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Observation of the early parliamentary elections in Armenia (20 June 2021)

Election observation report

Ad hoc Committee of the Bureau

Rapporteur: Mr George KATROUGALOS, Greece, Group of the Unified European Left

1. Introduction

1. On 18 March 2021, the Prime Minister of Armenia announced that early parliamentary elections would be held on 20 June.
2. On 16 April 2021 the Bureau of the Parliamentary Assembly decided to observe these elections, subject to the receipt of an invitation, and to set up an ad hoc committee composed of 20 members (SOC-7; EPP/CD-6; EC/DA-3; ALDE-3; UEL-1) as well as the two co-rapporteurs of the Monitoring Committee. On 26 April the Bureau authorised the President to appoint its chairperson.
3. On 13 May 2021 the President of the National Assembly of Armenia invited the Parliamentary Assembly to observe the early parliamentary elections.
4. On 28 May the Bureau approved the final list of members of the ad hoc committee to observe these elections and confirmed the appointment of Mr George Katrougalos (Greece, UEL) as its chairperson. The list of members having participated in the election observation mission is set out in Appendix 1.
5. In accordance 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 from the Venice Commission was invited to join the ad hoc committee as an adviser.
6. The ad hoc committee (PACE delegation) worked from 18 to 21 June 2021. It operated as part of an International Election Observation Mission (IEOM) together with a delegation from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE-PA) and the electoral observation mission of the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR EOM). The programme of the delegation's meetings is set out in Appendix 2.
7. On election day the PACE delegation split into 11 teams and observed the voting process in a number of polling stations in Yerevan and its surroundings, as well as in Hrazdan, Gavar, Artashat, Gyumri, Ararat, Masis, Vanadzor, Azatan, Artik, Maralik and Dzorakap.
8. The IEOM concluded that the 20 June 2021 early parliamentary elections in Armenia were competitive and generally well-managed within a short time-frame. However, they were characterized by intense polarization and marred by increasingly inflammatory rhetoric among key contestants. The legal framework is generally comprehensive, but the fact that amendments were adopted so close to the elections caused some legal uncertainty. The election administration conducted its work in a transparent, collegial and professional manner and enjoyed electoral stakeholders' confidence. Voters were provided with a broad range of options, and fundamental rights and freedoms were generally respected, with contestants being able to campaign freely. However, the negative tone and the personality driven nature of the campaign hindered a policy-focused debate. Generally, women were sidelined throughout the campaign. Election day, including the vote count, was assessed positively overall. The press release by the IEOM is set out in Appendix 3.



9. The PACE delegation wishes to thank the heads and members of the parliamentary delegation of the OSCE-PA and of the OSCE/ODIHR EOM for their excellent co-operation within the IEOM. It also wishes to thank the Council of Europe Office in Yerevan for the co-operation and support.

2. Political context

10. The Assembly has observed elections in Armenia since 1995. The last parliamentary elections in Armenia took place on 9 December 2018 and the Assembly's delegation concluded that they were held "with due regard for fundamental freedoms and enjoyed broad public trust that needs to be preserved through further electoral reforms. Open political debate, including in the media, contributed to a vibrant campaign, although cases of inflammatory rhetoric online were of concern. The peaceful so-called "velvet revolution", in conjunction with the political will of the current authorities, enabled the holding of democratic elections." The Assembly's observation delegation also highlighted that "despite the complex electoral system and reported instances of intimidation via social media, the electoral irregularities which tainted many elections in the past were absent. It is up to Armenia's elected representatives to launch legal reforms to consolidate the democratic process in the country".

11. On 18 March 2021, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan announced that early parliamentary elections would be held on 20 June. In compliance with relevant legal deadlines, he resigned on 25 April, and the elections were called via presidential decree on 10 May. The decision to hold early elections arose in the aftermath of anti-government protests following the signing of a ceasefire statement with Azerbaijan, brokered by the Russian Federation in November 2020. The ceasefire statement followed a 44-day war in and around Nagorno-Karabakh.

12. The elections took place in an atmosphere of continuing tension between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The national security situation dominated political discourse during these elections. The Covid-19 pandemic aggravated the economic downturn resulting from the war, further impacting the electoral environment. The political environment leading up to the elections was highly polarised, often personality-driven, and characterised by aggressive accusations and inflammatory rhetoric.

13. The most recent parliamentary elections were early elections held in 2018. They resulted in the My Step alliance led by Mr Pashinyan's Civil Contract party receiving 70.4% of votes cast and 88 of the 132 seats. Prosperous Armenia and Bright Armenia were the only other parties to pass the 5% threshold, with 8.3% (26 seats) and 6.4 (18 seats), respectively.

14. The political landscape in Armenia during the past 20 years was dominated by the ruling Republican Party which in 2018 could not even enter the parliament anymore, as it only received 4.7%. To be noted that only 18 months before, in April 2017, the same Republican Party won the elections with 55.23%.

3. Legal framework and electoral system

15. The PACE delegation recalls that Armenia signed and ratified the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5) and its Additional Protocol (ETS No. 9), which enshrine a number of principles crucial for an effective and meaningful democracy, such as the right to free elections (Article 3 of the Additional Protocol), freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and association, as well as prohibition of discrimination (Articles 10, 11 and 14 of the Convention).

16. Parliamentary elections are regulated by the 1995 Constitution (last amended by referendum in 2015), the 2016 Electoral Code, and other legislation. Armenia is a party to the main international treaties related to democratic elections. Overall, the legal framework is conducive to the conduct of democratic elections.

