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BUREAU OF THE CONGRESS

REPORT ON
THE MISSION TO OBSERVE THE LOCAL ELECTIONS
HELD ON 17 NOVEMBER 1996 IN
"THE FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA"

Report approved by the Bureau of the Congress
on 21 January 1997

CLRAE delegation:

Mr Markku Andersson, Mayor of Lappeenranta (Finland)
Ms Evalisa Birath-Lindvall, County Council Commissioner, Bohus (Sweden)
Mr Giorgio de Sabbata, Difensore Civico, Marche region (Italy)
Mr Christian Eymard, Mayor of Uchaud (France)
Mr Athanassios Kantartzis, Mayor of Karditsa (Greece)
Mr Andreas Pandelides, Mayor of Morphou (Cyprus)
Mr Diego Scacchi, President of the Union des Villes Suisses (Switzerland)
Mr Manuel Soares Machado, Mayor of Coimbra (Portugal)
Mr Boris Valchev, Mayor of Malko Trnovo (Bulgaria)
Mr Richard Volek, Mayor of Bratislava-Ruzinov City District (Slovak Republic)

Expert: Mr Patrick Quinet (Belgium)

CLRAE Secretariat: Mr Riccardo Priore

I. GENERAL INFORMATION ON "THE FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA"

The population of "the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" totals 1,936,877 (1994 census) and its area 25,713 km², giving an average population density of 79.1 inhabitants per km².

The population includes various minorities; 66% of inhabitants are Macedonian, 22.9% Albanian, 4.0% Turk, 2.3% Roma, 2.0% Serbs and 1.2% of other ethnic origins.

There are 1,752 cities, towns, villages and hamlets including Skopje, which alone has over 541,280 inhabitants or 27% of the total population.

The country has been independent since 1991 and is governed under a Constitution adopted on 17 November 1991. Following an initial general election in 1990, the country's first parliament (Assembly of the Republic) was formed on 1 January 1991. The present parliament was elected in November 1994.

The Macedonian Constitution is based on the traditional principle of separation of powers (legislative, executive and judicial). A Constitutional Court reviews the constitutionality of Acts of Parliament and all other law-making instruments.

The country has a republican system of government, with a parliament and a president. Parliament exercises control over government policy, and the government is answerable to it. The President of the Republic is elected by direct suffrage and therefore has no strict answerability to parliament and no authority to dissolve it. The power to do so is not vested in any institution, and this constitutes an anomaly in the Macedonian system, especially when governments rely on politically weak coalitions.

The main political parties are the Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VRMO), the Democratic Party (DP), the Liberal Party (LP), the Macedonian Social Democratic Union (SDUM), the Socialist Party (SP) and the Party for Democratic Prosperity (PDP).

The Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VRMO), founded in 1990, is a Macedonian nationalist party with a firm foothold in rural communities of the Orthodox persuasion. It won the majority of votes in the 1990 election but boycotted the second round in the 1994 parliamentary elections, alleging that the ballot had been rigged. It is therefore now absent from parliament, despite continuing to represent a large part of the population.

The Democratic Party (DP), founded in 1993, also boycotted the 1994 elections.

The Liberal Party (LP) was set up in 1990. It gained 27 seats in the 1994 parliamentary elections and supported the government coalition until February 1996. It is now part of the opposition.

The Macedonian Social Democratic Union (SDUM) was founded in 1994. This party, which leans towards socialism, has 64 seats in parliament and backs the government. It is in favour of full privatisation of State-owned firms, a free-market economy, freedom of economic initiative and Macedonian membership of international organisations (NATO, the EU, etc.).

The Socialist Party (SP) is the most left-wing. It is very popular in towns and cities and currently supports the government coalition. It has 27 seats in parliament.

The Party for Democratic Prosperity (PDP) was set up in 1990. It is one of the parties that promotes the interests of the Albanian minority. It has 11 seats in parliament and five ministers in the current government.

Other small parties include the PDPA (5 seats in parliament) and the NDP (3 seats), which defend the Albanian minority's interests, the Turkish Party (2 seats) and the Roma Party (2 seats).

