

Press Release

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May 12 vote: a touchstone for Armenian democracy

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Strasbourg, 13.04.2007 – The forthcoming parliamentary elections in Armenia on May 12 will be a crucial touchstone for the degree of maturity of democracy in Armenia, concluded the four-member (*) pre-election delegation of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) at the end of a visit to Yerevan from 10 to 13 April 2007.

The delegation was heartened by the assurances of the Armenian authorities, and all political stakeholders it met, that it is their intention to hold elections that fully meet Council of Europe standards for democratic elections. In this respect the delegation stresses that it is the responsibility of all parties and stakeholders to adhere to the rules that a genuinely democratic process demands.

The delegation took note of the improved election code, which has generally passed the expert analysis of the Council of Europe's Venice Commission. The election code forms a sound basis for the conduct of democratic elections if it is fully implemented in good faith.

The delegation welcomes the efforts by the authorities to create a centralised voters' list, in line with long-standing recommendations by the Parliamentary Assembly. However, the delegation also notes the concerns of several interlocutors that the accuracy of the voters' lists still leaves a lot to be desired. It therefore calls upon the authorities to continue, and if necessary step up, all efforts to ensure the highest possible accuracy of the voters' list on Election Day. In this respect, the delegation regrets the reluctance by the majority of the political players in Armenia to introduce the inking of voters' fingers, as advised by the Venice Commission, as a proven mechanism to prevent multiple voting.

The delegation was concerned over its overall impression of a lack of popular interest in the election process by the electorate. Such attitudes of apathy, or even cynicism, are not conducive to the development of democracy in Armenia. The delegation was not able, with a few notable exceptions, to discern marked differences between the political platforms of the contenders. It was left with the impression that the upcoming elections are regarded by many as a struggle between political elites and not between concepts and ideas. In relation to this, the delegation is concerned that, in a number of constituencies, only one candidate is running for the majoritarian mandate, thereby not allowing the electorate in those constituencies a fully democratic choice.

The delegation would like to stress that a level playing field in the campaign, and full respect for the principles of freedom of expression and assembly, are key conditions for democratic elections. It is therefore concerned by the uneven conditions for the political players, as highlighted by the media monitoring sponsored by the Council of Europe. In this respect, the exorbitant costs for paid political advertising demanded by broadcasters are deeply regretted.

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The Parliamentary Assembly brings together 315 members from the national parliaments of the 46 member states.

President: René van der Linden (Netherlands, EPP/CD); Secretary General of the Assembly: Mateo Sorinas.

Political Groups: SOC (Socialist Group); EPP/CD (Group of the European People's Party); ALDE (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe); EDG (European Democratic Group); UEL (Group of the Unified European Left).

The fact that out-of-country voting has been abolished in the amended election code is of concern to the delegation, as, in practice, it will disenfranchise a sizeable part of the Armenian population that is living abroad.

The delegation strongly condemns the recent attacks on the headquarters of a political party in Armenia. It would like to reiterate its position that violence and intimidation have no place in a democratic society. Electoral violations during past elections have never been satisfactorily investigated and prosecuted. A climate of impunity for electoral violations and election related violence can not be allowed to exist in Armenia. The delegation therefore calls upon the competent authorities to fully investigate any election-related complaints that are brought to its attention and, where violations are found, to provide redress and prosecute the violators to the fullest extent of the law.

Lastly, the delegation calls on all political actors to use the little time that is left before May 12 to ensure that the forthcoming parliamentary elections are fully in line with Council of Europe standards.

(*) The pre-election delegation visited Yerevan from 10 to 13 April at the invitation of the President of the National Assembly of Armenia. The cross-party delegation was composed of Leo Platvoet (Netherlands, UEL), Head of Delegation, Georges Colombier (France, EPP/CD), Ewald Lindinger (Austria, SOC) and Bernard Marquet (Monaco, ALDE). During its visit, the delegation met with the President of the Republic, the President of the National Assembly, the Prime Minister and the Ministers of Justice and Foreign Affairs, the Chairman of the Central Election Commission, a cross-section of political parties running in these elections, members of the Constitutional Court and the Office of the Human Rights Defender of Armenia, as well as representatives of the mass media and NGO communities.

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