

Post-electoral conference
Local elections of 21 June 2015 in Albania

Hotel Tirana, 29 September 2015

The conference, organised by the Council of Europe and the Albanian Central Electoral Commission (CEC), was attended by CEC commissioners and staff, several civil society representatives, Albanian election specialists, political parties, representatives of the Council of Europe, OSCE Presence in Albania, Venice Commission, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, OSCE/ODIHR and the European Union.

The objective was to enable an exchange of views between participants on the conclusions of both national and international observers as well as on recommendations for future improvements in electoral legislation and practice. The reports from local observers, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and the OSCE/ODIHR served as basis for the discussions*.

Summary of the discussion

Despite notable progress in the organization of the local elections 2015, there is still room for improvement in order to meet the international standards for democratic elections:

1. Election Administration – Which are the next steps towards independence, impartiality and professionalism?

To increase the independency of the electoral bodies from political parties, in particular when replacing lower level commissioners, the participants agreed on the following:

Conclusions:

- Training of commissioners must be systematically improved and de-politicised.
- The training should be connected with the appointment of trained people as commissioners. Trainings need to be open for any citizen and not only political parties, a database should be created and commissioners should be appointed only out of this pool.
- The project of CEC to establish a training centre for commissioners should be concretised within near future in order to provide continuous and qualified training.
- Such a centre should be considered on a long term perspective also to offer training to a wide range of people and be a structure also for voter education and observer training.

2. Election legislation and its implementation – What needs to be improved?

The Electoral Code has undergone a considerable number of changes over the last years, nevertheless it needs to be reviewed in order to fill in gaps and reduce the room for

interpretation. Also, a proper implementation of the changes in the electoral legislation has to be tackled.

Conclusions:

- Sensibilisation of commissioners of all levels on sanctions for non-respect of legal obligations is needed as well as improvement of the legal framework in this sense.
- De-politicisation and inclusiveness in the process of legislative revision is needed to ensure that law is not modified in an arbitrary manner, and that it has sufficient stability. All parties, both in the government and in the opposition should be involved and have a responsibility in this regard. Furthermore Venice Commission and different Albanian stakeholders should be involved into the process in order to provide transparency and independency.
- Clarification on the Electoral Code is specifically needed regarding complaints and appeals, to prevent complaints and appeals bodies to avoid taking a decision or to reject an appeal on mere formal grounds.
- To ensure equality of opportunity and confidence in the electoral process, regulations on media and campaign finance should be clarified.

3. Voter's Education and Awareness Raising – What has to be done?

As a result of the electoral education and public awareness projects of the international community, local actors have raised their capacity and understanding of the electoral process, but the decrease of the turnout in the last elections shows that mistrust in the system and lack of knowledge on the side of voters is an important concern.

Conclusions:

- CEC has a vital role in changing this trend and restore the trust of voters in elections through the public awareness campaigns.
- The best way to reach all voters' groups is the cooperation of various actors, namely institutions (especially educational institutions) and civil society.
- The evaluation of the projects implemented so far by assessing the results before undertaking new initiatives regarding voter education and public awareness campaign is of essential importance in order to guarantee a development and sustainability.
- The education on the electoral process needs long-term programmes, which combine electoral education with the civic education. Both should be included in the curricula delivered at the high schools and universities.

- The pool of trained teachers for the first-time voters education should become a sustainable team which receives updated information permanently and a firm political neutrality of teachers in the rural areas needs be ensured.
- For long-term results and effective method of learning CEC should coordinate the work with the local and international institutions to draft voter's education and public awareness strategies and ensure human and financial resources to implement those strategies. Academic studies and works related to the electoral processes in Albania are needed in order to provide a solid basis for this work.
- Gender training of journalists should be carried out throughout the year, even in non-electoral years in order to improve sensibility and quality of the media coverage concerning women candidature.
- The Media Monitoring Board should make sure media coverage of women candidates and language used for this coverage is monitored in order to guarantee non-discriminatory media coverage.
- Specific programs for the political participation of Roma and Egyptian community should be reinforced, and existing mainstream programmes should explicitly open up to minority participation, in order for political parties to reach minority voters.
- The project of a training centre for commissioners of the CEC should develop strategies and offer training modules on voter education, targeting explicitly marginalized groups.

4. The Role of Civil Society in the Observation of Elections

As local NGOs are more familiar with the general situation and the political developments than international observers, they should have a main role in observing the electoral process and voicing the voters' and citizens' concern. Nevertheless politicians prefer to refer and cite the international reports although the findings of both local and international observers are very similar.

Conclusions:

- In order to better include the findings of local observer organisations, they should be invited and taken more into account in post-election debates and evaluations of political parties, CEC and international organisations.
- Media should offer reasonable access to opinions of civil society on the electoral process and offer a platform for discussion including domestic observers. Currently it is prohibitively expensive for civil society to echo their opinion on the TV media;
- In order to strengthen civil society and local observers, international observer organisations should be more attentive to their concerns.

- The role of civil society should not be considered only during electoral campaigns, but its mission should extend in between elections.
- In order to guarantee a transparent process, the communication between CEC and local observers and the access to information of CEC for domestic observers should be improved.

Final Conclusions of Council of Europe

Based on the outcomes of the conference and the Programmatic Co-operation Document for Albania 2015-2017 ([CM/Del/Dec(2015)1224] approved by the Committee of Ministers in April 2015, potential future activities of the Council of Europe in the field of elections in Albania could be:

- Capacity building of the electoral administration
- Amendments and improvement of the electoral law
- Establishment of the training centre for elections
- Voter's education activities
- Participation of minorities (Roma, etc.) to elections

* Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, Final Report Albania:
http://www.coe.int/t/congress/Sessions/29/default_en.asp

OSCE, Final Report Albania:
<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/albania/180731>