹ On 4 March, the SEC stated that no legal procedures were in place for the SEC to amend the candidate lists. SEC Session minutes are available at:

The Campaign

The election campaign commenced officially on 4 March and ended at midnight on 22 March. The OSCE/ODIHR EOM observed a number of instances of early campaigning. In addition, because of the extended registration deadlines, parties in the SDSM coalition started to campaign before their lists were verified by the MECs.

Candidates were able to campaign freely and access to public space was provided without limitations. The campaign was active and increased significantly during the last two weeks before election day. Billboards, posters and banners were prevalent in cities and along the main roads, with VMRO-DPMNE enjoying the highest visibility. Candidates also relied on door-to-door campaigning, campaign rallies and meetings, as well as the use of social media and websites to reach out to voters.¹² Candidates generally targeted voters from their respective ethnic communities.

The recent political crisis sharpened the tone of the campaign and the use of ethnically divisive rhetoric led to heightened tensions in an intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic context.¹³ Although campaign events were generally peaceful, several cases of vandalized campaign offices, physical attacks, and destroyed or removed campaign materials were observed across the country.¹⁴ The violent protests that surrounded the appointment of Talat Xhaferi as the new Defence Minister at the start of the campaign period resulted in some political parties accusing one another of inciting ethnic tensions, prompting the international community and domestic civil society groups to urge calm ahead of the elections. In an effort to promote a positive campaign atmosphere, candidates in Skopje and some other municipalities signed a code of conduct in support of a peaceful and fair campaign.

Allegations of voter intimidation and misuse of state resources persisted throughout the campaign. The OSCE/ODIHR EOM observed multiple cases of party campaign materials being displayed on state property, including on lampposts, public buildings and bridges, which contravenes Article 82 of the Electoral Code. The OSCE/ODIHR EOM also observed several cases of government officials attending campaign events during working hours and using government vehicles, even when not warranted by security concerns. In addition, the government announced multiple vacancy notices as well as increases in pensions, welfare benefits and state support for agricultural products during the campaign. A number of interlocutors of the IEOM made allegations of intimidation of voters, especially of public sector employees. Collectively, this blurred the line between state activities and party campaigning and is inconsistent with paragraph 5.4 of the 1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document.¹⁵

Campaign Finance

All electoral contestants were obliged to open a special bank account for campaign funds and to submit reports on campaign expenditure to the SEC, State Audit Office and State Commission for Prevention of Corruption. In line with a prior OSCE/ODIHR recommendation, the Ministry of

http://www.sec.mk/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=42&Itemid=103.

¹² The OSCE/ODIHR EOM observed 54 rallies.

¹³ For example, on 13 March in Struga, the Prime Minister spoke at a rally warning against “the other side’s” voter mobilization efforts and urging ethnic Macedonians to look beyond party divisions “because Struga has a problem that has to be resolved.” In Kičevo, DUI mayoral candidate Fatmir Dehari posted a photograph of himself in combat gear and holding an automatic weapon on his social media profile page.

¹⁴ Including offices of mayoral candidate Jakimovski in Karpoš as well as of DUI in Kičevo and of SDSM in Ohrid. In addition, Ajduvan Mamudov, head of the campaign office of the candidate Nedždet Mustafa (United Democratic Forces of the Roma) was attacked on 20 March and the case is under investigation.

¹⁵ Paragraph 5.4 of the 1990 Copenhagen Document provides for “a clear separation between the State and political parties; in particular, political parties will not be merged with the State.”

Finance developed an itemized campaign finance form and trained political parties on how to complete the reports. The first reports were due on 14 March and the deadline was extended to 19 March for those registered during the extended period.¹⁶ According to the SEC, 83 out of 121 reports were submitted on time.¹⁷ The first reports show that VMRO-DPMNE enjoyed a significant financial advantage, spending over three times more than its closest competitor.¹⁸ The second reports had to be submitted by 23 March and final reports within 30 days after the end of the campaign. The law is silent on requirements to submit campaign finance reports should there be a second round of elections.

Although campaign expenditures are limited to MKD 180 (EUR 3) per registered voter in the municipality for which a list is submitted, campaign organizers are obliged to submit a unified report for all their lists that is not broken down by municipality. Thus, it will not be possible to determine if the limitation on expenditures was respected. In addition, concerns remain in respect of differing thresholds for donations by individuals and legal entities.

Media

There is a large number of registered media outlets in the country. They are divided along language and political lines. Television is the main source of political information. Since the last elections, the closure of two broadcasters and several print media has significantly reduced the number of media outlets critical of the government. Media coverage of the campaign is regulated by the Electoral Code, the Law on Broadcasting Activity, and regulations of the Broadcasting Council (BC). Broadcast media are obligated to provide balanced coverage of the campaign and provisions are in place for free airtime and paid advertisements.