17. The electoral legal framework provides comprehensive regulation of issues related to election administration, voter lists and voter identification. While the rules on candidate registration, campaigning and campaign financing are detailed, certain shortcomings, previously noted by the Venice Commission and the ODIHR, remain unaddressed. These include restrictions on the rights of persons with dual citizenship to stand for election, the short time-frame for reviewing campaign-finance reporting, as well as the narrow definition of campaign expenditures. The legal framework regulating the handling of complaints and appeals and addressing electoral violations, while adequate, could also benefit from review.

18. The Venice Commission was requested to produce several opinions on the electoral reform since 2016. In October 2018, the government submitted to the parliament proposed amendments to the Electoral Code including outstanding recommendations from the Venice Commission and the ODIHR, but they were not backed by the required three-fifths majority in the Assembly. In 2020 an inclusive working group of election

stakeholders recommended significant changes including the end of the district lists. The most recent Venice Commission/ODIHR opinion (March 2021) dealt with that change to a single closed list, and many other changes arising from the discussions of the working group.

19. The Electoral Code was adopted in 2016 and has been amended several times since then. In April and May 2021, shortly before elections were called, parliament adopted two sets of amendments. The 1 April amendments eliminated open territorial lists of candidates with corresponding procedural changes, among others, to candidate registration, the distribution of mandates, and election-day procedures. These amendments were adopted by a majority of 82 out of 132 members of parliament (MPs); notably Prosperous Armenia and Bright Armenia did not participate in the vote. While the move to a single nationwide constituency had long been debated and advocated by many political parties and civil society actors, some suggested that the change was made too close to the elections. The President of the Republic opted not to sign the amendments, citing their timing and lack of consensus in the parliament. A second, more comprehensive, package of amendments that are not applicable to this election was adopted on 7 May 2021. Until both sets of amendments were adopted and signed, electoral stakeholders were uncertain which amendments would apply to these elections thereby affecting legal certainty and leaving limited time for implementing regulations and informing voters on new procedures.

20. In these parliamentary elections, voters were called to elect a minimum of 101 MPs, through a closed-list proportional system within a single nationwide constituency. MPs are elected for a five-year term. In order to qualify for the distribution of mandates, political parties had to obtain at least 5% of votes cast, while alliances of two or more political parties were required to obtain at least 7%. The amendment to reduce the 5% threshold did not take effect for these elections. These thresholds remain high for the stated aim of a purely proportional system and relatively higher than the European average. The Electoral Code stipulates that if less than three parties and/or alliances pass the threshold, the three parties or alliances with the highest number of votes gain parliamentary representation. In addition to the MPs elected under the proportional system, the law provides for up to four reserved seats in parliament, one for each of the four largest national minorities: Yezidis, Russians, Assyrians and Kurds.

21. The Constitution requires a proportional electoral contest and a multiparty system. The Constitution also requires a “stable parliamentary majority” (which the Electoral Code defines as 54% of seats in parliament) in order to form a government. If the winning party or alliance list obtains at least 50% of seats plus one, but falls short of 54%, that party or alliance would be assigned additional seats in order for it to reach the required stable majority. If no single party or alliance wins a 50% plus one majority, and no political parties or alliances are able to form a coalition within 6 days of the finalisation of the results, a second round between the top two candidate lists was to be held 28 days after first election day. In the second round, these two remaining contesting parties or alliances are permitted to form new alliances with other parties that ran in the first round.

4. Election administration

22. Elections are administered by a three-tiered system comprising the Central Election Commission (CEC), 38 Territorial Election Commissions (TECs), and 2008 Precinct Election Commissions (PECs). The CEC is a permanent and professional body composed of seven members who are elected for a six-year term, for a maximum of two consecutive terms. The CEC, in its current composition, was appointed in October 2016. Most IEOM interlocutors expressed confidence in the capacity of the CEC to deliver on its mandate professionally. However, some interlocutors voiced apprehensions over the election administration’s ability to maintain its independence.

23. The CEC conducted its work in a transparent, collegial and efficient manner, meeting all legal deadlines despite a short time-frame for preparations. Its sessions were live-streamed and attended by party and alliance proxies, observers and the media. Meeting agendas and decisions were published in a timely manner on the CEC website. The CEC developed election-day procedures and guidelines for PEC members, Voter Authentication Device (VAD) specialists, as well as for observers and proxies.

24. While the CEC has the regulatory power to issue instructions, a significant proportion of clarifications on election-day procedures were not adopted in CEC sessions, nor were they the subject of formal CEC decisions. Importantly, the determination of ballot validity was not adequately regulated. Limited Covid-related procedures for polling operations were adopted, though these did not address possible overcrowding.

25. The CEC's voter-education campaign was launched 20 days before election day. It included posters, brochures, as well as TV and radio advertisements on new voting procedures, including in the languages of the four main national minorities, for persons with visual and hearing impairments and with the help of civil society for persons with intellectual disabilities. However, the visibility of the CEC voter-education campaign remained limited across the country.

26. TECs are permanent professional bodies composed of seven members appointed by the CEC for a six-year term. TEC sessions were open and characterised by a consensus-led approach. The public display of TEC decisions was not consistent, contrary to legal requirements and TEC decisions were not published on the CEC website.

