



Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights

OSCE / ODIHR FINAL STATEMENT

ON THE ELECTION OF REPRESENTATIVES TO THE CHAMBER OF COUNTIES OF THE PARLIAMENT AND OF REPRESENTATIVES OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND SELF-GOVERNMENT BODIES OF THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA (13 APRIL 1997)

Upon receipt of an official invitation by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Croatia, the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) observed the election of representatives to the Chamber of Counties of the Parliament of the Republic of Croatia, and the election of members of Representative of Local Government and Self Government Bodies.

At the request of the United Nations Transitional Administrator for Eastern Slavonia, General Jacques Paul Klein, the ODIHR also observed the election in the UNTAES region of Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium.

The ODIHR's mandate is to observe elections, not to supervise them or to certify them. Certification of the elections in the UNTAES regions is the sole responsibility of the UNTAES Transitional Administrator General Jacques Paul Klein.

The ODIHR has had close co-operation with the Croatian election administration and national authorities, with UNTAES, and with ECMM whose support and contribution of observers was vital to the observation.

From mid-February the ODIHR deployed 22 long-term observers in ten locations throughout the Republic of Croatia. They followed and reported on the pre-election period and prepared for the observation of election day.

On election day, ODIHR deployed 192 observers provided by 25 OSCE participating States, including 60 persons provided by ECMM. 58 short-term observers were deployed in the UNTAES region.

ELECTIONS IN THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA (EXCLUDING THE UNTAES REGION)

The ODIHR commends the election administration in the Republic of Croatia for administering a generally efficient election process. The voting arrangements for displaced persons constitute a complicated voting procedure which was reportedly handled in a professional way.

However, despite the fact that the administration of the elections represented an improvement over the administration of the parliamentary elections of October 1995, some significant issues of concern remain.

Observers noted often that the secrecy of the ballot was not consistently guaranteed. In approximately twenty percent (20%) of the polling stations observed, particularly in rural areas, the secrecy of the ballot was not always assured due to the lack of adequate polling booths or sufficient screens to protect the secrecy of the vote. A fundamental OSCE commitment is to ensure that votes are cast by secret ballot.

Contrary to the Croatian law, there were also incidents of proxy voting, whereby a voter was issued and cast ballots for other family members.

While the ODIHR recognises some improvement in the access of party observers to the election process, it notes with concern that non-partisan civic observers are still excluded from observing the election process in Croatia. The ODIHR strongly encourages the Croatian authorities to address this problem before any future elections, in order to enhance the transparency of the election process in line with the OSCE Commitments.

Concerning the pre-election period, the ODIHR has previously noted in the 1995 elections that proper access for all parties to the state media was not assured, and there is no clear sign that this issue has been seriously addressed.

ELECTIONS IN THE UNTAES REGION

The OSCE-ODIHR recognises the commitment of UNTAES to oversee an election process in challenging circumstances and according to a very demanding time schedule. The election seems to have achieved a high level of participation, although due to the decision to depart from strict adherence to a voter register, it is impossible to determine the exact voter turnout.

The election was characterised by significant technical problems. Once technical problems became apparent on election day, UNTAES should be commended for taking far reaching steps in order to try to correct the process.

The technical problems seem to be the result of an unrealistic time schedule imposed by political considerations, at the expense of efficient election management.

Problems included: last minute changes of election regulations and the late notification of the changed regulations to polling commissions and voters; inaccuracies in the voters lists; the late delivery and absence of materials including ballots and ballot boxes; the late opening of polling stations.

In order to address these problems, UNTAES extended voting for a second day, and in an attempt to address the flawed voter list, authorised permission for people to vote if they could present a valid Croatian ID card.

However, according to OSCE-ODIHR observers, significant problems persisted into the second day of voting, including late opening of significant numbers of polling stations, widespread reports of lack of ballot papers or delivery of the wrong ballot papers in many polling stations, and in some cases the distribution and use of misprinted ballot papers.

Of ninety observer reports processed so far, one third of them reflect serious problems including late opening, absence of ballot papers and misprinted ballot papers.

It will be for UNTAES to decide on certification of the election in the region.

A Final Report will be submitted to the OSCE Chairman-in-Office shortly.

For further information please contact the OSCE-ODIHR Observation Mission in Zagreb (phone: 385 1 650 47 21 or fax: 385 1 679 521) until 17 April, and afterwards, the ODIHR Warsaw Office (phone: 48 22 625 70 40; fax: 48 22 625 43 57).