Parliamentary Assembly
Assemblée parlementaire
https://pace.coe.int

COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Doc. 12475
24 January 2011

Observation of the parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan (7 November 2010)

Election observation report
Ad hoc Committee of the Bureau
Rapporteur: Mr Tadeusz IWIŃSKI, Poland, Socialist Group

Contents **Page**

1. Introduction 1
2. Political background, legal framework, candidate registration, election administration and election campaign 3
3. Media environment 5
4. Election day 5
5. Results of the elections 6
6. Conclusions and recommendations 6
Appendix 1 – Statement by PACE pre-election delegation visiting Azerbaijan 7
Appendix 2 – Programme of the pre-election mission (19 to 22 October 2010) 8
Appendix 3 10

1. Introduction

1. The Bureau of the Parliamentary Assembly decided, at its meeting on 21 June 2010, following an invitation from the Chairman of the Milli Mejlis (Parliament) of the Republic of Azerbaijan, to set up an ad hoc Committee of 30 members to observe the parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan (7 November 2010), and authorised a pre-electoral mission consisting of five members, one from each political group, who were also members of the ad hoc committee. On 25 June 2010, the Bureau approved the composition of the ad hoc committee and appointed Mr Paul Wille (Belgium, ALDE) as its Chairperson.

2. Following the proposals of the political groups, the ad hoc committee was composed as follows (asterisks indicate those members who also took part in the pre-electoral mission; Mr Giuseppe Galati cancelled his participation on the eve of the mission):

– Group of the European People's Party (EPP/CD):

- Pedro AGRAMUNT*, Spain
- Axel E. FISCHER, Germany
- Giuseppe GALATI, Italy
- Dariusz LIPIŃSKI, Poland
- Jean-Claude MIGNON, France
- Gebhard NEGELE, Liechtenstein

- Marietta DE POURBAIX-LUNDIN, Sweden
- Janusz RACHOŃ, Poland
- Özlem TÜRKÖNE, Turkey
- Egidijus VAREIKIS, Lithuania

– Socialist Group (SOC):

- Joseph DEBONO GRECH, Malta
- Andreas GROSS, Switzerland
- Sinikka HURSKAINEN, Finland
- Tadeusz IWIŃSKI, Poland
- Francine JOHN-CALAME, Switzerland
- Pietro MARCENARO, Italy
- Patrick MORIAU, Belgium
- Yanaki STOILOV, Bulgaria
- Christoph STRÄSSER, Germany
- Lord John E. TOMLINSON, United Kingdom

– Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE):

- Anne BRASSEUR, Luxembourg
- Michael HANCOCK, United Kingdom
- Maximilian REIMANN, Switzerland
- Andrea RIGONI, Italy
- Paul WILLE*, Belgium

– European Democrat Group (EDG):

- Ruhi AÇIKGÖZ, Turkey
- Zmago JELINČIČ PLEMENITI, Slovenia
- Øyvind VAKSDAL*, Norway
- Robert WALTER, United Kingdom

– Group of the Unified European Left (UEL):

- Jaakko LAAKSO*, Finland

3. Mr Dronov and Ms Gastl provided secretarial support to the ad hoc committee, including during its pre-electoral mission.

4. In accordance with the co-operation agreement between the Assembly and the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), the latter was invited to join this delegation. Mr Serguei Kouznetsov, of the Venice Commission secretariat, provided legal advice to the ad hoc committee.

5. The pre-electoral mission visited Baku from 19 to 22 October 2010. The delegation had meetings with the President of Azerbaijan, Mr Ilham Aliev, the Chairman of the Central Election Commission (CEC), the Chairman of the Constitutional Court, the Minister of the Interior, as well as with a representative cross-section of political parties and electoral blocs, civil society and the media. It also had discussions with the Head of the OSCE ODIHR Election Observation Mission and members of the diplomatic community. Regrettably, representatives of an opposition bloc made up of Musavat and the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (APFP) refused to meet with the delegation, even though the editor-in-chief of the Musavat Newspaper participated in our round table discussion with media representatives.

