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Observation of the parliamentary elections in Armenia (2 April 2017)

Election observation report

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1. Introduction

1. On 23 January 2017, the Bureau of the Assembly took note of the invitation letter sent on 12 January by the President of the National Assembly of Armenia to observe the parliamentary elections on 2 April 2017, decided to observe these elections and constituted an ad hoc committee for this purpose composed of 30 members (EPP/CD: 11; SOC: 10; EC: 4; ALDE: 4, UEL: 1 – in accordance with the D'Hondt system) as well as of the co-rapporteurs of the Monitoring Committee, and authorised a pre-electoral mission.

2. On 27 January 2017, the Bureau approved the list of members of the ad hoc committee (subject to receiving their declarations on conflict of interest) and appointed Ms Liliane Maury Pasquier (Switzerland, SOC) as its Chairperson. The list of members appears in Appendix 1.

3. In line with the co-operation agreement signed between the Parliamentary Assembly and the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) on 4 October 2004, a representative of the Venice Commission was invited to join the ad hoc committee as a legal adviser.

4. A pre-electoral delegation visited Yerevan on 22 and 23 February 2017. Its programme, statement and composition appear in Appendices 2 and 3.



5. For the observation of the parliamentary elections, the ad hoc committee operated in the framework of an International Election Observation Mission (IEOM) together with delegations from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the European Parliament and with the election observation mission (EOM) of the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR).
6. The ad hoc committee ("PACE delegation") met in Armenia from 31 March to 3 April 2017 to observe the parliamentary elections on 2 April. The programme of the delegation's meetings is set out in Appendix 4.
7. On polling day, the PACE delegation split into 12 teams which observed the elections in Yerevan and its surrounding areas as well as in the following regions and municipalities: Kotayk, Gegharkunik, Gyumri, Aragatsotn, Armavir, Tavush, Lori and Ararat.
8. The following day, the IEOM held a joint press conference and issued a "Statement of preliminary findings and conclusions" and a press release (Appendix 5).

2. Political background

9. Following constitutional amendments, approved in a referendum on 6 December 2015, Armenia is transitioning from a semi-presidential to a parliamentary political system. The amendments reduced the powers of the president in favour of the prime minister and the parliament and changed the electoral system from a majoritarian one to a largely proportional system, with 13 district lists. These were the first elections to be held under the new political system.
10. At the last parliamentary elections in 2012, the Republican Party of Armenia (RPA) won 69 seats out of 131 and formed the government. In 2016, it entered a coalition with the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), which held five seats. The parliamentary opposition included Prosperous Armenia (PA) with 33 seats, the Armenian National Congress (ANC) with 7 seats, Armenian Renaissance (AR) with 5 seats, and Heritage with 4 seats.

3. Legal framework

11. Parliamentary elections are regulated by a comprehensive legal framework, primarily consisting of the amended Constitution, the 2016 Electoral Code, and the regulations and decisions of the Central Election Commission (CEC). The reform process that led to the new Electoral Code was characterised as inclusive and seen by most IEOM interlocutors as a step forward in building overall confidence in the electoral process. Civil society organisations were initially involved in the discussions on the draft Electoral Code, but did not endorse the final text, as their calls to ease restrictions on citizen observers were not addressed.
12. The new Electoral Code, which was adopted less than one year before election day, addressed a significant number of previous Venice Commission recommendations. It provides for improved voter identification, measures to enhance the independence of election authorities, removal of the mandatory test for citizen observers, and an increased gender quota on candidate lists. Amendments also clarified important provisions related to campaigning, campaign finance, candidate registration and complaints and appeals. The Code additionally provided for publication of the signed voters lists, the use of voter authentication devices (VADs) as well as web cameras on election day to identify voters and prevent multiple voting, impersonation and fraud.
13. However, some prior Venice Commission recommendations remain unaddressed, including those related to narrow rules on legal standing for submitting electoral complaints; citizenship and residency requirements for candidates, as contained in the Constitution; electoral thresholds for alliances to enter parliament; formation of candidate lists for national minorities; and exclusion of organisational expenditures from campaign finance reporting. A number of IEOM interlocutors also expressed concerns about complicated voting procedures, limitations on the number of citizen observers and journalists allowed in polling stations, and criminal sanctions for negligent or intentional reporting of incorrect information from the signed voters lists. Some of these issues proved to be problematic during these elections.
14. The new electoral system is very complex. A minimum of 101 members of parliament are elected through a two-tier proportional system, with candidates elected from a single national list and 13 district lists. To qualify for the distribution of seats, political parties must pass a threshold of 5%, while alliances of parties must pass 7%. The system also provides for a total of up to four reserved seats for the largest national minorities (Yezidis, Russians, Assyrians and Kurds). In line with the Electoral Code, a "stable parliamentary

majority" (defined as 54% of seats) must be achieved to form a government. If a stable majority is not formed as a result of the elections, or by forming a political coalition within six days of the finalisation of the results, a second round is held between the top two candidate lists 28 days after election day.

15. Some IEOM interlocutors criticised the complexity of the electoral system and its deviations from a purely proportional system and raised concerns that there was a lack of efforts to raise public awareness as to how votes would transfer into seats.

16. The ballot paper includes one page with the national list and one page with the district candidates. The district candidates have to appear on the national list. The voter can, in addition to choosing a ballot with the list of the party, also give a preference vote to a district candidate. Some considered that the new electoral system, with a preference vote to a district candidate, gave the opportunity to local businessmen and wealthy candidates to use illegally important administrative and finance resources, given the very weak control mechanisms of the funding of election campaigns and political parties.

17. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has observed all parliamentary and presidential elections in Armenia since 1995. From 2000 to 2016, the Venice Commission adopted more than 20 opinions on different aspects of the electoral legal framework of Armenia, mostly further to requests from the authorities of Armenia.

18. Despite this considerable number of opinions and the subsequent amendments of the electoral legal framework, many recurrent electoral issues observed by international observation missions during previous elections still remain unaddressed.

4. Electoral administration, voters lists and registration of candidates

19. The elections were administered by a three-tiered system, comprising the CEC, 38 territorial election commissions (TECs), and 2 009 precinct election commissions (PECs). The CEC is a permanent and professional body, composed of seven members elected by parliament for a six-year term. All CEC members were re-elected in October 2016 by a strong majority vote in parliament.

