

Statement of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum Steering Committee, 9 October 2012

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Free and fair elections in Georgia, and peaceful transition of power, applauded by Civil Society Forum

The Georgian parliamentary election held on October 1 2012 is a welcome development in the quest for free and fair elections in the Eastern Partnership states. The contest between government and opposition parties was confined, by and large, to the electoral process itself, giving citizens a peaceful way to express their views. Moreover, even with the lodging of complaints about the results in particular localities, the outcome of the election was accepted by the losing side, with its leader appealing to Georgians to respect the result.

The leader of the winning coalition has declared that government officials would not be prosecuted unless they have broken the law. Fulfilment of this promise in both letter and spirit will be necessary to safeguard a plural political landscape, providing security to supporters of the losing side and serving as an essential element of a peaceful handover of power. This needs to be combined with responsible, mutually respectful negotiations on the part of both sides to ensure a smooth period of co-habitation before the transition of executive powers from president to parliament under the new constitution, due to come into force in 2013.

For the first time in Georgia's post-Soviet history, power is being transferred peacefully through an election whose results are not questioned by the competing parties. Thus Georgia's voters and politicians have sent an important signal to other Eastern Partnership countries that it is possible to conduct free and fair elections. This is a development applauded by the Steering Committee of the Civil Society Forum.

This does not mean that the situation was ideal. Government agencies failed to stay on the sidelines in the election but sought to influence the result in favour of the ruling party. Recourse to 'administrative resources' by governing parties plagues elections in the Eastern Partnership countries, and this practice has to be brought to an end.

In Georgia, police arrested and detained more opposition than ruling party activists during the campaign. When the Inter Agency Commission (IAC) - a temporary Georgian state body set up to address allegations of political misconduct by government agencies - intervened, the number of arrests and detentions of opposition activists fell. There were also reports of government employees, such as teachers, being pressured to support the governing party. Donors of political funds to the opposition parties were investigated by the relevant state authority and fined more often and by greater amounts than donors to the governing party.

Happily, the Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB) offered balanced coverage of the election in contrast to privately owned media which showed considerable bias in their broadcasts.

An important part in the success of the election was played by both domestic and international observers. This underscores the need for elections in the Eastern Partnership countries, including presidential elections in Georgia in 2013, to be observed also by independent observers – such as the planned election taskforce of the Civil Society Forum.

Steering Committee, Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum