



EASTERN PARTNERSHIP Civil Society Forum

Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum Election Task Force Report on the Presidential Elections in Georgia on October 27, 2013

Seven election observers (Belarus, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Moldova, Ukraine and Poland) representing non-governmental organizations which are members of the Civil Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership observed the Presidential election in Georgia on October 27, 2013. The observers were well received and had an intensive programme of meetings and training sessions with local NGO's, representatives of the media, main contenders and government officials. On polling day, the Task Force (TF) monitored the voting process in 41 precinct election commissions in Tbilisi, Rustavi and Mtskheta and attended the opening and vote count in four randomly selected precinct commissions.

The Task Force would like to express its gratitude to the Georgian National Platform of the Civil Society Forum headed by Manana Kochladze for driving the initiative, to the Liberal Academy of Georgia headed by Lasha Tugushi for organizing the programme and making all the essential arrangements and to the Open Society Georgia Foundation (OSGF), especially to Vano Chkhikvadze, for funding this initiative.

General impressions:

In general, the TF found that election procedures were followed in all precinct commissions. Precinct commissions were opened on time and were well prepared for voting. Also the vote count was conducted in accordance with procedures set out by the Central Election Commission (CEC). The TF noted that a great majority of the members of the election commissions were women and that many chairs of the commissions had led such commissions in previous years. This allowed them to follow all the procedures efficiently.

The voting was conducted in a transparent way and the custom of putting ballot papers into envelopes before placing them into the ballot box added a measure of secrecy to the whole process. In a majority of precincts there were virtually no complaints from observers or representatives of the candidates.

The voting atmosphere was calm and with a relatively low turnout there was no sign of queues outside the polling stations. However, some precinct premises were small, thus the voters, commission

members, observers and representatives of candidates were crowded. The TF observed very few facilities allowing disabled people to vote but blind voters did have the opportunity to vote thanks to Braille equipment.

Irregularities:

The generally positive impression of the Election Day was marred in Precinct Election Commission (PEC) # 70 from District Election Commission (DEC) #3 where representatives of the Georgian Dream coalition appeared to be active in helping commission members with their duties (handing envelopes to voters). A similar case took place in another commission where we found that a representative of the Georgian Dream was telling the head of the commission what to do. Also, the Task Force found that Georgia Dream had sponsored the refreshments for members of PEC #43 from DEC #3. This behavior led the TF team to surmise that voting was under the supervision of the ruling authorities.

In the PEC #7 from DEC #4 the TF members were informed by a local observer about two people with already inked fingers (which showed that they had already voted) who attempted to enter the polling station during the day but fortunately they were stopped in time by the PEC member responsible for securing the precinct. In the PEC #63 from DEC #3 four voters with already inked hands were allowed to enter the precinct and did vote again. When this was questioned by TF observers the flow of voters coming into the PEC stopped temporarily. During the incident one observer, who was identified as a Georgian Dream activist at the DEC level intervened to check the credentials of TF observers and criticized the PEC chairperson for allowing them onto the premises without having them sign the precinct log book (international observers are only bound to identify themselves and present accreditation documents).

Other problems identified were the presence of party political materials closer than 50 meters to the voting stations, careless storage of voting materials (i.e., not in a safe place but in the personal handbag of a commission member) and in one case the use of a car belonging to the Georgian Dream for the transportation of the mobile box by the PEC members to the voters who asked for it at home (this information was confirmed by the chairperson of the commission).

Conclusions:

Despite the problems described above the election marks a decisive step forward on Georgia's drive towards a fully functioning electoral democracy. The feeling of many Georgians who characterized this election as calm and transparent was summed up by the words of a local observer who said with obvious delight that "nothing dramatic is happening, at last we are a normal, boring democracy".

Reported incidents of electoral transgressions show that some continue to believe that fraudulent voting remains a method of winning elections and is still present in the country's political culture. However the detailed nature of voting regulations, close monitoring of the process by civil society organizations and the expressed political will of the government and opposition to ensure free and fair elections suggest that the era of electoral fraud in Georgia is coming to an end.

Recommendations:

- Keep involving civil society in the management of the electoral processes and government in general;
- Upgrade election procedures by including new features and technologies in the election process;
- Ensure continuous training for PEC members;
- Equip the premises of the precincts with ramps to enable the people on wheel-chairs to vote.