20. The CEC conducted its work in a transparent manner and generally operated collegially and efficiently, meeting legal deadlines; however, it did not pursue complaints rigorously. Its sessions were attended by observers, media, and party representatives and were streamed online. Decisions and agendas were published in a timely fashion on the CEC website. The CEC approved rules of procedure for TECs and PECs and guidelines for observers and proxies. The new Electoral Code empowers the CEC to issue legally binding instructions to ensure uniform implementation of the law. However, the CEC instead opted to issue clarifications to lower-level commissions, which were not regarded as legally binding, detracting from legal certainty.

21. The CEC developed and disseminated a wide variety of printed and audiovisual voter education materials on new election day procedures. However, the distribution of printed materials was not sufficiently wide to reach voters in remote areas.

22. Materials were provided in accessible formats for people with disabilities. No voter education material was produced in minority languages.

23. The TECs, formed in 2016, are professional bodies composed of seven members appointed by the CEC for six-year terms. The TECs are responsible for supervising PECs, handling complaints against PECs, recounts, and tabulating the results. The PECs were formed on 11 March for the organisation of voting and counting. While many IEOM interlocutors expressed confidence in the work of the TECs, the impartiality of PECs was questioned due to the distribution of leadership positions that favoured the governing parties. The quality of training organised by the CEC for the PECs was generally evaluated positively. However, the complexity of election day procedures prompted concerns about the capacity of PECs to administer them.

24. Women are well represented in the election administration. Three of the seven CEC members are women, including the deputy chairperson. Women comprise 35% of TEC members, but with only 16% in leadership positions. IEOM observers reported a higher proportion of women in PEC compositions (some 57%, including 39% chairpersons in the PECs observed).

25. All citizens over the age of 18 on election day are eligible to vote, unless declared incompetent by a court decision. In line with a prior OSCE/ODIHR and Venice Commission recommendation, the amended Constitution grants prisoners convicted for lesser offenses the right to vote. Voter registration is passive and voters lists are based on the State Population Register, which is maintained by the Passport and Visa

Department (PVD) of the police, and includes all voters with an official permanent residence in Armenia. The voters register, as at 28 March, contained a total of 2 654 195 voters, including a significant number of voters who are residing abroad and maintain an official residence in Armenia. In addition, special lists are maintained for military voters and those imprisoned or in temporary detention.

26. The improvement of inter-institutional collaboration, including integration of computer systems and staff communication between the PVD and the Ministry of Justice, led to enhanced accuracy and inclusiveness of the voters lists, including the removal of deceased voters. The Electoral Code provides sufficient mechanisms for voters to request corrections to the PVD. However, voters lists continue to include addresses where a high number of voters are still registered: there are some 2 500 addresses where 15 or more voters are registered at the same address. This requires further scrutiny by the authorities.

27. In response to long-standing requests of the opposition and civil society, and in an effort to prevent voter impersonation on election day, significant measures were implemented to enhance the transparency of the registration process. The preliminary and final voters lists were posted at polling stations for public scrutiny on 21 February and on 30 March respectively. As required by law, the PVD also published the entire preliminary and final voters lists on its website. In addition, the CEC planned to publish scanned copies of the signed voters lists from all PECs by 3 April, allowing for public checks of those who voted but were allegedly abroad. All IEOM interlocutors regarded this as an important deterrent to potential fraud, despite concerns over the disclosure of voters' private data. However, such measures should not substitute effective action to be taken by authorities against those who engage in electoral malfeasance.

28. In a step to facilitate the right to vote, voters had the possibility to change their registration to a temporary residence where they were physically located on election day. However, several political parties and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) expressed concerns that some district candidates pressured voters to change their registration to districts where they were running. The PVD officers reported that there were no organised efforts to transport and re-register voters where they do not live.

29. In a further effort to prevent potential electoral fraud through impersonation and misuse of voters list entries, voters were identified on election day through the use of VADs, which contained an electronic copy of the voters lists. Voters' IDs were scanned to determine if the voter was registered in that polling station and if the voter had already been marked in the system as having voted. Voters' fingerprints were also scanned and the CEC reported to the IEOM that it planned to conduct cross-checks to identify potential cases of multiple voting in case of complaints. The introduction of the VADs was welcomed by most IEOM interlocutors as a useful tool for building confidence in the integrity of election day proceedings.

30. In an inclusive process, the CEC registered the candidate lists of all five political parties and four party alliances that applied, with a total of 1 558 candidates for these elections: Armenian Renaissance (AR), Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), Communist Party of Armenia (CPA), Congress-Armenian People's Party Alliance (CoAPP), Free Democrats (FD), Ohanyan-Raffi-Oskanian Alliance (ORO), Republican Party of Armenia (RPA), Tsarukyan Alliance (TsA) and Yelk Alliance.

31. Candidates were required to be an eligible voter, at least 25 years old, reside in and be a citizen of only Armenia for the preceding four years, and have a command of the Armenian language. Addressing a prior recommendation of the OSCE/ODIHR and the Venice Commission, the language test administered by the Ministry of Education and Science was based on reasonable and objective criteria.

32. However, candidacy restriction based on citizenship of another State is at odds with international jurisprudence.

33. Candidate lists could be submitted by political parties and party alliances. While a list may include non-party members, the law does not provide a possibility for candidates to stand individually. Each contending party submitted a single national list with a minimum of 80 candidates and district lists corresponding to the 13 electoral districts. Only the AR, CoAPP, RPA and TsA nominated candidates for the national minority list. Some other parties which the IEOM met reported difficulties in finding minority candidates that were not loyal to the ruling party. Parties and alliances submitted a financial deposit that is refunded if the list receives more than 4% of the valid vote.

34. All the contending parties complied with the Electoral Code requirement that each gender must be represented by at least 25% of candidates on the national lists, with each gender appearing in each group of four candidates. In a positive development, the gender quota applied also to the distribution of obtained and vacant seats. Almost 30% of registered candidates were women.

5. Election campaign and finance and media environment

35. The official electoral campaign started on 5 March and ended on 1 April, 24 hours before election day. The campaign started slowly and intensified as election day approached. Depending on available resources, parties campaigned through rallies, car parades, door-to-door canvassing, posters, media advertisements and social media. Most campaigns focused on individual candidates rather than political platforms or policies. Women were active as candidates; however, party platforms did not directly address issues related to gender equality. Contending parties and candidates were largely able to campaign without restrictions, but isolated incidents of violence were reported in some areas of the country.

