

## **Many positive aspects of Ukraine elections an important step, and new parliament should take opportunity to advance key reforms, international observers say**

KYIV, 27 October 2014 – The 26 October early parliamentary elections marked an important step in consolidating democratic elections in line with international commitments, and were characterized by many positive aspects, including an impartial and efficient Central Election Commission (CEC), competitive contests that offered voters real choice, and general respect for fundamental freedoms, international observers concluded in a preliminary statement released today. The new parliament should ensure that key reforms are passed, and grievances should be resolved with respect for the rule of law and through democratic institutions, the observers said.

“At this crucial moment for the future of their country, Ukraine’s institutions and voters responded to daunting challenges with an election that largely upheld democratic commitments,” said Kent Härstedt, the Special Co-ordinator and leader of the short-term OSCE observer mission. “That response and, in particular, the authorities’ determination to enable voting in as many areas of the country as possible, demonstrate a resilience that will help the country overcome its national and international challenges.”

“The sombre mood of the Ukrainian people in these elections reflects the gravity of the crisis facing the country. They have chosen a new Verkhovna Rada, which will be very different in composition from its predecessor. By doing so, the Ukrainians have shown their desire for action to address their needs,” said Christopher Chope, Head of the PACE delegation. “The Verkhovna Rada must now accept this new mandate in the same spirit and work quickly to implement reforms, many of which are long overdue. The PACE and Venice Commission are ready to assist in this urgent and important work.”

In most of the country, election day proceeded calmly, with few disturbances and only isolated security incidents reported. The voting process was well-organized and orderly and was assessed positively in 99 per cent of the polling stations observed, although some procedural irregularities were identified, including during the counting and the early stages of the tabulation processes. Due to the efforts of the election administration to ensure voting in as much of the east as possible under extraordinary circumstances, including through simplified procedures allowing voters to temporarily transfer their voting address, voting took place in 12 out of 21 election districts in the Donetsk region, and in 5 out of 11 in the Luhansk region.

“The nearly 30 seats that will be left empty in the new parliament serve as a stark reminder that illegal armed groups prevented voters in some parts of the country from being able to vote,” said Doris Barnett, Head of the OSCE PA delegation. “These illegal actions do not call into question the validity of the overall election. We look forward to these seats being filled as soon as possible so that representatives of those areas can join their colleagues in an open dialogue to the benefit of all Ukrainians.”

Candidates were generally free to campaign in what was a competitive and visible campaign environment. While largely peaceful, there was a marked increase in violence in the last ten days of the campaign, including cases of intimidation, threats and the targeted destruction of campaign property. The observers noted that no intolerant speech targeting national minorities was used during campaigning, despite the prevalence of nationalistic campaign rhetoric.

“The elections clearly showed the resolve of the Ukrainian society for change – the people have chosen Europe and peace,” said Andrej Plenković, Head of the EP delegation. “The new Rada and the future Government will have the responsibility to embark on the ambitious European reform agenda and the reintegration of the entire Ukrainian territory. The European Union and the European Parliament will support Ukraine throughout this process.”

“We must not lose sight of the context in which these elections took place. Ukraine is at war. Yet, despite the ongoing violence, voting took place yesterday in a majority of districts in Donetsk and Luhansk,” said Rasa Juknevičienė, Head of the NATO PA delegation. “Despite that, the elections marked significant progress for Ukraine’s democracy. The parliament that was elected yesterday will now have the difficult but important responsibility to carry this work forward, and address remaining issues.”

In a positive development, the misuse of state resources was not named as an issue of major concern, although the president and prime minister took unfair advantage of their positions on the eve of the elections in televised appeals calling on voters to elect a pro-reform parliament. A number of credible allegations of vote buying were reported and are being investigated by the authorities.

The CEC administered the process in a largely professional and efficient manner. However, the holding of closed-door meetings before CEC sessions and unilateral decision-making undermined the transparency of the process. In commissions at lower levels, the replacement of commission members partly affected the stability and efficiency of election administration. Candidate registration was generally inclusive and offered voters a wide variety of choice among 6,600 candidates. The rejection of more than 640 candidates on the basis of technicalities restricted the choice of candidate and runs counter to international standards, however.

“The impartial management of the process by the Central Election Commission can further contribute to reinforcing public confidence in democratic elections in Ukraine,” said Tana de Zulueta, Head of the OSCE/ODIHR long-term election observation mission. “Our statement also notes some persisting difficulties, so the positives in these elections can be used as a basis for further improvements. Moving forward, the OSCE ODIHR is ready to provide assistance and expertise in this process.”

The media environment was dynamic and diverse and offered voters a broad range of views. However, media autonomy and independent reporting were in some cases inhibited by political or business interests, and some private media outlets demonstrated bias in their campaign coverage. The ongoing hostilities in the east jeopardized journalists’ safety and prevented the transmission of Ukrainian broadcasts, while steps taken to prevent certain channels from broadcasting alleged propaganda remain in place. In a positive step, election debates between political parties were held for the first time and broadcast on national television.

The legal framework is generally adequate for the conduct of democratic elections. Recent amendments addressed some previous recommendations by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and the Council of Europe’s Venice Commission. A number of concerns remain, however, including with regard to certain candidacy requirements. Persistent issues with electoral district boundaries meant that national minorities were under-represented, the statement noted. Despite recent amendments to increase the transparency of campaign finances, corruption continues to undermine confidence in the electoral process.



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