



**OSCE/ODIHR
ELECTION OBSERVATION MISSION**

**THE FORMER YUGOSLAV
REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA
MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS
24 September 2000 (Second Round)**



STATEMENT OF PRELIMINARY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Skopje, 25 September 2000 — The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) Election Observation Mission (EOM) for the municipal elections in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia issues this statement of preliminary findings and conclusions.

The EOM, headed by Ambassador Charles Magee (USA), issues this statement before the final certification of the election results and before a complete analysis of the observation findings. This statement should be considered in conjunction with the statement issued by the EOM on 11 September after the first round of voting. The OSCE/ODIHR will issue a comprehensive and final report approximately one month after the completion of the electoral process.

The EOM wishes to express appreciation to the Office of the President, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the State Election Commission, and other national and local authorities for their assistance and cooperation during the course of the observation.

Preliminary Conclusions

The 24 September second-round municipal elections in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia showed improvement in some areas but still fell short on a number of international standards for democratic elections formulated in the 1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document. In particular, the elections again did not fully meet the country's OSCE commitment to conduct elections free from violence and intimidation, and to safeguard the secrecy of the vote.

While voting on 24 September was carried out in a calm and orderly manner in the majority of municipalities, election day was also marked by tension, major irregularities, acts of intimidation and violence in a significant number of municipalities. In a number of polling stations, voting had to be suspended. In at least 14 polling stations, ballot boxes were destroyed. The EOM noted cases of ballot stuffing. There were also many cases of group and proxy voting throughout the country. In a significant number of polling stations, observers reported problems regarding the secrecy of the vote. Unlike in the first round, such cases were not limited to a particular region but appear to have been most severe and widespread in municipalities where the mayoral race was particularly close. The most serious and numerous cases were reported from Strumica, Struga, Ohrid and some Skopje municipalities. While serious, these incidents did not reach the levels of violence that marred the first round.

Between the two rounds of voting, the State Election Commission (SEC) generally continued to define its role in a restrictive way, addressing only issues explicitly assigned to it in the Law on Local Elections. On 21 September, however, the SEC adopted the position that ballots are considered valid if the will of the voter is expressed in a clear, unambiguous way.

Tabulation of results was slow and the complaints and appeal process in some cases took a long time. As a result, in some municipalities the second round and first-round reruns could not be carried out on 24 September as scheduled.

The issue of funding the elections appeared to be resolved between the two rounds of voting, after the Finance Ministry decided on 11 September to allocate funds totaling 19 million denars (about \$280,000) to almost all municipalities in order to enable them to meet their obligations. However, by the second round election day only a few municipalities had received any of these funds, making it difficult for the elections to be carried out smoothly.

The election campaign between the two rounds of voting was low key, and campaign activities took place in a generally calm and peaceful atmosphere.

Overall, the media gave extensive, generally accurate, and informed coverage to election activities, developments, and major political issues before the second round of voting and on election day. However, Macedonian Television continued to give overly extensive coverage to government activities, usually positive in tone, thus indirectly favoring the ruling parties.

Preliminary Findings

Legislative Framework and Election Administration

The Election Observation Mission noted that, as before the first round of the municipal elections, the SEC generally continued to limit its activities to the duties which are explicitly assigned to it in the Law on Local Elections. This approach created a number of problems. For example, the SEC did not issue complete results for the first round, arguing that this was not among its duties. This decision forced the public and the media to depend on individual Municipal Election Commissions (MECs) for results. Lacking any complete results in the days following first-round voting, various political parties made claims of seats won that later proved incorrect, and added to the general confusion.

On 21 September, however, the SEC took the useful step of adopting the position that ballots are considered valid if the will of the voter is expressed in a clear, unambiguous way. The EOM welcomes this decision, especially in light of the fact that in the first round vote for municipal councils the number of invalid ballots was unusually high.

Tabulation of results was slow and the complaints and appeal process in some cases took a long time. As a result, in some municipalities the second round and first-round reruns could not be carried out on 24 September as scheduled because cases were still pending.

Funding of the elections was a serious concern before the first round. On 11 September, the Finance Ministry allocated a total of 19 million denars to 117 of the 123 municipalities so that the municipal authorities could meet their election obligations. However, by the second round election day, very few municipalities had received any of these funds, making it difficult for the elections to be carried out smoothly. The EOM welcomes the decision to allocate these funds before the second round of voting, although measures to ensure their prompt disbursement would have avoided further problems and financial uncertainties.

The EOM noted with concern that in the municipality of Radovis, the MEC chairman without consulting with opposition members of the MEC replaced a significant number of polling officials of opposition parties with supporters of the ruling parties.

Election Environment and Campaign

The election campaign between the two rounds of voting was generally low key, and for the most part campaign activities took place in a calm and peaceful atmosphere. The EOM noted a few cases

of incidents, including attacks on campaign offices of various parties and coalitions. Overall, the campaign was noticeably quieter than before the first round.

