



## OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Ukraine

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### **OSCE Project Co-ordinator's office helps strengthen knowledge of Ukrainian election officials in run-up to snap elections**

*In the run-up to the September 30 pre-term parliamentary elections, the OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Ukraine implemented the project "Assistance in the Conduct of Pre-term Parliamentary Elections in Ukraine." This project aimed to train 70 000 election officials in order to strengthen national capacity for holding democratic elections. The project may be deemed a success, based on post-election international classifications of the electoral process as being "conducted mostly in line with international commitments and standards for democratic elections."*

In the decade since the OSCE Project Co-ordinator (PCU) in Ukraine first began its work, the country has seen its share of political turbulence. Notably, the Orange revolution in December 2004 saw mass demonstrations calling for governmental accountability in the wake of a flawed second round of Presidential elections. However, despite an increased sense of public attention to the political workings of the country in recent years and many progressive achievements from the side of Ukrainian authorities, a lack of information regarding voter rights and electoral procedures remains prevalent in Ukrainian society. This issue was brought to the forefront earlier this year, with the announcement of snap elections and the pre-term dissolution of parliament following a series of conflicts between governing bodies.

Based on previous experience in Ukraine and working closely with Ukrainian experts and officials, the OSCE PCU identified some pressing issues to be resolved in order to ensure the September 2007 parliamentary round supported Ukraine's tradition of democratic elections. These were issues that created both legal and physical obstacles to the promotion of democratic elections, borne from certain ambiguities in the legal framework, and exacerbated by the shortened timeframe induced by the pre-term elections. The OSCE/ODIHR Needs Assessment Mission in July reiterated the need to address these issues in order to ensure the snap election be held freely and fairly, and according to OSCE human dimension standards.

Among these issues, training of election officials, voter education, access to media, compilation of voter lists, and domestic and international observation were underscored as key points of focus. The OSCE PCU targeted the first three issues in the project 'Assistance in the Conduct of Pre-term Parliamentary Elections in Ukraine,' specifically: providing for the training of election officials, implementing a voter education program, and ensuring equal access to media through the establishment of an independent expert council. The vast scale and virtual impossibility of implementation of the training program merit this component additional attention.

## **Training at the Grassroots of Election Administration**

In the framework of the project, the OSCE PCU was responsible for organizing, coordinating and conducting training for election officials as well as elaborating and producing educational materials for Polling Station Commissions. In concert with the Central Election Commission of Ukraine, District Election Commissions, USAID-funded Strengthening of Electoral Administration in Ukraine Project II, and Ukrainian NGO-implementers, the OSCE PCU worked to encourage adherence to the law and implement the standardization of electoral procedures by increasing the level of professionalism among election officials. The methodology for the training sessions was elaborated and agreed upon with the Central Election Commission, thus guaranteeing the inclusion of local experiences and norms, and strengthening the local institutional framework surrounding elections.

Large-scale training was necessary to ensure that all election officials had access to election-related knowledge, thus minimizing the possibility of inadvertent falsification or unlawful action by officials due to ignorance of legal norms. This was especially important given the fact that the commissioners are nominated by political parties from the outgoing parliament in Ukraine and, consequently, often have little experience working with the Election Law, especially regarding recent amendments made as of June 1, 2007.

In total, at least 70 000 Polling Station Commissioners were trained in 740 training sessions in all regions of Ukraine, and a sample of the training sessions was monitored by certified OSCE PCU staff. All trainers and controllers were trained and certified under the Central Election Commission. In total 250 trainers were responsible for the training. At least two to three commissioners were trained per each of the 34 000 Polling Station Commissions throughout Ukraine over a time span of only one week. These figures serve to demonstrate just how large-scale this initiative really was. Moreover, the fact that often 200 or more participants attended the trainings, rather than the 70 that were foreseen, stands as a practical argument for the necessity of such a program.

## **Beyond Election Administration**

The remaining two project components were equally aimed at fulfilling the recommendations of the OSCE/ODIHR NAM final report. The objective of these components was to increase public awareness of voter rights under the newly amended Election Law, and to ensure the protection of journalists' rights and equal access of electoral subjects to unbiased media during the electoral campaign. To this end, the OSCE PCU created Public Service Announcements and printed other educational materials on voter mobilization, voter list verification procedures, and liabilities for violations of the electoral law. Moreover, an Independent Media Council was established by the OSCE PCU to assist in the monitoring of political campaigns on television, and an informational campaign was launched to familiarize journalists with principles of balanced coverage of election processes and to provide advice regarding their rights and obligations.

## **Establishing a Tradition of Democratic Elections**

Now that the pre-term elections are over, it is clear that the OSCE PCU project 'Assistance in the Conduct of Pre-term Parliamentary Elections in Ukraine' was a resounding success. Working in concert with Ukrainian authorities and experts, and within the framework of the OSCE PCU mandate, the project was conducted in response to specific pressing issues identified to be impeding on the preservation of the tradition of democratic elections in Ukraine. By increasing voter knowledge of pre-term electoral procedures and legislature, the project served to strengthen voters' rights to universal suffrage, consolidate practices aimed at

organizing and conducting democratic elections, and to increase the public sense of trust in elections and elected bodies. Moreover, the increased level of knowledge and skill of electoral officials resulting from this project had a significant impact on the freeness and fairness of elections themselves, allowing the OSCE PCU to preserve its image as an independent, non-partisan and authoritative body, while contributing to the development of Ukraine as a democracy.