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CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Doc. 13069
29 November 2012

Observation of the early parliamentary elections in Montenegro (14 October 2012)

Election observation report
Ad hoc Committee of the Bureau
Rapporteur: Mr Christopher CHOPE, United Kingdom, European Democrat Group

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1. Introduction

1. On 3 September 2012, the Bureau of the Parliamentary Assembly decided to constitute an ad hoc committee to observe the early parliamentary elections in Montenegro on 14 October 2012. To this end, the Bureau appointed an ad hoc committee composed of 11 members and the two co-rapporteurs of the Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe (Monitoring Committee). At its meeting on 1 October 2012, the Bureau appointed Mr Christopher Chope (United Kingdom, EDG) as Chairperson of the ad hoc committee. The composition of the ad hoc committee can be found in Appendix 1.

2. The ad hoc committee observed the elections as part of an International Election Observation Mission (IEOM), in which the election observation mission of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE/ODIHR) and a delegation from the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA) also participated.

3. The ad hoc committee had meetings in Podgorica from 12 to 15 October 2012, including with the Head of the European Union delegation to Podgorica, the Head of the OSCE/ODIHR mission and members of his team, the Political Adviser of the OSCE mission to Montenegro, the Chairperson of Montenegro's State Election Commission (SEC), political party representatives and representatives of civil society and the media. The ad hoc committee's programme of meetings can be found in Appendix 2.

4. On election day, the ad hoc committee was divided into six teams which observed the elections in Podgorica and the surrounding area, Tuzi, Kolasin, Golubovici, Vranija, Niksic, Bar, Ulcinj and Cetije.

5. The ad hoc committee concluded that the early parliamentary elections held on 14 October 2012 “took place in a peaceful and pluralistic environment with respect for fundamental rights, although the continued lack of confidence needs to be addressed”. In the press release published following the elections and at the press conference held on 15 October, the head of the Parliamentary Assembly delegation underlined that “the citizens of Montenegro made their choice in a free way from a large number of political parties. The abuse of administrative resources and a lack of transparency in campaign and political party financing are a matter of concern that should be addressed by the authorities”. The Parliamentary Assembly will continue its close co-operation with the Montenegrin Parliament and institutions, through its monitoring procedures and the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), with a view to the further consolidation of democracy. The press release is set out in Appendix 3.

6. The ad hoc committee wishes to thank the Montenegrin Parliament and the OSCE/ODIHR for their co-operation and support.

2. Political and legal framework

7. These are the third parliamentary elections since the country declared its independence in June 2006. On 26 June 2012, the European Union announced that it was opening accession negotiations with Montenegro. According to the governing coalition, a full four-year mandate was needed in order to permit the calm, untroubled conduct of these accession talks. On 26 July, the coalition therefore tabled a motion on the dissolution of parliament, which was adopted by 47 votes for and 27 against. On 31 July, the President of Montenegro, Filip Vujanovic, called the early parliamentary elections for 14 October 2012, bringing forward the end of the parliamentary term, initially scheduled for spring 2013.

8. As regards the legal framework, these early elections were held in accordance with Article 105 of the Law on the Election of Councillors and Members of Parliament, which provides that early elections shall be governed by the same provisions as elections held according to the regular mandate. The early parliamentary elections were regulated by a comprehensive legal framework that generally provides an adequate basis for the conduct of democratic elections.

9. In addition to the Law on the Election of Councillors and Members of Parliament, the relevant pieces of legislation concerning elections are the constitution, the Law on Electoral Lists and the Law on Financing of Political Parties (also amended in 2012, primarily concerning supervision of compliance, which is carried out by both the State Election Commission and the State Audit Institution).

10. Montenegro was required to bring its electoral legislation into conformity with the Constitution of 2007 and with European standards by 31 May 2011. This concerned, in particular, the issue of who could vote (according to the Constitution “citizens” are entitled to vote, whereas the electoral law refers to “inhabitants”, which affected the status of persons living in Montenegro but originating from the former Yugoslav republics) and the “authentic representation” of minorities under Article 79.9 of the constitution.

11. The electoral law was amended on 8 September 2011, bringing it into line with the Constitution of 2007. This legal framework was given a positive assessment by the Venice Commission and the OSCE/ODIHR in their most recent joint opinion on the draft law amending the Law on Election of Councillors and Members of Parliament of Montenegro.[1] Overall, the amendments consisted in technical improvements to voting and a reinforcement of the protection of fundamental rights, such as non-discrimination. A number of issues raised in the previous opinion by the Venice Commission and the OSCE/ODIHR were also addressed.