II. ORGANISATION OF THE OBSERVATION MISSION

1. Initial contacts

The President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe (CLRAE), Mr Haegi, received a letter dated 4 October 1996 from the Speaker of the Assembly (parliament), Mr Petkovski, informing him that on 17 November 1996 "the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" would be holding the first round in local elections to 123 municipal councils and the Skopje City Council in accordance with new legislation defining local government boundaries. After consulting the Permanent Representative of "the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" in Strasbourg and given that the CLRAE had not, until then, had any opportunity to observe elections in the country, Mr Haegi suggested in a reply to Mr Petkovski of 15 October 1996 that a delegation from the Congress might observe the elections.

2. Members of the delegation

The members of the CLRAE observer delegation were:

Mr Markku Andersson, Mayor of Lappeenranta (Finland)
Ms Evalisa Birath-Lindvall, County Council Commissioner, Bohus (Sweden)
Mr Giorgio de Sabbata, Difensore Civico, Marche region (Italy)
Mr Chistian Eymard, Mayor of Uchaud (France)
Mr Athanassios Kantartzis, Mayor of Karditsa (Greece)
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Expert: Mr Patrick Quinet (Belgium)

CLRAE Secretariat: Mr Riccardo Priore

3. Practical arrangements and programme for the visit

The arrangements for the CLRAE delegation's visit were made by the Council of Europe Secretariat in co-operation with the Macedonian Ministries of Justice and Foreign Affairs and the Macedonian Association of Local Authorities. The members of the delegation wish to thank these institutions for their efficiency in organising the visit. Every effort was made to facilitate the mission, and the delegation enjoyed full freedom of movement to observe the election process as it saw fit without any form of interference.

Official programme for the visit

Friday 15 November

15.35 Arrival of the CLRAE delegation at Ohrid airport

Welcome by:

- Ms Violeta Atanasovska, Head of Section at the Ministry of Justice
- Mr Safet Kadriu, Deputy Director of Joint Services of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia
- A Ministry of Justice representative and the Head of Protocol

16.00 Departure for Ohrid

16.15 Meeting with Mr Blagoja Siljanovski, Chairman of the Ohrid Municipal Assembly and of the Macedonian Association of Local Authorities and also a member of parliament. Mr Plamen Georgievski, Secretary of the Association, also attended the meeting.

17.15 Departure for Skopje

19.30 Arrival in Skopje

Installation at the Grand Hotel, Skopje

Saturday 16 November 1996

09.00 Meeting with the Minister for Justice, Dr Vlado Popovski

10.00 Discussion with the Chair of the National Election Committee, Ms Liljana Ristova-Ingilizova

11.15 Brief pause

11.30 Meeting with representatives of opposition parties:

- VRMO - Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity
- DP - Democratic Party
- LP - Liberal Party

12.45 Meeting with representatives of the government coalition:
SDUM - Macedonian Social Democratic Union
Socialist Party
PDP - Party for Democratic Prosperity

14.15 Meeting with press representatives

17.00 Visit to the OSCE delegation in Skopje

Sunday 17 November 1996

Observation of the elections

Monday 18 November 1996

11.00 Discussion with the Chair of the National Election Committee, Ms Liljana Ristova-Ingilizova

12.30 Press conference

The CLRAE delegation made a number of observations in the course of the initial meetings on 16 November. These related to various aspects of the election process and are set forth in detail in chapter III of this report.

4. Co-operation with other international organisations

On its arrival at Ohrid airport the CLRAE delegation was told that:

- the United Nations would not be taking a direct role in observation activities but would be present throughout Macedonian territory on polling day with 26 civilian police officers and 35 military officials, the latter belonging to the contingent deployed by the UN under the Dayton Agreement;
- the ODIHR of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) did not intend to send an observer delegation because it had other priority commitments. In this connection, the Deputy Head of the OSCE mission in Skopje informed the CLRAE delegation that the organisation would be observing the elections on 17 November with the assistance of a number of representatives of national embassies in Skopje.

