

Chamber of Local Authorities

Thursday 19 October 2017 9.00 – 12.30, Hemicycle

**Information Report on the elections to the Council of Elders of Yerevan, Armenia
(14 May 2017)**

Rapporteur: Liisa ANSALA, Finland (L, ILDG)

Presentation by Luc MARTENS, Belgium (L, EPP/CCE)

Dear Colleagues,

On behalf of our colleague from Finland, Liisa ANSALA, I am very glad to be able to present to you the major findings of the Electoral Assessment Mission carried out by the Congress from 11 May to 15 May in Yerevan, the Capital City of Armenia.

As you are aware, further to the invitation by the Prime Minister of Armenia, the Congress decided to deploy a delegation of limited scope composed of 10 participants including two members of the EU Committee of the Regions. A short while before these elections, the Congress had observed the partial local elections in September 2016.

At the national level, shortly before vote in Yerevan, Parliamentary elections were held in Armenia on 2 April and brought the expected victory of the party which has been in power since almost 20 years - the Republican Party of Armenia. The short lapse of time between the general elections and the Yerevan vote had certainly to do with the low

level of political competitiveness and the general lack of public interest in the local elections.

On E-Day, our 4 teams visited some 100 polling stations and we can say that the elections were carried out in an overall calm and orderly manner. With the exception of some individual procedural irregularities, the commissions at the polling stations were well prepared and aware of the new legal requirements, and the vote was held in line with international standards, by and large.

The mission was of particular interest, since we had the chance to assess the implementation of the new Electoral Code of Armenia, adopted in 2016, for the first time at the local level. This legislation provided, among other things, for new technical equipment in the polling stations, for the publication of “signed” voters’ lists after the Election Day and for the obligation of the Central Electoral Commission to develop training materials.

In the polling stations we were able to assess the good functioning of the so-called VADs, the Voters Authentication Devices, which comprised an electronic version of the voters’ lists, the verification of the voters’ IDs and the scanning of their fingerprints. We also noticed that the web cameras, introduced by the new Electoral Code, ensured live-streaming of the whole electoral process in all polling stations.

All in all, this aimed at enhancing transparency of the vote and increasing citizens’ trust in elections. The new technical equipment certainly plays also an important role for the prevention of electoral fraud, including the long-standing problem in Armenia with regard to the impersonation of the vote, which occurs when individuals vote in place of others who are known to be no longer in the country but stayed on the voters’ lists.

In our Information Report we clearly recognise these efforts made by the Armenian authorities. At the same time, in order to assess the genuine quality of elections, the situation “outside of polling stations” cannot be ignored. And we have to stress that technical equipment alone cannot meet all the challenges connected to truly democratic elections. Consequently, there are some issues which remain a matter of concern for the Congress.

Therefore, we are concerned about the reports we have heard about allegations of widespread vote-buying, misuse of administrative resources as well as pressure exerted on public civil servants, such as employees of public schools and hospitals. This is not a new phenomenon and we can even say that, due to poverty and the high unemployment rate, such phenomena seem to be an entrenched part of the political culture in Armenia.

This is regrettable, and the Congress encourages the authorities to revise the current investigation and sanction process in order to ensure the integrity of elections.

There is also the long-standing issue of accuracy of voters’ lists which needs to be further addressed. Many citizens of Armenia remain on the voters’ lists despite the fact that they are residing, *de facto*, abroad. In line with Congress’ Recommendation 368, we believe that the local issues should be decided by those citizens who are permanently residing in a specific municipality, with their very centre of life in this place.

Lastly, the current procedure of candidates’ registration for the elections to the Council of Elders in Yerevan does not allow for independent candidates to run in local elections in the Capital. Contrary to the regulations in place for other communities in Armenia, in Yerevan, only political parties or alliances of parties have the right to nominate

candidates' lists to the City Council. We think that changing the procedure would strengthen local democracy in Yerevan.

And a last word in this respect – as you are aware, the Congress welcomed the administrative territorial reform launched in 2013 which aims at providing better services to citizens and improving the budgetary situation of municipalities. However, the authorities should ensure also a process of proper consultation prior to the merging of communities and make sure that the new amalgamated communities have enough funding.

Thank you for your attention!