

PRESS RELEASE

Fundamental freedoms generally respected during Georgian municipal elections but insufficient distinction between State and governing party

TBILISI, 6 October 2006 – Yesterday’s municipal elections in Georgia were conducted with general respect for fundamental freedoms, however, the blurred distinction between the authorities and the governing party reinforced the advantage of the incumbents. Those are the conclusions of international observers from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe.

“We appreciate the efforts of the authorities to conduct the process in a professional and inclusive manner and welcome the readiness of Georgia to continue international co-operation on bringing further improvements to the electoral practice to fully meet all OSCE and other international commitments,” said Ambassador Geert Ahrens, who headed the Limited Election Observation Mission from the OSCE/ODIHR, deployed a month prior to the elections.

Wim van Gelder, Head of Delegation of the Congress said: “We have observed significant progress in the conduct of voting.” Referring to the fact that following these elections, mayors of large cities will no longer be appointed by the central government, he added: “Georgia has also taken encouraging steps towards effective local democracy in accordance with its commitments to the Council of Europe. However, preliminary turnout figures show that progress is still to be made to ensure broader participation of citizens and political forces in local affairs.”

Five political parties, one electoral bloc and a number of independent candidates contested the 2006 municipal elections, although two political parties announced a boycott of election. Parties and electoral blocs did not face problems in the registration process. However, regrettably, in 27.5 per cent of majoritarian races and 8.7 per cent of proportional races only one candidate or party list appeared on the ballot, in all but one case representing the governing party. Furthermore, 30 per cent of all independent candidates were not able to register, largely due to the failure of the election administration to provide clear instructions on the establishment of campaign funds. Consequently, in some districts voters were not presented with a choice.

Contestants had the opportunity to present their views to the electorate without impediments in a campaign environment that was characterized by a general respect for fundamental rights and freedoms. However, the campaign remained low-key until the last week prior to the elections. It mainly involved door-to-door canvassing, small scale meetings and use of free airtime. Political parties, except for the governing United National Movement (UNM), did not develop comprehensive campaign programs, and their outreach to voters in the regions was limited.

The media offered voters a plurality of views and provided them with a basic reflection of main election events, devoting significant attention to the activities of authorities. The broadcasters mostly respected the legal requirements for allocation of free airtime and organization of debates. Regrettably, the UNM governing party chose not to engage in these debates.

The ruling party has made extensive use of its advantage as incumbent and conducted highly visible social aid programmes including issuing of utilities vouchers, payment of pension bonuses and temporary employment schemes. These programmes, conducted in parallel to the election campaign and covered extensively by the media, blurred the line between state activities and the electoral campaign. The use of identical slogans, designs and images in electronic and print materials made it difficult to distinguish between PR materials paid for from the state budget and campaign material produced by the UNM. Furthermore, in some cases, local executive buildings hosted UNM branches, and some election commissions appeared to be involved in campaign activities of the governing party.

The election legislation provided an adequate framework for the conduct of democratic elections, however, it will benefit from further improvements in a number of areas. Changes introduced to the election system for local elections were adopted without broad consultations among the political actors and were criticized by the opposition parties. The OSCE/ODIHR and the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe will publish a comprehensive review of recent amendments at the end of 2006.

The election administration largely provided for an orderly electoral process, operating within a constrained timeframe. However the Central Election Commission did not meet all legal deadlines and allowed some ambiguity in its instructions to District Election Commissions. The right of ethnic minorities to receive election-related information in their preferred languages was not fully respected across the country.

Some parties questioned the impartiality of the election administration. However, international observers did not witness concrete instances of biased decision making. Political parties had an opportunity to appoint members of precinct level commissions and to nominate proxies to election commissions of all levels. Domestic and international observers as well as the media enjoyed a generally unimpeded access to all aspects of the electoral process.

On election day, international observers assessed voting and observed the count and tabulation processes in a limited number of polling stations throughout the country. Despite commendable efforts undertaken by the authorities to improve the accuracy of the voters' lists, a number of voters did not find their names on the register. In the polling stations visited, the election commissioners appeared reasonably well organized and trained, and procedures were widely followed. UNM observers and representatives were prominently present, and were at times seen interfering in the process. During the count, observers noted significant procedural problems in some areas, mainly minority areas.

The OSCE/ODIHR will issue a final report approximately two months after the completion of the process.

The Congress' recommendations based on this observation will be addressed to the Georgian authorities following their adoption at the Congress' Autumn Institutional Session in mid-November.