The CLRAE delegation met the OSCE delegation's leaders on 16 November. With a view to achieving the widest possible geographic coverage of Macedonian territory on polling day, the OSCE representatives proposed during this meeting that the CLRAE delegation should observe six specific areas located in entirely separate regions. The delegation willingly accepted this proposal.

The OSCE delegation's observation activities were based on a questionnaire, which all the observers completed while observing the polls. This questionnaire, which was similar to

those prepared for the elections to the Russian Duma and the presidential and parliamentary elections in Bosnia-Herzegovina, addressed the main election-related issues, viz voter information, identification and registration; presence of the political parties; voting instructions, etc. In response to a specific request from the OSCE representatives, the CLRAE delegation agreed to complete the questionnaire in the course of their observation activities. The OSCE officially announced the presence of a delegation from the Council of Europe, which it described as an asset for the OSCE delegation.

The scope of our co-operation with the OSCE was well defined from the geographical (territorial distribution) and methodological (questionnaire) points of view.

III. LEGAL BASIS AND CONDUCT OF THE ELECTION PROCESS

1. The institutional, constitutional and legal basis of the local elections

Organisation of the local elections of 17 November 1996 was the responsibility of the Ministry of Justice. This responsibility was shared with the Central Election Committee. The Ministry of the Interior was solely in charge of civil-status and security issues.

The local elections had their direct or indirect basis in the following legislation:

- Articles 114-117 of the Constitution (adopted on 17 November 1991);
- the Local Self-Government Act (passed on 26 October 1995);
- the Local Government Boundaries Act (passed on 12 September 1996);
- the Act on the City of Skopje (passed on 6 September 1996);
- the Local Elections Act (passed on 6 September 1996);
- the Voter Registration and Identification Act (passed on 6 September 1996).

It is of particular interest to note that the Local Government Boundaries Act, which was passed by parliament only a few weeks before the local elections of 17 November 1996, completely redefined the territorial boundaries of Macedonian local authorities. Under the Act, 123 new municipalities were set up, in addition to the Skopje city authority. Before this major reform there were 34 municipalities. The entire population was provided with information on the new system of boundaries in preparation for the local elections of November 1996. To define the new boundaries the criteria set forth in sections 11, 12 and 13 of the 1995 Local Self-Government Act were applied. These provisions specify in particular the criteria governing the establishment or reform of local government entities, viz citizens' local interests, socio-economic development and participation in public decisions.

In view of the short period between the passing of the Local Government Boundaries Act and the Local Elections Act on 6 September 1996 and the holding of the local elections on 17 November the CLRAE delegation wondered whether the population might not be prey to some confusion and even whether the political parties might not protest.

In this connection, the Minister for Justice and the Chair of the Central Election Committee confirmed that the legislation had been enacted on the basis of:

- widespread consultation of the population in the different languages spoken within the country, a process which had begun as far back as the previous January; and
- talks between the government and the political parties concerned.

Moreover, the Minister for Justice pointed out that since the new local government boundaries were based on geographical and economic criteria, and in no way on ethnic considerations, they would permit better integration of citizens from different ethnic and/or religious backgrounds, while avoiding the emergence of any form of minority ghettos.

At a more general level, the Minister expressed confidence in the proper conduct of the forthcoming elections, although he acknowledged that parliament had been obliged to issue a number of fundamental texts of relevance to the elections in only a short space of time.

2. Scope of the elections

Local elections were held in 123 constituencies corresponding to 123 municipalities, in addition to the city authority for the Skopje urban area. These were the first free elections since the country had proclaimed its independence in 1991. 2,631 polling stations were set up in the 123 constituencies. Voters took part in a direct ballot to elect municipal councils and mayors. In the Skopje urban area people registered to vote at the polling stations of the seven municipalities were also asked to elect the Skopje City Council and the city's mayor. 3,700,000 numbered ballot papers were printed for the elections as a whole (two rounds). According to the authorities responsible for the ballot these papers were treated and protected "like money".

On 30 October 1996 the electorate consisted of 1,498,653 voters. However, a 1% margin of error was allowed for deaths occurring between 30 October and 17 November 1996. Citizens over 18 years of age on 17 November 1996 were included on the electoral registers.

