



Election Observation Mission to Estonia 1999

Preliminary Statement – 8 March 1999

The Election Observation Mission of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) issues the following preliminary statement regarding the 7 March election to the Riigikogu (Parliament) of Estonia. This statement is issued prior to the publication of the official results and the resolution of disputes. A final report will be prepared by OSCE/ODIHR at the end of March.

The Election Observation Mission would like to thank the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for facilitating the task of international election observers, and to commend the National Election Committee for its excellent support and co-operation.

Summary of Conclusions

- ◆ The OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission concludes that the 1999 elections for the Riigikogu were held in accordance with Estonia's commitments as an OSCE participating State.
- ◆ The 1999 elections to the Estonian Riigikogu were carried out in accordance with Estonian law and were conducted in a transparent manner, enjoying the confidence of political parties and the public.
- ◆ State-owned media (radio and television) gave full and balanced coverage to the election campaign and the competing political parties. Privately owned media – notably the press - was more selective in both its coverage and support of parties. Generally all parties enjoyed a fair level of exposure.
- ◆ Election day proceedings were well organised; polling division officials carried out the process efficiently and in accordance with electoral provisions. It is notable that the voter turnout was significantly lower than in the 1995 Riigikogu elections.

The Electoral Framework

Several amendments have been introduced to both the Riigikogu election law and the law regulating political parties since the last Riigikogu elections were held in 1995. These include increasing the membership threshold that a political party must attain in order to register and run for election and the banning of pre-electoral coalitions for the sole purpose of getting over the 5% threshold needed to obtain party preference seats before splitting into factions.

Notwithstanding that some smaller parties raised concerns with the intent and late introduction of these changes, the overall legal framework remains in accordance with OSCE commitments.

The introduction of voting outside one's place of permanent residence during the three days of advance voting organised between the 1st and 3rd of March, as well as postal voting abroad, widened the possibility for voters to participate in the democratic process.

Concerns were raised in the course of the observation about the transparency of political party financing during the campaign. The OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission welcomes a recent tightening of the law on financing of political parties designed to ensure a greater level of transparency than is presently the case.

At the same time other recent amendments to the election law raise potential concerns regarding the scope of democratic participation in future elections, specifically the right of citizens to seek office. The intent of these amendments, which have effect from 1 May, 1999, is to stipulate more clearly the level of Estonian language proficiency required of all candidates for electoral office. The OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities has expressed concern that these stricter requirements could unfairly limit a voter's right to elect his or her candidate of choice. The OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission shares this concern.

The Election Campaign and the Media

The election campaign was conducted in a calm atmosphere. No major incidents or complaints were reported to the mission.

During the campaign the state media went beyond its legal requirement to cover political party platforms and took up the responsibility to give equitable and equal coverage. No restrictions were placed on the private media in terms of campaign coverage. The Election Observation Mission received complaints from smaller parties that they could not afford to place advertisements, and that newspapers were overtly biased.

The Voting and Counting Processes

Based on the reports from OSCE/ODIHR observers around the country, the voting and counting processes were generally carried out in accordance with the law. The election authorities and polling station officials are to be congratulated for their effective organisation of the election.

The processing of votes through the various levels was carried out in a transparent manner. It is clear that the electoral process enjoys the confidence of political parties and the general public alike.

Minor irregularities aside, the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission concludes that the voting and counting procedures were carried out in accordance with OSCE commitments.

The OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission

Ambassador Michael G. Wygant was appointed by ODIHR as the Head of the Election Observation Mission, upon being seconded by the Government of the USA.

This statement is based upon findings of the OSCE/ODIHR long-term Election Observation Mission, which has been present in Estonia since February 2, 1999.

The OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission has greatly benefitted from the support and experience of the OSCE Mission to Estonia.

The statement also incorporates election day observations, in accordance with ODIHR methodology, of 48 observers, operating in teams of 2-persons, who covered all eleven electoral districts of the country. International observers as well as members of the diplomatic community represented 16 OSCE participating States.

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All OSCE/ODIHR reports are also available on the Internet: www.osce.odih.org