6. In its statement issued at the end of the visit (Appendix 1), the pre-electoral mission welcomed the overall calm atmosphere in the run-up to the elections. It commended improvements in the work of the CEC, the voter education programme which it had launched, and greater attention to the quality of the voters' lists.

7. The pre-electoral mission also welcomed active involvement of the Azerbaijani opposition in the electoral race, as well as new possibilities created for non-governmental organisations to be involved in the electoral procedures.

8. Yet, once again, the pre-electoral mission did not witness a competition of substantive political ideas, platforms or approaches. It regretted the lack of any public debate to help the electorate make an educated choice on election day.

9. In its meetings with all the relevant Azerbaijani officials, the pre-electoral mission voiced its concerns over allegations it had heard from numerous interlocutors that the pre-electoral situation was characterised by administrative pressures and difficulties relating to candidate registration, as well as by harassment and even imprisonment of some Internet bloggers and journalists.

10. While the existing legislation does provide for universal suffrage in Azerbaijan, the pre-electoral mission noted that the numerous Azerbaijanis residing abroad would only be able to vote in the parliamentary elections if they returned to their constituencies in the country on the voting day. It considered this compromised the principle of universality of voting rights.

11. By the same token, it considered that people with disabilities should have better possibilities to vote, for instance, through the setting up of polling stations in hospitals.

12. The ad hoc committee conducted its observation mission from 5 to 7 November 2010 (see Appendix 2 for the programme of the visit). On election day, the committee was split into 16 teams and observed elections in and around Baku, Sumgait, and Sheki.

13. The ad hoc committee acted as part of an International Election Observation Mission (IEOM) that also included delegations from the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE, the European Parliament and the OSCE/ ODIHR observation mission. Relations with the parliamentary partners were normal, though not always easy. The ad hoc committee did, however, experience serious frictions and nearly insurmountable difficulties in its interplay with the ODIHR.

14. A joint statement was presented by the Heads of the delegations constituting the IEOM at a press conference held on 8 November 2010 (Appendix 3).

15. At its meeting of 11 November 2010 in Antalya, the Bureau appointed Mr Iwiński (Poland, SOC) to replace Mr Wille, who is no longer a member of the Assembly, in presenting the report to the Assembly.

2. Political background, legal framework, candidate registration, election administration and election campaign

16. In accordance with the existing Constitution, on 3 September 2010, the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliev, called parliamentary elections for 7 November 2010. Once again, elections took place in a political environment characterised by a lack of dialogue between the ruling party, the New Azerbaijan Party (YAP), and the main opposition parties, whatever the reasons behind this. It will be recalled that the results of the last parliamentary elections held in 2005 were not accepted by some opposition parties. By way of protest, those parties subsequently boycotted the partial repeat parliamentary elections in May 2006 and the October 2008 presidential election. This time, all the main opposition parties opted to run in the 7 November 2010 vote.

17. Azerbaijan has a strong presidential system, with the executive enjoying broader powers than the legislative. The outgoing parliament was dominated by the YAP party, which held 64 seats out of a total of 125. Deputies who had run as independent candidates held 45 seats. These deputies habitually supported YAP. The opposition is heavily fragmented and disunited. Musavat, the strongest opposition party, had four seats in the outgoing Parliament. Some opposition parties, including the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (APFP), refused to take up their seats in Parliament in the wake of the 2005 elections.

18. The primary legislation for the 2010 elections is codified in the Constitution (last amended 2009) and the Election Code (enacted in 2003, last amended in 2010). The legal framework also includes the Law on the Freedom of Assembly (2008), the Law on Radio and TV Broadcasting, the Code of Civil Procedures, as well as applicable provisions in the Criminal Code, the Code of Administrative Offences, and regulations of the CEC.

19. The latest amendments to the Election Code were introduced as late as June 2010, with little public debate. The amendments were adopted in a referendum that was observed*, inter alia*, by the Assembly. They reduced the election period from 75 to 60 days, shortened the campaign period, which now started 23 days before the election day. Provisions under which candidates received state funding were eliminated for this campaign. The amendments did not, however, address longstanding recommendations from the Council of Europe Venice Commission and the OSCE ODIHR, in particular those relating to the composition of election commissions. Arguably, this left room for the domination of pro-government forces in the commissions. On the other hand, such a composition, although unbalanced, ensured the functioning of the election commissions. In the past, this was not the case, even though the system was more balanced, as the opposition obstructed the commissions' work.