27. PECs are temporary bodies formed for each election, with a minimum of seven members selected by parliamentary groups as well as by the TECs. For these elections, each PEC was composed of seven to eight members, two of whom were nominated by the respective TEC and two by each of the three parliamentary groups represented in the outgoing parliament. While most PECs were formed by 2 June in accordance with the CEC calendar, many TECs were required to nominate additional candidates, after parliamentary factions, particularly Bright Armenia, did not nominate sufficient candidates for all PECs. In line with the law, the positions of PEC chairperson and secretary were distributed among the alliances in the outgoing parliament in proportion to their current representation, hence providing a large majority of PEC management positions to the ruling party.

28. The CEC and all TECs complied with the legal requirement to include at least two members of each gender. Three of the seven CEC members were women (42%), including the deputy chairperson. At the TEC level, out of 266 members 94 were women (35%), with only a few holding decision-making positions, including two chairpersons (5%) and six deputy chairpersons (16%). Gender disaggregated data on the composition of the TECs needs to be extracted and is not readily available, which is at odds with international standards. The CEC did not publish gender disaggregated information on the composition of PEC members.

5. Voter lists and candidate registration

29. All citizens who are at least 18 years old on election day are eligible to vote, unless convicted of a serious crime or declared mentally incompetent by a court decision. Deprivation of the right to vote on the basis of a mental disability is inconsistent with international standards. Voter registration is passive, with voter information being provided automatically by the State Population Register. The voter register is maintained by the Passport and Visa Department (PVD) of the police and includes all eligible citizens who maintain a permanent residence in Armenia. As of 13 June, there were 2 577 172 registered voters, including a significant number of voters residing abroad who remained on the voter register because they maintain an official residence in Armenia. While all IEOM interlocutors recognised that a significant number of those included in the voter list are abroad and therefore not in a position to vote, no concerns were expressed with regards to the accuracy of the voter register.

30. The legal framework provides extensive measures ensuring the transparency and accessibility of voter lists, with public display of voter lists and the publication of the lists online in searchable and downloadable versions. Preliminary voter lists were displayed at polling stations for public scrutiny by the 31 May deadline. Voters were able to request corrections, inclusions and deletions concerning themselves or other voters until 10 June. Voters omitted from the voter lists, as well as those in medical facilities or detention centres, could be included on supplementary voter lists up until the end of voting on election day.

31. On election day, voters were identified through the scanning of their ID document and fingerprint with electronic VADs, which contained an electronic copy of the voter list for the respective polling station. The law requires the CEC to publish scanned copies of the signed voter lists from all polling stations on 22 June, allowing for public verification. While international standards and best practices recommend the protection of data privacy and secrecy of individual voter data, including whether they voted and at which location, all IEOM interlocutors expressed support for the measure as an effective way to enhance transparency and prevent electoral malfeasance.

32. The April 2021 amendments specify that the signed voter lists should remain available until the tabulation of results at the CEC or, if appeals are filed, until their adjudication. However, neither the rules for consulting the lists nor confidentiality obligations are specifically addressed.

33. For parliamentary elections, political parties and alliances of political parties can each submit a single closed list for the nationwide constituency, containing between 80 and 300 candidates. Women and men must account for at least 30% of the candidates, with a requirement that both genders are represented in each group of three consecutive candidates on the list. This quota increased from 25% in the most recent elections.

34. In order to be eligible to stand as a candidate, one must be an eligible voter of at least 25 years of age, be a citizen of and resident in Armenia for the preceding four years and have command of the Armenian language. Citizens holding another nationality are not eligible to stand as candidates. Judges, prosecutors, military personnel, police officers, other categories of civil servants, and election commissions members are also not permitted to stand as candidates. Candidate lists may include up to 30% of non-party members. The law does not provide the possibility for candidates to stand individually.

35. In an inclusive process, the CEC registered the candidate lists of 22 political parties and 4 alliances. Following the withdrawal of one political party by the 10 June deadline, a total of 25 contesting lists remained, composed of 2 498 candidates of whom 925 were women (37%). All lists complied with the gender requirement, including after the withdrawal and cancellation of 39 candidates' registration. Only two candidate lists were headed by a woman. One alliance and three parties registered a total of 13 candidates for the four seats reserved for national minorities. Among the contestants were the three largest parties represented in the outgoing parliament, as well as those affiliated with all three presidents to have held office between 1991 and 2018: Levon Ter-Petrosyan (Armenian National Congress; ANC), Robert Kocharyan (Armenia Alliance; AA) and Serzh Sargsyan (With Honor Alliance; WH). While Mr. Sargsyan was not a candidate in these elections he was prominent in the campaigning for his party.

36. All registered parties and alliances submitted the required financial deposit of 10 million Armenian dram (AMD, approximately €15 700). The deposit will be returned if a list obtains seats in parliament or more than 4% of valid votes.

6. Election campaign, funding and the media

37. For these early elections, the official campaign period was 12 days, compared to 35 to 45 days for regular elections, in accordance with the law. The official campaign period commenced on 7 June and ended on 18 June, with campaigning prohibited on the day before election day and on election day itself.

38. As in the pre-campaign period, the national security situation dominated the political discourse in the campaign period. The economic situation, exacerbated by the war and the Covid-19 pandemic, was the next most important issue. The polarisation intensified during the campaign period, with some contestants levelling derogatory and inflammatory accusations against one another, rather than engaging in issue-based discussions. For example, at rallies in Ashtarak on 8 June, in Yerevan on 11 June, in Tashir and Vanadzor on 12 June, former President Kocharyan accused the current Prime Minister of being a "traitor", "lunatic" and stated that he should leave the country. During a Civil Contract rally in Talin on 8 June, Prime Minister Pashinyan accused the former president of being part of a "criminal gang" and threatened to "break the teeth of that pack", threatened a "staff massacre" and said that he has a "vendetta" against those whom he accuses of working against him within the administration or as leaders of private businesses.

