

Polling in second round of Moldova's local elections slightly improved, but serious shortcomings remain

CHISINAU, 18 June 2007 – Election Day procedures during yesterday's second round of local elections in Moldova showed marginal procedural improvements over the first round on 3 June, concluded an international election observation mission deployed by the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the Council of Europe's Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe. However, key problems identified during the pre-electoral period persisted, particularly media bias and intimidation of candidates.

"Despite the fact that we highlighted these shortcomings in our statement on the first round, the relevant authorities failed to take remedial action prior to the second round," said Ambassador Dieter Boden, who headed the ODIHR Election Observation Mission. "There continues to be a clear need to rectify these matters."

The head of the Congress delegation, Mrs. Susan Bolam, added: "We remain concerned that the standard of administration of the polling stations varied considerably: some were well run but many were not. It is essential that the appropriate action be taken to improve the knowledge of election procedures by polling station staff."

A second round was held on 17 June to elect 474 mayors in run-off contests, as well as mayors and councillors in nine localities where the results of the first round were declared invalid or null, in some cases due to ballots containing incorrect information on contestants. The Central Election Commission (CEC) announced the run-offs on 7 June, giving contestants eight days to campaign. In Chisinau, the run-off was announced a day later. Campaign activities were very limited.

Between the two rounds, most opposition parties committed to support one another against candidates of the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM) and to constitute non-communist majorities in regional and local councils. The Social Democracy Party, the Social Democratic Party, and the Centrist Union announced that they would form joint council factions. As before the first round, observers continued to receive allegations of pressure on, and intimidation of, candidates and voters, including in Hincesti, Dubasari, Balti, Telenesti, Floresti, and Riscani.

Following voting on 3 June, the CEC released preliminary results as they were being submitted by District Electoral Councils (DECs). The CEC results protocol for the first round, released with a five-day delay on 13 June, was incomplete, as it did not contain detailed information for each contest; instead, it provided data from Level 2 DECs, as well as national aggregate data. Delays in the publication of results and incomplete data provided grounds for concern over the transparency of the tabulation of results.

In the run-up to the second round, no additional voter-education campaigns were carried out by the CEC in order to improve voters' understanding of polling procedures. Despite inaccuracies noted in the first round, voter lists remained unavailable for public review at the majority of polling stations. Lack of legal provisions and clear deadlines applicable to second-round contests hindered the preparations for the run-offs and resulted in inconsistent practices.

In the period between the two rounds, the majority of monitored TV stations, including publicly funded *Moldova 1*, continued to provide extensive news coverage of the activities of state authorities outside the campaign context, thus repeating the pattern observed before the first round. This benefited pro-government candidates and limited opposition candidates' opportunity to convey their message to the electorate on an equal basis.

The work of the Audio-Visual Co-ordinating Council (CCA) was disrupted during the last week before the second round by an investigation by the Center for Combating Economic Crimes and Corruption (CCCEC) into allegations of bribe-taking by members of the CCA. One of the four detained CCA members has been charged and remains in custody. Two of the others have publicly claimed that the detentions might have been linked to CCA warnings to some broadcasters for biased coverage before the first round. The CCCEC has denied this allegation.

There were no debates between the two candidates for Chisinau mayor because the PCRM candidate, Veaceslav Iordan, chose not to participate. In line with a CEC decision, his opponent, Dorin Chirtoaca, was able to utilize his allocated time. The public broadcaster and *Euro TV* also organized debates between mayoral candidates running in other parts of the country.

Negative campaigning reappeared in the media, with paid spots aimed against both contestants in Chisinau. Two formerly state-owned newspapers, *Moldova Suverana* and *Nezavisimaya Moldova*, which received substantial subsidies from the state budget at the end of 2006, clearly supported Mr. Iordan and published several articles against Mr. Chirtoaca, some with inflammatory content.

A significant number of complaints on the first round were filed with the CEC, DEC, and courts on a broad range of issues related to voting, counting, and the tabulation of results. A number of requests by parties for recounts or annulments were satisfied. In the absence of legal regulations on the conditions and responsibilities for conducting recounts, different procedures were followed by the courts and DEC. The Chisinau DEC responded positively to parties' requests for recounts; however, this delayed the tabulation of municipal results by seven days.

Election Day was generally calm. Overall, observers assessed the voting process slightly more positively than on 3 June, especially with regards to adherence to procedures. However, the stamping of the reverse side of ballots immediately before they were deposited in the ballot box once again undermined the secrecy of the vote. On a positive note, a smaller percentage of observers reported the presence of unauthorized persons inside polling stations, attempts to influence voters, and tension in polling stations. Furthermore, fewer instances of group voting were noted and more polling stations opened on time. The limited number of counts observed were assessed somewhat more positively than in the first round. However, observers again noted that many Precinct Electoral Bureaus had problems reconciling the results and that results protocols were frequently not posted at polling stations.

Voters in Corjova, a Moldovan-administered commune on the left bank of the Nistru/Dniestr river, were once again deprived of their right to vote by Transdniestrian militia, who used force to prevent the opening of the polling station there.

This press statement should be read in conjunction with the Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions of 4 June. The ODIHR will issue a final report approximately two months after the completion of the electoral process and the Congress will vote on a report on these elections during its next session. Both institutions will also make recommendations on possible improvements to the electoral process.

This statement is also available in Moldovan and Russian. However, the English version remains the only official document.