33 parties, 9 local coalitions and 26 "citizens' groups" presented candidates for election to the 123 municipal councils.

803 municipal lists were presented, and 655 lists for the office of mayor. Under the Local Elections Act the signatures of 200 citizens are required in order to be able to file a list of candidates.

According to the statistics issued by the relevant authorities, the elections were observed by over 54 OSCE representatives, 7 members of the National Institute for Democracy in Washington, 12 members of the Council of Europe (CLRAE) and 93 members of various national human rights associations. The Minister for Justice told the CLRAE delegation that 21 foreign journalists had requested and been granted accreditations.

3. Electoral system and bodies

The municipal councillors were elected in a single round of voting under a system of proportional representation based on the d'Hondt method.

The mayors were elected under a majority vote system with the possibility of a second round.

The electoral bodies were the Central Election Committee, the Municipal Election Committees and the Polling Station Committees.

The Central Election Committee is a permanent body made up of judges of the ordinary courts and chaired by a judge of the Supreme Court.

The Municipal Election Committees are temporary bodies appointed by the Central Election Committee and chaired by a judge of the Court of Appeal. Members of the Municipal Election Committees other than the Chairs were appointed by the Central Election Committee on the basis of names put forward by the majority and opposition political parties.

At the first meeting between the Central Election Committee and the CLRAE delegation, with a view to the latter's official accreditation, the Chair of the Central Election Committee stressed the democratic, open nature of the procedure by which the election committees were appointed. She confirmed that the majority and the opposition had an equal number of representatives on the above-mentioned committees and pointed out that under the Local Elections Act the representatives were chosen on the basis of the number of votes obtained by the parties in the first round of the 1994 general election, subject to the requirement that the party must have scored at least 5%.

4. Entitlement to vote and electoral registers

Only Macedonian nationals over the age of 18 on polling day had the right to vote.

The Ministry of Justice prepared electoral registers, which it forwarded to the Central Election Committee. Lists of electors were not posted on public notice boards, but the registers were open to inspection by voters or political parties from 1 to 25 October. The Central Election Committee received the registers on 31 October and was allowed to check them until 4 November. Following this check, the Ministry of Justice sent the registers to the polling stations via the Municipal Election Committees.

Lists of electors were not posted publicly, but the Minister for Justice pointed out that the registers were nevertheless open to inspection by citizens at the polling stations.

The registers contained the following information: surname and first name, name of one parent, main place of residence, address, national registration number.

In answer to a question from the CLRAE delegation as to how the Minister for Justice took charge of the preparation of the electoral registers, it was specified that the registers were based on data supplied by the National Statistical Institute. The Minister for Justice pointed out that the "electorate constituted a separate statistical population in the census".

At the meeting with the CLRAE delegation the Minister for Justice also stated that the registers only included Macedonian nationals, but that people resident abroad, with or without an occupation, who had kept an address - a residence - within the country were registered and could also exercise their right to vote. The CLRAE delegation noted that no voting arrangements had been made in consulates or embassies abroad.

5. Candidate nomination procedure and campaign advertising

At the initial meeting with the Chair of the Central Election Committee the CLRAE delegation was told that the candidate nomination procedure had been properly conducted and had been closed on 17 October 1996. The Chair informed the delegation that it had been

possible for complete lists of candidates to be submitted in all municipalities. She regarded this as additional proof that civil society was taking an active role in the establishment of a genuine system of local self-government within the country.

On the subject of campaign advertising by the political parties which had fielded candidates in the local elections (33 out of 35), the Minister for Justice explained that the Central Election Committee was the responsible body and allocated advertising space to the parties in the different media according to statutorily defined criteria and on an impartial, equal basis. It should be noted in particular that the Central Election Committee subjected political party accounts to strict monitoring with regard to campaign financing.