20. The Election Code still contains inconsistencies and ambiguities, not least relating to candidate eligibility, as well as to the complaints and appeals process. In parliamentary elections, there is no provision for Diaspora voting and no arrangements are provided for voting in hospitals.

21. In a positive development, amendments to the Code of Civil Procedure, introduced in the wake of the 2008 presidential election in accordance with the then Assembly election observation recommendations, eliminated the conflict with the Election Code as regards the jurisdiction of courts in election-related disputes.

22. Candidate nomination and registration was handled by constituency election commissions (CONECs). Would-be candidates were nominated by political parties or party blocs, by groups of voters or through self-nomination. To register a candidate, a CONEC had to receive, *inter alia,* at least 450 valid support signatures. Of the 1 115 prospective candidates, 743 were registered. Following 52 withdrawals and one deregistration, 690 candidates participated in the electoral race. Over half of the candidates nominated by the opposition had their registrations rejected, while all of the 111 YAP candidates were registered. The APFP-Musavat bloc had 38 registered candidates out of 88 nominated, followed by the Karabakh and Reform blocs with 34 and 31 registered candidates out of 95 and 97 candidates nominated, respectively. Registration denials were mostly due to the restrictive implementation of provisions of the Election Code and other legislation and mostly concerned the verification of support signatures.

23. The election administration in Azerbaijan is a three-tiered structure consisting of the CEC, 125 CONECs and some 5 175 Precinct Election Commissions (PECs). Eleven CONECs were looking after voters from constituencies in the territories dealt with by the Minsk Conference on Nagorno Karabakh. These CONECs served some 340 000 IDPs from those territories. Under the Election Code, three equal quotas are reserved in each commission for members nominated by the parliamentary majority, parliamentarians elected as independent candidates, and the parliamentary minority. By law, all commission chairpersons are nominated by the parliamentary majority.

24. The CEC went to great lengths to ensure a smooth election process. It worked transparently, launched an extensive voter education campaign, including in the media. It provided training for CONECs and PECs, as well as the police and local authorities. However, it did not issue written instructions on the implementation of legal provisions on the validity of citizens' IDs in the context of support signature collection. This may have contributed to the confusion and the substantial number of registration denials.

25. The CEC worked in earnest to improve the centralised voter register. Voters' lists per polling station were put on the CEC web site for the electorate to consult and act, as appropriate. Voters' data were verified on line and corrected, where necessary. On the other hand, there remained a discrepancy between the CEC data (4.8 million registered voters as at 13 October 2010), and the State Statistics Committee (according to its own data, as at 1 January 2010, more than 6 million people eligible to vote were residing in Azerbaijan).

26. As from 13 October 2010, voters' lists could only be amended by PECs, including on the election day. Following all verifications and amendments, on the election day, the total number of registered voters was 4 844 116.

27. The period preceding the official election campaign period was characterised by a lack of visible political activities of political parties. According to opposition representatives, this was due to a restrictive interpretation of the Election Code with regard to political rallies ahead of the official campaign period.

28. The executive allocated a number of venues for candidates to conduct rallies and meetings. This rule applied to all, including the ruling party. The opposition, however, claimed that the venues were distant, hard to reach and hand picked to limit participation.

29. The campaign was calm, low-key and, seemingly, generated little public interest. At the political party level, no public debate between the ruling party and the opposition was organised. The use of campaign materials was limited.

30. There were allegations of abuse of administrative resources. According to the OSCE ODIHR, state employees in 19 constituencies were campaigning for one particular candidate. By those accounts, state employees were generally coerced to campaign for YAP.

3. Media environment

31. Despite a proliferation of media outlets in Azerbaijan, there is a lack of independent reporting in the electronic media. Printed media critical of the authorities are scarce. Freedom of expression is in peril due to media harassment, detentions, defamation lawsuits and other forms of pressure on journalists and Internet bloggers. An opposition newspaper editor, Eynullah Fatullaev, remains in prison despite a European Court of Human Rights judgment that he should be released immediately. As a result, many journalists resort to self-censorship.