39. Increasingly high levels of intolerant, inflammatory and discriminatory rhetoric were reported in the period leading up to election day. The Human Rights Defender criticised the use of such rhetoric and called on all contestants, in particular current leaders (or officials), such as the prime minister, to refrain from using such language. The CEC also called on contestants to refrain from such rhetoric.

40. Fundamental rights such as the freedoms of assembly were generally respected throughout the campaign, and contestants were able to campaign freely throughout the country. While voters had a wide range of options of political parties and alliances, the most visible parties and alliances in the campaign were incumbent Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's Civil Contract and former President Robert Kocharyan's Armenia Alliance. Campaign messages were aggressive with accusations of corruption against the former president from one side and criticisms of the so-called failures of the current administration, particularly in relation to the conduct of the war from the other side. Negative campaign materials targeting Mr Kocharyan were also noted before and on election day near some polling stations.

41. In-person campaign activities took place around the country. Many observed events did not adhere to government mandated measures against the Covid-19 pandemic. Among the features of the campaign were marches, car parades, door-to-door canvassing, public meetings and meetings with specific groups, as well as extensive use of social networks and advertisements on television. Contestants also made widespread use of billboards and posters, including in places allocated by the CEC equally to contestants for paid advertising.

Parties and Alliances reported a few significant concerns relating to the destruction of posters and billboards during the campaign, but no official complaints were filed. Despite the 30% gender quota, women have been notably side-lined in campaign events, rarely participating as speakers. Further, there was an observable absence of messages targeting women and national minority groups during the campaigns.

42. Prime Minister Pashinyan was criticised for using his working visits to the regions during the pre-campaign period to promote his electoral messages in meeting local communities and visit local offices of his party. While these events were not labelled as campaign events, they featured campaign messages and materials such as banners with the Civil Contract logo. The Electoral Code restricts campaigning by civil servants and government officials to off-duty hours but does not clearly define working or non-working hours. Visits to party offices in the course of a working visit by a State official, or to government offices while campaigning blurs the line between the ruling party and the State.

43. There were incidents of pressure on private and public sector employees by employers connected to contestants to attend campaign events. Allegations of vote buying were also made, in particular concerning larger parties and investigations were opened against three candidates on vote-buying charges during the campaign period.

44. On 8 June a Prosperous Armenia candidate was arrested on charges of vote buying in Gegharkunik region. On 11 June the former Mayor of Armavir, standing as a With Honor candidate, was also arrested in Armavir region. On 18 June a With Honor candidate was arrested on vote buying charges in the Zeytun district in Yerevan. In addition to the three candidates arrested, investigations were initiated in 14 cases related to vote buying.

45. Allegations of the misuse of administrative resources also persisted throughout the campaign and were not uniformly addressed.

46. The campaign silence was generally maintained, but following a complaint by With Honor, the CEC issued a warning against Civil Contract candidate Mr Pashinyan for campaigning on the day before the elections.

47. Campaign financing is primarily regulated by the Electoral Code and the Law on Political Parties. Political parties or alliances that received at least 3% of the vote in the previous elections are entitled to annual public funding, but there is no direct public funding of campaign expenses. Parties and alliances contesting the elections are required to open a dedicated bank account for campaign finance transactions. Campaigns may be funded by donations from voters, as well as from candidates' own contributions and funds transferred by political parties. Contributions from commercial and non-commercial entities, as well as from foreign and anonymous sources, are not permitted. The law limits campaign expenses to AMD 500 million (approximately €788 000) per contesting party or alliance.

48. While campaign finance regulation is detailed, a number of shortcomings allow for the circumvention of legal provisions. For instance, despite a long-standing ODIHR recommendation, the legal definition of campaign expenditures does not cover organisational expenses, such as costs for office space, transportation, communications, and campaign staff, leaving the opportunity for contestants to use these expenses as a means to circumvent spending limits. Some parties used charitable organisations and personal publicity to bypass campaign spending limits. While the amended law on Political Parties banned contributions from commercial entities to party funds and introduced corresponding sanctions, it seems that the ban can be circumvented by channelling large corporate donations through individual citizens as smaller contributions to campaign funds. While new sanctions were introduced in recent amendments to the legal framework, some of the most necessary amendments addressing criminal and administrative liability for violations of campaign financing rules will only become applicable in 2022.

49. The CEC's Oversight and Audit Service (OAS) is in charge of overseeing the compliance of contesting parties and alliances with campaign finance legislation. OAS published summarised data on the total amounts of contributions and expenditures per contesting party/alliance and posted their pre-election financial reports online, thereby contributing to financial transparency. The second financial reports have to be submitted no later than three days before the summarisation of the election results by the CEC.

50. The media landscape is diverse and includes 50 broadcasters, including 6 TV channels and 4 radio stations with nationwide outreach, over 35 periodical print publications, and more than 200 online news portals. The role of online sources and social networks, in particular Facebook, is growing rapidly, and they have become significant platforms for the exchange of election-related information. Nevertheless, television

remains the most important source of political information, especially outside the capital. Public television, which is financed from the State budget, continues to be perceived as having a pro-government editorial policy. Long-standing concerns exist about the political affiliation of private broadcasters.

