



## **Moldova presidential election competitive and fundamental freedoms respected, but biased media coverage and lack of transparent financing marred campaign, international election observers say**

CHISINAU, 31 October 2016 – The first round of Moldova’s first direct presidential election in 20 years provided ample opportunity for voters to express their preference for a new head of state. Fundamental freedoms were respected. The campaign was competitive, though marred by widespread abuse of state resources, biased media coverage and a lack of transparency in campaign finance, the international observers concluded in a preliminary statement released today. The election administration worked in a professional and transparent manner, and voting and counting were largely assessed positively by the observers.

“We were impressed to see the citizens of Moldova participate in the electoral process yesterday. This is proof that Moldovans want an active voice in significant decisions in their country,” said Arta Dade, Special Co-ordinator and leader of the short-term OSCE observer mission. “While the voters were provided with real choices in a competitive campaign, some negative aspects of the process, if not addressed, could further undermine voters’ trust that their voices are being heard.”

The competitive campaign took place against a backdrop of economic hardship and a climate of mistrust in state institutions. The numerous cases of abuse of state resources by parties holding elected office included pressure on state employees and other voters during the collection of signatures to support candidates and the campaign.

“The primary concern of the PACE observation delegation was not the outcome of the election, but the functioning of the electoral process. In this regard, we noted that the Moldovan people made their choice in a free manner and that the voting day was very well organized,” said Elisabeth Schneider-Schneiter, Head of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe delegation. “However, some serious and long-standing issues remain unaddressed. Of particular concern are politically biased media, strongly associated with major political parties, and serving as a tool for propaganda; the use of huge sums of money for the election campaign; the lack of transparency of sources of funding and the weakness of state control mechanisms in this regard. These and other concerns, unless addressed in a timely and effective manner, will erode citizens’ trust in the democratic electoral process.”

Twelve candidates were initially registered, providing voters with a wide range of political alternatives. Two candidates withdrew before the election and one was de-registered for violating campaign finance rules. Inconsistent signature verification processes, conflicting legal deadlines and disproportionate sanctions for campaign violations limited the equal right to stand for elections, the observers said.

The election administration, led by the Central Election Commission, worked in an open manner, met legal deadlines and generally handled technical aspects of the election professionally at all levels. Despite a climate of distrust in state institutions, there was wide public confidence in the election administration, although there were some concerns whether the CEC was impartial in considering complaints.

“Moldova has once more proven its commitment to democratic values and administered the election in a professional manner. Unfortunately, I was concerned to see that the elderly and people with disabilities had to face substantial challenges to express their right to vote,” Geir Jørgen Bekkevold, Head of the OSCE

Parliamentary Assembly delegation. “I encourage the election administration to redouble efforts to guarantee an inclusive process.”

Media outlets are strongly associated with major political parties, and the concentration of ownership diminishes political pluralism on television, the statement says. Media monitoring by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) mission and by the regulatory body revealed clear political bias in the campaign coverage of major broadcasters.

The legal framework largely provides an adequate basis for conducting democratic elections. Following the 4 March 2016 Constitutional Court decision that reintroduced direct presidential elections, the Election Code was amended in an expedited manner. However, despite longstanding concerns raised by ODIHR and the Council of Europe, a number of gaps and ambiguities remain.

There was general public trust in the voter register and voters may be added on supplementary voter lists on election day, provided they prove their identity. Questions were raised about the continued inclusion in the register both of a large number of citizens living abroad but still associated with their former residences, and of deceased persons. The nationwide electronic voter verification system in all polling stations provided a safeguard against multiple voting, the observers said.

“There are concerns over the lack of transparency in the area of campaign finance and the possibilities that this provides for manipulating the media,” said Igor Soltes, Head of the European Parliament delegation. “This issue requires urgent reform – both in political campaigns and in the funding of political parties.”

The CEC is responsible for campaign finance oversight, but lacks sufficient resources for effective monitoring. Recent legal amendments addressed some previous recommendations by providing comprehensive reporting requirements and criteria for spending limits. Nevertheless, a lack of effective oversight and sanctions for violations proved to be problematic and concerns were raised about the transparency of financing.

Of the 12 candidates initially registered, five were women. The CEC chairperson and deputy are women, and women are well represented in lower level election administration bodies. More than three quarters of commissioners at polling stations observed, including chairpersons, were women. Instances of gender stereotyping and sexist language in the coverage of one woman candidate were observed in some media during the campaign period.

Complaints and appeals were generally handled in an open manner within legal deadlines. However, inconsistent interpretation of the law in cases regarding candidate de-registration diminished overall trust in the impartiality of the election administration and judiciary.

The law provides for observation by international and citizen organizations, as well as by candidate representatives. More than 3,700 citizen and international observers were accredited and were able to conduct their activities freely.

“The election process has so far confirmed that Moldova has an adequate legal framework for holding democratic elections but also that further work is needed to fill gaps and address inconsistencies, in areas such as signature collection for candidate registration, and in ensuring appropriate sanctions for violating campaign rules,” said Douglas Wake, Head of the ODIHR election observation mission. “The aim of election observation is to assist in further improving electoral processes. Even in areas where there are solid laws, including those designed to ensure campaign finance transparency and media pluralism, oversight institutions need strengthened capacity to work effectively.”

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