

Observation of local elections in Georgia of 15 June 2014 by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities

Preliminary Conclusions by Jos WIENEN (Netherlands, EPP/CCE), Head of Delegation and Congress Rapporteur

I am pleased to present to you preliminary conclusions following the observation of yesterday's local elections in Georgia. My name is Jos Wienen, I am Mayor of the city of Katwijk in the Netherlands.

You may know that our delegation comprises 22 members from 15 European countries, representing the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe and the EU Committee of the Regions. We have been in Tbilisi since last Wednesday and held meetings with government and opposition leaders, candidates, representatives of NGOs, the media and the diplomatic community as well as the Central Election Commission. Already at the end of May I have been to your country, as part of a pre-electoral delegation.

Yesterday, 11 observation teams were deployed to different regions of Georgia and visited polling stations in municipalities including Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Batumi, Gori, Mtsketha, Rustavi, Gardabani, Telavi, Marneuli, Bolnisi, Tetri Tskaro, Ninotsminda, Akhalkalaki, Dmanisi, Tsalka, Zugdidi and in many other towns and villages. All in all, the Congress observers were present in more than 150 places throughout the country.

I think that we are all glad to say that yesterday's elections - despite the reports we have received about local incidents and individual irregularities - were carried out in an overall calm and peaceful manner. After a very controversial campaign in a heated atmosphere including harsh rhetoric and violent actions, this was not to be taken for granted.

We can also say that the electoral management steered by the Central Election Commission has achieved further progress in respect of the technical side of polling in Georgia. And I congratulate the CEC for this professional performance in a very difficult situation.

The electoral environment, in particular with regard to media freedom and the access of political contestants to the media, has improved and law enforcement seems to be, by and large, less polarised than in previous times. Moreover, we received positive echoes with regard to the openness of the electorate and the absence of pressure on voters, in particular on public servants, to cast their ballot in favour of such and such party. This is an important step forward for the country.

We acknowledge that the Georgian authorities have made efforts to prevent electoral fraud and put in place a new system of verification of voters's identity including digital photos on the voters' list. Yesterday, this new system did stand a first proof in practice. The governmental campaign to provide new ID cards for as many citizens as possible aimed at reducing the risk of misuse of fake ID cards, a well-known practice in Georgia in the past.

In respect of the strengthening of local government in Georgia, we are pleased that a large number of candidates, in total more than 16.000, contested for the seats in 71 municipalities and the posts of mayors in 12 self-governing cities and gamgelis in 59 self-

governing municipalities. The fact that now all mayors and town managers are directly elected in Georgia, is in line with Congress' recommendations and very welcome.

However, the electoral legislation has to be further improved. For example, the current system still favours the incumbent forces and is not conducive to smaller parties and independent candidates. Exemplary to this situation is also the current composition of electoral commissions. Among the 13 members of Election Precinct Commissions, six are appointed by the upper level of electoral administration and seven by political parties, only one member belongs to the largest opposition party. Other opposition parties were not represented at the commissions at all. We believe that this situation constitutes an electoral disequilibrium and needs to be addressed by the Georgian authorities.

In practical terms, we also believe that the counting procedures have to be reviewed. After a well-organised Election Day, the Congress' observers witnessed - in most of the places we were present - long and tedious counting procedures, partly because of over-bureaucratic interpretation of rules, partly because of bad micro-management. In this respect, more training is needed for the electoral staff, notably the leadership of the commissions. In terms of locations, there is still room for improvement in respect of accessibility of polling stations for handicapped people.

Moreover, we were not pleased to receive reports about candidates of opposition parties who withdrew from the proportional party lists, allegedly because of pressure exerted on them. Whatever the real number of such incidents may have been, each case is one too much and we urge the Georgian authorities to ensure due and transparent legal proceedings. This holds also true for cases of violence which happened prior to these elections and yesterday, according to individual reports we have received.

Therefore, with regard to the runoffs which are going to take place in the coming two weeks in different municipalities, notably in the capital city Tbilisi, a zero-tolerance policy has to be adopted towards electoral violence and degrading or hateful discourse. I urge all political actors to contribute to this strategy!

Within a system of checks and balances both government and opposition have their roles to play. Government has a specific responsibility for the overall situation. Not to refrain from degrading or hateful statements and not to clearly condemn incidents of violence creates a false impression and damages the overall image of a country. Also for the opposition, party politics should not overshadow real policy issues at local level.

I am confident that all political actors will be able to learn from the past and take this into account in the next days, before the runoffs and I ask my colleague Jerzy Zajakala - who is speaking on behalf of the members of the EU Committee of the Regions on our delegation - for his statement.