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Check against delivery

Situation of local and regional democracy in Georgia

26 March 2025

Dear colleagues,

Let me begin by reiterating that Georgia, like every other member State of the Council of Europe, has committed to implementing the European Convention on Human Rights and the European Charter of Local Self-Government, both of which it has ratified. These commitments require the country to uphold the three pillars of this organisation: human rights, the rule of law, and democratic standards at all levels of government.

I fully agree with what Cecilia has just said, and the presidential visit suggested a bleak outlook for all three pillars, in a country tainted by extreme polarisation and with a near complete absence of political dialogue. Allow me to present the recommendation and resolution and to highlight some key aspects that could contribute to a resolution of the current political crisis.

In the recommendation for adoption, the Congress calls on the Georgian authorities to take decisive action on the overall situation of local and regional democracy and to first and foremost urgently resume inclusive political dialogue at all levels of government and to restore the checks and balances essential to a pluralist society, as well as the opposition's rights to participate.

It invites the authorities to repeal legislation in breach of human rights, which has a chilling effect on democratic freedoms, and to thoroughly investigate arbitrary arrests and violence against peaceful protesters and journalists. The recommendation also calls for the immediate release of those unjustly detained, including Ms. Mzia Amaghlobeli, and for law enforcement actions to remain lawful, necessary, and proportionate, as urged by the Venice Commission. Finally, amendments to the Law on Public Service that led to unjust dismissals must be repealed and local public servants should be reinstated.

With a view to the local elections, we cannot believe that these can be held in a free and fair manner in the current environment. In fact, we left Tbilisi with serious doubts over all key aspects of local elections. None of the conditions noted in the recommendation are currently fulfilled - but should be restored urgently, ahead of the scheduled 2025 elections to provide for a fully democratic campaigning environment. As a longstanding partner of Georgia, the Congress calls for these conditions to be so that

there can be truly competitive elections to observe this autumn. We therefore urge the Georgian authorities to reverse recent amendments on the electoral system (which will be detailed by the President of the Venice Commission following my intervention) and to restore the previous seat ratio as well as gender quotas.

We believe broad reforms to strengthen election integrity are needed, in parallel to efforts to prevent voter intimidation, electoral violence and fraud. A key point of the recommendation is to guarantee the independence of the election administration, which has been jeopardised by the successive adoptions of amendments in 2024-5.

Finally, democracy is built on the trust of voters and of candidates and the authorities should strive to promote fair participation for opposition parties in media and politics, to protect the rights of election observers, and to carry out voter education to promote democratic values and voter awareness.

Dear colleagues, without these pre-conditions, we fear that public confidence in institutions and democratic processes will erode even further, the consequences of which may be long-lasting.

At the same time, the resolution shows the strong commitment of the Congress to support Georgia through dialogue and cooperation. Our recent presidential visit was a clear signal of this, allowing us to engage with a broad range of stakeholders and the resolution explores ways to continue that approach.

It tasks the Monitoring Committee with continuing its work guarantee the right to free elections at local level and to postpone the monitoring visit until after the upcoming elections. It also envisages a potential fact-finding or high-level visit, based on progress in implementing key recommendations which should be assessed systematically in the Bureau and Monitoring Committee meetings until full implementation.

The resolution also reaffirms the Congress' support for the Council of Europe's Action Plan for Georgia (2024-2027), focusing on strengthening local authorities. Finally, it calls on the National Association of Local Authorities of Georgia to represent all municipalities fairly, ensuring participation from all political actors.

Dear colleagues, in conclusion, I believe both the recommendation and resolution are clear and well-substantiated and will allow the Congress to regularly assess progress made on the state of local and regional democracy in Georgia.

I look forward to hearing the debate and I encourage you to adopt the draft recommendation and resolution.