36. In an effort to prevent abuse of administrative resources, the Electoral Code prohibits campaigning by government officials while performing their activities and the use of public buildings for campaigning. On a positive note, many government officials in the regions involved in the campaign took leave for these purposes, while central government officials, including the Prime Minister, campaigned mostly on weekends.

37. Widespread allegations of vote buying to vote for certain parties were reported throughout the country and the IEOM received many credible reports directly from the public. Several interlocutors, including some government officials, indicated that vote buying had become an entrenched part of political culture stating that accepting money or other benefits in exchange for votes was often justified by extreme poverty and lack of economic opportunities. This created an atmosphere in which overall public confidence in the electoral process was diminished.

38. The IEOM also received credible reports of pressure and intimidation on voters, especially on private and public sector employees. According to information obtained by the Union of Informed Citizens, 114 school principals admitted that they had collected lists of names of teachers and parents of students who would support the RPA. These lists were then submitted to local authorities. Two political parties filed complaints with the CEC claiming that it was an abuse of administrative resources. Although voters were generally free to obtain information on all contending parties, some opposition parties informed the IEOM that their supporters were put under pressure not to attend their rallies.

39. Several public employees informed international observers that, on 15 March, the Governor of the Syunik region instructed them to vote for the RPA. The head of a cultural centre in Syunik requested his staff to create lists of RPA supporters. Teachers were threatened that they would be fired if they would not vote for the RPA. Teachers, doctors and other public employees were asked by their supervisors to attend meetings with an RPA candidate in the city of Armavir. A private company owner in Yerevan threatened his employees that they would be fired if they would not provide him with a list of a sufficient number of potential RPA supporters.

40. Collectively, the widespread allegations of vote buying and pressure on and intimidation of voters had a negative impact on the campaign and raised concerns about voters' ability to cast their votes free of fear of retribution.

41. In line with the law, all the parties contesting the elections opened a special bank account for their campaign finance transactions, which could include contributions from voters, personal funds of candidates and parties. Contributions from legal entities, as well as from foreign and anonymous sources, were not allowed. The law limited campaign expenses to AMD 500 million (approximately €950 000) per candidate for the first round.

42. Following prior recommendations made by the OSCE/ODIHR and the Venice Commission, some legal provisions for campaign finance reporting and oversight were strengthened. Under the Electoral Code, the Oversight and Audit Service (OAS) should act independently from the CEC; however, the CEC appoints the head of the OAS and the law does not clearly set out its institutional status or working methods. In addition, the OAS cannot initiate any administrative proceedings on its own or challenge a CEC decision. Six auditors were appointed by the parliamentary parties to work with the OAS, but their activities were not sufficiently regulated or implemented consistently. Overall, the OAS did not have a proactive approach to monitoring campaign finance.

43. All the contending parties submitted two financial reports before election day, declaring donations and expenditures. The OAS did not identify violations of campaign finance and published information on total income and expenditures of candidates on the CEC's website. A list of donors was provided by the Central Bank to the OAS every three days, but this information was not published. Despite a prior OSCE/ODIHR and Venice Commission recommendation, so-called organisational expenditures such as for campaign offices, transport and communication were excluded from campaign finance reporting. These factors diminished the transparency and integrity of the campaign finance system.

44. Freedom of expression is guaranteed by the Constitution and was broadly exercised. Numerous media operate in Armenia, but the media landscape is characterised by a limited and politically affiliated advertising market which leaves room for only a few self-sustainable media outlets. Major commercial television stations are reportedly financed by businessmen in order to promote their political and commercial interests, often perceived by IEOM interlocutors to be affiliated with the government. The ultimate ownership of media outlets is not transparent.

45. Journalists informed the IEOM that interference of media owners in their editorial autonomy results in self-censorship and discourages critical reporting of the government, including on public television. News stories of public interest related to the elections, including the publication of lists of supporters collected by principals of schools and electoral complaints heard by the CEC, were not covered by the public broadcaster H1 prime-time news but were covered in other media. Journalists also reported that recent cases of violence against journalists and insufficient prosecution undermine their safety and hinder their work. On a positive note, there is no interference in internet freedom, with online news sources contributing to increased media pluralism and critical reporting of the government. In addition, some online media outlets, financed by international donors, provide space for in-depth and investigative journalism.

46. The Electoral Code stipulates that television and radio must provide “impartial and non-judgmental” news coverage of candidates’ campaigns. This provision is vague and was not clarified by the body which oversees implementation of media-related provisions during the campaign, the National Commission for Television and Radio (NCTR). Many TV journalists interpreted this provision to mean that they must provide an equal amount of coverage to every candidate in each programme and complained that this limited substantial campaign reporting. The NCTR did not communicate any guidance on how inequality of coverage would be assessed.

47. During the campaign, the public broadcaster H1 broadcast a total of 60 minutes free airtime per contending party, in line with the law. In addition, all contending parties purchased political advertising on monitored TV stations under equal conditions. OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission monitoring results showed that during the campaign the public H1 devoted an equitable share of airtime to all contending parties in its newscasts. Armenia TV devoted almost double the news coverage to the RPA and CoAPP (21% and 19% respectively) than to each of the other contending parties. Kentron TV devoted significantly more news coverage (18%) to the TsA than to other contending parties. Shant TV devoted 20% of the news to the RPA while giving between 7% and 12% to the others. Yerkir Media favoured the ARF with 25% of its news leaving the others with 6% to 13% of coverage. The news coverage on all monitored TV stations was 98% neutral or positive in tone. However, media monitoring results for the period from 24 February to 4 March, before the start of official campaign, revealed a clear bias of monitored TV stations in favour of their publicly perceived party affiliation.

48. Generally, the amount of campaign-related coverage on the most popular TV stations Armenia TV, Shant TV, and the public H1 was limited and prime-time programming during the campaign was dominated by entertainment programmes. Kentron TV and Yerkir Media provided more election-related coverage, including interviews and discussion programmes. They have, however, less audience share. There were no televised candidate debates on major TV stations, including H1, which could have enhanced the opportunity of voters to compare electoral programmes of the contending parties and allowed opposition parties to challenge the ruling parties in live public broadcasts.

6. Complaints and appeals

49. Under the Electoral Code, decisions, actions and inactions of election commissions can be appealed to the superior commission, while complaints against the CEC are under the jurisdiction of the Administrative Court. Complaints against election results are solely under the Constitutional Court’s purview. Contrary to a previous OSCE/ODIHR recommendation, the Electoral Code limits the right to file complaints to those whose personal electoral rights are at stake. Only candidates, not voters, can appeal the final election results, contrary to international standards and good practice. Overall, the new timelines for filing and resolving complaints are reasonable.

50. Despite a substantial number of allegations raised throughout the process, a limited amount of complaints were filed with the election administration and courts. The CEC received 15 complaints, including four from candidates. The other nine complaints came from NGOs and were subsequently denied for lack of standing; however the CEC took up the issues *ex officio*.

51. All complaints related to campaign violations, including allegations related to campaign offices located in State-owned buildings, promising goods and services to voters, abuse of administrative resources, and campaigning while performing official functions.

52. The CEC rejected two complaints in which parties requested de-registration of the RPA for abuse of administrative resources for engaging schools principals and teachers in the collection of lists of supporters. The CEC found that there was no evidence that principals and teachers were collecting the signatures while performing their official duties or during the campaign period. Although the CEC examined some of the alleged facts, they were reluctant to thoroughly consider contentious issues, including possible pressure on and intimidation of teachers to collect the signatures.

53. TECs received no official complaints but proactively initiated administrative proceedings in relation to campaign violations, including destruction of campaign materials, in some 50 cases. The Administrative Court received two complaints from two prospective candidates who were refused residency certificates and six appeals against CEC decisions, including on campaign issues and denial of accreditation of media representatives. All were rejected.

54. The Prosecutor General's working group on election-related offences has identified some 225 cases from media sources, mostly related to vote buying and obstruction of voting rights; 57 cases, including 46 about vote buying, were investigated by the police. The vast majority of cases were dismissed due to lack of evidence. While the 2016 amendments to the Criminal Code decriminalised the receiving of a bribe, if reported, public reluctance to report vote buying persisted. Additionally, the Ombudsperson reviewed 148 allegations, mostly related to campaign violations, and referred five cases to the law-enforcement bodies.

55. Most IEOM interlocutors stated that there is a public reluctance to report electoral offences due to lack of confidence in the effectiveness of the complaint adjudication system. The lack of independence of the judiciary, election administration and law-enforcement bodies, the limited right to file complaints, and the manner in which election administration dealt with complaints undermined the credibility of electoral dispute resolution and the effectiveness of legal redress, at odds with Council of Europe and other international standards.

7. Citizen and international observers

56. The law provides for international and citizen observation and entitles party proxies to be present at polling stations. In order to be accredited, citizen observer groups are required to adopt an internal code of conduct for their observers and to hold their own training courses. Despite prior OSCE/ODIHR and Venice Commission recommendations, the new Electoral Code requires citizen observer groups to include in their charter explicit aims related to democracy and human rights protection for at least one year preceding the call of elections, thereby narrowing the opportunity to observe. Due to non-compliance with this requirement, the CEC refused accreditation of two citizen organisations.

57. Some NGOs informed the IEOM that the 15-day deadline for applications for observer's accreditation also created hurdles in mobilising observers.

58. The CEC accredited 49 citizen organisations with a total of 28 021 observers as well as 640 international observers. Some IEOM interlocutors regarded a number of citizen organisations as being affiliated with some district candidates. All international NGOs were officially refused an invitation to observe the elections with a formal explanation that there was already a high number of observers accredited. Media and civil society criticised the Electoral Code provisions, which introduced the possibility to selectively limit the number of citizen observers and media representatives at polling stations, but this was not an issue on election day.

8. Polling day

59. Election day was generally calm and peaceful, with no serious incidents reported anywhere in the country. However, IEOM observers noted tension (6% of observations) and intimidation of voters (3%) taking place inside and outside the polling stations. This was generally as a result of large numbers of party proxies and others who were present around polling stations throughout the day (as had happened in the past and as was already mentioned in previous Parliamentary Assembly election observation reports). The police did not consistently enforce the law prohibiting crowds from gathering in front of polling stations.

60. The opening of polling stations was assessed positively in 95% of observations. The procedures were generally followed and polling stations opened on time. However, ballots boxes were not shown to be empty and then sealed in 5% of polling stations observed.

61. The voting process was assessed negatively in 12% of observations. This was primarily due to overcrowding, poor queue control and voters having difficulties in understanding voting procedures. Although procedures were generally followed, voters did not always vote in secret and group voting, including family voting, was noted in 10% of observations. IEOM observers saw voters deliberately showing their ballot to party proxies before sliding them in the ballot boxes. TV crews, some allegedly sent by the CEC, were observed filming closely the IDs of the voters. Cameras were seen behind the voting booths in a number of polling stations, and IEOM observers were told that those cameras were not working; however, voters could not know this.

62. IEOM observers noted some cases of serious violations, including attempts to influence the voters' choice, proxy voting, and the same person accompanying multiple voters into voting booths. A significant number of polling stations (69%) were not accessible to persons with disabilities.

63. Party proxies were present in 97% of polling stations observed and citizen observers in 94%, contributing to the transparency of the process. However, in 12% of observations proxies, citizen observers, local officials or police were seen to be interfering in the conduct of the elections, sometimes assuming the leading role in the polling station. In addition, large groups of people were present in the immediate vicinity of polling stations in 30% of cases, with tensions and direct intimidation of voters seen in a number of cases.

64. Many citizen observers whom the IEOM observers met in polling stations clearly had no idea about the goal or activities of the NGOs they were claiming to belong to, which led to the conclusion that many of the domestic NGOs observing elections were in fact fake NGOs.

65. The process of voter identification by means of voter authentication devices was conducted efficiently and without significant issues. There were some problems with scanning of ID documents and fingerprints; however, this did not lead to significant disruptions of voting. IEOM observers noted nine cases of voters attempting multiple voting that were captured by the voter authentication devices. The devices provided the possibility for voters to be redirected if they were registered in another polling station in the same TEC.

66. For the first time, web cameras were installed in the 1 499 largest polling stations in these elections, so that election day procedures could be recorded and observed via the internet. Due to technical issues, the public online streaming was not available for all polling stations, especially in the morning on election day; however, the contending parties and the CEC had uninterrupted access to all cameras through direct connection to servers throughout the day. After closing, a number of polling stations were set up by PECs in such a way that the counting procedures could not be followed via the web cameras in a meaningful manner.

67. The vote count was conducted largely in a transparent manner, with those present generally having a clear view of counting procedures and the possibility to examine ballots on request. The process was assessed negatively in some 20% of observations, mostly due to interference of party proxies and observers who directly participated in the counting of votes. Procedures were generally followed; however, the PECs did not determine the validity of ballots in a consistent and reasonable manner and transparency was, at times, undermined by not showing ballot papers to all present and counting ballots for district candidates one by one.