51. Freedom of expression is guaranteed by the Constitution and international organisations have noted overall improvements in this respect since 2018. Defamation was decriminalised in 2010, but a Civil Code amendment from April 2021 tripled the maximum pecuniary damages that can be claimed in insult and libel cases. However, there is a growing level of harsh, intolerant and inflammatory rhetoric in the political arena. The political environment in which different opinions are routinely confronted with hatred and reprimand, particularly on social networks, is negatively affecting public discourse. Additionally, the number of recent instances of physical harassment of journalists performing their professional duties raise questions about respect for media freedom.

52. On 1 June, in line with the law, the CEC, through a public lottery, allocated 30 minutes of free airtime on public television, and 60 minutes on public radio, both during prime time, to each contesting party or alliance. In addition, each contesting party or alliance had the right to purchase up to 60 minutes on public television, and up to 90 minutes on public radio. Thirty-two private broadcasters, including 26 regional broadcasters, provided contestants with an opportunity to buy paid advertisements.

53. By law, the Commission for Television and Radio (CTR) oversees all broadcasters during the official campaign period, including through its own media monitoring. In a welcome step, the CTR interpreted the requirement in the Electoral Code to provide “impartial and non-judgemental information” in a manner that allows for a more comprehensive coverage of the various parties and alliances rather than a formalistic emphasis on equal amounts of coverage to each contestant. On 16 June, the regulator issued its first monitoring report, which did not note any major violations of the law.

54. There were discernible differences in the media coverage of political developments before and after the start of the official campaign. Monitored broadcasters, in particular public television decreased their coverage of the current government and the acting prime minister, and coverage dedicated mostly to contesting parties and alliances. A significant portion of the television content related to elections were campaign adverts, including frequent negative campaigning, primarily by Armenia Alliance.

55. The share of coverage dedicated to the government on public H1 decreased from 66 to 4%, remaining overwhelmingly positive or neutral in tone. Public H1 covered all contestants to a generally comparable extent, providing the largest coverage to Civil Contract with 12%, followed by Armenia National Congress with 11%, Armenian Alliance with 8% and With Honor Alliance with 7%. The coverage was mostly positive and neutral in tone, and generally avoided harsh rhetoric. The public television adhered to its requirements for free and paid airtime allocation. It also aired numerous electoral debates and interviews; including two live debates with the leaders of contesting parties and alliances. However more than half of the leaders of the contesting parties and alliances declined to participate in the final two public television debates, which negatively affected their informational value. Several opposition parties complained about various aspects of H1 election coverage, including the editing and rejection of paid advertising materials which were critical of the ruling party and its supporters and the means for determining the debate order.

56. During the official campaign, some private broadcasters, particularly Shant TV, made an observable effort to cover most electoral contestants in a largely impartial manner, contributing to the diversity of information available and to the voters’ ability to make an informed choice. Shant TV dedicated 11% of its politics related coverage to Armenia Alliance and 10% to Civil Contract. The tone of the coverage was neutral or positive. By contrast, the news channel Armnews often presented one-sided and critical biased coverage against the ruling authorities and Civil Contract, including derogatory statements voiced by its journalists.

57. Channels that are perceived to be openly affiliated with particular parties did, however, give those contestants preferential treatment. For example, Yerkir Media dedicated 36% of coverage in a mostly positive or neutral tone to the Armenia Alliance.

7. Election day

58. On election day the PACE delegation split into 11 teams and observed the voting process in a number of polling stations in Yerevan and its surroundings, as well as in Hrazdan, Gavar, Artashat, Gyumri, Ararat, Masis, Vanadzor, Azatan, Artik, Maralik and Dzorakap.

59. Election day was generally peaceful, with a voter turnout of 49.4% announced by the CEC. The CEC started posting detailed preliminary election results on its website, by polling station, in the early hours of 21 June.

60. The opening was assessed positively in all 123 polling stations where it was observed. Established procedures were generally followed, but 12 of the polling stations observed opened with slight delays.

61. Voting was assessed positively in 98% of polling stations observed. While IEOM observers characterised the process as smooth, transparent and well-organised, they reported problems such as interference by party or alliance proxies, and frequent overcrowding as well as a general disregard for Covid-19 protection measures.

62. Campaign materials and activities were noted in the vicinity of 7% of the polling stations observed. 23 instances of tension or unrest around polling stations observed were reported (2%), as well as isolated indications of vote buying and pressure on voters. 14% of the polling stations observed were overcrowded, in particular in Yerevan and other cities. Approximately 67% of the polling stations were not accessible for persons with physical disabilities, and in 32% the layout was not suitable for such voters.

63. Party and alliance proxies were present in 97% of the polling stations observed, and citizen observers in 77%. However, PACE teams noted that some observers were not aware what entity they were representing. The presence of unauthorised persons was noticed in 8% of polling stations observed, mostly police who had not been invited into the voting room by the PEC chairperson. In 73 polling stations observed (6%), persons other than PEC members interfered in or directed the process; in 55 cases, these were proxies. Official complaints were filed in 7% of the polling stations where voting was observed. Some 43% of PECs observed were chaired by women, and overall, 65% of PEC members in the polling station observed were women.

64. No problems with the VADs were reported and voter identification procedures were almost universally adhered. In 7% of the polling station observed, one or more voters were turned away, mostly because they had come to the wrong polling station, could not be found on the voter list, or were unable to produce a valid ID. In 8 polling stations observers saw that voters without a valid ID were still allowed to vote. Voting procedures were respected, with a few exceptions where not all voter confirmation slips were stamped by the PEC or retained after voters cast their ballots. There were some problems with the secrecy of the vote, including not all voters voting in secret (4% of the polling stations observed) or voters taking their unused ballots out of the voting booth (2%). A limited number of cases of violations were reported, such as group voting (3%), proxy voting (1%), or attempts to influence voters (less than 1%). Isolated instances where voters were not handed a full set of ballots were reported, as was one case where a PEC member handed an envelope already containing a ballot to a voter. In 3% of the polling stations observed, the ballot boxes were not sealed properly.

