



Election Environment Observation: Mission Three

Mission Findings

Republic of Macedonia

August 19-23, 2002

Background

In an effort to contribute to credible and legitimate elections in the Republic of Macedonia, the International Republican Institute has conducted three pre-election observation missions leading up to the parliamentary elections in September. These election environment observation missions are in response to requests from parties for IRI to be engaged in the electoral and political processes well before polls open this fall. This report, in addition to other documents that may be produced for this or future missions, is meant to assist the political parties and their leaders in efforts to conduct credible and democratic elections.

IRI conducted the third election environment observation mission in Macedonia from August 19 through 23, 2002. Five teams, composed of experts from Europe and the United States, deployed throughout the country. They had meetings with local and national political party leaders, representatives of the media and NGOs. IRI teams met with representatives from all major parliamentary parties (governing and opposition) in all six electoral units. Observers visited 20 different municipalities, not only in major cities but also in small towns and villages. A total of 65 meetings were held with around 100 local, national, and international leaders. This report represents the overall findings of the third mission.

General Environment

IRI's third election environment mission found party, media, and NGO leaders to be significantly more optimistic about both the current environment and their outlook for the upcoming elections. With few exceptions, those interviewed felt that the campaign to date had been proceeding calmly and without serious incident in their local area, and expected that this would also be the case on election day. In general, IRI observers had the impression that, as the official campaign has begun and the election date draws nearer, party activists from both governing and opposition parties have recognized the importance of having an open, credible, and peaceful election and have begun to be more responsible in their statements, leading to a lessening of some of the rumors and speculation shared with previous missions. With this more responsible and realistic outlook has come an increased sense of optimism, as activists take a harder look at the real situation in their respective communities without the earlier bias of rumor or fear.[†]

The key exception to this general impression was the Tetovo region, where tensions remain high – both inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic – and expectations for violence and other irregularities on election day are still widespread. By contrast and perhaps surprisingly, however, Kumanovo, the other of last year's two key crisis regions, conformed to the more optimistic pattern noted across the country overall.

[†] *Editor's note: the week following this third mission saw a significant increase in tensions due to several incidents related to inter-ethnic tensions following last year's war. The killing of two Macedonian police officers, the subsequent kidnap and release of five ethnic Macedonians (both in the Gostivar area and both claimed to have been carried out by the so-called Albanian National Army), an ethnic Macedonian roadblock targeted at preventing Ali Ahmeti's Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) from holding a rally in Skopje, and the Interior Ministry's announcement of a warrant for Ahmeti's arrest all are events which have raised tensions since the third mission ended. If more such incidents occur they could serve to reverse the generally optimistic trend noted by the third mission's observers.*

IRI's third observation mission was the first of the three to take place during the official campaign period. The week prior to the mission, President Trajkovski marked the official campaign with a much-lauded address to the people on August 14, in which he urged citizens to vote their conscience based on parties' stances on the issues of concern to them, and reminded voters and parties alike that the integrity of the election process is more important than any specific outcome. The campaign itself was kicked off with relatively little fanfare on August 16. In fact, many of those interviewed expressed surprise at how quietly the campaign began – to them, another indication of parties' commitment to avoiding provocative behavior. With few exceptions, those interviewed felt that campaign activities – public events, rallies, canvassing, etc. – have thus far taken place without incident. Complaints of violations of election law were limited largely to complaints that parties started their campaigning before the official date, and complaints related to the tearing down and/or covering over of campaign posters and related material.

Similarly, this was the first of the missions to take place with the full complement of Regional Election Commissions and Municipal Election Commissions in place. The RECs and MECs were largely reported to be formed and functioning well. Most importantly, virtually across the board those interviewed expressed confidence in the functioning of electoral management bodies, from the State Election Commission down. Considered in the context of the overwhelming lack of trust in election institutions and processes observed by previous missions, as well as considering the lack of confidence in previous election management bodies, this expression of confidence in the effective and impartial functioning of current election management bodies is an extremely positive indicator for the election itself.

Potential Problems

Violence

Findings:

Though overall fears of violence have reduced, parties continue to express concern of violence during the election campaign and on election day. As stated in the first two mission findings, the conflict of 2001, the widespread proliferation of weapons throughout the country, and the entrance into the political environment of former combatants in that conflict, have caused concern that members of armed groups may try to force their will upon the electorate or, at the very least, poison the pre-election period with implied threats of violence. This is particularly true in former 'crisis areas' and in areas with a significant presence of special police units.

Observers in this third mission had the impression that rumors of violence were in many cases most likely just that – rumors – but that in some cases these rumors were very deliberately being utilized to stoke fears among the electorate. Rather than focus on the likelihood that threats of violence would be realized, those interviewed focused more on the deliberate use of the threat itself (most likely with no intention of carrying out violence), either to coerce voters to vote a certain way or to prevent voters from coming out to vote at all. Though the fact that many of the threats of violence are seemingly hollow has positive implications for the level of violence on election day, it is nevertheless a point of concern if being used by parties or groups to influence the vote on election day.

While heard less often in this mission, there is also still the concern that party activists, lacking confidence in established institutions such as the police or judiciary, may respond to violence or threats of violence by taking matters into their own hands. Party leaders from governing and opposition parties continue to stress their commitment to “defend” party activists and supporters against violence from the other side. The 1999 and 2000 elections have demonstrated that the presence of such ‘defenders,’ even absent any premeditated attempts to disrupt voting, can itself very easily precipitate clashes on election day.