32. Under the existing legislation, only political parties and party blocs that succeed in getting more than 60 candidates registered are entitled to free air time on public TV. Since no opposition party or electoral bloc had more than 60 registered candidates, only YAP was eligible for free airtime on public TV and free space in State-owned newspapers. Therefore, the CEC took an unprecedented decision to give each candidate four minutes of free airtime on public TV. However, some candidates deliberately did not make use of this decision. Contestants could also buy time for paid political advertising. Two national TV channels offered this latter opportunity and 15 candidates used it.

33. Campaign coverage in the news was limited, with TV channels focusing on the procedural aspects of the electoral process. All main TV channels provided extensive news coverage of the authorities' initiatives, outside of the campaign context, reflecting positively on the activities of State officials. Public TV news coverage of state officials was reduced after the start of the campaign, but they still benefited from considerable coverage.

34. The printed media, generally, provided a more diverse range of views than the TV, with the state-funded newspapers, *Azerbaijan,* and *Respublika* demonstrating their clear support for the authorities.

4. Election day

35. Election day was generally calm and peaceful. However, tensions started building up closer to the vote count.

36. Notwithstanding the CEC training and awareness-raising campaigns, there were significant procedural violations and irregularities, including ballot box stuffing.

37. Based on IEOM observers' reports, opening procedures were not respected in 21% of polling stations visited (1 100 out of a total of 5 175). The most widely observed procedural violation concerned finger inking, a safeguard against multiple voting. In 12% of polling stations visited, the procedure was not followed at all, or followed incorrectly. Observers reported 61 instances of ballot box stuffing, 95 instances of identical signatures on voters' lists, carousel voting in five polling stations. In 7% of polling stations visited, the secrecy of the vote was not observed. 45% of polling stations visited were difficult to access for voters with disabilities. International observers were restricted in their observation in 114 polling stations.

38. International observers assessed the vote count negatively in 31% of counts observed, with procedural errors reported from a quarter of those counts. In over 11% of counts observed, the number of ballot papers in ballot boxes was higher than the number of signatures on the voters' lists, 24 ballot boxes contained clumps or stacks of ballots, suggesting ballot box stuffing.

39. Over 30% of PECs observed had difficulties completing the results protocol. The results protocol had been pre-signed in 10 PECs. In 35% of counts observed, PECs did not post a copy of the protocol for public scrutiny. In many cases, observers were not given a copy of the protocol upon request.

5. Results of the elections

40. On 29 November 2010, the Constitutional Court of Azerbaijan approved the CEC Protocol on the results of the elections. The voter turnout was 49.56%. The following morning, the new Parliament met to elect its Chair, Vice-Chairs and Committee Chairs. The YAP Party received 71 seats, independent candidates got 42 seats, the Party of Citizen's Solidarity got three seats, Ana Vatan Party got two seats, UMID, Citizen's Union, Adalat, the Party of Democratic Reforms, the Party of United Popular Front, the Social Well-Being and the Party of Great Construction got one seat each.

41. Given the absence of proportional lists (as the elections were held following the majority principle, the votes were cast for individuals) it is practically impossible to establish the percentage of votes obtained by specific political parties or different categories of individual candidates. In some constituencies some members of different parties or independent candidates obtained around 70% or even more than 90%, whereas in others it was usually around 50-60%.

42. According to the CEC, 15 complaints were received on the voting day and 165 complaints thereafter.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

43. The ad hoc committee noted that the parliamentary elections held on 7 November in Azerbaijan were peaceful, in a welcome departure from the ways of the past. The opposition participated and was making efforts at forging electoral alliances.

44. All opposition members participated in the work of the CEC which, generally speaking, conducted its work efficiently and transparently.

45. Of the 172 candidates who had been denied registration and who appealed, 43 were reinstated.

46. A very high number of international (1 029) and domestic (48 000) observers were registered; international observers enjoyed good co-operation with the CEC. In this sense, Azerbaijan has demonstrated its openness to international scrutiny.

