



## **Competitive elections follow cross-party co-operation to end political crisis, though need for sustainable reforms remains, international election observers say in Skopje**

SKOPJE, 12 December 2016 – The 11 December parliamentary elections in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia were competitive and an essential step in resolving two years of deep political crisis, but took place in an environment characterized by widespread public mistrust in institutions and the political establishment, international election observers concluded in a preliminary statement released today.

While the main political forces agreed to a series of legal and institutional changes to provide for a level playing field, underlying issues such as those related to the media and voter registration have yet to be addressed in a sustainable manner, the statement says.

“The high turnout testifies that the voters understood the crucial role good elections play in the future of their country,” said Roberto Battelli, Special Co-ordinator and leader of the short-term OSCE observer mission. “The political establishment now has a responsibility to live up to these expectations. They have to make use of this momentum and the mandate they have been given to carry on with reforms necessary for the country’s future.”

Significant improvements to electoral legislation addressed most previous recommendations by ODIHR and the Council of Europe’s Venice Commission, and introduced temporary mechanisms for cross-party oversight of key aspects of the electoral process. However, the statement says, some recommendations remain unaddressed and certain provisions are ambiguous.

“The country is at a new crossroads, which opens a path towards normality in political life. All stakeholders must now prove their commitment to directing the country along this path,” said Stefan Schennach, Head of the delegation from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. “The different ethnic communities already proved, during last summer’s street protests, that co-operation towards a common political goal is possible. Now the entire country must replace ethnic separation with nation-building co-operation.”

While fundamental freedoms were generally respected and contestants were able to campaign freely, there were allegations of voter intimidation and widespread pressure on civil servants, verified by observers in a dozen cases.

“We saw an overwhelming number of people who wished for better for their country and the generations to come. The positive trends we observed now have to be turned into sustainable mechanisms, and the shortcomings we list need to be addressed through meaningful dialogue within the relevant state institutions, and the parliament in particular,” said Azay Guliyev, Head of the delegation from the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. “All political forces need to work to ensure there is no backsliding into political crisis.”

The State Election Commission (SEC) preparations for the elections were hampered by inefficient internal organization, politicized decision-making and shortened legal deadlines, the observers said. The Commission’s activities were not always transparent, as it often held closed sessions and did not always publish its decisions. Election day was generally well administered and proceeded without major incidents.

“We believe these elections have shown the people of this country want, and fully deserve, to see an end to the long period of political crisis. We expect to see a clear signal from the new government that it will work with all political parties in the parliament to carry out urgently needed reforms,” said Igor Šoltés, Head of

the European Parliament delegation. “We call on all parties to provide the necessary support for judicial institutions, and the Special Prosecutor’s Office in particular, as its work must be carried out in full.”

To address longstanding concerns about the accuracy of voters’ lists, for the first time the SEC reviewed the voter register, by cross-checking several databases and conducting door-to-door checks, the statement says. As the legal and structural flaws in maintaining the voter register have yet to be addressed, the Commission’s review, which applied only to these elections, does not guarantee sustainable improvement.

The diverse media environment is split along political and ethnic lines and media monitoring showed that, while the public media largely provided contestants with equitable news coverage, some private media outlets demonstrated bias in favour of the ruling party. Significant foreseen media reforms have yet to be implemented.

“The events in the lead-up to these elections required cross-party co-operation to find temporary mechanisms to address pressing issues. As a result, the process was improved, particularly as regards the media and the legal framework,” said Tana de Zulueta, Head of the ODIHR election observation mission. “For these improvements to be durable, underlying shortcomings will have to be addressed. This will require further co-operation and commitment to systematic and, most importantly, inclusive electoral reform efforts.”

The full text of the statement is available at <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/fyrom/288186>

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