

State Duma elections well organized but failed to meet many international standards

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MOSCOW, 8 December 2003 - The State Duma elections on 7 December failed to meet many OSCE and Council of Europe commitments, calling into question Russia's willingness to move towards European standards for democratic elections, concludes the International Election Observation Mission (IEOM) in a statement, issued today. Over 500 international observers from 42 countries monitored the voting and counting from Vladivostok to St. Petersburg.

The Central Election Commission deserves credit for its professional organization of these elections. However, the pre-election process was characterized by extensive use of the state apparatus and media favoritism to benefit the largest pro-presidential party, reflected in voter apathy.

"Given that procedures on election day were conducted in a technically correct way, it is even more regrettable that the main impression of the overall electoral process is of regression in the democratization process in Russia," said Bruce George MP, President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, appointed by the OSCE Chairman in office as the Special Co-ordinator for the Short-term observers. "We hope that improvements will be made within the next few months to ensure that the upcoming presidential elections will come closer to meeting international standards."

David Atkinson MP, Head of the Parliamentary Delegation of the Council of Europe, added: "The Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly delegation welcomes improvements in the conduct of these elections in line with our recommendations four years ago. However, we are very concerned at the unfair practices, which have benefited one party. Real political competition and choice for the voters are indispensable elements in a true democratic election process."

Professor Rita Süssmuth, Head of the Long-term Observation Mission, deployed by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, said: "We have serious concerns regarding the lack of media independence. State media failed to provide balanced coverage of the campaign and considerable pressure was exerted on journalists, which restricted information available to voters to make an informed choice. Steps should be taken to develop the state broadcasters into a truly independent public service."

Despite the shortcomings in the election process, the IEOM recognized the improvement of a comprehensive legal framework which provides the potential for a democratic election process, as well as the fact that the Central Election Commission functioned in an efficient and open manner. In a positive step, there was a decision by the constitutional court lifting the most restrictive and controversial provisions on campaign media. Televised debates encouraged an exchange of views, although their value to the

electorate was lessened by the non-participation of United Russia.

Election day proceeded in a generally calm and orderly manner. International observers assessed the conduct of voting as positive in an overwhelming majority of polling stations. However, irregularities were noted in regard to the protection of the secrecy of the vote, while other problems were noted during the counting process. The OSCE and the Council of Europe will continue to follow the process closely and stand ready to assist the authorities and civil society of the Russian Federation in continuing to improve its democratic process.