68. The tabulation process started immediately after the results protocols were delivered from the PECs to the TECs. IEOM observers assessed the tabulation process positively in 33 of the 38 TECs observed. The processing of PEC results protocols in the TECs was generally well organised. The observers noted some cases of changing of protocol figures due to mathematical errors; however, no deliberate falsification was observed. The CEC started publishing the preliminary results online shortly after midnight, broken down by polling station, providing for transparency of election results.

69. The official results of the parliamentary elections, according to the CEC, are as follows:

- Yelk (Way out) Alliance – 122 065 (9 seats)
- Free Democrats Party – 14 739
- Armenian Renaissance Party – 58 265
- Tsarukyan Alliance – 428 836 (31 seats)
- Armenian National Congress–Armenian People's Party Alliance – 25 950
- Republican Party of Armenia – 770 441 (58 seats)

- Communist Party of Armenia – 11 741
- Ohanyan-Raffi-Oskanian Alliance – 32 508
- Armenian Revolutionary Federation Party – 103 048 (7 seats)

The total number of voters was 1 575 786.

70. On 14 April, the alliance Armenian National Congress–Armenian People’s Party appealed to the Constitutional Court of Armenia to cancel the official results of the 2 April 2017 parliamentary elections because of alleged serious electoral irregularities. The opposition alliance presented the court with more than 40 pages of different documents as well as video and audio records concerning the irregularities. The CEC rejected the demand and on 28 April the Constitutional Court rejected it as well.

9. Conclusions

71. The parliamentary elections of 2 April 2017 were well administered and fundamental freedoms were generally respected. Despite welcomed reforms of the legal framework and the introduction of new technologies to reduce the incidents of electoral irregularities, the elections were tainted by credible information about vote buying, and pressure on civil servants and employees of private companies. This contributed to maintaining an overall lack of public confidence and trust in the elections.

72. Election day was generally calm and peaceful but marked by organisational problems and undue interference in the process, mostly by party representatives.

73. The legal framework for elections is comprehensive but complex. The new Electoral Code was adopted less than one year before the elections in a reform process that was characterised as inclusive and seen by most IEOM interlocutors as a step forward in building overall confidence in the electoral process. A number of previous Venice Commission recommendations were addressed, although some areas merit further attention. Some IEOM interlocutors criticised the complexity of the new electoral system. Civil society organisations did not endorse the final text because of restrictions on citizen observers.

74. The CEC met all legal deadlines and conducted its work in a transparent manner while operating collegially and efficiently. However, the CEC did not pursue complaints rigorously.

75. Many IEOM interlocutors expressed confidence in the work of the territorial election commissions. The impartiality of precinct election commissions was questioned due to the distribution of leadership positions favouring the ruling party. The quality of training sessions organised by the CEC for lower-level commissions and voter education materials was, overall, evaluated positively, but the printed materials did not always reach their target audience.

76. The accuracy of the voters lists was improved as a result of enhanced inter-institutional collaboration. Although the law provides sufficient mechanisms for voters to request corrections, the voters lists continue to include addresses where a high number of voters are registered; there is a need for further scrutiny of the lists by the authorities.

77. Voters were identified on election day through the use of voter authentication devices, which contained an electronic copy of the voters lists. Voters’ fingerprints were also scanned and the CEC informed the IEOM that it would conduct cross-checks to identify potential cases of multiple voting in case of complaints. For the first time, scanned copies of signed voters lists from PECs will be published, which is regarded as an important deterrent to voter impersonation despite the disclosure of voters’ private data.

78. In an inclusive process, the CEC registered candidate lists of five political parties and four party alliances. For the first time, the system provided for four reserve seats for minorities; however, some parties reported difficulties in finding minority candidates. All the contending parties complied with the requirement that each gender must appear in each group of four candidates and, out of a total of 1 558 candidates 30% were women. In a positive development, the gender quota applied also to the distribution of obtained and vacant seats.

79. Most campaigns focused on individual candidates rather than party platforms or policies. Candidates were largely able to campaign without restrictions, but isolated incidents of violence were reported in some areas of the country. It should be noted that many government officials took leave for campaign purposes.

80. Some legal provisions for campaign finance reporting and oversight were strengthened, but so-called organisational expenditures, such as for campaign offices, transport and communication are excluded from reporting, which diminished transparency. Before election day, all contending parties submitted to the CEC's Oversight and Audit Service (OAS) reports on campaign income and expenditure, which were published online. While no violations of campaign finance were identified by the OAS, it did not proactively examine the accuracy of the reports.

81. Freedom of expression is guaranteed by the Constitution and broadly exercised. However, the freedom of broadcast media is limited by the interference of owners in editorial autonomy. This results in self-censorship of journalists and discouragement of critical reporting of the government, including on public television. Journalists stated that recent cases of violence and lack of prosecution hamper journalists' work and undermine their safety. There is, however, no interference in internet freedom, with online news sources contributing to increased political pluralism in the media. Media monitoring of the campaign period showed that the public channel H1 devoted equitable coverage to each contending party in its newscasts.

82. Most IEOM interlocutors stated that there is a continuing public reluctance to report electoral offences due to lack of confidence in the effectiveness of the complaint adjudication system. The lack of independence of the judiciary, election administration and law-enforcement bodies, and the manner in which they dealt with complaints undermined the effectiveness of legal redress, in contradiction with Council of Europe standards.

83. Election day was generally calm and peaceful. Voting procedures were generally followed and the voter authentication devices functioned effectively. However, the voting process was marked by overcrowding, long queues and interference by party representatives and police. Crowds were allowed to gather outside polling stations, contrary to the law. Voters had difficulties understanding the voting process in 35% of observations and instances of group voting and attempts to influence voters were observed. The vote count was conducted in a transparent manner. IEOM observers assessed the tabulation process positively in 33 of the 38 TECs observed.

84. As a conclusion, after observing the parliamentary elections of 2 April 2017, the PACE delegation reiterates the declaration of the pre-electoral delegation, which stated that the electoral legislation allows for the organisation of free and democratic elections, if it is applied in good faith and if there is a political will. However, the PACE delegation still feels that the legislation is too complicated and believes that this contributes to the maintaining of the existing distrust in electoral processes in Armenia.