Recommendations:

The fear of violence at polling sites could suppress the vote and may well distort the outcome of the election if voters are not assured of their safety well before election day itself. Parties must clearly and publicly remind their activists and supporters that there is no place for violence in the political or electoral process, and that security to protect voters, election commissioners or candidates is solely the obligation of police.

Illegal Enticement/Intimidation

Findings:

Widespread allegations by both the governing and opposition parties (as well as other observers) persist that voters are being given illegal enticements to vote for a particular party. Methods of alleged enticements include the outright buying of votes by local branches with specifically -allocated slush funds set aside for this purpose or the promise of employment for a voter or members of a voter’s family. The current mission heard of increasing instances of the delivery of ‘humanitarian aid’ to villages or communities in the form of flour, vegetables, or other staples, with the clear understanding that the aid was being delivered by a particular party.

The flip side of enticement is intimidation. Allegations remain widespread that intimidation will be used to frighten voters into supporting a particular party, such as the threat of loss of employment of the voter or the voter’s family members; the threat of eviction from property, etc.

Enticement and intimidation remain serious risks in the upcoming elections. As mentioned in previous reports, the key to eliminating this risk is ballot secrecy – both the secrecy itself and people’s belief in it. As long as the secrecy of the vote can be assured, efforts at either enticement or intimidation, while clearly illegal and unethical, cannot change someone’s vote. However, since voters do not trust the electoral process, and therefore they fear their vote will not remain secret, illegal enticement or intimidation could have an effect on the outcome of the vote.

Recommendations:

Party leaders need to remind all party activists and supporters that campaigning should not include the offering of jobs, money, or other benefits, particularly if public money is at stake. Parties need to publicly stress to their local activists that the use of intimidation, whether

direct or indirect, is not in the interest of any party, can seriously undermine the legitimacy of elections, and is not in any way sanctioned or tolerated by party leadership.

Media

Findings:

The media environment seems not to have changed significantly since the first mission. As before, while virtually every local party leader said that his or her party would be able to effectively communicate with the voters, concerns remain about the lack of objectivity in the media and the absence of journalistic standards or legal framework to prevent libel and/or slander. Local media continue to be concerned that governmental agencies would cut services to their operations in an attempt to silence them during the election campaign. Both governing and opposition parties increasingly complained in this mission of instances in which media outlets 'hostile' to their party have been charging artificially high advertising rates as compared with those offered to competing parties, thus posing a barrier in key media markets.

Recommendations:

National and local media should implement strict internal guidelines to ensure objective and balanced reporting during the election campaign and to prevent libel or slander. Government officials at the national and municipal level should ensure that no decisions about the continuation or cessation of services are being made for political purposes. The political parties should each publicly call upon their respective activists and supporters who will play a role in the media coverage of the campaign to act in accordance with the party's firm commitment to fair and objective media coverage for all parties competing in the election.

Campaign Finance

Findings:

IRI's findings and recommendations in this area remain virtually unchanged from the first mission. Party activists remain deeply concerned about the lack of transparency of, and control over, campaign and party financing. There were many allegations by both governing and opposition parties of improper donations to political parties. While it is increasingly unlikely as the election approaches that party and campaign financing will be made to be transparent and open to scrutiny, it is essential that government resources – whether they are municipal or national, financial or human – not be used for political purposes.

Recommendations:

All government officials and business leaders should make sure that their organizations are abiding by the letter and the spirit of laws that do not allow the misuse of public or private resources for political purposes.

Expectations for Election Day

Findings:

While widespread concerns that there will be significant fraud on election day, taking such forms as ballot box stuffing, family and proxy voting, etc.; as well as the abovementioned concerns about violence on election day itself; these concerns have lessened significantly since the previous missions (as discussed in the general environment above). Both parties and NGOs such as MOST have dramatically increased their activity in terms of training activists and preparing to observe the election itself. Overall, however, the belief prevails that the international community's role in observing the election is critical, and that *only* the international community can serve to guarantee an open, credible, and peaceful election.

All of the parties have indicated that they will be fielding poll watchers in addition to their representatives on the polling boards. A number, but not all, of the party representatives indicated that their party would be conducting a parallel vote count. All of the parties indicated that their activists would be participating in training in the above areas, either organized by the international community or by the party itself.

From the civic side, MOST and their partner NGOs are recruiting a significant number of domestic observers for election day. MOST partner NGOs were optimistic that they would reach their goals. One concern expressed is that volunteer recruitment has become more difficult given the high demand on the part of international observation missions for interpreters and drivers – paid positions that seem more attractive to qualified individuals than volunteering as a domestic observer.

Recommendations:

The international community, Macedonian government officials, and party leaders must take care in their public statements to set realistic public expectations for what the OSCE/ODIHR and other international election observation missions can and will do to prevent electoral abuses. At the same time, the international community, Macedonian government officials, and party leaders must clearly and repeatedly stress to the citizens of Macedonia that they must take responsibility for the elections, and that absent the will among parties and voters alike to have an open, credible, and peaceful election, no international observation will be able to impose it.

Conclusion

IRI is encouraged by the increased sense of responsibility and of optimism observed throughout the country with regard to the September 15 parliamentary election. As noted above, events subsequent to this mission have already put that optimism to the test. Without observing the impact of these events on the local level, it is difficult at this writing to measure the damage that these events may already have done to the process. It is safe to say, however, that if the citizens of Macedonia hold on to the sense of responsibility noted by the third mission's observers and remain committed themselves to doing their part to insure an open, credible, and peaceful election, then the agendas of those who would disrupt the process – after this mission, seeming increasingly to be in the minority – will find no fertile ground in which to take root.