12. Montenegro's unicameral parliament has 81 seats. Members are elected for a four-year term in a single nation-wide constituency under a proportional system (with a seat allocation threshold of 3% of the valid votes). Political parties can submit lists either individually or, if they are part of a coalition, jointly.

13. The amendments also involved changes to the electoral system. Previously, under Article 96 of the electoral law, half of the seats won by an electoral list were allocated according to the candidates' order on the list, and the other half at the discretion of the list's submitters. These arrangements had drawn constant criticism from the Parliamentary Assembly's election observation missions. The amended law ensures that all seats won by a list are allocated on the basis of the list's order. The same applies to Articles 104 and 105 concerning the filling of vacant seats.

1. Document CDL-AD(2011)011.

14. The new rules on national minorities' participation in parliament reflect the constitutional requirement of "authentic" representation (Article 79.9 of the constitution). National minorities recognised by the constitution benefit from provisions facilitating their authentic representation in parliament. Under the electoral law, a contestant (list of candidates) is regarded as a minority contestant if it represents a specific minority or a minority national community constituting not more than 15% of the population at the time of the latest census.

15. The most recent changes to the electoral law have brought further positive developments that improve national minorities' representation in parliament:

– a decrease in the number of signatures required: 1 000 signatures of registered voters, instead of 1% of the total number of voters, and 300 signatures for specific minorities constituting up to 2% of the total population;

– a decrease in the seat allocation threshold to 0.7% of the valid votes, and 0.35% for the Croat minority.

16. Generally speaking, the Constitution of 2007 guarantees fundamental civil and political freedoms and human rights. It provides that every Montenegrin citizen aged 18 or over and resident in the country for at least two years shall be entitled to vote and to stand as a candidate in elections. However, the 24-month residence requirement inherited from the pre-independence period cannot be regarded as a reasonable restriction, in keeping with the principle of universal suffrage, as the Venice Commission and the OSCE/ODIHR underlined in their previously cited opinion.[2] All citizens must enjoy the right to vote and to be elected, in so far as this is a fundamental human right, and the law must put in place all the practical measures for exercising this right.

3. Election administration and registration of lists and candidates

17. Elections are administered by a three-level system of electoral commissions: a State Election Commission (SEC), 21 Municipal Election Commissions (MECs) and 1 165 Polling Boards (PBs). The SEC and MECs are appointed for a four-year term by a newly elected parliament, while the Polling Boards are appointed for each election of councillors or MPs.

18. The recent amendments to the electoral legislation ensure a balanced representation of political parties in the election administration. The 11 members of the SEC are appointed by parliament, including the Chairperson and four members representing the ruling coalition, while the secretary and the other members represent opposition parties and national minority parties.

19. The seven members of an MEC are appointed by the relevant municipal assembly. PBs have five members. In addition to the appointed members, the SEC, MECs and PBs include representatives of the political parties present in parliament, not least the opposition parties, and of the candidate lists standing in elections. While the SEC organises and administers the electoral process as a whole, the PBs are responsible for directly administering the vote. For the early parliamentary elections of 14 October, the governing coalition had a majority in 17 out of 21 MECs and had appointed 64.7% of the members of the PBs. The assessment of the impartiality of election administration was nonetheless globally positive.

20. The elections were organised in a professional, transparent manner, although the SEC did not do everything it could to ensure the due implementation of the party funding legislation and general oversight of the election campaign; it primarily confined its role to consideration of the very small number of complaints lodged with it. The SEC's other activities, such as the printing of ballot papers, were performed in a very transparent manner in the presence of the media and observers. The electoral commissions at all levels complied with most of the deadlines laid down by law.

21. According to the latest census of the population of Montenegro, conducted in 2011, the country has 625 266 inhabitants. For the early elections of 14 October, 514 055 voters were registered on the electoral lists. Montenegro has 21 separate voter registers managed by the respective municipal authorities. The voter registration process is passive in that voter data are updated automatically on the basis of information provided by the local offices of the Ministry of the Interior.

22. The decentralised system for registering voters on the electoral lists is fairly complex to run, particularly regarding identification of deceased persons and updating of the lists. In addition, the system fails to offer sufficient guarantees regarding personal data protection. Representatives of opposition parties and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) raised concerns as to the accuracy of the electoral lists and the fact that

2. Document CDL-AD(2011)011, paragraphs 24 and 25.

many Montenegrins residing abroad were still included on the lists. Some of the persons with whom the ad hoc committee spoke also mentioned cases of persons included on the electoral lists whose nationality was not known. A situation of this kind does not enhance political and civil society stakeholders' confidence in the democratic nature of the election process.

