



Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights

PRESS STATEMENT IMMEDIATE 29th October 1996

Final Statement of the OSCE/ODIHR International Observer Mission to the Election of the President of the Bulgarian Republic on the FIRST ROUND of voting, 27th October 1996.

Conclusion:

The OSCE International Observer Mission congratulates the people of Bulgaria for participating in the first round of the Presidential election in a calm and thoughtful fashion;

The Mission states its belief that the conduct of the electoral process has assisted in the further development and entrenchment of democracy in Bulgaria;

The Mission states that, whilst noting its criticisms of the electoral law, the result of the first round of voting accurately expresses the wishes of the Bulgarian electorate on the day.

INTRODUCTION

The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights received the invitation from the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs dated 20th September 1996 inviting it to co-ordinate the International Observer Mission to monitor the presidential elections.

The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights issued its Note Verbale to the participating States on 24th September inviting them to nominate Observers and stating that Michael Meadowcroft had been appointed as Co-ordinator of the Mission. Ultimately twenty-eight Observers from eleven countries have been deployed across Bulgaria. Members of diplomatic missions accredited to the Republic of Bulgaria who participated in the observation have also reported back to the Mission on their findings.

The OSCE/ODIHR Observer Mission opened an office in Sofia on 5th October and in Plovdiv on 18th October. It issued an invitation to all Presidential candidates to meet with its members, and it also met with representatives of the two noted Bulgarian organisations, BAFECR and GISDYS, and with other Bulgarian NGOs. It also heard representations from Ms Reneta Indjova, whose registration as a Presidential candidate had been rejected - a decision upheld by the Supreme Court. The Mission wishes to place on record its appreciation of the co-operation and help it has received from the Bulgarian people, from the Central

Electoral Commission, from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and from all the organisations it has contacted.

The Mission will also be observing the second round of voting next Sunday.

CAMPAIGN PERIOD

The OSCE/ODIHR Mission is concerned at aspects of the electoral law governing the conduct of the election. In particular it notes that the law does not give registered Presidential candidates equal status. Those nominated by registered political organisations which have representation in Parliament enjoy more favourable treatment than their counterparts without formal parliamentary links. This differential treatment was manifested in a number of concrete ways:

- q only candidates whose nominating bodies were represented in Parliament were entitled to be represented on the electoral commissions at all levels;
- q candidates with parliamentary links had substantially more time allowed to them in the televised debates;
- q only candidates without links with parliamentary representation had to produce bank guarantees in order to receive campaign finance.

It is the Mission's view that any worry about the eventual number of candidates being so numerous as potentially to undermine the important concept of equal treatment should be dealt with through the rules for their registration.

The Mission also wishes to voice a concern as to the published figure of registered voters which, at 6.75 million is at least 350,000 higher than the maximum possible figure, according to the published demographic statistics. It is accepted that there may well be some double counting as a consequence of transferred votes and that the rules in regard to stamping of internal passports are a crucial safeguard against double voting.

The late partisan public intervention of the Prime Minister was raised as a possible contravention of the rule forbidding campaigning during the 24 hours prior to the poll opening.

POLLING DAY

Observers reported in each area of the country that polling day had been conducted in an atmosphere of calm and efficiency. After six ballots in six years the Sectional Election Commissions - i.e. the polling station officials - were familiar with the process and had carried out their work with a sense of pride and competence. Observers had been well received everywhere and the details of protocols to be completed after the counting of the votes carefully explained to them. The method of voting used - putting the chosen ballot paper into an envelope - ensured that the elector had to cast his or her vote in secret, although there were a number of instances where electors had put more than one ballot paper of the same candidate into the envelope.. Where domestic observers were also present they expressed themselves satisfied with the conduct of the poll. The widespread presence of observers from BAFECR and GISDYS is a valuable component of the democratic process in Bulgaria.

Electors told Observers that they felt that they had had sufficient information, both on the campaign and on the voting procedure, to be able to make their choices.

It was noted that a handful of electors who tried to vote using an international, red, passport were not allowed to do so.

THE COUNT

Observers reported that the counting procedure had been carefully followed virtually everywhere and that there had been no significant disagreements over the results declared in the polling districts. We note that the procedure for displaying a copy of the result protocol publicly at the polling station is a good safeguard against any possible attempt to manipulate the figures later.

THE TABULATION

The Observer Mission notes that the appointment of an independent company - after a competitive tendering process - to carry out the vote tabulation is probably unique, as is the highly commendable practice of publishing after the election, in both book and computer disk form, the complete results of the election. The Mission was concerned that a chosen second company refused to sign a contract believing that the level of control on the timing and flow of data from the Central Election Commission did not give them sufficient financial and organisational protection. In the event those fears do not appear to have been fulfilled.

One Observer team was denied access to a Regional Commission but otherwise Observers reported that the gathering of protocols and the primary tabulation at regional level was carried out satisfactorily.

The central vote tabulation is being carried out with detailed checks and balances on the inputting of vote data from the individual polling station result protocols. Election Commissioners, working in pairs, with one Commissioner from the Government Group and one from the Opposition side respectively, personally receive the material and see to its initial recording and transmission to the data processing stage. Direct involvement of CEC members in this way is unusual and commendable. Sufficient safeguards are in place for the public to be able to have confidence in the declared result.

[Statement given by Michael Meadowcroft, Co-ordinator of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights International Observer Mission to the Bulgarian Presidential Election 1996, at a Press Briefing at the NDK Centre, Sofia, 1500 hrs, 29 October 1996]

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