

THE CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

Recommendation 501 (2023)¹ Elections to the Council of Elders, City of Yerevan, Armenia (17 September 2023)

1. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe (“the Congress”) refers to:

a. Article 1, paragraph 2, of the Committee of Ministers’ Statutory Resolution CM/Res(2020)1 on the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe;

b. the principles laid down in the European Charter of Local Self-Government (ETS No. 122) which was ratified by Armenia on 25 January 2002;

c. Chapter XIX of the Rules and Procedures on the practical organisation of election observation missions;

d. previous Congress reports on local elections in Armenia, including the Information report on partial local elections in Armenia (5 December 2021) and the Information report on the elections to the Council of Elders of the City of Yerevan, Armenia (14 May 2017);

e. the invitation addressed to the Congress by the Central Election Commission of Armenia (CEC), dated 25 July 2023, to observe local elections held in Yerevan scheduled on 17 September 2023.

2. The Congress reiterates the fact that genuinely democratic local and regional elections are part of a process to establish and maintain democratic governance and that observation of grass-roots elections is a key element in the Congress’ role as a guardian of democracy at local and regional levels.

3. The Congress acknowledges that, overall, the legal framework in Armenia is conducive to holding democratic elections.

4. The Congress notes with satisfaction that:

a. the amendments to the Electoral Code in 2020 and 2021 addressed some previous Congress recommendations, strengthened the overall electoral legal framework and reinforced safeguards to eliminate the possibility of election fraud;

b. the Central Election Commission worked in a transparent, efficient and timely manner at the helm of a generally well-managed and professional election administration, which benefited from additional and more specific training programmes;

c. overall, the election day was calm and well administered from opening to closing, without major incidents or anomalies, and counting was assessed positively, as shown in the wide acceptance of the results by the candidates;

d. the use of electronic voter authentication devices and the installation of cameras for live streaming worked seamlessly throughout the day and were perceived by polling station commissioners, observers and voters alike as strong safeguards against potential violations;

e. efforts to reduce the possibility of abuse of assisted and carousel voting, including by using separate ballot papers with larger fonts and Braille covers for voters with visual impairments, seem to have been successful;

f. a wide range of political subjects ran in the elections, presenting voters with different programmes, and nearly all of them participated in the two televised debates broadcast at prime time on public television.

5. At the same time, the Congress expresses its concern about the following issues:

a. despite some notable efforts, accessibility for voters with disabilities remained inadequate in most of the polling stations visited, and resorting to mobile ballot boxes is not foreseen for local elections, despite them being used during national elections;

b. the blurred distinction between official and campaigning activities in the media, including ahead of the official campaign period, and reports of misuse of public resources and participation of public-sector employees in campaign events, unduly benefited the candidate of the ruling party;

c. the campaign was low key but polarised, revolving primarily around mayoral candidates, with local issues overshadowed by national security concerns and some candidates presenting programmes not in line with the responsibilities of the Yerevan Council of Elders;

d. the discrepancy in expenses between political subjects, the relatively high expense cap and the persisting legal gaps in party and campaign finances did not allow for a level playing field;

e. the accuracy of the list of eligible voters was not fully ensured as a result of the registration of citizens *de facto* living abroad to vote in local elections despite their lack of a genuine link with the municipality, and some anomalies were observed on the lists on election day; furthermore, signed registers were published online a few days after the vote, which did not contribute to the full respect for the secrecy of the participation of voters;

f. the percentage of women heading candidate lists remained low at 14%, and progress on the participation of women in decision making in Yerevan is slow, despite the application of a 30% quota on lists;

g. independent candidates are prohibited from running if they are not registered with a party or an alliance;

h. there is a lack of public interest in local elections, particularly among young voters, as seen in the low turnout.

1. Debated by the Chamber of Local Authorities during the 45th Session on 25 October 2023 and adopted by the Congress on 25 October 2023 (see document [CPL\(2023\)45-02](#), explanatory memorandum), rapporteur: Carla DEJONGHE, Belgium (R, ILDG).

6. In the light of the above, the Congress invites the authorities of Armenia to:

a. further reinforce efforts to ensure accessibility of all polling stations and their surroundings in order to provide the same opportunities for all voters and to standardise the deployment of mobile ballot boxes for all elections, while ensuring that their use is closely regulated;

b. implement existing legislation and regulations related to the misuse of public resources and provide for timely investigations and dissuasive sanctions in cases of violations;

c. strengthen oversight and control mechanisms with regard to political party and campaign finance, including by allocating more responsibilities to the Commission for the Prevention of Corruption, introducing provisions for the pre-campaign period and lowering the cap for expenditures;

d. undertake a review of the quality of the list of eligible voters in Yerevan, to ensure that the registers reflect the voters

currently residing in the capital; and strongly consider alternatives to publishing the signed registers of voters;

e. provide incentives in order to strengthen the participation of women as heads of candidate lists and contribute to a balanced representation in decision-making positions in Yerevan;

f. introduce legal provisions in order to allow for independent candidates to run in local elections;

g. give serious consideration to the introduction of a single day of voting for local elections to facilitate and streamline the organisation of elections and raise awareness of issues of local significance.

7. The Congress calls on the Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe to take account of this Recommendation regarding to 2023 elections in the capital of Armenia and the accompanying explanatory memorandum in their activities relating to Armenia.