

## **Croatian elections transparent and show further progress**

ZAGREB, 26 November 2007 – The 25 November 2007 parliamentary elections in the Republic of Croatia were administered transparently, professionally, and represented further progress in fully meeting OSCE commitments for democratic elections. The campaign took place in a competitive and pluralistic environment and the media generally provided voters with sufficient information about the contestants and their campaign activity. Nevertheless, some issues remained, including with respect to the legislative framework and its implementation, and the short timeframe for election preparations.

These are the initial conclusions of the Limited Election Observation Mission of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR).

“We recognise the efforts of the authorities to conduct the elections in a professional and inclusive manner,” said Vadim Zhdanovich, who heads the mission, “We note the confidence displayed by the voters, political parties and non-governmental organisations in the electoral process.”

Members of the *Sabor* (parliament) are elected in 10 geographical constituencies within Croatia through a closed-list proportional representation system. Eight further seats are reserved for Croatia’s 22 constitutionally-recognized national minorities, and a further number of seats are elected by Croatian citizens living abroad. In total, 251 candidates’ lists (including 3,585 candidates), were registered, representing a wide spectrum of political parties, coalitions and groups of independent candidates.

Almost 7,000 polling stations served the four and a half million voters registered for these elections, including 265 polling stations established in 53 foreign countries to permit some 400,000 citizens registered outside Croatia the possibility to vote. With almost 96% of results announced, the turnout in the election within Croatia was 63.5%. Significant increases in the number of polling stations established for the registered voters in Bosnia and Herzegovina (124, up from 30 in 2003) had an impact on voter turnout there, which increased to almost 29% compared to the 19.8% who participated in the 2003 parliamentary election. While this step was taken to further facilitate access for Bosnian Croats eligible to vote, this issue was also politicized in the context of the election campaign.

A generally calm and pluralistic campaign became increasingly competitive, dominated by the main governing and opposition parties. In its closing stages, the campaign focused on the personality of some of the main party leaders, rather than on specific policy platforms.

The media met their legal obligations, providing opportunities for all contestants to communicate their messages to voters. However, provisions for media coverage of the election campaign are overly restrictive, and the regulatory framework could be further enhanced by adopting clear provisions for sanctions and effective enforcement through a monitoring body.

The legal framework provides overall an adequate basis for the conduct of a democratic election process. Previously incomplete aspects of the election legislation, which created challenges for the administration bodies, have been addressed by the enactment of new laws on the State Election Commission (SEC), Voters' Lists, and Financing of Political Parties. The SEC, however, is not yet actually operating on a permanent basis. Effects of the Law on Financing of Political Parties will only be evident next year when annual reports are due. The Law would also benefit from provisions requiring full transparency of campaign spending.

The SEC and other election management bodies appear to enjoy wide public confidence and performed their tasks in an efficient and professional manner. However, the system of extending membership of the lower level commissions to include political party appointments, in order to enhance transparency, would benefit from more prescriptive procedures.

The Ethics Commission, constituted at election time under the auspices of the Constitutional Court, oversees compliance with an Election Code of Ethics. However, the Commission's decisions are not legally binding, and it requires both an enforcement capability and more detailed rules of procedure in order to become fully effective.

Voter lists were improved by the introduction of a unified computerized system by the Central State Administration Office (CSAO). New rules limiting the issuance of Voting Certificates were widely adhered to.

6,076 domestic and foreign observers were accredited by the SEC, and afforded wide access to the election process.

The OSCE/ODIHR deployed from 30 October 21 electoral experts, including 10 long term observers, across the country, representing 13 OSCE participating States. The mission did not carry out a comprehensive observation on election day, but the observers visited a number of polling stations to follow procedures.

The OSCE/ODIHR will issue a Final Report on its observations approximately two months after the conclusion of the election process. The OSCE/ODIHR would like to thank the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and European Integration, the Central State Administration Office, the State Election Commission, lower level electoral commissions, political parties, GONG and other civil society and media organisations, as well as the OSCE Mission to Croatia, for their cooperation during the course of the OSCE/ODIHR LEOM.