

Press Release

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Georgia: restoring confidence in democratic elections is the joint responsibility of all political forces

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Strasbourg, 07.12.2007 - At the end of a three-day mission ahead of the observation of Georgia's 5 January parliamentary elections, a four-member Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly PACE delegation (*) today made the following statement :

"The consolidation of democracy has, until recently, been notable in Georgia. However, the events in November have seriously damaged this process. The political schism and polarised political debate risk undermining the credibility of the upcoming Presidential elections, and its outcome, in the eyes of the Georgian public. International observers, such as those deployed by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, therefore play a key role in ensuring that the Georgian public enjoy confidence in the democratic nature of the electoral process.

The Parliamentary Assembly consists of members from all major political groups of the 47 member States. This is a guarantee that the Assembly's only interest is in ensuring that these elections comply with the high democratic standards of the Council of Europe with the outcome reflecting the free will of the Georgian people. For this reason the Assembly deployed, from 5 to 7 December 2007, a pre-electoral mission (*) to Georgia to assess the preparations and political climate in the run-up to these elections. Moreover, the Assembly will be back in January with a 30 member strong cross-party delegation to observe these elections jointly with its international partners.

However, the democratic conduct of these elections is not in the hands of international observers but the common responsibility of all political forces in the country. The Delegation therefore calls upon electoral contestants to stop already questioning the credibility and outcome of these elections before they take place, but instead, work to resolve any shortcomings found. Genuine democratic elections, and public confidence in them, are in the common interest of all political forces, and indeed of the country itself.

During its visit the Delegation was convinced that the preparations for these elections were well under way, despite the short time-frame in which they have to be organised. The electoral law forms an adequate basis for the conduct of democratic elections. However, the Delegation is concerned that the amendments to the law, as agreed between the Government and the opposition, have not yet been adopted and calls upon the Parliament to do so without further delay. Any possible further changes should only take place after the elections, as otherwise they may lead to confusion on election day, which, in turn, could undermine public confidence in the process.

Genuinely democratic elections demand a level playing field between all electoral contestants, and this is an area of concern for the Delegation. The alleged use of state resources and the active involvement of central and local state officials at all levels of the campaign of the former President, raise the spectre of abuse of administrative resources. Even if it is within the limits of the law, the Delegation would like to remind the governmental authorities that they have the responsibility to ensure that the public perceives the campaign as fair between all participants.

The allegations of intimidation and pressure are too many for comfort. The leaders of

The Parliamentary Assembly brings together 318 members from the national parliaments of the 47 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 law enforcement bodies should repeatedly make it publicly clear that any allegations of violations will be investigated and, if found to be valid, perpetrators prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

Equal and unbiased access to the media for all candidates is essential for democratic elections. While the Delegation expects that all legal requirements for access to the media will be met, it is undeniable that the current news coverage is dominated by the campaign of the former President. The Delegation wants to stress the responsibility of the media in this respect. All media should ensure a balanced and unbiased coverage of all candidates, without any form of self-censorship. The media in this respect should not only adhere to the letter, but also to the spirit of the law. In addition the Delegation would like to support the idea of regular topical debates between all contestants in the public media. This is essential for the voters to make an informed choice on election day.

The accuracy of the voters' lists continues to be of concern in Georgian elections, especially in the context of the reduction of the size of the precincts. The Central Election Commission (CEC) should start a highly visible public voter education campaign to exhort voters to check their entry on the voters list. While the Assembly has some concerns regarding the use of additional voters' lists, it accepts that they will be used for these elections. However the CEC should adopt adequate provisions to prevent them being used as an avenue for multiple voting and should ensure that the additional ballots can not be tampered with when they are transported from the precinct to the CEC where they will be counted. The public voter education campaign should make it clear that the existence of additional lists can not be an excuse for citizens not to check their entry on the voters' lists before election day.

Last but not least, the Delegation noted the concerns expressed about possible infringements of the secrecy of the vote, especially as a result of the video cameras installed in each polling station. Secrecy of the vote - and equally the perception of the secrecy of the vote - is crucial for democratic elections. The CEC should take all necessary measures, including proper voter education, to ensure that voters cast their ballot in absolute secrecy.

The Assembly continues to stand ready to help the Georgian people with the consolidation of democracy in their country.

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(*) The pre-election Delegation visited Tbilisi from 5 to 7 December at the invitation of the Speaker of the Parliament of Georgia. The cross party Delegation was composed of Mátyás Eörsi (Hungary, ALDE) - Head of Delegation, Kastriot Islami (Albania, SOC), Andres Herkel (Estonia, EPP/CD) and Ganira Pashayeva (Azerbaijan, EDG). During its visit, the Delegation met, *inter alia*, with the Acting President of the Republic, the Acting Speaker of the Parliament of Georgia, a cross section of candidates or their representatives in these elections, the Chairman of the Central Election Commission, the Deputy Minister of the Interior, the Chairmen of the Supreme and Constitutional Courts, the Public Prosecutor, a cross section of political parties, representatives of the international community as well as representatives from the mass media and civil society.