6. Security of ballot boxes and guarantees in the event of a complaint

In answer to a question from the delegation concerning security of ballot boxes, the Minister said that, in general, the Central Election Committee was responsible for the proper conduct of the polls. He specified in particular that:

- if a ballot box was stolen, the poll would be cancelled in the constituency concerned;
- tampering could nevertheless be possible, as was the case elsewhere in Europe, but special care had been taken in implementing measures to prevent vote-rigging;
- witnesses would be present at all stages in the ballot, right up to the count, and an official record would be drawn up as soon as the poll was over.

The delegation also asked about responsibility for counting of the votes. In reply, the Chair of the Central Election Committee said that the results of the poll were public, that any complaint was dealt with within 24 hours by the Municipal Election Committee, failing which the Central Election Committee had an additional 48-hour time-limit in which to reach a decision. If no decision was reached, the Supreme Court had to give a final verdict within a further 48 hours.

IV. THE POLITICAL PARTIES' ATTITUDE BEFORE THE ELECTIONS

1. Meetings with the main opposition and majority parties

At the parliament the CLRAE delegation first met representatives of the opposition parties - the Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity, the Democratic Party and the Liberal Party - followed by representatives of the majority parties - the Macedonian Social Democratic Union, the Socialist Party and the Party for Democratic Prosperity.

2. The opposition parties' attitude

The opposition party representatives brought the following facts to the CLRAE delegation's attention:

- the duration of the election campaign did not meet the statutory requirements;
- section 37 of the Electoral Law on equal treatment of the parties with regard to information had not been complied with;

- the population had been inundated with Macedonian Social Democratic Union propaganda;
- some opposition parties were not represented on the Central Election Committee;
- the Chairs of the local election committees and their Secretaries (civil servants) were not really independent;
- Macedonians living abroad would not be able to vote (see above), which was against the Electoral Law;
- participation by the speaker of parliament in the election campaign contravened Article 18 of the Constitution;
- it was not normal that the electorate had increased by 200,000 between the 1994 poll and this one;
- the opposition parties welcomed the presence of foreign observers but were concerned about the shortness of their stay¹;
- the 1994 parliamentary elections had been rigged and the same would happen with the local elections. (In particular, doubts were cast on the preparation of the electoral registers, which according to the opposition party representatives included people who were dead and people living abroad, leaving the door open to all sorts of tampering);
- the opposition parties would have liked ballot papers to be marked in a way that would be illegible before and during the poll but could be checked subsequently;
- the Liberal Party was the only party in the parliamentary opposition²;
- the Liberal Party had taken part in drafting the Electoral Law³;
- the daily newspaper "Nova Makedonija" had breached the law by publishing a tendentious political editorial on 16 November 1996, when the campaign was supposed to be closed⁴;
- other abuses had been noted in the way the candidates were presented on the first television channel (MTV - Makedonija Televizija);

¹ The Chair of the CLRAE delegation responded by saying that, as the Minister for Justice had pointed out, the Council of Europe had been involved in establishing the rule of law since 1991 and that many missions had taken place in various regions of Macedonia since that date.

² During the 1994 parliamentary elections the VRMO and the DP had decided to boycott the second ballot and thus excluded themselves *de facto* from the electoral battleground. It should be said that both at the meeting on 16 November and during the observation visits to polling stations the following day the delegation noted that representatives of these parties were present as witnesses of the ballot. This can be regarded as a "return" of these parties to the parliamentary political terrain.

³ The Liberal Party belonged to the government coalition until February 1996.

⁴ This was confirmed by the OSCE. A complaint has moreover been investigated pursuant to section 72 of the Electoral Law.

- according to the information in the opposition's possession some ballot papers had been numbered, but others not⁵;
- the opposition parties feared there had been serious shortcomings in the information and instructions given to voters, for example concerning the location of polling stations and general voting know-how.

3. The majority parties' attitude

The representatives of the majority parties brought the following matters to the CLRAE delegation's attention:

- the municipal elections were of exceptional importance to them as it was the first ballot to be held after the 1994 parliamentary elections and would constitute a test of the ruling coalition's worth;
- there was a consensus within the coalition on the Electoral Law;
- the majority parties had suggested that ballot papers should not be numbered so as to avoid what they called "voter insecurity";
- citizens had not been sent any notice convening the elections;
- citizens who could prove their nationality and identity but were not registered to vote would be prevented from taking part in the ballot.