While the media monitored by the OSCE/ODIHR EOM provided extensive campaign coverage in the news, it showed significant bias in favour of the governing parties both in terms of quantity and content of coverage.¹⁹ All monitored broadcast media, except *Telma*, regularly covered government activities but failed to distinguish between state activities and party campaigning. The public broadcaster Macedonian Radio and Television (MRT) did not provide balanced coverage of the campaign. MRT's first channel, *MRT-1*, devoted 29 per cent of its news coverage to the government and 27 per cent to VMRO-DPMNE, mainly neutral or positive in tone. SDSM received 24 per cent of exclusively neutral or negative coverage. *MRT-2*, which provides programmes in minority languages, displayed a similar approach, and devoted 27 per cent of mostly neutral coverage to the government and 21 per cent to DUI, while other major parties received between 8 and 12 per cent of mostly neutral coverage.

For the private channels, *Sitel* and *Kanal 5* favoured the ruling parties and were mostly negative in tone towards the opposition, while *TV Telma*, *Alfa*, and *Alsat-M* provided more neutral coverage. *Sitel* allotted 49 per cent of news coverage to VMRO-DPMNE, 21 per cent to SDSM, and 16 per cent to the government. *Kanal 5* devoted 36 per cent to VMRO-DPMNE, 26 per cent to SDSM, and 16 per cent to the government. *TV Telma* allotted 25 per cent to VMRO-DPMNE, 32 per cent to SDSM and *Alfa* allotted 34 per cent to VMRO-DPMNE and 30 per cent to SDSM. *Alsat-M* placed

¹⁶ The SEC decision is based on Article 15.3 of the Electoral Code, which states that electoral deadlines are determined by the SEC. However, this Article refers only to parliamentary elections.

¹⁷ Not all institutions published all reports, as required by law.

¹⁸ According to the reports the total spent amount for VMRO-DPMNE is EUR 729,826, compared to SDSM's total of EUR 222,098. Reports are available at <http://www.dksk.org.mk/>.

¹⁹ The OSCE/ODIHR EOM monitored the prime time (18:00 to 24:00) political coverage of seven television channels: Public *MRT-1* and *MRT-2* and *Sitel*, *Kanal 5*, *TV Telma*, *Alfa*, *Alsat-M*; newspapers: *Dnevnik*, *Nova Makedonia*, *Fokus*, *Koha*, *Zhurnal* +.

more focus on the ethnic Albanian parties and devoted 24 per cent to DUI, 12 per cent to DPA, 10 per cent to NDR, and 17 per cent to both VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM.

MRT complied with its obligation to allocate free airtime to electoral contestants.²⁰ However, the allotted time was aired outside of prime time, which decreased the potential audience as well as the interest of candidates in using the time. MRT created a special program, *Election Chronicle*, to provide more detailed coverage of campaign activities. However, this programme was also aired outside of prime time and more than half of its coverage on *MRT-1* was devoted to VMRO-DPMNE. While *MRT-1* did not organize any debates, 17 debates were held between ethnic Albanian parties on *MRT-2*; however most of them were biased in favour of DUI.

Every broadcaster may sell up to 15 minutes per hour of paid political advertisements and every contestant may purchase up to 10 minutes of such time. The OSCE/ODIHR EOM monitoring showed that while the VMRO-DPMNE coalition used paid advertisements extensively, advertisements from other contestants were significantly less frequent.

The BC is obliged to monitor compliance of the broadcast media and to react to irregularities identified. Based on its media monitoring results the BC initiated 24 misdemeanor charges against 17 television channels and their editors in chief for violating rules on paid political advertisement and airing advertisements paid from the state budget. In addition, monitoring by the BC revealed a lack of balance in the news coverage in favour of the ruling parties in most national broadcast media, as well as violations of rules for presentation of opinion polls by *Sitel* and *MRT Radio*. The BC did not take any action on these issues before election day.

Complaints and Appeals

The SEC has jurisdiction over complaints related to voter registration, violations of citizens' rights to vote on election day, and on the voting, counting, and tabulation of results. Appeals of these decisions are heard by the Administrative Court, whose decisions are final. Although short deadlines are provided for the resolution of complaints and appeals regarding the protection of candidate and voter rights, the Administrative Court adhered to the deadlines.²¹ Contrary to a prior OSCE/ODIHR recommendation, the SEC can only decide on some election day complaints if at least two complaints are submitted for the same polling station.²²

Eleven complaints were filed with the Administrative Court during the candidate registration period that disputed the rejection of candidate lists by MECs, of which four were accepted. With the extension of the candidate registration deadline, three candidate lists that were initially rejected by MECs because of late submission were resubmitted and accepted.²³

The SEC received over 400 complaints related to early campaigning, but did not act on these before election day. The lack of clear procedures for handling pre-election complaints by the SEC does not guarantee effective redress as provided by paragraph 5.10 of the 1990 OSCE Copenhagen

²⁰ MRT allocated two minutes to every mayoral candidate and one minute to every candidate list for municipal council.

