

# Press Release

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### **Continued progress is key to ensuring public confidence in democratic election, says PACE delegation**

Strasbourg, 31.01.2008 – A pre-electoral mission of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has just completed a visit to Yerevan to assess the political climate and preparations for the forthcoming Presidential election in Armenia. Its main task was to assess progress in the implementation of the electoral framework, as continued progress in the manner in which the election is conducted will be essential to ensure public confidence in the electoral process in this country.

The delegation noted that the parliamentary elections in 2007 had shown progress over previous elections and expressed its hope that this progress would continue during the forthcoming Presidential election on 19 February 2008. It was therefore heartened by the clearly expressed political will of the authorities to address previous shortcomings and to hold fully democratic elections in line with Armenia's commitments to the Council of Europe. In this respect, the delegation welcomes the improvements in the legal framework for these elections, which address a number of recommendations of the Parliamentary Assembly. However, it would also like to stress that the democratic conduct of the elections will squarely depend on the electoral framework being fully implemented, both according to the letter and spirit of the law.

Genuinely democratic elections, and the legitimacy of their outcome in the eyes of the people, depend on a high level of public confidence in the electoral process. In that respect, the delegation is concerned with the apparent lack of trust in the electoral process, including in the impartiality of the legal complaints and appeals process, expressed by a number of interlocutors. It therefore strongly recommends that the authorities take all necessary measures to ensure public confidence in the electoral process, especially with regard to the secrecy of the vote and the transparency of the counting and tabulation processes.

While the setup of the voting booths has been changed to impede vote-buying and multiple voting, there is some concern that this may lead to voters inadvertently showing how they voted, especially if large numbers of people are present in the polling stations. The delegation saw a sample voting booth and was convinced that they are designed according to international standards. However, it calls upon the Central Election Commission (CEC) to take all precautions to ensure the secrecy of the vote on election day. Moreover, while the CEC has made laudable efforts to increase the transparency of the tabulation process, these measures did not work fully satisfactorily during the previous parliamentary elections. The delegation hopes that the technical

The Parliamentary Assembly brings together 318 members from the national parliaments of the 47 member states.

President: Lluís Maria de Puig (Spain, SOC) ; 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).

problems encountered at that time have been overcome and recommends that the CEC sets a minimum timeframe during which the results protocols have to be publicly posted at polling stations.

The Election Code ensures a balanced composition of all election commissions, but it was noted that this balance was not reflected in the composition of the leadership troikas of the Territorial Election Commissions. The delegation hopes that this imbalance will not be repeated at the level of the Precinct Election Commissions.

Democratic elections demand a level playing field between all candidates during, but not limited to, the legal campaign period. The delegation therefore regrets the clearly unbalanced media coverage on most broadcast media, including public television, before the official campaign period, as was reported by several monitoring organisations, including by the Election Observation Mission of the OSCE/ODIHR, whose findings - published in its first interim report - the delegation fully supports.

The delegation heard several complaints that the current Prime Minister, who is a Presidential candidate, would have unfair campaign advantages as a result of his decision to maintain his position as Prime Minister during the campaign period. While recognising the legality of the current Prime Minister continuing his functions despite being a candidate, it adds to the responsibility of the government to avoid any perception that administrative resources are abused in favour of, or against, any particular candidate. The delegation welcomes the fact that, until now, the election campaign has taken place in an open and unimpeded climate, but notes reports by some candidates of their difficulties in obtaining campaign offices in some regions.

The delegation is confident that the authorities will address the concerns of the delegation and will continue its efforts to organise a fully democratic Presidential election that will have the full confidence of the Armenian people.

The delegation would like to thank the authorities for their co-operation and assistance during this visit. The Parliamentary Assembly will return to Armenia to observe the Presidential election with a 30-member delegation.

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(\*) The pre-election delegation of the Parliamentary Assembly visited Yerevan from 29 to 31 January 2008. The cross-party delegation was composed of John Prescott (United Kingdom, SOC), Head of Delegation, Lord Russell-Johnston (United Kingdom, ALDE) and Bjørn Jacobsen (Norway, UEL). During its visit, the delegation met with the President of Armenia, the Chairman of the National Assembly of Armenia, the Armenian delegation to PACE, the Chairman of the Central Election Commission, all but one of the Presidential candidates, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Chairman of the Constitutional Court, the Head of the Police, the international community in Armenia, as well as representatives of the mass media and civil society.

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