85. The PACE delegation stresses that, in previous observations of elections in Armenia, the PACE, ODIHR and other international observers criticised the country for cases of misuse of administrative resources, allegations of vote buying and intimidation or even physical violence towards voters. The delegation noticed that these concerns are still widespread. It stresses also that new technologies are welcome in electoral processes, but that they must never be considered as a substitute for trust.

86. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the Venice Commission will continue to work alongside the authorities of Armenia in the field of elections and more generally on the reinforcement of democratic institutions through co-operation activities.

Appendix 1 – Composition of the ad hoc committee

Based on the proposals by the political groups of the Assembly, the ad hoc committee was composed as follows:

Chairperson: Liliane MAURY PASQUIER, Switzerland (SOC)*

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

- Boriana ÅBERG, Sweden
- Luís LEITE RAMOS, Portugal
- Aleksander POCIEJ, Poland
- Volkmar VOGEL, Germany
- Maura HOPKINS, Ireland

Socialist Group (SOC)

- René ROUQUET, France
- Stefan SCHENNACH, Austria
- Angela SMITH, United Kingdom
- Pascale CROZON, France
- Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ, Switzerland
- Petra De SUTTER, Belgium
- Liliane MAURY PASQUIER, Switzerland
- Claude ADAM, Luxembourg
- Zviad KVATCHANTIRADZE, Georgia

European Conservatives Group (EC)

- Richard BALFE, United Kingdom
- Józef LEŚNIAK, Poland

Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)

- Nellija KLEINBERGA, Latvia
- Adele GAMBARO, Italy*
- Anne KALMARI, Finland
- Dovilė ŠAKALIENĖ, Lithuania

Venice Commission

- Richard BARRETT, Ireland, Member
- Simona GRANATA-MENGHINI, Deputy Secretary of the Venice Commission

Secretariat

- Bogdan TORCĂTORIU, Administrator, Election Observation and Interparliamentary Co-operation Division
- Franck DAESCHLER, Principal Administrative Assistant, Election Observation and Interparliamentary Co-operation Division

* members of the pre-election delegation

Appendix 2 – Programme of the pre-electoral mission (22-23 February 2017)

Wednesday 22 February 2017

- 09:15-09:45 Delegation meeting:
– briefing by Ms Natalia Voutova, Head of the Council of Europe Office in Yerevan, on the latest developments in the field of elections
- 09:45-10:30 Meeting with Ms Andrea Chalupova, Political Officer, European Union Delegation to Armenia
– discussion on the EU projects in the field of elections
- 10:30-11:15 Meeting with Mr Bradley Busetto, United Nations Resident Co-ordinator and representative of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
– discussion on the UN projects in the field of elections
- 11:15-12:15 Meeting with members of the diplomatic corps in Yerevan:
– Ambassador Lukas Gasser (Switzerland)
– Ambassador Giovanni Ricciulli (Italy)
– Ambassador Judith Farnworth (United Kingdom)
- 12:15-13:15 Meeting with Ambassador Jan Petersen, Head of the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission, Mr Donald Bisson, Deputy Head of Mission, and Mr Alexey Gromov, ODIHR Election Adviser
- 14:30-15:45 Round table with representatives of NGOs:
– Armenian Helsinki Committee: Mr Avetik Ishkhanyan (Chair)
– Helsinki Citizens' Assembly: Mr Arthur Sakunts (Chair)
– Transparency International: Ms Heriknaz Tigranyan (Legal Advisor)
– Open Society Institute: Ms Larisa Minasyan (Executive Director)
– Regional Studies Center: Mr David Shahnazaryan
- 15:45-17:00 Round table with media representatives:
– Yerevan Press Club: Ms Arevhat Grigoryan, Mr Mikayel Zolyan
– RFE/RL (Radio Liberty): Ms Siranush Gevorgyan
– A1 Plus: Ms Karine Asatryan
– *Aravot*: Ms Nelli Grigoryan
- 17:00-18:00 Meetings with leaders and representatives of non-parliamentary parties and/or blocs running in the elections:
- 17:00-17:30 The Unity bloc (including the following parties: “Heritage”, “Unity”):
– Mr Seyran Ohanyan, former Minister of Defence, member of the bloc
– Mr Vardan Oskanyan, Chairperson of the “Unity” Party, former Minister of Foreign Affairs
– Mr Armen Martirosyan, Vice-Chairperson of the “Heritage” Party
- 17:30-18:00 The “Yelk” (Way Out) bloc (including the following parties: “Civil Contract”, “Bright Armenia”, “Republic”)
– Mr Aram Sargsyan, Chairperson of the Republic Party

Thursday 23 February 2017

- 10:00-10:50 Meeting with the Delegation of Armenia to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (members present: Ms Hermine Naghdalyan, Mr Samvel Farmanyan, Ms Naira Zohrabyan, Mr Mikayel Melkumyan)
- 11:00-11:50 Meeting with Mr Tigran Mukuchyan, Chairperson of the Central Electoral Commission
- 12:00-12:25 Meeting with Mr Galust Sahakyan, President of the National Assembly of Armenia

- 14:00-14:30 Meeting with leaders and representatives of the “Armenian Revolutionary Federation” Faction: Mr Armen Rustamyan
- 14:35-15:05 Meeting with leaders and representatives of the “Rule of Law” Faction: Mr Mher Shahgeldyan
- 15:10-15:40 Meeting with leaders and representatives of the “Armenian National Congress” Faction: Mr Levon Zourabian
- 15:45-16:15 Meeting with leaders and representatives of the “Prosperous Armenia” Faction: Ms Naira Zohrabyan
- 16:20-16:50 Meeting with leaders and representatives of the “Republican” (RPA) Faction: Mr Gagik Melikyan, Ms Hermine Naghdalyan, Ms Margarit Yesayan, Ms Naira Karapetyan, Ms Ruzanna Muradyan, Mr Gagik Minasyan, Mr Samvel Farmanyan, Mr Vahram Mkrtychyan
- 17:00-19:00 Preparation and adoption of a statement

Appendix 3 – Statement by the pre-electoral delegation

Armenia: PACE delegation told about transparency of electoral process but also about widespread fears that past irregularities could recur

Strasbourg, 23.02.2017 – The pre-electoral delegation of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) supports the opinion of the Venice Commission, adopted in 2016, which concluded that the electoral legislation in Armenia allows for the organisation of free and democratic elections, if it is applied in good faith and if there is a political will. However, after having heard detailed explanations of the new electoral code, the delegation still felt that it was too complicated to be understood by the general public and believes that this may lead to confusion and add to existing distrust in the electoral process.

