

## Despite violence and threats in east, Ukraine election characterized by high turnout and resolve to guarantee fundamental freedoms, international observers say

KYIV, 26 May 2014 – The 25 May early presidential election in Ukraine was characterized by high turnout and a clear resolve by the authorities to hold what was a genuine election largely in line with international commitments and that respected fundamental freedoms, despite the hostile security environment in two eastern regions of the country, international observers concluded in a preliminary statement released today. While the election administration ran the process impartially and transparently on the whole, some decisions taken may have been beyond its authority.

“This election proved the democratic spirit of the people of Ukraine, who had the opportunity to genuinely express their will at the ballot box, and seized it in high numbers,” said João Soares, the Special Co-ordinator who led the short-term OSCE observer mission. “The electoral and security authorities of Ukraine should be commended for their efforts – under extraordinary circumstances – to facilitate an election that largely upheld democratic commitments.”

Genuine efforts were made by the electoral authorities to conduct voting throughout the country, despite continued unrest and violence in the east, which seriously impacted the election environment, negatively affected the human rights situation, obstructed meaningful observation, and had a significant adverse affect on preparations. Forced evictions and closures of District Election Commissions by armed groups, abductions, death threats, forced entry into private homes and the seizure of equipment and election materials were attempts to prevent the election and to deny citizens their right to vote, the observers said.

“The extraordinary quality of yesterday’s election provides the new president of Ukraine with the legitimacy to establish immediately an inclusive dialogue with all citizens in the eastern regions, to restore their trust and confidence, and to decentralize state power in order to preserve the unity of the country by respecting the diversity of Ukrainian society,” said Andreas Gross, Head of the PACE delegation. “There is no military solution to today’s crisis, and those who belong together can only come together through dialogue, mutual understanding, social reforms and greater fairness.”

The election did not take place in the Crimean Peninsula, which is not under the control of the Ukrainian authorities, and Ukrainian citizens living there faced serious difficulties in participating in the election.

“Unfortunately, many citizens were prevented from voting in Donetsk and Luhansk, as were nearly all in Crimea, due to the ongoing threats to Ukraine’s territorial integrity,” said Ilkka Kanerva, Head of the OSCE PA delegation. “However, the impressive turnout in the rest of the country offered a powerful rebuke to those who would challenge Ukraine’s unity and progress.”

Despite the challenging environment and limited lead-time, the Central Election Commission operated independently, impartially and efficiently, in general, and met all legal deadlines. A lack of adequate regulation of a few aspects of the election, however, lessened uniformity in the administration of the process. The substitution of numerous candidate nominees to District and Precinct Election Commissions affected the stability and efficiency of election administration, but most commissions outside of the Donetsk and Luhansk

regions were able to overcome time constraints, the frequent changes in their composition and some resource problems.

“Before Sunday, everyone agreed that this was going to be an important, if difficult election, but few believed it would be successful. Our assessment is clear: the Ukrainian authorities and the Ukrainian people have made this election a success,” said Karl Lamers, Head of the NATO PA delegation. “Despite an exceptionally challenging environment, we have seen a good election process and election officials performing their duties with dedication and professionalism, sometimes in extremely difficult conditions. And we have seen the Ukrainian people expressing confidence in their country’s future by voting in large numbers, wherever they were able to do so.”

“This election has laid a solid foundation for the future of Ukraine, and the pressing tasks of economic consolidation, political reforms and uniting the country.” said Göran Färm, Head of the EP delegation.

Most candidates were able to campaign without restrictions, except in the two eastern regions, although there were a number of campaign-related incidents, including cases of intimidation and attacks on party and campaign offices, and allegations of instances where campaigning by candidates was obstructed.

In a positive development, no cases were observed of the misuse of state resources and, unlike in previous elections, allegations of such practices were not made to observers. Despite recent amendments to campaign finance regulations, these should be further strengthened to provide greater oversight and transparency, the statement says.

The media landscape is diverse, but the lack of media autonomy from political or corporate interests often affects their editorial independence. Freedom of the media was severely undermined in the east, where journalists and media outlets faced threats and harassment throughout the campaign period. Editorial coverage of candidates was limited and focused on a few candidates. The organization and broadcasting of debates among all candidates by state television and the adoption of a law transforming state television into a public-service broadcaster were both welcome initiatives. Steps to stop certain channels from broadcasting alleged propaganda, while they did not directly impact the election, were an unwelcome restriction, the observers found.

The legal framework is adequate for the conduct of democratic elections, the statement says. Numerous changes were introduced to this during the election period, both to address the rapidly changing political and security environment and as a further step in the electoral reform process. While most of the changes were seen as necessary by election stakeholders, the result was a significantly different framework than the one in place when the election was called.

While voting was largely conducted in line with procedures, there were long queues to vote in some parts of the country, and there were some technical problems in the early stages of the tabulation process.

“Over the two months our mission has been present in Ukraine we have witnessed impressive efforts by the election administration to ensure citizens’ rights to vote,” said Tana de Zulueta, Head of the OSCE/ODIHR long-term election observation mission. “ODIHR deployed more than 1,000 observers, from 49 countries, to monitor the process on election day. Based on their reports, I can say with confidence that those voters who had the opportunity to cast ballots took part in a process that was largely in line with international commitments and respectful of fundamental freedoms.”

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