

IFES IN RUSSIA

by Alexander A. Veshnyakov



During the past 15 years the world and our perceptions of it have undergone fundamental change. In Russia, in the Commonwealth of Independent States and in Central and Eastern Europe, election administrators have found themselves at the epicenter of social and political change, along with international non-governmental organizations that promote democratic governance and human rights. Among

these NGOs, IFES occupies a special place because it works toward free elections, without which no other institutions of democratic society can emerge. Solid professional cooperation between the Central Election Commission (CEC) of the Russian Federation and IFES was established as early as the autumn of 1993, while the first tentative contacts date back to the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Russia is aware of the fundamental importance of public and international confidence in election results for the legitimacy of emerging democracies. Our country traversed the last decade with lightning speed, transforming its political, social and economic landscape and striving to learn to live under such conditions of democracy as political pluralism, freedom of expression and information, and the right of citizens to vote and run for government office. Elections have been important milestones of these transitional years. They required the reform of the entire body of electoral legislation and the creation of a system of independent election commissions—all in the absence of an established democratic tradition.



Russian President Vladimir Putin at the opening session of the 11th annual ACEEEO conference in Moscow, along with Mr. Zoltán Tóth, Secretary General of the ACEEEO; Mr. Alexander Veshnyakov, Chairman of the CEC of Russia; and Mr. Paul DeGregorio, Executive Vice President of IFES.

It would be no exaggeration to say that throughout these years we, the Russian election organizers, were aware of IFES' commitment to our work. It is impossible to count all the pages of documents translated by IFES, lectures delivered, and round tables, seminars, fact-finding tours and exchange trips organized jointly with the CEC. IFES was always by our side during the difficult process of synthesizing global best practices to promote the professionalism and growth of independent election commissions in Russia.

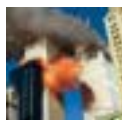
Today Russia may be said to be entering the final stage of its transition to democracy. Radical political confrontation in our society has given way to a civic demand for stability, law and order. In parallel a national consensus is emerging on the fundamental values in the organization of public life. Common people today want to live according to uniform and understandable rules throughout the territory of the country.

During the last two and a half years, much work has been done to eliminate contradictions between federal and regional legislation regulating the conduct of elections. The goal has been to preserve diversity while forging a common legal space. In the solution of these issues we have always been able to lean on the friendly shoulder of IFES. There is hardly an election law in Russia that has not been subjected, by mutual agreement between the CEC and IFES, to highly professional expert examination by IFES specialists. In this way a coherent legislative system that ensures an open and fair electoral process has emerged in Russia, corresponding to existing international criteria for free elections. One sign of this development was the recent establishment of the Russian

January: Congo president Laurent Kabila assassinated by bodyguard.



September: Hijackers ram jetliners into twin towers of New York City's World Trade Center and the Pentagon.



October: Irish Republican Army begins to dismantle its weapons arsenal, marking a dramatic leap forward in Northern Ireland peace process.

December: Taliban regime in Afghanistan collapses after two months of bombing by American warplanes and fighting by Northern Alliance ground troops.



2001

IFES designs a Democracy and Governance course for schools in Central Asia.

IFES' Moldova office becomes an independent association called ADEPT.



IFES reveals findings of Bangladeshi voter survey.



IFES releases report proposing a strategy for post-conflict governance in Afghanistan.

Free Election Foundation, a new non-governmental organization that will broaden cooperation with IFES.

The past years have brought substantial changes in the legal and social status of election organizers not only in Russia, but also in the CIS and Central and East European countries. European election experience has been enriched by the introduction of new laws and electoral systems. International observation of elections has become widely practiced, and constant dialogue has been established between national election organizers and international organizations. This integrating trend has been embodied for more than ten years by the first and only professional regional association of election officials in Europe, the Association of Central and Eastern European Election Officials (ACEEEO). The role of IFES in the creation of ACEEEO and in stimulating its activities is well known.

To advance such integration and collaboration, the CEC has initiated an effort to codify and unify international election standards. As a first practical step we have prepared a draft Convention on Standards for Democratic Elections, Electoral Rights and Freedoms in the Commonwealth of Independent States to be signed by the heads of CIS states.

This issue is emerging as a priority in Central and Eastern Europe as well. Seeking to enrich the common European experience of ensuring the rights of citizens, the countries of the region discussed the problems of international election standards at an ACEEEO conference held in Moscow from September 26 to 28, 2002. A concrete result of our joint efforts was the adoption of the European Convention on Election Standards, Electoral Rights and Freedoms. In the opinion of IFES specialists who recently subjected it to a comprehensive and very detailed examination, the Convention is a unique document that makes it possible to translate into practice the fundamental principles of democratic elections.

In connection with its 15th anniversary, I wish IFES ever greater achievements in the cause of strengthening democracy, fostering the professional growth and association of election organizers, developing the legal and regulatory framework for free and fair elections, and ultimately protecting the rights and civil freedoms of people everywhere.

Alexander A. Veshnyakov is the Chairman of the Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation and also serves as the Chairman of the Executive Council of the Association of Central & Eastern European Election Officials.

ACEEEO 11TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE

The Association of Central and Eastern European Election Officials (ACEEEO) adopted a convention on international election standards at its 11th annual conference, held in Moscow from September 26 to 28, 2002.



Addressing the opening session, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that "many positive changes in this country occurred because high-performance and regular elections are becoming one of the basic conditions for ensuring the rights and freedoms of Russian citizens." He added that Russian elections "fully comply with international standards."

Plenary and working sessions focused on a draft European Convention on Election Standards, Electoral Rights and Freedoms, which had the aim of harmonizing and reforming existing European electoral standards. The Convention was adopted by the ACEEEO with minor changes, and Mr. Veshnyakov appealed to members to put the standards into practice in their respective countries.

Two countries, Azerbaijan and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, were accepted as full members of the ACEEEO this year. The conference also featured professional development workshops, panels of election experts, exhibits by election equipment vendors and an exhibit of election history in ACEEEO member nations.



March: Robert Mugabe re-elected president of Zimbabwe in an election marred by political violence and other irregularities.



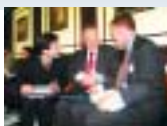
May: Sierra Leone holds first elections since brutal civil war in 1999.

June: Palestinian Authority announces plans to hold elections for president and legislative offices in January.



September: Thousands of Kashmiris vote in State Assembly elections after 13 years of separatist insurgency.

Judges from the CEE and NIS attend election dispute resolution conference in Bulgaria.



IFES assists in landmark election in Sierra Leone (photo, courtesy AP).



2002

IFES participates in pre-election assessment mission to West Bank/Gaza.

37 Commonwealth countries attend IFES elections workshop in Mauritius.

