



**ORGANIZATION FOR SECURITY AND CO-OPERATION IN EUROPE
Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights**

PRESS RELEASE

Elections met most international standards, despite some remaining challenges, observers in Skopje say

SKOPJE, 23 March 2009 - The first round of yesterday's presidential and municipal elections in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia met most international standards, although some challenges remain to be addressed, an international election observation mission said in a statement released today.

The elections were well administered and free of the violent incidents that clouded last year's parliamentary elections. Election day was peaceful and the voting process was generally well managed, although there were procedural irregularities and the counting process was assessed less positively.

The authorities and political party leaders made concerted efforts to ensure the elections took place in a calm environment. The elections were preceded by a vigorous and highly visible campaign, with a multiplicity of candidates and parties providing a genuine choice for the voters. However, the observers also noted that an atmosphere of distrust persisted to some extent, as demonstrated by numerous troubling allegations of election-related pressure or intimidation, especially targeting public employees, during the pre-election period.

"It is a pleasure for me to see that this country has made a number of steps along the democratic road that it returned to during the rerun of the elections last summer. Irregularities and a lack of trust remain - and these must be dealt with - but there is no doubt that you have made further progress in holding elections according to international commitments," said OSCE PA Vice President Pia Christmas-Møller, Special Co-ordinator appointed to lead the short-term OSCE observer mission.

"The authorities and main political actors learnt positive lessons from the June 2008 parliamentary elections. Security during this election campaign and on voting day was significantly improved. It is clear that this presidential election made progress in restoring the confidence of citizens through a democratic process," said Marietta de Pourbaix-Lundin, Head of the PACE delegation.

"The first round, despite some issues of concern, represents an important step forward. We will be watching closely for continued progress in the second round," said Peter Eicher, Head of the OSCE/ODIHR long-term election observation mission.

"We welcome that the municipal elections were held in line with most European standards, but we regret that local campaigns were overshadowed by the presidential election. We encourage the government to consider separating local and national elections to afford municipal polls their due importance," said Ludmila Sfirloaga, Head of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities delegation.

The international election observation mission is a joint undertaking of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR), the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA), and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE). The Council of Europe's Congress of Local and Regional Authorities also subscribed to the joint statement.

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