

**34th Congress Session – Chamber of Local Authorities, 28 March 2018, Strasbourg**

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Rapporteur**

*Check against delivery - Seul le prononcé fait foi*

**Debate on Municipal elections in Georgia” (21 October 2017)” / Information Report “CPL34(2018)03”**

**Strasbourg, France, 28 March 2018**

Dear colleagues,

Together with my colleagues Jos WIENEN, as Thematic Spokespersons on election observation, and Congress Vice-President Barbara TOCE, we visited Georgia from 19 to 22 October 2017, in the format of an Electoral Assessment Mission. The Congress’ Bureau having decided to deploy an ad-hoc mission of limited scope to observe the municipal elections to be held on 21 October.

On Election Day we deployed three Congress’ teams allowing our seven observers to visit around 30 polling stations our deployment was co-ordinated with the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission. I can confirm what my colleague Karim VAN OVERMEIRE just said, namely that our co-operation with ODIHR was excellent, in Georgia.

I would also like to highlight the good co-operation with the Georgian delegation to the Congress, with whom we had a fruitful discussion prior to the Monitoring Committee meeting in February. I thank our colleagues for their interest and taking the time to comment on our draft report. Just like you, I hope that our recommendations are useful to improve future elections in your country.

Let me first describe the overall political situation of Georgia: it is marked by the predominance of the “Georgian Dream”, the ruling party that gained a strong majority in Parliament in 2016. A Constitutional reform adopted in September 2017 created much public debate and the reform was criticised for lacking inclusiveness and consensus, especially with regard to changes in Parliamentary elections.

However in this context, the campaign for the local elections was described as calm – even low-key in some rural areas – with the exception of urban centres where the ruling party ran an extensive campaign, such as in Tbilisi. For the first time, independent candidates could run for local elections, which were very much welcomed by our delegation. However, restrictions on the independent candidates’ registration could be removed to enhance the inclusiveness of the process further.

Election Day in itself was generally calm and mainly uneventful. Opening and polling procedures were generally assessed positively by the Congress’ observers. We also followed the elections in areas where Internally Displaced People voted and it was no different from other places visited by our delegation.

It is to be noted that the presence of party proxies and domestic observers contributed to the overall transparency of the process but some of those accredited as media representatives or domestic observers were clearly affiliated with political parties or candidates and, at times, interfered in the process. In particular, there was some confusion in certain polling stations about the possibility to

collect information by party proxies and domestic observers concerning voters who had cast their vote.

With regard to the general management of the elections, most Congress' interlocutors expressed confidence in the election administration. We share the opinion that the Central Election Commission, overall, organised these elections in an efficient manner.

At the same time, commissions' practices with regard to counting procedures in the polling stations remain a matter of concern. Even though the Congress' observers did not gather evidence of deliberate attempts to falsify the results in polling stations, some irregularities were noted with regard to the transparency of the counting, the presence of unauthorised persons or the completing and signing of protocols.

As you will be aware, the misuse of administrative resources is an issue in almost all our democracies. Georgia is not different in this respect and our delegation received multiple reports of instances of misuse of administrative resources. In particular, teachers of schools and kindergartens allegedly mobilised in favour of the ruling party and attended campaign events, sometimes under pressure. This raises concern about public sector employees' ability to vote free from the fear of retribution. More generally, the misuse of administrative resources is an issue that should be tackled by the Georgian authorities at all levels.

I would like to conclude by highlighting the need for municipalities and regions in Georgia to be strengthened. In particular, financial independence is critical to further develop the capacities of local authorities in a country characterised by a sort of exodus from the rural area and regions into the capital city of Tbilisi. As usual, we stand ready to assist the Georgian authorities with issues relating to decentralisation.

Thank you!