23. Political parties and groups of citizens can register to stand in the elections separately or as a coalition, on the basis of the electoral lists. Party and coalition lists must have the supporting signatures of 1% of the total number of voters (for the elections of 14 October, the requirement was accordingly 4 983 signatures), apart from lists of parties and groups of voters representing specific minorities or a national minority community, which must have 1 000 supporting signatures (or 300 for specific minorities constituting up to 2% of the population).

24. Under the system for allocating seats, an exceptional rule continues to apply for participation by lists of candidates representing minorities. If none of the lists of candidates representing the same minority or same national minority community reaches the general threshold of 3%, but certain lists individually gain at least 0.7% of the valid votes, these lists are taken into consideration in the distribution of seats corresponding to a maximum of 3% of the total number of valid votes. This upper limit applies whatever the actual number of votes scored individually by the lists: the “aggregated” list will participate in the allocation of seats only within the 3% limit.

25. The ethnic composition of the population of Montenegro is as follows: 43% Montenegrins, 32% Serbs, 8% Bosnians, 5% Albanians, 4% Muslims, 1% Croats and 7% people belonging to other ethnic groups. The population of Albanian origin is mainly concentrated in the towns of Ulcinj, Plav and Tuzi in the Podgorica district. The Bosnian population mostly lives in the northern part of the country, in the municipalities of Berane, Rožaje and Bijelo Polje. There is also a significant Roma population, which is disseminated all over the country although the greatest concentration of Roma is to be found in the vicinity of Podgorica.

26. The SEC registered 13 lists of political parties or coalitions. A total of 841 candidates took part in the elections, competing for 81 parliamentary seats. The SEC adopted an inclusive approach to registering all the lists of candidates, and no political party was rejected. The provision allowing 48 hours for rectifying errors was applied in a reasonable manner.

27. As in the parliamentary elections of 2009, women were under-represented on the lists of candidates for these elections. Under the legislation in force, the quota for women was set at 30% of candidates on a list. Three of the lists registered complied with this legal requirement, and one list, the Croatian Civic Initiative, was led by a woman. The first woman on the outgoing ruling coalition's list was in 14th position, and of the 81 candidates on this list only nine were women.

4. The election campaign and the media environment

28. For the elections, the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists/Social Democratic Party maintained its coalition under the banner “European Montenegro – Milo Đukanović”. The opposition was grouped around the Democratic Front headed by Modrac Lekic, Positive Montenegro headed by Darko Pajovic and the Socialist People’s Party of Montenegro. The main national minority parties taking part in the elections were the Bosniak Party, the Croatian Civic Initiative and the Albanian parties.

29. The election campaign began on 20 September. On the whole, the campaign took place in a peaceful environment and the parties/coalitions campaigned freely throughout the country. Most of the candidates focused on the issues of European Union and NATO accession, the economic crisis and unemployment and organised crime and corruption. Local issues were also important. Election meetings were attended by 50 to 1 000 participants, and the parties stated that they had given priority to doorstep campaigning.

30. The funding of political parties and election campaigns is an issue which the opposition has been raising for many years. Representatives of the opposition parties, NGOs and the media told the ad hoc committee that there was a lack of transparency concerning party and campaign funding. This situation also blurs the distinction between the activities of State bodies and those of the ruling political parties.

31. In its 2010 report on Montenegro, the Council of Europe’s Group of States against Corruption (GRECO)[3] recommended that:

– clear rules and guidance concerning the use of public resources for party activity and election campaigns be introduced;

– an institution, whether new or existing, be given appropriate independent authority and resources to monitor the funding of political parties and electoral campaigns (both from private and public sources);

– a practical working arrangement ensuring effective implementation of party/campaign funding rules be developed;

– that arrangement be described publicly on the websites of the Ministry of Finance and the State Election Commission (and the local commissions where appropriate) and clear information to the public be included regarding how and where to lodge complaints.

32. The ad hoc committee believes that GRECO's next report on Montenegro's implementation of the recommendations on party and campaign funding, which will be discussed in December 2012, will also complete the assessment of the situation in this connection during the elections on 14 October 2012.

