



# **Election Environment Observation: Mission Two**

Mission Findings

*Republic of Macedonia*

*July 15-19, 2002*

## **Background**

In an effort to contribute to credible and legitimate elections in the Republic of Macedonia, the International Republican Institute is conducting 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 second election environment observation mission in Macedonia from July 15 through 19, 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. Twenty-five different municipalities were represented, not only in major cities but also in small towns and villages. A total of 49 meetings were held with over 150 local and national leaders. This report represents the findings of the second mission.

## **General Environment**

The election environment in Macedonia remains tense, with the general impression being that the parties are girding for battle – both in the political sense, and in some cases, in the sense of literal physical confrontation. IRI's second election environment observation mission saw increased political party activity compared with the first. Several of the parties and coalitions competing in the September elections have held large rallies to launch their election campaigns. As with the last mission, parties at the local level generally have not begun their campaign activities, indicating that they were waiting for the start of the official campaign period. At the same time, parties grumbled about their opponents beginning their campaigns 'illegally,' distributing leaflets and flyers before the start of the official campaign. By 'campaigning,' however, parties seemed to refer to electronic and print advertisement, billboards, posters, leaflets, etc.; virtually all parties mentioned efforts already underway to go door-to-door or otherwise canvass voters to check electoral lists and gauge existing support among the local electorate.

Interestingly, during this second round, parties generally seemed *slightly less* concerned about their own ability to campaign freely and fairly, though it is difficult to say whether this stemmed from an opening of the electoral environment or from parties' increasing convictions that they are 'ready' for what their opposition will try to throw at them. The latter interpretation is certainly consistent with the fairly aggressive attitude observed among all of the parties.

While parties themselves seemed more confident about their ability to compete freely and fairly, there is still a fairly widely-held consensus that the elections themselves will not be credible, legitimate, or peaceful and that the results will be fraudulent. As a whole, trust in the system – in the electoral system, political parties, the police, the judicial system, and the government – remains virtually nonexistent.

Worthy of note, however, is that in this mission, far more so than in the last, IRI began to see a *localization* of people's outlook regarding legitimate and peaceful elections. In the first mission, very few tangible signs of election problems were evident, and people had only their past experiences, current fears, and rumor upon which to base their assessment of how elections would unfold. In this mission, while the overall atmosphere nationwide can still be described as overwhelmingly pessimistic and fearful, it is clear that party activists at the local level are beginning to take a harder look at their own communities and what are likely to be the problems there. As a result, IRI saw a polarization of views during this mission. On one hand, a greater number of activists from across the political spectrum reported that they did not believe major problems are likely in their communities during the campaign or on election day. On the other hand, in the communities where activists *do* expect problems, albeit in relatively fewer areas, it seems that these expectations are increasingly grounded in facts, as concrete instances of election-related problems become more evident.

## **Potential Problems**

### **Violence**

#### *Findings:*

Parties continue to perceive a significant threat of violence during the election campaign and on election day. The proliferation of weapons in Macedonia – far more widespread than in previous elections due to the intervening crisis – as well as the continued presence of organized armed groups throughout the country continues to contribute to fear of politically-motivated violence. As stated in the first mission findings, the conflict of 2001, as well as the entrance into the political environment of former combatants in that conflict, has 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.

Additionally, numerous incidents of violence have occurred outside the context of politics – with causes ranging from continuing war-related violence to simple barroom brawls that were allowed to escalate out of control – that have been seized upon and used by governing and opposition parties alike to score political points. This politicization of violence serves only to make bad situations worse and to escalate the already significant tension and fear of violence being used for political means.

Finally, this fear of violence, the escalation of tension due to politicization of violence, and the abovementioned lack of confidence in established institutions such as the police or judiciary have led many party activists to conclude that they must take 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:*

As in the previous mission, there are widespread allegations by both the governing and opposition parties (as well as other observers) that voters will be given illegal enticements to vote for a particular party. More and more concrete instances of such allegations were noted in this second mission. 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. One less direct, but frequently mentioned, method of enticement involves the delivery of 'humanitarian aid' to villages or communities, 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.

As stated in the first mission report, there are serious risks of enticement and intimidation in the upcoming elections. As long as the secrecy of the vote can be assured, these efforts, 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 and thus remains a significant issue. 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. One area of concern not raised in the first mission: both

governing and opposition parties alike complain that the media outlets 'hostile' to their party will charge 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:*

There remains the widespread belief 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. 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. None of the party representatives, however, felt that any of the above measures would serve to check election day fraud or violence.

Instead, all those with whom the mission met reiterated the request heard in the first mission: that the international community mounts an even more robust observation mission than the

planned 750-member OSCE/ODHIR mission, so as to have international observers at each of the nearly 3,000 polling stations nationwide from opening to closing. Without such a presence, fraud and violence were deemed inevitable.

IRI also noted that a number of party branches were conducting “public opinion research” with no basis in accurate survey methodology. These “polls” are being shared with the party faithful and media and, predictably, show the sponsoring party invariably leading the pack. This raising of expectations among party activists and members may lead to disappointment and claims of fraud on election day.

#### *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/ODHIR 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 a free, fair, and peaceful election, no international observation will be able to impose it.

#### **Conclusion**

It remains more crucial than ever that political parties ensure discipline among their activists and supporters and hold them to the highest standards of behavior prior to and on election day. As representatives of the people, political leaders have the responsibility to look beyond this particular election and to recognize that having credible, legitimate, and peaceful elections that meet international standards is more important than a particular election outcome. Parties should be devoting their time and energy to building and mobilizing their organizations and getting their message out to the voters – competing as best they can in the contest of ideas, while above all publicly committing themselves to the sanctity and integrity of the electoral process as the best guarantee of a positive future for Macedonia and all of its citizens.