47. The share of female candidates increased from 10 to 13% compared to the last parliamentary elections, the number of female MPs in the newly-elected parliament increased from 14 to 19.

48. At the same time, a deficient candidate registration process at the constituency level led to the registration of all nominated candidates from the ruling party and less than half of the opposition candidates.

49. The ad hoc committee heard credible allegations of intimidation of voters and candidates, as well as abuse of administrative resources. The ad hoc committee is happy to state that the two imprisoned bloggers were released on 18 November 2010.

50. The ad hoc committee regretted that legal recommendations by the Venice Commission and the OSCE ODIHR remain unaddressed in the Election Code. Furthermore, legal remedies against decisions on election-related complaints are often untimely and ineffective and are not reasoned.

51. The ad hoc committee calls for more balanced media behaviour in the electoral context.

52. The Azerbaijani authorities are encouraged to consider introducing provisions for Diaspora voting in the interests of universality of suffrage. By the same token, provisions need to be introduced for setting up polling stations in hospitals to facilitate voting for the sick and disabled. This would foreclose potential conflicts with the case law of the European Court of Human Rights.

53. The ad hoc committee strongly believes that the opposition has a share of its responsibility in the absence of a vibrant public debate in Azerbaijan; the opposition should focus on real issues rather than on egocentric petty politicking.

54. Based on these findings, the ad hoc committee, whilst stating that the whole election process showed progress in reaching Assembly and OSCE standards and commitments, is, however, convinced that significant progress would still be necessary to reach an overall electoral and democratic consensus in Azerbaijan.

55. The Council of Europe and its Parliamentary Assembly stand prepared to continue co-operation with Azerbaijan in further improving its democratic system.

Appendix 1 – Statement by PACE pre-election delegation visiting Azerbaijan

Strasbourg, 21.10.2010 – A five-member, cross-party delegation (*) from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) visiting Azerbaijan ahead of the 7 November parliamentary elections has welcomed an overall calm atmosphere in the run-up to the elections. “This is a positive departure from the ways of the past where electoral campaigns were marred by violence and mutual recriminations,” the delegation said. “Improvements in the work of the Central Election Commission, the voter education programme launched by it, and greater attention to the quality of the voters’ lists, should be commended.”

The delegation continued: “In a welcome development and in contrast to some earlier elections, the Azerbaijani opposition is actively involved in the electoral race. It is making attempts at forging electoral blocs and trying to overcome competing individual agendas. Building electoral alliances is usually part and parcel of a democratic process. The delegation also welcomes the new possibilities created for non-governmental organisations to be involved in the electoral procedures.

Yet, once again, the PACE delegation has not witnessed a competition of substantive political ideas, platforms or approaches. Furthermore, this is exacerbated by the lack of any public debate (including TV debates) that would help the electorate to make an educated choice on election day.

The delegation was also concerned about allegations that the pre-electoral situation is characterised by administrative pressures and difficulties relating to candidate registration. Harassment of some journalists and bloggers, instances of which were brought to the attention of the delegation, is not conducive to a constructive dialogue within society. Corrective action is urgently needed.

While the existing legislation does provide for universal suffrage in Azerbaijan, the very numerous Azerbaijanis residing abroad will only be able to vote in the parliamentary elections if they return to their constituencies in the country on voting day. This compromises the principle of universality of voting rights.

Also, people with disabilities should have better possibilities to vote, for instance through the setting up of polling stations in hospitals.

A comprehensive compendium of earlier PACE proposals to improve the electoral process in Azerbaijan can be found, *inter alia,* in PACE Resolution 1750 (2010) on the functioning of democratic institutions in Azerbaijan.

Finally, the delegation calls on Baku to rectify the situation with entry visas for observers. If, contrary to official declarations, those cannot be issued upon arrival, this should be made known to would-be observers for them to avoid unpleasant surprises en route to Baku.”

The delegation was in Baku from 18 to 21 October 2010 at the invitation of the Speaker of the Milli Majlis and will return, as part of a full-scale, 30-member PACE delegation, to observe actual voting. The delegation had meetings with the President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliev, the Chairman of the Central Election Commission, the Chairman of the Constitutional Court, the Minister of the Interior, as well as with a representative cross-section of political parties and electoral blocs, civil society and the media. It also had discussions with the Head of the OSCE ODIHR Election Observation Mission and members of the diplomatic community.