33. As in the previous elections, some opposition parties, NGOs and media outlets mentioned cases of abuse of administrative resources by the ruling parties and pressure and intimidation being exerted on vulnerable groups, including teachers and officials working in government bodies, so that they voted for the ruling parties. According to the OSCE/ODIHR limited mission, during the election campaign, the ruling coalition announced the creation of 45 temporary civil service posts, allegedly for its supporters. In this connection, it should be noted that approximately 40% of jobs in Montenegro are in government bodies of various levels.

34. The members of the ad hoc committee were told that, during doorstep campaigning, representatives of the governing coalition had apparently drawn up a list of voters supporting the coalition, who later received targeted welfare benefits from the relevant public bodies. The ad hoc committee does not have the resources to check all these allegations, but nevertheless believes that the relevant authorities in Montenegro should conduct investigations to shed light on the cases reported and inform the public of the findings. Action of this kind by the authorities would help strengthen public trust in the democratic process.

35. Frequent allegations were made that the authorities had bought identity cards of opposition supporters and undecided voters so as to eliminate their votes; this matter was raised in various newspapers. Unfortunately, these allegations (which are a constant concern for the opposition) are hard to quantify and, above all, prove; once again, however, the authorities failed to take appropriate measures to shed light on these allegations. By responding, they would have strengthened public trust in the electoral process.

36. The media environment in Montenegro is diverse, which means that a wide range of political opinions were voiced, but it is divided along political lines. Television is by far the most important source of news and information. Public-service radio and television, Crna Gora (RTCG 1) in particular, enabled voters to compare the candidates in six 90-minute free-view televised debates in which a large number of the registered candidates took part on an equal footing and in accordance with the applicable rules.

37. The private media broadcast debates and special programmes about the elections involving various political parties and candidates, some of whom questioned the impartiality of the private media and the lack of transparency concerning their funding and their owners. In spite of the pluralist media environment, most programmes are still strongly influenced by the owners, which raises questions about the independence of radio and television broadcasting in the private sector.

38. During the election campaign, public-service television devoted 57% of political and news programmes to the activities of the various organs of government. Private channels devoted 54% of their air time to covering the activities of the government and the governing coalition, but often in negative terms. In general, the four main political parties and coalitions received most coverage (European Montenegro – Milo Đukanović, the Democratic Front, Positive Montenegro and the People's Socialist Party of Montenegro). The written press produced interesting reports on the election campaign and reflected political pluralism.

5. Polling day

39. Polling day was calm. The members of the ad hoc committee visited a substantial number of polling stations and were able to confirm that the ballot proceeded in an orderly manner. The voting and counting operations were conducted, on the whole, in a professional manner. Some tension was noted by one of the teams which visited polling stations in Albanian-speaking areas.

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3. Greco Eval III Rep (2010) 7E, Group of States against Corruption, Montenegro.

40. The members of the ad hoc committee identified a number of technical problems in the polling stations visited:

– the design of the booths did not ensure voting secrecy. Nevertheless, no attempt to take advantage of this deficiency was noted;

– the ballot boxes were not transparent and there were no mobile ballot boxes: people who voted at home placed their ballot papers in envelopes, which did not ensure voting secrecy;

– the fact that the political parties' logos were not on the ballot papers made voting difficult for illiterate voters, mainly in rural areas with Albanian-speaking inhabitants, and for Roma;

– there were very few observers in polling stations in Albanian-speaking areas;

– there were a considerable number of people in the polling stations, including representatives of political parties, often without badges;

– in general, polling stations were not, or were not easily, accessible for people with disabilities;

– cases of unintentional non-compliance with the counting procedures in certain polling stations were observed, particularly in rural areas.

41. According to the preliminary election results announced by the SEC on 15 October 2012, the allocation of the 81 seats in the new Parliament of Montenegro is as follows: European Montenegro – Milo Đukanović: 39 seats; Democratic Front: 20 seats; the People's Socialist Party: 9 seats; Positive Montenegro: 7 seats; the Bosniak Party: 3 seats; the Albanian parties: 2 seats; and the Croatian Civic Initiative: 1 seat. The turnout was 70.55%.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

42. The ad hoc committee concluded that Montenegro's early parliamentary elections on 14 October 2012 took place in a peaceful and pluralistic environment with respect for fundamental rights and that the citizens of Montenegro made their choice freely from a large number of political parties. Nevertheless, the abuse of administrative resources and a lack of transparency in campaign and political party financing were a matter of concern that should be addressed as soon as possible by the authorities.

43. Polling day was calm. The members of the ad hoc committee visited 71 polling stations and observed that the ballot proceeded in an orderly manner and the voting and counting operations were generally conducted in a professional manner and with composure.

