



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

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## Press Release

### **First round of Serbian presidential election mostly in line with OSCE commitments, says observation mission**

BELGRADE, 21 January 2008 – A limited election observation mission (LEOM) deployed by the OSCE’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) concluded that the first round of voting in Serbia’s presidential election yesterday was conducted mostly in line with OSCE commitments for democratic elections.

“Serbia has shown once again that it can hold democratic elections,” said Nikolai Vulchanov, head of the observer mission. “But it is important that the authorities continue to make improvements where they are needed. For example, Serbia is still without a statewide voter register, something that is required by law.”

The campaign was competitive, pluralistic, and calm. A variety of media provided candidates with mostly neutral coverage, as well as free and paid advertising. Observers noted that the election was well administered by the Republic Election Commission (REC), although they expressed concern that the Commission initially chose to ignore a Supreme Court ruling regarding the accreditation of some foreign observers.

“Respect for the rule of law is fundamental in a democracy,” said Vulchanov. “Court rulings are not mere suggestions; they must be respected.”

The REC registered nine candidates in an inclusive process. Public attention focused mainly on incumbent President Boris Tadić of the Democratic Party and Tomislav Nikolić of the Serbian Radical Party. Four candidates – Tadić, Nikolić, Čedomir Jovanović of the Liberal Democratic Party and Velimir Ilić of New Serbia, who was also supported by the Democratic Party of Serbia – had the most visible campaigns. All four held rallies across the country and conducted extensive advertising campaigns in the private media.

Civil and political rights were widely respected during the campaign. Campaign discourse was dominated by questions of the possible signature of a Stabilization and Association Agreement with the European Union and of the future status of Kosovo. Over 60 per cent of registered voters turned out to cast their ballots, demonstrating a high level of public interest in the democratic process.

Serbia’s media landscape is characterized by a wide diversity of media outlets operating in a largely free environment. The public broadcasters provided contestants with equitable opportunities to convey their campaign messages. All candidates were given an equal amount of free airtime. Public TV station RTS1 provided relatively balanced coverage of the candidates in its news programme, although it favoured the incumbent president to some

degree. Private broadcasters TV Pink and TV B92 dedicated their coverage mainly to candidates supported by political parties represented in Parliament.

The combined coverage on RTS1, TV B92, and TV Pink amounted to about three hours daily, more than half of which was paid advertising. Only a few debates were broadcast prior to the first round. The news coverage of the candidates tended to be neutral. The Parliament failed to establish a supervisory board to monitor the conduct of the media and candidates in the campaign, as prescribed by law. A number of candidates and media outlets expressed concern about the continued lack of such a monitoring mechanism.

While the legal framework is conducive to holding democratic elections, room for improvement remains, as indicated in the 2006 joint recommendations of the Council of Europe's Venice Commission and ODIHR. These recommendations have not been acted upon, although new legislation was adopted in December 2007. Areas of concern include the *in camera* adjudication of election disputes at the Supreme Court, the lack of an intermediate level of election administration, as well as the lack of provisions on international and domestic non-partisan election observation in the election law.

The REC's administration of the electoral process was open and transparent and met most domestic legal provisions. It is of concern, however, that a majority of REC members opposed the accreditation of some observers from the local diplomatic community, disregarding OSCE commitments, REC instructions, and an invitation to all OSCE participating States from the speaker of Parliament. In addition, the same majority voted to ignore a Supreme Court ruling that the REC had no discretion to grant or deny accreditation to applicants who had fulfilled the requirements. This raised questions about the Commission's adherence to the rule of law. Following a Supreme Court ruling on a second appeal, the REC finally granted the requested accreditations shortly after the opening of polling stations. While this last-minute step was a welcome development, accreditation must be provided in a timely manner in order to permit effective observation.

The REC appointed working groups at the municipal level in order to provide logistical support between the REC and the voting boards. The members of the working groups were nominated by parliamentary factions. They discharged their duties efficiently. However, the need to establish such working groups underscores the utility of having an intermediate level of election administration for national elections.

The LEOM did not conduct systematic or comprehensive observation of polling, counting, or the tabulation of results. Observers visited a limited number of polling stations on election day. Voting and counting appeared to be conducted in a peaceful and smooth manner, but issues related to secrecy of the vote that had been noted in previous ODIHR reports remain to be addressed.

ODIHR deployed an LEOM on 4 January and will remain in Serbia until the election process has been completed. The mission consists of nine international experts based in Belgrade and 12 long-term observers deployed across the country. A final report will be issued approximately two months after the completion of the process.

ODIHR would like to thank the Foreign Ministry, the Republic Election Commission, and other state and local authorities, as well as working groups and voting boards, candidates' campaign staff, civil society and media organizations for their co-operation during the course of the mission. The support of the OSCE Mission to Serbia and embassies of OSCE participating States and international organizations accredited to Serbia is highly appreciated.