The representatives of the Party for Democratic Prosperity expressed a general reservation as to the fact that only one language (Macedonian) was used in the ballot papers.

The CLRAE delegation was also concerned about this situation and asked whether members of non-Macedonian speaking communities (in particular Albanians) would be able to take part in the vote.

In reply, the delegation was told that since the ballot of 17 November 1996 was a nation-wide election it was obvious that use of languages had to be governed by the Constitution, which clearly stated that Macedonian was the official language of the Republic.

In view of the institutional and legal background to the polls, and following their discussions with the authorities responsible for the election process and with political party representatives, the members of the CLRAE delegation agreed that when carrying out the observations proper it was important to bear in mind that the citizens' prior opportunity to consult the electoral registers appeared to be a "technical delusion" and problems might therefore arise on polling day with regard to their actually exercising their right to vote. Although such consultation was permitted by law, following the introduction of the new local government boundaries citizens had not really been informed in which public places the electoral registers would be open to consultation or in which polling stations their names had been registered.

As to the problem of failure to number all the ballot papers, the CLRAE delegation noted on polling day that, although the complaint was founded, this matter was of marginal importance and the underlying reasons were, in all likelihood, of a purely technical nature.

⁵ The delegation also noted this when observing the elections in the polling stations on 17 November 1996.

V. OBSERVATION ACTIVITIES AND INITIAL ASSESSMENT

1. Observation of the local elections

The CLRAE delegation split into pairs (Mr Andersson and Ms Birath-Lindvall, Mr de Sabbata and Mr Scacchi, Mr Eymard and Mr Priore, Mr Kantarzis and Mr Quinet, Mr Valchev and Mr Volek, Mr Soares-Machado and Mr Pandelides) and visited six different areas from 5 am to 11.30 pm. The pairs were formed without any difficulty on the basis of language preferences or centres of interest.

Two pairs visited a district in Skopje (with a population of 100,000), while another went West to the vicinity of Tetovo⁶, another to Ohrid, another to the country's agricultural heartland and the last one to the area close to the Greek border.

The delegation was provided with freelance interpreters and rented cars. The polling stations were open from 7 am to 7 pm on Sunday 17 November. The CLRAE delegation agreed to meet at 8.30 am on Monday 18 November to make an initial assessment.

The delegation noted that it was allowed to do its job everywhere and its role and function were not affected by any incident.

However, the delegation's fears about the electoral registers (see above) were unfortunately borne out on polling day. Everyone had the same general impression that there had been serious shortcomings in the preparation of the registers and a surprising number of citizens were unable to vote.

The delegation noted that many people who presented an identity card or passport were prevented from voting because they were not registered. This was particularly the case in the North-West and in the towns and cities, and this state of affairs may have had an effect on results in some municipalities.

Although this observation was particularly relevant to urban areas, it also applied to a lesser extent to rural communities. The delegation noted that the situation arose in all the constituencies (14) and almost all the polling stations (95) that it visited.

A specific observation was made relating to the polling booths' suitability and the secrecy of the ballot. All of the observers noted failings in this respect but were of the view that it should be said that any violations were perpetrated with good intentions.

It rapidly became clear from the delegation's observations that, apart from the thorny issue of the citizens prevented from voting, the unanimous opinion was that the polls had been orderly and calm.

As to the ballot itself, the CLRAE delegation considered that it had always been organised so as to make the election process as simple and clear as possible for the voters. It was obvious that the Municipal Election Committees had received clear, precise instructions, which they had scrupulously applied.

All members of the Polling Station Committees knew what they had to do, and the delegation did not note any confusion. As already mentioned, the polling booths proved to be too small, and there was even too few of them, particularly in polling stations in Skopje. At peak voting times electors completed the ballot papers on tables set up outside the polling booths. The

⁶ An area with a large Albanian minority

Chairs of the Polling Station Committees systematically allowed this and also permitted members of the same family to enter booths together.