_____

* The delegation was made up of Paul Wille (Belgium, ALDE), Head of Delegation, Pedro Agramunt (Spain, EPP/CD), Tadeusz Iwinski (Poland, SOC), Øyvind Vaksdal (Norway, EDG) and Jaakko Laakso (Finland, UEL).

Appendix 2 – Programme of the pre-election mission (19 to 22 October 2010)

Tuesday, 19 October 2010

09:00-10:00	Delegation Meeting
10:00-11.00	Meeting with Ms Veronika KOTEK, SRSG of the Council of Europe to Azerbaijan
11:00-12:00	Meeting with the OSCE/ODIHR EOM: – Mr Stefan Krause, Deputy Head of Mission – Mr Alexey Gromov, Election analyst – Ms Marian Gabriel, Political analyst – Mr Rasto Kuzel, Media analyst
14:00-15:00	Meeting with Mr Mazahir Panahov, Chairperson of the CEC
15:15-16:00	Meeting with the National Delegation of Azerbaijan to the Parliamentary Assembly
16:00-17:00	Meeting with Mr. Ogtay Asadov, Speaker of the Parliament of Azerbaijan
17:15	Meeting with Ambassadors of Council of Europe member states and the European Union Ambassador: – Belgium: Mr Philippe Jottard – France: Mr Gabriel Keller – Norway: Mr Erling Skjonsberg – Poland: Mr Jan Brodowski, Political Officer – Russian Federation: Mr Yevgeniy Verlin, First Secretary – European Union Delegation: Mr Manfredas Limantas, Political Officer

Wednesday, 20 October 2010

09:00-13:00	Individual meetings with the Political Parties and Blocks:
09:00-09:30	Ana Vatan Party: – Mr Fazail Agamalioglu
09:30-10:00	"Democracy" bloc composed of Civil Solidarity Party and Democratic Reforms Party: – Mr Asim Mollazade, Chairperson, Democratic Reforms Party
10:10-10:40	Azerbaijan National Independence Party (ANIP): – Mr Arzukhan Alizade, Secretary General
10:40-11:10	"For People" bloc composed of the Liberal Party, the Citizen and Development Party and the Green Party: – Mr Avaz Temirkhan, Chairperson, Liberal Party – Mr Ali Aliyev, Chairperson, Citizen and Development Party – Mr Mais Gulaliyev, Chairperson, Green Party
11:20-11:50	"Karabakh" bloc composed of Umid Party, Azerbaijan Democratic Party and Aydinlar Party: – Mr Igbal Agazade, Chairperson, Umid party – Mr Sardar Jalaloglu, Chairperson, Azerbaijan Democratic Party – Mr Gulamhuseyn Alibeyli, Chairperson, Aydinlar Party
11:50-12:20	"Reforms" bloc composed of the United Azerbaijan Popular Front Party, the Great Establishment Party and the Adalet Party: – Mr Niyamaddin Ordukhanov, Deputy Chairman, United Azerbaijan Popular Front Party – Mr Elkhan Shukurlu, Deputy Chairman, Adalet party
12:30-13:00	Yeni Azerbaijan Party – Mr Hikmet Mammadov, Editor-in-Chief of Yeni Azerbaijan newspaper

14:30-15:30	Meeting with Mr Farhad Abdullayev, Chairperson of the Constitutional Court
15:40	Meeting with NGO representatives (Round table format)
15:40-16:15	Azerbaycanda Vatandash Camiyyetine Yardim Assosiasiyasi (AVCIYA) (Association for Support to the Civil Society in Azerbaijan), Maharram Zulfugarli
16:20-17:00	– Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Centre, Azer Gasimov, lawyer
	– Law and Development Public Association, Hafiz Hasanov, Chairperson
17.00	Meeting with media representatives (round table format)

Print news agencies:

17:00-18:00 – "Azeri-Press" Information Agency (APA), Ms Vusala Mahir qizi, Director General
- "Baki Xeber" newspaper, Mr Aydin Guliyev, Editor-in-Chief
- "Trend" Information Agency, Mr Emil Huseynli
- "525-ci qezet" newspaper, Mr Rashad Majid, Editor-in-Chief

18:00-19:00 – Azadliq newspaper, Mr Ganimat Zahid, Editor-in-Chief
- Yeni Musavat newspaper, Mr Rauf Arifoglu, Editor-in-Chief
- Zerkalo newspaper, Mr Elchin Shikhli, Editor-in-Chief

TV:

19:00-20:00 Public TV, Mr Ismail Omarov, Director General

Thursday, 21 October 2010

09:45	Meeting with Mr Ramil Usubov, Ministry of Internal Affairs
10:00-11:00	Meeting with Mr Ilham Aliyev, President of the Republic of Azerbaijan
13.00 -14.00	Press Conference

Appendix 3

Azerbaijan's elections were peaceful and the opposition participated, but the process overall was not sufficient to constitute meaningful progress in democratic development

Strasbourg, 08.11.2010 – Yesterday's parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan were characterised by a peaceful atmosphere and all opposition parties participated in the political process, but the conduct of these elections overall was not sufficient to constitute meaningful progress in the democratic development of the country, international observers said in a statement issued today.

The observers noted that the Central Election Commission overall administered the technical aspects of the electoral process well. But limitations of media freedom and freedom of assembly, and a deficient candidate registration process, further weakened the opposition and made vibrant political discourse almost impossible. This and a restricted competitive environment created an uneven playing field for candidates, making it difficult for voters to make an informed choice. On the positive side, voters had the opportunity to check the centralised voter register and request correction or inclusion, and the CEC conducted a voter education campaign, including in the media. Voting on election day was assessed positively in almost 90 per cent of the polling stations visited, while serious problems were noted in 10 per cent. Counting deteriorated, with almost a third of polling stations observed rated bad or very bad, with worrying problems like ballot box stuffing noted in a number of places.

"It is never easy to do justice to a country which is developing its democratic institutions, especially in a difficult environment. We have seen the many efforts made to make progress and the areas in which the country does very well, and we welcome them as much as the hospitality demonstrated by all our interlocutors. However, despite all the efforts made, the country needs to do much more to make progress in developing a truly pluralist democracy," said Wolfgang Grossruck, who led the short-term OSCE observer mission and headed the delegation of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly.

"In a welcome departure from the past, the run-up to the elections and election day were peaceful and not marred by violent incidents, all opposition parties opted to participate in the political process, sometimes running as part of electoral blocs, rather than to boycott it, as was the case in the past. A positive environment was created by good co-operation between the authorities, international institutions and the domestic actors," said Paul Wille, head of the delegation of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly (PACE).

"Economic growth and stability are evident in Azerbaijan. Sustainability of this situation can only be reinforced by greater political liberalisation and democratisation of the country. Independent observers have reported vote count irregularities, harassment of opposition observers and ballot box stuffing. Azerbaijan has to make further efforts to ensure greater democratisation," said Anneli Jäätteenmaki, Head of the delegation of the European Parliament.

"Regrettably, our observation of the overall process shows that the conditions necessary for a meaningful democratic election were not established. We are particularly concerned about restrictions of fundamental freedoms, media bias, the dominance of public life by one party, and serious violations on election day. We stand ready to assist the authorities in moving Azerbaijan's elections towards meeting OSCE commitments," said Ambassador Audrey Glover, Head of the OSCE/ODIHR long-term election observation mission.

Contacts:

Jens-Hagen Eschenbächer, OSCE/ODIHR, +994 (0) 502252281 or +48 603 683 122, jens.eschenbaecher@odihr.pl

Petra Jezkova, OSCE PA, +994 (0) 502507318 or +45 6010 8173, petra@oscepa.dk

Vladimir Dronov, PACE, +994 (0) 507833741 or +33 663 49 37 92, vladimir.dronov@coe.int

Alina Alexandra Georgescu, EP, +994 (0) 502255584 or +32 498 981 364, alina.georgescu@europarl.europa.eu