The delegation recalls that, in previous observations of elections in Armenia, the Parliamentary Assembly, ODIHR and other international observers criticised the country for cases of misuse of administrative resources, allegations of vote buying, intimidation or even physical violence towards electors during election campaigns. The delegation noted that concerns about potential abuse of State resources, organised vote buying, pressure on candidates and unbalanced media coverage are still widespread. It was told that new technologies would be used to prevent irregularities on election day. However, the delegation stressed that they must not be considered as a substitute for trust.

In this regard, concerning the elections scheduled for 2 April 2017, the pre-electoral delegation asks the relevant authorities to take all necessary measures, at all hierarchical levels and throughout the entire country, in order to prevent such practices in the period preceding polling day, as well as on polling day itself.

The delegation hopes, among other things, that on polling day both domestic and international observers will be allowed to observe freely, without fear of being expelled from polling stations if they point out irregularities. Retaliation for “false reporting” and official demands to the media for the disclosure of their sources are practices that must disappear. On the other hand, those responsible for any kind of irregularities, either during the campaign or on election day, must expect severe punishment.

The delegation felt that Armenia’s political culture still needs to be developed, as politics is linked to personalities rather than ideologies and political programmes with concrete proposals to address the numerous political, economic and sociological issues confronting the country. It heard that financing of certain opposition parties was strongly discouraged by intimidation, and that businessmen were at risk of seeing their businesses endangered, should they decide to sponsor those parties. The delegation was told about the danger of social resignation and passivity, and therefore underlines that, for the benefit of Armenian society, it is crucial that public confidence in the democratic electoral process be restored.

The PACE pre-electoral delegation* was in Yerevan at the invitation of the President of the National Assembly of Armenia. It met with the President of the National Assembly, the Chairman of the Central Electoral Commission, representatives of the main parliamentary and non-parliamentary political parties, NGO and media representatives, the Head of the OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission, representatives of international organisations and members of the diplomatic corps in Yerevan.

A full-fledged, 32-member team of PACE observers will arrive in Yerevan at the end of March to observe the vote.

* Liliane Maury Pasquier (Switzerland, SOC), Head of the Delegation, Ingebjørg Godskesen (Norway, EC), Adele Gambaro, (Italy, ALDE).

Appendix 4 – Programme of the International Election Observation Mission (31 March-3 April 2017)

Friday, 31 March 2017

- 10.30- 11.30 Meeting of the ad hoc committee:
- Opening by Ms Liliane Maury Pasquier, Head of Delegation
 - Comments by the members of the pre-electoral mission
 - Briefing by the Venice Commission on legal issues
 - Briefing by the Secretariat on operational issues
- 12:00-12:15
- Mr Ignacio Sánchez Amor, Special Co-ordinator of the OSCE Short-Term Observers
 - Mr Geir Bekkevold, Head of Delegation of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly
 - Ms Liliane Maury Pasquier, Head of Delegation of the PACE
 - Ms Heidi Hautala, Head of Delegation of the European Parliament
- 12:15-12:45
- Ambassador Argo Avakov, Head of the OSCE Office in Yerevan
 - Ms Loreta Vioiu, Deputy Head of the Council of Europe Office in Yerevan
 - Mr Dirk Lorenz, Acting Head of the European Union Delegation to Armenia
- 12:45-14:45 Briefing by the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission:
- Welcome – Ambassador Jan Petersen, Head of Mission
 - Political overview and candidates – Ms Dana Diacinu, Political Analyst
 - Legal framework and complaints – Ms Kseniya Dashutina, Legal Analyst
 - Election administration and candidate registration – Ms Svetlana Chetaikina, Election Analyst
 - Voter registration – Mr Goran Petrov, Voter Registration Analyst
 - Media environment – Ms Elma Šehalić, Media Analyst
 - Citizen observer groups – Ms Svetlana Chetaikina, Election Analyst
 - Security – Mr Davor Čorluka, Security Expert
- 15:30-16:15 Ms Arpine Hovhannisyan, Minister of Justice
- 16:15-17:00 Mr Tigran Mukuchyan, Chair of the Central Electoral Commission
- 17:00-18:00 Round table with media representatives:
- Mr Tigran Hakobyan, member of the National Commission on TV and Radio
 - Mr Boris Navasardyan, Chair, Yerevan Press Club
 - Ms Siranush Gevorgyan, Editor-in-Chief, Radio Free Europe/RL (Radio Liberty)
 - Ms Karine Asatryan, Editor-in-Chief, A1 Plus
 - Ms Nelli Grigoryan, Journalist, *Aravot*
 - Mr Harutyun Harutyunyan, Director of Information and Analytical Programs, Public Service TV
- 18:00-19:00 Round table with representatives of NGOs:
- Mr Avetik Ishkhanyan, Chair, Armenian Helsinki Committee
 - Mr Artur Sakunts (Chair), Helsinki Citizens' Assembly
 - Ms Sona Aivazyan, Vice-Director, Transparency International
 - Ms Larisa Minasyan, Executive Director, Open Society Institute
 - Mr Richard Giragosian, Director, Regional Studies Center
 - Mr Daniel Ioanissyan, Programme Director, Union of Informed Citizens

Saturday 1 April 2017

09:30-12:30 Briefing by the Political parties

- 09:30-09:50 Republican Party of Armenia (RPA):
- Mr Vigen Sargsyan, Member of the Executive Body
 - Mr Davit Harutyunyan, Member of the Executive Body

09:50-10:10	Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) – Mr Aghvan Vardanyan, Head of Campaign
10:10-10:30	Tsarukyan Alliance (Prosperous Armenia, Alliance Party, Mission Party): – Ms Naira Zohrabyan, Deputy Head of “Prosperous Armenia” Fraction – Mr Mikayel Melkumyan, MP
10:30-10:50	Armenian Renaissance – Mr Artur Baghdasaryan, Chair
10:50-11:10	Free Democrats (FD) – Mr Khachatur Kokobelyan, Chair
11:10-11:30	Congress Armenian People’s Party (CoAPP) – Mr Levon Zurabian, Vice-Chairperson
11:30-11:50	Communist Party of Armenia – Mr Boris Gyurjyan, Organisation Unit Head
11:50-12:10	Yelk Alliance (Bright Armenia, Republic Party, Civil Treaty) – Mr Nikol Pashinyan, Leader of the Yelk Alliance
12:10-12:30	Hanyan-Rafi-Oskanyan (ORO) Alliance – Mr Raffi Hovhannisian, Chair of the Heritage Party – Mr Hovsep Khurshudyan, Spokesperson
12:45-13:50	Briefing by the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission – Observation forms – Mr Anders Eriksson, Statistics Analyst – Election day procedures – Ms Svetlana Chetaikina, Election Analyst and Mr. Goran Petrov, Voter Registration Analyst – Code of conduct – Mr Donald Bisson, Deputy Head of Mission – Presentation of EOM Long-Term Observers – Mr Marcell Nagy, Long-Term Observers Co-ordinator of Yerevan-based LTO teams
14:00	Meeting with drivers and interpreters