The CLRAE delegation noted that the majority and opposition political parties were always represented in the polling stations by accredited observers.

Voters interviewed before and after voting were not afraid to give their views.

The delegation attended the closing of the polls and the count in six polling stations. It did not note any major problem. The Chairs of the Polling Station Committees rigorously followed their written instructions to determine whether a ballot paper was valid.

Safety was guaranteed at all times through the presence of the police, but their presence did not disturb or intimidate the voters. In general, the counts were completed fairly early in the evening and no major difficulties were reported.

The CLRAE delegation was able to observe 95 out of 2,631 polling stations. Given the sample's small size, it decided that it could not reach any statistical conclusions. The delegation therefore decided on its position and prepared questions for the meeting with the Chair of the Central Election Committee.

2. Meeting with the Central Election Committee

At this meeting the Chair of the Central Election Committee brought the following points to our attention of her own accord:

- 1) No major procedural weakness had been observed.
- 2) Turnout had been high, although it was not yet possible to give a figure.
- 3) The few shortcomings in the electoral registers had administrative causes and were not due to ballot rigging.
- 4) Only 1% of the electorate had been unable to vote because of registration problems.
- 5) All citizens had had 25 days in which to ensure that they had been registered to vote.
- 6) Failure to send out election notices (unlike for the 1994 parliamentary elections) might have caused some confusion among voters.
- 7) Although some citizens living in the North-West had been unable to vote, many of the inhabitants of this region were not Macedonian nationals but had immigrated from neighbouring countries.
- 8) Some polling stations in Skopje had stayed open after 7 pm because of the large number of people voting, above all after 5 pm. This was due to the fact that people in Skopje had to vote four times (for their municipal council and mayor and for the city council and mayor).
- 9) Only two polling stations had had to close for one hour because of outbreaks of violence. These were located at Zicava and Mala Recica near Tetovo.

The Chair concluded by confirming that the Central Election Committee was not responsible for the results of the election but for its organisation. The Vice-Chair acknowledged that any future election should be convened by sending proper notices to voters.

The CLRAE delegation summarised its initial conclusions for the Central Election Committee, highlighting the fact that a large number of people had in fact not been registered to vote and that problems had been noted with regard to the secrecy of the ballot. The delegation also

pointed out that official assertions that citizens had been able to consult the registers beforehand did not gainsay the fact that they had encountered practical difficulties in doing so.

3. Press conference and conclusions

Following the meeting with the Central Election Committee, the delegation prepared the following press release, which was read out at the press conference:

"After observing the 17 November local elections in "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", a delegation from the Council of Europe's Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe (CLRAE) concluded that they were essentially fair and orderly, but with registration problems in almost all of the polling stations visited.

The delegation noted that many citizens who carried identity cards or passports were not given the possibility to vote because their names did not appear on the electoral list; this fact was observed most strongly in the north-western part of the country. Such problems may have affected the results of the elections in some local authorities. The CLRAE findings have been forwarded to the national electoral commission. The delegation will submit a report containing more detailed observations on this event to the relevant bodies of the Council of Europe."

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

The CLRAE delegation is of the view that the shortcomings noted during the observation mission can be attributed more to technical and administrative weaknesses than to political arrangements or to problems connected with the minorities.

It is evident that a larger number of people had not been registered to vote in the region with the highest density of citizens of Albanian origin, but it is also true that problems were encountered in that region during the 1995 census. This therefore also raises the question of how people are registered for census purposes and recognised as Macedonian citizens.

Moreover, although the new local government boundaries do not seem to pose any major problem for citizens, who, on the contrary, seem fairly satisfied with the reform voted by parliament, the changes may have adversely affected the conduct of the elections and in particular the voter registration process.

The CLRAE delegation therefore believes it would be advisable to address all of these issues in the course of future contacts between Council of Europe institutions and the Macedonian authorities to ensure more troublefree conduct of the country's next elections, which should be more straightforward and will perhaps no longer be observed.

In any case, in connection with any future poll it is desirable that special care be paid to ensuring that electoral registers are open to public inspection and that voters are convened by means of individually addressed, authenticated notices.