44. The ad hoc committee points out that, in the conclusions of the report on the 2009 parliamentary elections, it was recommended that the Montenegrin authorities bring the legal framework into line with the country's constitution. The ad hoc committee is therefore pleased to note that Montenegro, on 8 September 2011, amended the electoral law and brought it into line with the 2007 constitution. This amended legal framework was assessed positively by the Venice Commission, as, on the whole, the amendments involved technical improvements to voting and strengthened the protection of fundamental rights.

45. Many discussion partners informed the ad hoc committee of cases of abuse of administrative resources by the ruling parties and of pressure and intimidation being exerted on teachers and government officials to vote for the ruling parties. During the election campaign, the ruling coalition allegedly announced the creation of 45 temporary civil service posts for its supporters.

46. As the ad hoc committee does not have the resources to check all these allegations, it asks the relevant authorities in Montenegro to investigate them and, should they prove founded, to identify those responsible and inform the public and the Parliamentary Assembly as quickly as possible. The ad hoc committee believes that any recurrence of practices of this kind in future elections must be averted at all costs; otherwise, it would be difficult to strengthen the confidence of Montenegrin citizens in the democratic functioning of institutions and the electoral process.

47. The ad hoc committee notes that the transparency of party and campaign funding remains a problem which the opposition has been raising for many years, in spite of the fact that the parliament passed a law on political party financing in January 2012. The members of the ad hoc committee were informed by representatives of the opposition parties, NGOs and the media that there was blurring of the distinction between the activities of State bodies and those of the ruling political parties in this respect.

48. The media environment is now more diverse, but it is divided along political lines. The media provided broad coverage of election programmes and differing opinions. Television was by far the most important source of news and information. In spite of the pluralist media environment, however, most programmes were still strongly influenced by the owners, which raises questions about the independence of radio and television broadcasting in the private sector.

49. The ad hoc committee believes that the Parliamentary Assembly should pursue its close co-operation with the Parliament and institutions of Montenegro, through its monitoring procedure and the Venice Commission, in order to consolidate still further the entire electoral process. To continue improving the electoral process in Montenegro, the ad hoc committee calls on the Montenegrin authorities to:

– implement the recommendations of the Assembly and GRECO in full in order to increase the transparency of election campaign and political party funding;

– strengthen the legal status of government officials in order to avoid cases of their being subjected to undue pressure or intimidation during election campaigns or on polling day;

– conduct investigations into all the allegations of abuse of administrative resources by the ruling parties and publish the findings of the investigations;

– make a clear distinction between the government and the ruling parties;

– improve electoral legislation in order to guarantee the right of universal suffrage for all citizens of Montenegro without the 24-month residence requirement inherited from the pre-independence period;

– improve polling booth design to enhance voting secrecy, and install transparent ballot boxes;

– arrange training for polling board members, in particular in rural areas, so as to improve their command of procedures on polling day.

Appendix 1 – Composition of the ad hoc committee

Based on proposals by the political groups, the ad hoc committee was composed as follows:

– Christopher CHOPE, Head of the Delegation

– **Group of the European People's Party (EPP/CD)**
  - Miltiadis VARVITSIOTIS, Greece

– **Socialist Group (SOC)**
  - Josette DURRIEU, France
  - Tudor PANŢIRU, Romania
  - Konstantinos TRIANTAFYLLOS, Greece

– **Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)**
  - Doris FIALA, Switzerland
  - Bernard MARQUET, Monaco

– **European Democrat Group (EDG)**
  - Christopher CHOPE, United Kingdom

– **Group of the Unified European Left (UEL)**
  - Dimitrios PAPADIMOULIS, Greece

– **Co-rapporteur of the Monitoring Committee** (ex officio)
  - Nursuna MEMECAN, Turkey

– **Secretariat**
  - Chemavon Chahbazian, Deputy to the Head of the Interparliamentary Co-operation and Election Observation Division
  - Daniele Gastl, Assistant
  - Gaël Martin-Micallef, Secretariat of the Venice Commission

Appendix 2 – Programme for the observation of the early parliamentary elections (14 October 2012)

Friday 12 October 2012

11:00 – 12:00 Meeting of the ad hoc committee

Opening of the meeting of the parliamentarian delegations by Mr Roberto Battelli, OSCE Special Representative, Head of the OSCE PA, and by Mr Christopher Chope, Head of the PACE delegation, followed by Mr Ranko Krivokapić, Speaker of the Parliament of Montenegro