²¹ In some cases the complainant must submit an appeal within 24 hours of receiving the decision from the MEC and the Administrative Court must decide within 24 hours. On complaints on the protection of the right to vote, the SEC must decide within 4 hours of receiving the complaint. The Administrative Court must decide within 24 hours of receipt of a SEC decision.

²² Article 31(2)35 of the Electoral Code.

²³ Alliance of Tito's Left Forces in Aerodrom and Karpoš municipality and the Social Democratic Union in Gjørče Petrov.

Document.²⁴ Representatives of some political parties told the OSCE/ODIHR EOM that they did not file complaints because they lacked confidence in the complaints procedures and the courts.

Citizen and International Observers

The Electoral Code provides for observation by international and citizen observers as well as authorized representatives of candidates at all levels of the election administration. The citizen observer groups which deployed the greatest number of observers were MOST, CIVIL, and the Institute for Democracy. In line with a prior OSCE/ODIHR recommendation, all observers were entitled to receive copies of MEC and EB results protocols.

Election Day

Election day was calm and peaceful although some technical irregularities were noted. Several parties raised concerns about large numbers of diaspora voters returning on election day to vote. Preliminary figures announced by the SEC put voter turnout at 67 per cent. The SEC started announcing results on election night and posted them on its website by municipality and polling station.

Early voting took place on 23 March for homebound voters, prisoners and internally displaced persons. The overall assessment by IEOM observers was positive in 55 of the 66 cases observed. However, in 13 cases the secrecy of the vote was not respected, while voters' understanding of the voting procedure was assessed negatively in 26 instances. IEOM observers noted that some voters in prisons were not included in the voter list. Citizen observers were present in 30 per cent of places where homebound and prison voting was observed.

IEOM observers evaluated the opening of polling stations positively in 99 per cent of observations. Seventeen of the polling stations visited opened with short delays, but this did not prevent voters from voting.

The overall assessment of the voting process was good or very good in 94 per cent of observations. IEOM observers were not obstructed and could clearly observe procedures in 98 per cent of observations. However, procedural irregularities were observed in 11 per cent of polling stations visited. This included group voting (15 per cent), respect for the secrecy of the vote (12 per cent), proxy voting (3.5 per cent), and ballot boxes not sealed properly (3 per cent). In 95 cases observed, voters were turned away because their names were not on the voter list of that particular polling station. The performance of the EBs and their understanding of voting procedures were assessed positively in 90 per cent of observations.

In addition, the IEOM noted that the secrecy of the vote could have been compromised in the 60 polling stations with less than 10 registered voters.

Vote counting was assessed positively in 66 of 81 observed counts and IEOM observers had a clear view of the counting procedure in 97 per cent of observations. However, the counting procedure was disorganized in 24 observed cases and procedural errors were noted in 18 counts observed. While the transparency of the count was assessed positively in 92 per cent of observations, the results protocol was not publicly posted in 44 per cent of polling stations observed, as required by the Electoral Code.

²⁴ Paragraph 5.10 of the 1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document provides that "everyone will have an effective means of redress against administrative decisions, so as to guarantee respect for fundamental rights and ensure legal integrity."

The overall assessment of the tabulation process was good or very good in 93 per cent of the MECs observed, with observers being generally able to observe without restrictions. Some discrepancies were noted in EB results protocols in 18 observed cases; these were mostly corrected by the MECs.

Citizen observers were present at the opening in 72 per cent of polling stations observed, during the voting process in 74 per cent of polling stations, and during the counting process in 80 per cent of polling stations. In addition, authorized representatives of candidates were present in 96 per cent of polling stations visited by observers. Women represented 46 per cent of EB chairpersons in the polling stations observed.

*The English version of this report is the only official document.
Unofficial translations are provided in Macedonian and Albanian.*

MISSION INFORMATION & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Skopje, 25 March 2013 – The OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission (EOM) opened in Skopje on 25 February, with 11 experts in the capital and 16 long-term observers deployed throughout the country.

On election day, some 215 short-term observers were deployed, including a 15-member delegation from the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe. In total, there were observers from 30 OSCE participating States. Voting was observed in 831 polling stations out of a total of 2,976. Counting was observed in 80 polling stations. The tabulation process was observed in 66 out of 81 MECs.

The institutions represented wish to thank the authorities for the invitations to observe the elections, the State Election Commission for its co-operation and for providing accreditation documents, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other authorities for their assistance and co-operation. The institutions also wish to express appreciation to the OSCE Mission to Skopje and other international institutions for their co-operation and support.

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