65. PACE teams stressed that there was some confusion caused by the large number of ballot papers (25 in total), this causing bottlenecks at the queue for getting the ballots. There was also some confusion caused by the use of the envelopes and the discarding of the unused ballots.

66. One PACE team observing in the Erebuni district saw very many flyers on the streets containing a negative message of a violent nature against one leading candidate (Robert Kocharyan). It also noted that in the rural area, many people on the voter lists were not living at those places.

67. The vote count was assessed positively in 91 of the 97 polling stations in which it was observed and characterised by a high level of transparency and general adherence to established procedures. Party and alliance proxies and citizen observers were present at almost all counts observed. IEOM observers reported 10 cases of undue interference in the count, 9 of which were by proxies. They reported only a few cases of PECs failing to follow basic reconciliation procedures before opening the ballot boxes. However, in 20 counts the number of signatures on the voter list did not match the number of voter confirmation slips issued by the VAD. Counting procedures were followed overall with very few significant procedural errors or serious violations such as intimidation of PEC members (2 reports) or evidence of falsification of official election material (3 reports). The determination of ballot validity was reasonable and consistent in all but 4 and 1 counts, respectively. Persons other than PEC members participated in 14 counts, and in 4 polling stations PEC members had pre-signed the results protocol. 21 PECs observed had problems completing the results protocol. In 4 polling stations observed, the PEC did not post a copy of the protocol for public display.

68. The tabulation process was assessed negatively in 6 of the 32 TECs where it was observed. While tabulation procedures were mostly followed, with very few procedural omissions or violations reported, in many TECs, the handover process was poorly organised and there were frequent reports of insufficient space and overcrowding negatively affecting the process and transparency. No interference was reported in the tabulation process. Unlike in PECs, proxies were only present in 13 TECs observed.

69. On election day, the CEC registered 27 reports of violations, several of which were confirmed. They included attempts to direct voters how to vote and cases of interference by proxies. The Prosecutor's Office reported that it had received 319 reports of violations during voting hours. Of these, 79 concerned obstruction of voting, 89 concerned voting more than once or of impersonation, 49 were for violations of the secrecy of the vote, and 69 for vote-buying. Six criminal cases were initiated. In addition, the police reported that they received 87 reports. On election day, the Special Investigation Service arrested three persons, including a candidate, on suspicion of vote buying in Vayots Dzor region.

70. The PACE delegation felt that in general it was a calm election day, with only minor irregularities and incidents without any influence on the validity of the vote and on the legitimacy of the results.

71. The CEC announced the results on 27 June:

Total number of voters on the Voter Lists	2 591 316
Total number of voters on the ad hoc supplementary lists prepared at PECs	1 245
Total number of voters on supplementary lists of mobile ballots	2 451
Total number of voters participated in e-voting	500
Total number of voters	2 595 512
Total number of voters participated in elections	1 281 997

72. The results are as follows:

##	Party / Alliance Name	Number of Votes	Percentage
#1	Fair Armenia Party	3 914	0.31%
#2	Armenian National Congress Party	19 691	1.54%
#3	Civil Contract Party	688 761	53.91%
#4	Zartonq (Awakening) National Christian Party	4 619	0.36%
#5	Liberty (Azatutyun) Party	1 844	0.14%
#6	With Honor Alliance	66 650	5.22%
#7	Unified Homeland Party	964	0.08%
#8	Pan-Armenian National Statehood Party	803	0.06%
#9	Bright Armenia Party	15 591	1.22%
#10	Our Home Is Armenia Party	12 149	0.95%
#11	Republic Party	38 758	3.03%
#12	Hayots Hayreniq (Homeland of Armenians) Party	13 130	1.3%
#13	Free Motherland Alliance	4 119	0.32%
#14	Prosperous Armenia Party	50 444	3.95%
#15	Democratic Party of Armenia	5 020	0.39%
#16	5165 National Conservative Movement Party	15 549	1.22%
#17	Citizen's Decision Social Democratic Party	3 775	0.3%
#18	Shirinyan-Babajanyan Democrats' Union	19 212	1.5%
#19	National Agenda Party	719	0.06%
#20	Verelk Party	1 233	0.1%
#21	Liberal Party	14 936	1.17%
#23	European Party of Armenia	2 440	0.19%
#24	Armenia Alliance	269 481	21.09%
#25	National Democratic Axis Party	18 976	1.49%
#26	Sovereign Armenia Party	3 915	0.31%

8. Conclusions and recommendations

73. Armenia's early parliamentary elections were competitive and well-managed within a short time frame. However, they were characterised by intense polarisation and marred by increasingly inflammatory language from key contestants.

74. The PACE delegation took note that the dramatical change in the political landscape in Armenia – dominated in the last two decades by the Republican Party – which started with the 2018 parliamentary elections has been confirmed in 2021.

75. The PACE delegation concluded that the electoral legal framework is generally comprehensive, but some shortcomings still remain. The observers noted that while recent changes in the electoral system were broadly debated and supported by the majority of political parties and civil society groups, the fact that amendments were adopted so close to the elections caused legal uncertainty and left little time to implement the new rules or inform voters about the changes.

