



Fundamental freedoms respected in competitive Ukraine election, though campaign lacked genuine discussion of issues, international observers say

KYIV, 22 April 2019 – The presidential election in Ukraine was competitive and held with respect for fundamental freedoms, the international observers concluded in a preliminary statement released today. The orderly transfer of power should offer the opportunity for strengthening democratic institutions and their accountability, although the campaign for both rounds lacked genuine discussion of issues of public concern, the statement says.

The media landscape and campaign coverage reflected the dominance of economic interests in public and political life, the observers said. The runoff was well-organized, despite operational challenges and a limited timeframe. The legal framework still contains shortcomings, and there was little will to resolve electoral complaints in a way that would guarantee effective remedy. Election day was assessed positively by the observers and, despite a few procedural problems, there was a marked improvement in the conduct of the counting and tabulation over the first round, the statement says. The incumbent conceded defeat shortly after the polls closed.

“The democratic and orderly transfer of power we witnessed yesterday is a great achievement by the Ukrainian people and paves the way for renewed efforts to advance necessary reforms to address burning issues and provide good governance. I thank my colleagues from different international institutions for their readiness to support this process,” said George Tsereteli, Special Co-ordinator and leader of the short-term OSCE observer mission. “The authorities now have to seize the opportunity the citizens have offered them to provide the economic and security conditions in which to realize their aspirations.”

The election took place in the context of ongoing armed conflict and other hostilities in the east of the country and the illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by the Russian Federation. As a consequence, the election could not be organized in Crimea and certain parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions that are controlled by illegal armed groups.

“The Ukrainian people demonstrated very clearly yesterday their commitment to securing change through the democratic process,” said Angela Smith, Head of the delegation from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. “Every effort should be made to facilitate in the future the voting rights of those Ukrainian citizens whose ability to cast their vote was seriously compromised by excessive administrative requirements.”

Doris Barnett, Head of the delegation from the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, said: “I am pleased that free elections are becoming the norm in Ukraine and that the people are making use of their right to vote. This election demonstrates that democracy in Ukraine has become more stable. I trust that the new political dynamics in the country can fulfill the high expectations of the voters. Now the country needs to focus on further economic development.”

Rebecca Harms, Head of the delegation from the European Parliament, said: “I would like to congratulate the citizens of Ukraine for their deep commitment to democracy, demonstrated in competitive elections in which they had a free choice. We also welcome the statesmanship

demonstrated by the incumbent in accepting the democratic choice of Ukrainians on election night, even after the heated campaign. I sincerely regret that many Ukrainians could not vote because Russia has illegally annexed Crimea and the aggression continues in eastern Ukraine. The European Parliament encourages and supports the incoming president in continuing, and even strengthening reform efforts, mainly in fighting corruption and poverty.”

The candidates did not conduct large-scale campaign rallies between the rounds, and campaigning was predominantly conducted on television, in online media and social networks, and through billboards and posters. Increased tensions between the two sides were reflected in massive and systematic negative campaigning and harsh mutual accusations, the statement says. There was a marked difference in the character of the conventional campaign of the incumbent, Petro Poroshenko, and that of Volodymyr Zelenskyi, which was conducted to a large extent by proxies and put little emphasis on his campaign platform.

Overall, the private television channels monitored provided imbalanced and biased coverage. The public broadcaster divided its prime-time news coverage equally between the two contestants. Zelenskyi largely avoided participating in campaign-related programming and coverage.

The misuse of state resources, both at the national and local levels, continued during the second round, the observers said. There remain a number of ongoing investigations into alleged vote-buying by Poroshenko’s campaign.

Despite time constraints, the Central Election Commission (CEC) handled preparations efficiently and met legal deadlines. The election laws regulate some but not all aspects of a second round, and the remaining gaps were not addressed by the CEC. It continued to hold regular open sessions, but also went on holding preliminary meetings before the sessions, which decreased transparency, the statement says.

“The runoff was organized well, but there is still a need to enhance the electoral legislation and practice,” said Ambassador Peter Tejler, Head of the election observation mission from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. “A genuine political debate and concrete steps to further improve elections will strengthen accountability of democratic institutions.”

Voter lists were updated to reflect changes between the rounds, and voters had a brief window to check their data online and to request corrections. Those who needed to temporarily change their place of voting had to submit new requests, even if they had already done so for the first round. This represents an unnecessary burden, especially for internally displaced persons, voters abroad and persons with disabilities, the observers said.

The CEC received seven complaints during the second-round period, all of which were denied consideration on technical grounds. All 11 cases lodged against the CEC and candidates in administrative court between the rounds were ruled inadmissible or dismissed, depriving complainants of access to effective remedy and undermining the transparency of the dispute resolution process.

All candidates eliminated in the first round submitted their final campaign finance reports by the legal deadline, and the two runoff candidates submitted their interim finance reports. No violations have been identified on the basis of these interim reports, and the official analyses of all final reports will be published at a later date. Both second-round campaigns were partly financed from sources other than the candidates’ legal campaign fund accounts.

For further information, contact:

Anna Di Domenico, OSCE PA, +380 98 046 62 21 or +45 60 10 83 80, anna.didomenico@oscepa.dk

Thomas Rymer, ODIHR, +380 67 339 62 93 or +48 609 522 266, thomas.rymer@odihhr.pl

Bogdan Torcatoriu, PACE, +380 96 429 48 91 or +33 6 50 39 29 40, bogdan.torcatoriu@coe.int

Doichin Cholakov, EP, +380 97 918 38 35 or +32 477 85 45 78, doichin.cholakov@europarl.europa.eu