

Widespread campaign irregularities observed in Ukrainian presidential election

KYIV, 1 November 2004 - The first round of voting in the 31 October presidential election in Ukraine did not meet a considerable number of OSCE, Council of Europe and other European standards for democratic elections, concluded the International Election Observation Mission in a preliminary statement today.

Nevertheless, the very high participation of the electorate and civil society in the election process show encouraging signs for the evolution of Ukrainian democracy.

The mission included some 600 observers from the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR), the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the European Parliament and the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

It reported a number of concerns about the electoral process, including bias by the state media, interference by the state administration in favour of Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich, the disruption or obstruction of opposition campaign events by the state authorities, and inadequacies in the Central Election Commission's handling of complaints.

"With a heavy heart, we have to conclude that this election did not meet a considerable number of OSCE, Council of Europe, and other European standards for democratic elections," said **Bruce George**, President emeritus of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and Special Co-ordinator for the short-term observers. "Consequently, this election process constitutes a step backward from the 2002 elections."

Ambassador **Geert-Hinrich Ahrens**, Head of the OSCE/ODIHR's long-term observation mission, said: "Although we are grateful to the Ukrainian authorities for their co-operation during our mission, we regret that they did not create equal campaign conditions. The election also came up short on other counts, such as the failure to allow Ukrainian civil society to directly observe the process." We will remain in the country, and we call on the authorities, including the Central Election Commission, to address existing deficiencies prior to the second round."

Doros Christodoulides, head of the delegation of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, said: "Ukraine now has three weeks to show that it is willing to organize democratic elections in accordance with its commitments. The authorities should ensure that both candidates have equal access to, and unbiased coverage by, the media. Both the authorities and political forces should refrain from any undue interference in the electoral process and fully respect the provisions of the electoral law and international standards. Any violations committed during the first round should be prosecuted to the full extent of the law."

Marek Maciej Siwiec, head of the delegation from the European Parliament, said: "The elections represent a significant test for democracy in the country, and we welcome the high participation of voters on polling day. The conclusions of this report must be taken on board in order to ensure that the second round is free, fair, and transparent and that the people of Ukraine can elect the President of their choice. The European Parliament stands ready to co-operate with the next President of Ukraine and looks forward to fruitful dialogue as part of the European Neighbourhood Policy and the agreed Action Plan."

Jane Cordy, Head of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly delegation, said: "We stand by the findings of the long-term observation mission and those of the short-term observers deployed on election day. A true democracy thrives on the freedom of its citizens to express a plurality of opinions and ultimately to express their will in the election of their representatives. The irregularities observed in the election are a disappointment for the international community, and, above all, they must be a disappointment for the Ukrainian people, especially for those we saw working so hard on election day itself."

A final report will be released four to six weeks after the completion of the electoral process.