The ethnic-Albanian Party for Democratic Prosperity (PDP) decided to withdraw from the second round, stating that after the first-round incidents, proper elections were not guaranteed and that its members' and supporters' security was jeopardized. The PDP also withdrew its members from the SEC, Municipal Election Commissions and polling boards. The EOM regrets this decision by the PDP to withdraw from election commissions, which can only serve to weaken trust in and transparency of the electoral process. However, the PDP did not carry out earlier threats that its elected councilors and mayor would not accept the positions to which they were elected.

In Debar, both the PDP and the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA) suspended their local branches as a result of violence on the first-round election day. While denying any responsibility for events on 10 September, the DPA also decided to withdraw its mayoral candidates in two municipalities where serious irregularities and acts of violence had occurred on 10 September.

The EOM is concerned that in Krusevo, employees of state institutions and companies who worked as opposition party observers during the first round of voting were transferred to other duty stations or were assigned less responsible positions.

Media Coverage

Overall, the media gave extensive, generally accurate, and informed coverage to election activities, developments, and major political issues before the second round of voting and on election day.

The large number of electronic and print media — both at the national and local levels — gave the public broad access to information and a wide range of opinions. Most media continued to provide regular coverage of the parties' activities, whether campaign-related or not. Media generally continued their election-related coverage in the same vein as in the first round, often showing a pronounced editorial policy.

Macedonian Television again fell short of meeting its obligations as a public broadcaster. In the period between the two rounds, MTV devoted 52% of its news programs to government activities, often in a positive tone. Another 22% was devoted to coverage of the ruling parties' activities. The SDSM-led Joint Opposition, by contrast, received just 9% of coverage.

Election Day

On 24 September, the second round of mayoral elections was carried out in 54 municipalities, while in another 27 municipalities, the first round of voting was repeated partially or completely.

Overall, voting on 24 September was carried out in a calm and orderly manner in the majority of municipalities. However, election day was also marked by major irregularities, acts of intimidation and violence in a significant number of municipalities. In a number of polling stations, voting had to be suspended. In at least 14 polling stations, ballot boxes were destroyed, sometimes immediately before the beginning of the vote count. Turnout differed greatly, sometimes within the same municipality.

In a number of municipalities, observers noted acts of violence and intimidation. Unlike in the first round, such cases were not limited to a particular region. Rather, such occurrences appear to have been most severe and widespread in municipalities where the race between the main political forces was particularly close. The most serious and numerous cases were reported from Strumica, Struga, Ohrid and some Skopje municipalities. In Strumica, guns were fired, and at least one person had to be hospitalized after having been beaten with a gun. In Strumica and in Struga, groups of party

supporters intimidated voters and in some cases prevented them from voting. In one polling station in Ohrid, the polling board reportedly was forced at gunpoint to fill in ballots for the ruling parties at the beginning of the count. In Suto Orizari, a member of parliament was physically assaulted and injured. During some of those incidents, police were present but failed to intervene.

In most municipalities in the west of the country — including Debar where the most violent incidents had occurred during the first round — there was marked improvement over the first round. However, the PDP decision to withdraw from the race meant that in most of those municipalities there was no competition.

The performance of polling boards was mixed. Observers noted inconsistencies in adherence to rules in some cases, and blatant disregard of the rules in others. The following major irregularities were reported:

- An increased number of blatant cases of ballot-box stuffing;
- At least 14 cases of destruction of ballot boxes;
- In a number of polling stations, voters were pressured into showing their marked ballots to polling officials before putting them in the ballot box;
- In at least one case, voters were told to use pens of specific colors, mark the ballot with special symbols, or fold the ballot paper in a particular way so that their voting behavior could be checked;
- In at least one polling station, the voters register was stolen during election day;
- Unauthorized persons were often present in and around polling stations, sometimes interfering in the process;
- Widespread group voting in all parts of the country;
- Instances of proxy voting;
- Identification documents not always checked.

The EOM noted that in many polling stations both in urban and rural areas, makeshift voting screens made of cardboard were used, which did not guarantee the privacy of the vote.

The EOM is concerned about reports that in Strumica, journalists of media which are known to be critical of the government were intimidated and prevented from performing their tasks.

Observers reported some major problems during the vote count. In the most severe incident, one observer in Skopje witnessed the chairman of the polling board tearing up all ballots during the count. As in the first round observers were prevented from attending the count in a few cases, while in at least one instance they were intimidated during the count.

Observers reported that non-partisan domestic observers were present in many of the polling stations visited. Some of these domestic observers were prevented from carrying out their task, mostly by party activists but sometimes also by election officials.

The ODIHR will monitor the follow-up to the election and stands ready to assist the Government in addressing the concerns highlighted in this and the previous preliminary statement.

*This statement is also available in Macedonian.
However, the English text remains the only official version.*

Mission Information

This statement is based on the observations of election preparations and the campaign by 17 election experts deployed throughout the country for seven weeks, and 80 short-term observers from 21 OSCE participating States monitoring the process on election day in over 500 polling stations in 61 municipalities. In addition, the EOM monitored two television channels and seven daily newspapers for a period of six weeks.

The EOM wishes to thank the OSCE Spillover Mission to Skopje for its support throughout the duration of the mission, as well as the international organizations and embassies for their support on election day.

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