

Local elections in Georgia on 2 October 2021

Press Conference to present preliminary findings and conclusions with OSCE/ODIHR and the delegation from the EU Parliament

Statement by David ERAY, Head of the Delegation of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe

Sunday, 3 October 2021

15:00 Sheraton Grand Tbilisi Metechi Palace

Ladies and gentlemen,

I also wish you a very warm welcome to this joint press conference of the International Election Observation Mission.

The delegation of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities comprised 18 members representing 15 Council of Europe countries who observed yesterday's elections in 9 regions of Georgia. All in all, we visited some 120 polling stations across the country, from the opening until the closing. We were also able to follow the counting in a selected number of polling stations in Tbilisi and surrounding areas.

I won't repeat what Ambassador Jonsson already said about the main features of these 2021 local elections in Georgia. I can only agree with my colleagues from ODIHR and the EU Parliament that - what we saw - was an overall calm and orderly polling day.

Except some inconsistencies, in particular with regard to the set-up of polling booths and finger-inking, no major shortcomings were noticed by our observers. Some polling stations in urban areas, in particular in Tbilisi, were small considering the large number of commission members and observers. This led to some confusion about different roles of election workers, notably during the counting. Some of our observers reported also violations of 100-meter-regulation around polling stations.

Again, as already mentioned after previous elections in Georgia, the registration of both party representatives and citizen observers - who, in our opinion, represented party-affiliated domestic NGOs - was not conducive to the role of independent election observers. This should be addressed for future elections, in our opinion.

As I said, technically speaking, the Election Day was overall calm and well-organised. However, good electoral management is just one side of the coin.

Speaking about the political environment of these elections, we from the Congress can only regret that 2 October 2021 was a missed opportunity for local democracy in Georgia. The discourse about whether these elections were a referendum on the government, yes or no, overshadowed, to a large extent, local issues. I would even say that, in this case, local elections have been taken hostage of the overall national political situation and this is not in the interest of the Georgian public.

Both government and opposition have their responsibility in this respect and the increase of verbal aggression, hate speech and fake news on social media during the campaign is a clear indicator that much more needs to be done in the near future to overcome this polarized political environment which has a

paralyzing effect on further democratic consolidation and puts off, I am convinced, the overwhelming majority of the Georgian public. It's high time to engage in a constructive dialogue.

Let me conclude by a remark on the situation of women in local politics - because, for us from the Congress, this is probably the second missed chance of yesterday's elections. As you are aware, we started with a situation where out of 64 Georgian mayors only 1 was female. There are new regulations in place to amend this situation and candidate lists for the proportional seats of councils were legally required to have at least one in every three candidates of the opposite gender.

However, in practice, we do not think that this regulation will lead to any improvement since many women have been placed third, or sixth or ninth on the lists. They will not have a chance to gain seats in their councils and this goes not only against the spirit of the new legislation this is also a missed opportunity for local democracy.

We saw so many women working on Election Day as members of the Precinct Commissions, they did a great job, despite challenging sanitary conditions due to the ongoing pandemic. It's high time that more women get involved in politics in Georgia, in particular at the local level. Not only as electoral workers on the Election Day but also as mayors and members of the Sakrebulo. They deserve it.

Thank you for your attention.