14:00 – 14:30 Meeting with Mr Alan Toberts, Political advisor of the OSCE Mission to Montenegro and with Ambassador Mitja Drobnic, Head of the European Union Mission to Montenegro

14:30 –15:30 Meeting with Ambassador Geert-Hinrich Ahrens, Head of the OSCE/ODIHR limited mission and members of his team

15:30 – 16:15 Meeting with representatives of the media:
- Mr Mihailo Jovović, Deputy to the Editor-in-Chief of the newspaper *Vijesti*
- Mr Esad Kocan, Editor-in-Chief, *Monitor*

17:00 – 17:45 Meeting with the representatives of civil society:

17:45 – 18:30 Meetings with representatives of the main political parties running in the elections:
- Mr Branimir Gvozdenovic, Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS)
- Mr Ivan Vujovic, Social Democratic Party (SDP)
- Mr Dragan Ivanovic, Socialist People's Party (SNP)
- Mr Slaven Radunovic, New Serb Democracy (NOVA)

Saturday 13 October 2012

9:30 – 11:30 Continuation of the meetings with representatives of the main political parties running in the elections:
- Mr Koca Pavlovic, Movement for Changes (PzP)
- Mr Mehmet Bardhi, Albanian Coalition
- Mr Mladen Bojanic, Positive Montenegro
- Mr Stojanovic, People’s Party
- Ms Ljerka Dragicevic, Croatian Civic Initiative (HGI)
- Mr Suljo Mustafic, Bosniak Party (BS)

11:30 – 12:15 Meeting with Mr Ivan Kalezic, President of the State Election Commission

12:30 – 13:30 Meeting with drivers and interpreters

Sunday 14 October 2012

Observation of the parliamentary elections

Monday 15 October 2012

8:30 – 9:30 Debriefing of the ad hoc committee

12:30 Press conference

Appendix 3 – Statement by the International Election Observation Mission (IEOM)

Montenegro elections pluralistic with respect for fundamental rights, although confidence-building is needed, observers say

Podgorica, 15 October 2012 – Montenegro's early parliamentary elections on 14 October took place in a peaceful and pluralistic environment with respect for fundamental rights, although continued lack of confidence needs to be addressed, international observers said in a statement issued today.

"These elections further consolidated the democratic process. Voters and polling board members have demonstrated a good understanding of their responsibilities", said Roberto Battelli, the Special Co-ordinator who led the short-term OSCE observer mission and Head of the OSCE PA delegation. "However, during the election campaign, all participants in the process have a responsibility to focus on democratic substance in order to strengthen trust in the process instead of undermining it."

"Yesterday the citizens of Montenegro made their choice in a free way from a large number of political parties. The abuse of administrative resources and a lack of transparency in campaign and political party financing are a matter of concern that should be addressed by the authorities," said Christopher Chope, the Head of the PACE delegation. "Our Assembly will continue its close co-operation, through its monitoring procedures and the Venice Commission, with the Montenegrin parliament and institutions for the further consolidation of democracy."

Observers noted that electoral contestants were able to campaign freely, and that the candidate-registration process was inclusive and transparent. Interlocutors alleged the abuse of State resources and reported violations of a public sector recruitment ban during the campaign. There were also concerns over the quality of the voter lists.

Geert-Hinrich Ahrens, the Head of the OSCE/ODIHR limited election observation mission (LEOM), said: "The OSCE/ODIHR limited election observation mission's interlocutors noted that the small number of complaints brought to the attention of the authorities reflected a lack of trust in the complaint system. Often stakeholders informed the LEOM about concerns they had, without seeking legal redress through this system. This situation is not satisfactory and needs to be addressed."

The State Election Commission operated professionally and transparently, but with a limited interpretation of its role. The right in the amended electoral law to appoint authorized representatives at all levels of the election administration was not fully exercised, with some parties citing limited financial and human resources.

The legal framework is comprehensive and generally provides an adequate basis for the conduct of democratic elections, the statement says, and the introduction of a gender quota for candidate lists represents a marked improvement. The residency requirement continues to unduly restrict voting rights and was inconsistently applied. Despite amendments to party financing laws, further improvements and better implementation would increase transparency.

The media environment is diverse and divided along political lines. There was extensive television coverage of the elections, and obligations to guarantee equal coverage were respected.

In polling stations observed the election administration conducted the process professionally and transparently. Observers noted that the new status of authorised representatives with voting privileges was often neglected.