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Threshold levels in parliamentary elections, and their impact on representativity of parliaments in Council of Europe member states

Motion for a recommendation

tabled by Mr Andreas GROSS and other members of the Assembly

This motion has not been discussed in the Assembly and commits only those who have signed it

Free and fair elections are a precondition for democracy.

Representative democracy is a core principle of a democratic system.

The question of representativity of parliaments, and the right of all citizens to be represented, is a major challenge for the whole democratic process.

The question of thresholds is closely linked to the representativity of democracy.

The need to achieve stable parliamentary majorities cannot justify the exclusion of significant numbers of citizens from their right to be represented in parliaments.

As a result of a 10% threshold in parliamentary elections held in Turkey in 2002, 45% of voters were not represented in the parliament. The fact that the new parliament elected in 2007 is more representative and reflects about 90% of the vote cast is mainly due to the fact that the opposition parties launched party-sponsored independent candidates who are not bound by the threshold at the national level. The question of a threshold in parliamentary elections in Turkey is pending before the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights.

There was a similar case during Russian parliamentary elections in 1995, with a 5% threshold excluding parties which received more than 20% of votes. And yet, since then, the threshold in the Russian Federation has increased to 7%. If it was not dramatically reflected in the 2007 elections, it is because of increased support for the winning party (United Russia).

In Georgia, following the recent crisis, a 7% threshold has been lowered to 5%, which is still relatively high. In several other Council of Europe member states, there are similar thresholds.

In the Ukrainian elections of March 2006, for which there was a 3% threshold, 22% of voters were effectively disenfranchised, having voted for minor candidates. One party, People's Opposition Bloc of Natalia Vitrenko, received over 3% of the formal vote but failed to obtain 3% of the overall vote (which includes informal ballot papers, that is, votes that are blank or incorrectly filled out).

Election thresholds can produce a spoiler effect, where minor parties, unable to overcome thresholds, take votes away from other parties with similar ideologies thus altering the final outcome and balance of power.



Confronted with a threshold, fledgling parties often find themselves in a vicious circle – if they are perceived as having no chance of meeting the threshold, they often cannot gain popular support, and continue to have little chance of meeting the threshold.

The mere existence of a threshold may have a discouraging effect on parties who sometimes decide not to present candidates at all.

In more advanced stages of democracy, all political views and interests should be represented. The Assembly calls on the Committee of Ministers to assess the impact of high thresholds and equivalent measures on the representativity of parliaments in different electoral systems in Council of Europe member states.

Signed (see overleaf)

*Signed*¹:

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