76. National security issues dominated the political discourse in the pre-campaign and campaign periods. The PACE delegation expressed its concern on the fact that the debate was driven by increasingly aggressive language and accusations, worsening the high degree of polarisation and further reducing attention to political programmes and policy.

77. The PACE delegation noted that election day itself was generally peaceful, and observers made an overwhelmingly positive assessment of the voting processes in the polling stations visited. However, many polling stations were inaccessible for voters with disabilities, and there was frequent overcrowding. There were also some cases of interference in the voting process by party or alliance proxies. At the same time, observers found that the vote counting process went well and was highly transparent.

78. The PACE delegation felt that in general it was a calm election day, with only minor irregularities and incidents without any influence on the validity of the vote and on the legitimacy of the results.

79. The PACE delegation was informed that during the brief campaign period, candidates were able to campaign freely, and the fundamental freedoms essential for democratic elections were generally respected. Observers noted that in some cases there was pressure on workers in both the private and public sector to take part in specific campaign events, while allegations of vote-buying and the misuse of State resources continued throughout the campaign period. Despite the fact that women candidates were included in the party lists, their visibility during the campaign was markedly low.

80. The PACE delegation noted that freedom of expression is guaranteed by the Constitution. However, cases of journalists being harassed in the course of their duties raised questions about respect for media freedom. Several media outlets made a visible effort to cover a wide range of contestants, organising debates that helped ensure voters had enough information to make an informed choice on election day. At the same time, there are long-standing concerns about the political affiliation of private broadcasters.

81. The Assembly and the Venice Commission are ready to continue the collaboration with the Armenian authorities to further improve the legal framework and electoral practices in the country and to contribute to their implementation.

Appendix 1 – Composition of the ad hoc committee

Chairperson: Mr George Katrougalos, Greece

Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group (SOC)

- Mr Gerardo GIOVAGNOLI, San Marino
- Ms Bela BACH, Germany
- Mr Paulo PISCO, Portugal
- Ms Sibel ARSLAN, Switzerland
- Mr Christian PETRY, Germany

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

- Mr Arin KARAPET, Sweden
- Ms Catia POLIDORI, Italy
- Mr Luís LEITE RAMOS, Portugal
- Mr Francesco SCOMA, Italy
- Mr Franck HEINRICH, Germany

Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)

- Mr Olivier FRANÇAIS, Switzerland
- Mr Arminas LYDEKA, Lithuania
- Ms Alexandra LOUIS, France
- Mr Georges-Louis BOUCHEZ, Belgium

European Conservatives Group and Democratic Alliance (EC/DA)

- Mr Arkadiusz MULARCZYK, Poland
- Mr Alberto RIBOLLA, Italy
- Mr Ulrich OEHME, Germany

Group of the Unified European Left (UEL)

- Mr George KATROUGALOS, Greece

Co-rapporteurs AS/MON (ex officio)

- Ms Boriانا ÅBERG, Sweden

Venice Commission

- Mr Richard BARRETT, expert, Ireland

Secretariat

- Mr Bogdan TORCĂTORIU, Administrator, Secretary of the ad hoc committee, Election Observation and Interparliamentary Cooperation Division
- Ms Ivi-Triin ODRATS, Administrator, Election Observation and Interparliamentary Cooperation Division

- Ms Daniele GASTL, Assistant, Election Observation and Interparliamentary Cooperation Division
- Mr Gaël MARTIN-MICALLEF, Legal advisor, Venice Commission

Appendix 2 – Programme of the ad hoc committee (18 to 21 June 2021)

Friday, 18 June 2021

- 09:45-10:45 Internal meeting of the PACE delegation
- 10:00 Registration of OSCE PA observers and distribution of observation packs
- 11:15-11:30 Welcome and Introductory remarks
- Ms Margareta Cederfelt, Special Coordinator and Leader of the short-term OSCE observer mission
 - Mr George Katrougalos, Head of the PACE Observer Delegation
 - Mr Kari Henriksen, Head of the OSCE PA Observer Delegation
- 11:30-13:00 ODIHR LEOM Briefing
- Welcome and overview of the ODIHR EOM's work, Mr Eoghan Murphy, Head of the ODIHR Election Observation Mission
 - Electoral legal framework, Ms Svetlana Chetaikina, Legal Analyst
 - Election administration, Ms Caroline Gonthier, Election Analyst
 - Political landscape, candidate registration and campaign, Mr Martin Kunze, Political Analyst
 - Media landscape and coverage of the elections, Mr Ivan Godarsky, Media Analyst
 - Security issues, Mr Laszlo Belagyi, Security Expert
- 14:00-15:30 Election campaign panel
- Armnews, General Director, Mr Narek Nikoghosyan
 - Azatutyun (RFE/RL), Director of the Armenian Service, Mr Hrayr Tamrazyan
 - Council of Public Broadcaster of Armenia, President, Mr Ara Shirinyan
 - Helsinki Citizens' Assembly – Vanadzor, Democratic Institutions Monitoring and Reporting Coordinator, Ms Vardine Grigoryan
 - Regional Studies Center, Director, Mr Richard Giragosyan
 - Transparency International, Executive Director, Ms Sona Ayyvazyan
 - “WomenNet” NGO, Correspondent, Ms Lia Khojayan
- 15:45-18:45 Representatives of political parties and party alliances
- 15:45-16:15 Armenia Alliance (Armenian Revolutionary Federation + Reborn Armenia), Leader, Mr Robert Kocharyan
- 16:15-16:45 Armenian National Congress (ANC), Deputy Chairman, Mr Levon Zurabyan
- 16:45-17:15 Bright Armenia Party (LHK), Press Secretary, Mr Aren Petunts
- 17:15-17:45 Civil Contract Party (QP), Chair of the Standing Committee on European Integration of the Parliament, Mr Arman Yeghoyan
- 17:45-18:15 With Honour Alliance (Republican Party of Armenia + Homeland Party), Representative of the Campaign HQ, Mr Davit Harutyunyan; Campaign Manager, Mr Armen Ashotyan
- 18:15-18:45 Prosperous Armenia Party (BHK), Secretary of the party, Mr Arman Abovyan

