



**ORGANIZATION FOR SECURITY AND CO-OPERATION
IN EUROPE**

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**Observation of the Elections for the Chambers of Deputies
of the Czech Republic**

PRELIMINARY STATEMENT

PRAGUE, 16 June 2002 - The 14-15 June elections for the Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Republic met international standards and commitments for democratic elections, concluded the Election Observation Mission of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR).

These elections, the fifth for the Chamber of Deputies since 1990, were carried out in a generally calm and low key political atmosphere. They were especially significant in part because the newly elected Chamber – with the Senate – will select the next President and because this Chamber is likely to guide Czech accession to the European Union. Although 28 political parties or groupings participated in the elections, only four passed the 5% threshold. Since no party won an absolute majority, negotiations will be required to form a new government. Voter turnout was 58%, substantially lower than in the last election for the Chamber of Deputies.

A number of significant changes in the election system were instituted following the last elections to the Chamber of Deputies four years ago. The new system is characterized by procedures that work well in the Czech Republic because of the high level of public confidence in the integrity and impartiality of the election administration. To their credit, the authorities went beyond legal requirements and implemented good practices to enhance transparency. The most notable of these was an impressive internet website on which detailed polling station results and tabulations were posted and immediately made available to the public. The Czech Statistical Office deserves high marks for its efficiency in publicly posting these comprehensive results on its website.

At the same time, however, the OSCE/ODIHR noted that while the legal changes to the electoral system do not contravene international standards, in a number of instances they do not reflect best practices in terms of promoting transparency. The increased efficiency of the electoral administration came at the cost of reducing its openness. For example, the highest electoral body, the State Election Commission (SEC), which previously included political party representatives, is now made up entirely of government officials and chaired by the Minister of Interior. The SEC voted to hold all its meetings behind closed doors, denying public access to its deliberations. While polling station commissions are made up of political party representatives, there is no legal provision for election observers, and those who wish to observe the vote count must obtain special permission from the SEC. Individual voters may check to ensure they are registered, but since 1994 the voters' registers have been closed to public review.

The election administration performed well and the election process ran smoothly. Technical preparations for the election were carried out efficiently. Training for election officials appeared to be particularly strong. In another positive step, voting by Czech citizens outside the country was permitted for the first time in this election; unfortunately, very few citizens abroad availed themselves of the opportunity to vote.

There were relatively few election-related complaints and appeals. However, the OSCE/ODIHR was concerned that the law and its application may not provide timely and effective remedies for complainants. Under the election law, any appeals concerning broad election issues such as the honesty and integrity of the campaign can be filed only after the elections are over. Before the elections, the only permissible appeals relate to registration of candidate lists. However, even this process proved inefficient. The case of one party was dealt with by regional courts, the Supreme Court and the Constitutional Court, with the end result being an inconsistent application of the law: the party was allowed to run in some regions but not in others. Separately, the Supreme Court, citing a backlog of cases, did not rule on a different appeal by a group denied registration as a political party long before the election; as a result the group could not compete in the election.

The public electronic media fulfilled its legal obligation to provide 14 hours of free air time divided equally among all political parties registered for the election. Public television, however, was not particularly imaginative in enabling the parties to get their messages across – the free air time was allocated in blocs of 70 minutes in mid-afternoon when viewership is low. Many of the smaller parties sharply criticized public television for heavily favoring the four parliamentary formations in its news and political programming. Public radio demonstrated substantially more creativity in its distribution of the required free time and in enabling the smaller parties to convey their messages on a more equitable basis. The private electronic and print media, taken as a whole, provided a range of predominantly neutral information and opinions to the public, although many of the smaller parties received little or no coverage in many media outlets.

Women made up 26.5% of the candidate lists, and a total of 34 women were elected to the Chamber of Deputies, three more than in the outgoing Chamber. Although the law does not discriminate against minorities, in an unfortunate trend no ethnic Roma were elected, continuing a steady decline in their representation since 1990; for the first time there will not be a single Roma member of the Chamber of Deputies.

***This Preliminary Statement is also available in Czech.
The English version of this Preliminary Statement is the only official version.***

Mission Information & Acknowledgments

The OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission was established in response to an invitation from the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It began work on May 16. Mission members were deployed in Prague, Brno and Plzen. The OSCE/ODIHR judged that there was no need to deploy short term observers for this election. This statement is therefore based on the Mission's long term observation. The OSCE/ODIHR will issue a final statement and recommendations within 30 days.

The OSCE/ODIHR and the Election Observation Mission express their appreciation to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Interior, the Czech Statistical Office, the State Election Commission and other authorities for their assistance and cooperation during the observation.

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