Sunday 2 April 2017

All day : Observation of the opening, voting, closing and counting

Monday 3 April 2017

08:00-09:00	Internal debriefing of the ad hoc committee
14:30	Press conference
16:00-17:00	Meeting with heads of delegations at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs

Appendix 5 – Statement by the International Election Observation Mission (IEOM)

Legal and technical reforms bring improvements in well administered Armenian elections, but process tainted by credible information of vote buying and pressure on voters, international observers say

Strasbourg, 03.04.2017 – The 2 April parliamentary elections in Armenia were well administered and fundamental freedoms were generally respected. Despite welcomed reforms of the legal framework and the introduction of new technologies to reduce electoral irregularities, the elections were tainted by credible information about vote buying, and pressure on civil servants and employees of private companies, international observers concluded in a preliminary statement released today. This contributed to an overall lack of public confidence and trust in the elections, the statement says.

“Yesterday’s elections marked a first step towards establishing a new political system in Armenia, but change cannot happen overnight”, said Ignacio Sanchez Amor, Special Co-ordinator and leader of the short-term OSCE observer mission. “Reform is a never-ending process, and I encourage the parliamentary majority and the new government to continue their efforts to transform the country’s political culture, in partnership with the opposition, civil society and the international community.”

A new Electoral Code was adopted less than one year before elections, in an inclusive process that was seen by most as a step forward in building confidence in the process, the observers said. The legal framework for elections is comprehensive, but was criticised by some as overly complex. The reforms to the Code addressed a number of previous OSCE/ODIHR and Council of Europe Venice Commission recommendations, although some areas merit further attention.

“There is little doubt that, since the last time the citizens of Armenia voted, efforts have been made, including through logistical improvements, to raise the quality of the electoral process. The authorities should be praised for working to inform the electorate of this new, quite complex, electoral legislation. It is a pity that, despite all of the legal and organisational changes, these elections did not remove long-standing doubts about the reliability and integrity of electoral processes in the country,” said Liliane Maury Pasquier, Head of the delegation from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. “The use of new voting technologies cannot alone restore confidence in elections – crucial in a genuine democracy – just the same as better legislation is only effective if applied in good faith.”

“The new electoral law provides for greater representation of women and minorities,” said Geir Jorgen Bekkevold, Head of the delegation from the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. “I am glad to note that a greater number of our colleagues in the National Assembly will be women, and I encourage political parties to empower them to bring about transformative change.”

“The new electoral procedure was complex and not always understood by the voters. Nevertheless, polling station staff made strong efforts to ensure a smooth process. Regrettably, the process was undermined by credible, recurring information of vote buying, intimidation of voters notably civil servants in schools and hospitals and employees of private companies as well as abuse of administrative positions,” said Heidi Hautala, Head of the delegation from the European Parliament. “The European Parliament will work closely with the future Armenian National Assembly to support reforms and democratisation, in line with our commitments as part of the deepening EU-Armenia relations.”

The Central Election Commission (CEC) operated efficiently and conducted its work in a transparent manner. It did not, however, pursue complaints rigorously, the statement says.

The campaign started slowly and intensified as election day approached, and most campaigns focused on individual candidates rather than party platforms or policies. Candidates were largely able to campaign without restrictions, but isolated incidents of violence were reported in some areas of the country. There was credible information of vote buying, of pressure on public servants, including in schools and hospitals, and of intimidation of voters. This contributed to an overall lack of public confidence in the electoral process, the observers said.

Election day was generally calm and peaceful, but observers noted tension and the intimidation of voters in some polling stations visited. This was generally as a result of large numbers of party proxies and others present around polling stations throughout the day. Voters were identified on election day using voter authentication devices containing electronic copies of the voters lists, their fingerprints were also scanned, and the CEC said that it will conduct cross-checks to identify potential cases of multiple voting in the event of

complaints. For the first time, scanned copies of signed voters lists from polling stations will be published, which the observers' interlocutors deemed an important deterrent of voter impersonation, despite the disclosure of voter's private data.

"The measures introduced ahead of these elections have improved the situation regarding the secrecy of the vote, which is an important step towards improving confidence in the process, but more clearly needs to be done to address long-standing practices like vote buying and pressure on voters", said Ambassador Jan Petersen, Head of the election observation mission from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. "Moving forward, our mission will remain here through this week and the next, allowing us to follow post-election developments, including the finalisation of results and the handling of any possible complaints and appeals."

There is a public reluctance to report electoral offences, due to a lack of confidence in the system for adjudicating complaints. The lack of independence on the part of judicial, election administration and law enforcement bodies, and the manner in which they dealt with complaints, undermined the effectiveness of providing legal redress, the statement says.

Enhanced inter-institutional collaboration led to improved accuracy in the voters lists. Although the law provides sufficient mechanisms for voters to request corrections, the lists continue to include addresses at which a large number of voters are registered, which requires further scrutiny by the authorities.

Freedom of expression is guaranteed by the Constitution and broadly exercised. The freedom of broadcast media is limited by interference by owners in editorial policy. This results in self-censorship by journalists and discourages reporting critical of the government, including on public television, the observers said. Journalists stated that recent cases of violence and the lack of prosecution of those responsible hamper their work and undermine their safety. There are no restrictions on online news sources, contributing to increased pluralism in the media. OSCE/ODIHR EOM media monitoring showed that the public broadcaster devoted equitable coverage to the candidates in its newscasts.

International and citizen observation is permitted, and party representatives are entitled to be present in polling stations. The CEC accredited a total of 28 021 citizen observers, but media and civil society criticised the legal provisions on observation as making it possible for polling officials to selectively limit the number of citizen observers and media representatives in stations.

International NGOs were refused an invitation to observe the elections, which is at odds with OSCE commitments.