Saturday, 19 June 2021

- 09:00-10:30 Election legislation panel
- Armenian Helsinki Committee, Chair, Mr Avetik Ishkhanyan
 - National Assembly Working Group on Electoral Reform, Coordinator, Mr Hamazasp Danielyan
 - Transparency International, Elections Systems Consultant, Mr Harout Manougian
 - Union of Informed Citizens, Programme Coordinator, Mr Daniel Ioannisyan
- 10:45-12:15 Election administration panel
- Central Election Commission, Chairperson, Mr Tigran Mukuchyan

- Central Election Commission Oversight and Audit Service, Senior Specialist, Mr Tigran Babikyan
 - National Commission for Television and Radio, President, Mr Tigran Hakobyan
- 12:15-13:15 ODIHR LEOM Briefing continuation
- Election Day procedures: Mr Stefan Krause, Deputy Head of ODIHR EOM, Ms Caroline Gonthier, Election Analyst, Mr Max Bader, Statistics Expert
- 13:15-13:45 Briefing by ODIHR Long Term Observers deployed in Yerevan
- 13:45-14:00 Final remarks
- 14:00-15:00 PACE observers meeting with E-day drivers and interpreters
- 15:00-16:00 Covid PCR testing for PACE observers at Armenia Marriott Hotel

Sunday, 20 June 2021

- 08:00 Covid PCR testing for PACE observers at Armenia Marriott Hotel Yerevan
- All day Election Day – Observation in polling stations

Monday, 21 June 2021

- 08:00-09:00 Debriefing of PACE observers
- 14:30 Joint press conference
- All day Departure of observers

Appendix 3 – Statement by the International Election Observation Mission

Armenia’s early parliamentary elections were competitive and well run, but polarized and marred by aggressive rhetoric, international observers say

YEREVAN, 21 June 2021 – Armenia’s early parliamentary elections were competitive and well-managed within a short time frame. However, they were characterized by intense polarization and marred by increasingly inflammatory language from key contestants, as well as by the sidelining of women throughout the campaign, international observers said in a [statement](#) today.

The joint observation mission from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA), and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), concluded that the electoral legal framework is generally comprehensive, but some shortcomings still remain. The observers noted that while recent changes in the electoral system were broadly debated and supported by the majority of political parties and civil society groups, the fact that amendments were adopted so close to the elections caused legal uncertainty and left little time to implement the new rules or inform voters about the changes.

“Despite the limited time for the implementation of the recent amendments to the electoral code, the administration of the elections was positively assessed by the majority of our observers,” said Margareta Cederfelt, special co-ordinator and leader of the short-term OSCE observer mission. “Most of our observers also assessed election day positively, up to and including the vote count.”

National security issues dominated the political discourse in the pre-campaign and campaign periods. However, the debate was driven by increasingly aggressive language and accusations, worsening the high degree of polarization and further reducing attention to political programmes and policy.

Election day itself was generally peaceful, and observers made an overwhelmingly positive assessment of the voting processes in the polling stations visited. However, many polling stations were inaccessible for voters with disabilities, and there was frequent overcrowding. There were also some cases of interference in the voting process by party or alliance proxies. At the same time, observers found that the vote counting process went well and was highly transparent.

“The deep polarization didn’t detract from a well-run election,” said George Katrougalos, Head of the PACE delegation. “It is to be hoped that the results will be accepted by all parties across the political spectrum, and the harsh rhetoric of the campaign will be consigned to history.”

During the brief campaign period, candidates were able to campaign freely, and the fundamental freedoms key to democratic elections were generally respected. Observers noted that in some cases there was pressure on workers in both the private and public sector to take part in specific campaign events, while allegations of vote buying and the misuse of State resources continued throughout the campaign period. Despite the fact that women candidates were included in the party lists, observers noted that their visibility during the campaign was markedly low.

“While the recently introduced electoral changes have resulted in larger representation of women in the candidate lists, they remained largely absent from the public discourse during the campaign,” said Kari Henriksen, Head of the OSCE PA delegation. “It is important that women are not just equally represented, but are also given the opportunity to engage actively in public and political life.”

Freedom of expression is guaranteed by the constitution. However, cases of journalists being harassed in the course of their duties raises questions about respect for media freedom. The observer mission’s media monitoring found that several media outlets made a visible effort to cover a wide range of contestants, organizing debates that helped ensure voters had enough information to make an informed choice on election day. At the same time, there are long-standing concerns about the political affiliation of private broadcasters.

“All candidates could campaign freely throughout the election process, and it was good to see the election authorities deliver on their mandate professionally,” said Eoghan Murphy, Head of the ODIHR election observation mission. “But the antagonistic language we heard during the campaign was not in any way constructive for an informed public debate.”

The international election observation mission to the Armenian parliamentary elections totalled 341 observers from 37 countries, composed of 249 ODIHR-deployed experts and long-term and short-term observers, 71 parliamentarians and staff from the OSCE PA, and 21 from the PACE.