

Statement on the observation of elections in Azerbaijan

The parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan on November 1st revealed some positive developments in election procedures in comparison with previous parliamentary elections held in the country, according to the findings of the Election Observation Mission of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, of which we, the undersigned, were part. This is rightly stated in the Mission's report on the elections. And of course this development should be commended.

These positive trends should, however, have been put into a more critical context in the Mission's final report, as would have been the case, had our amendments to the text been taken into account. Our recommendation was to rephrase parts of the report with the following:

“In the light of allegations of human rights violations in Azerbaijan, including the imprisonment of social critics and activists as well as journalists, confirmed by the Court of Human Rights, the Venice Commission and the Human Rights' Commissioner of the Council of Europe, and in the light of the lack of an adequate pluralistic framework, including equal access to the media, it cannot be agreed that the elections were up to the democratic standards set by the Council of Europe for free and fair elections.

It is, however, taken note of that in spite of these serious shortcomings, a significant increase in voters' turnout from previous parliamentary elections and increased transparency of electoral procedures, demonstrate positive steps in a democratization process in the country.”

We supported the decision to send a monitoring commission to Azerbaijan because we see this as an effort to strengthen democratic processes in the country. This we did in spite of our knowledge of very serious shortcomings as regards human rights in Azerbaijan; a situation the Commissioner of Human Rights at the Council of Europe maintains is deteriorating. It is imperative to take his reports to this effect seriously.

When monitoring elections under such circumstances the objective of the Council of Europe, which after all was established to set norms for democracy and human rights, is to highlight such developments as well as the interplay between the election itself on the one hand and its framework with regard to human rights and democratic plurality on the other. All these factors should form an integral part of monitoring elections by the Council of Europe.

In the concluding report of the Election Observation Mission there are indeed references made to the Venice Commission and the Human Rights Commissioner's critical reports on human rights in Azerbaijan. What was lacking, however, in our opinion, was emphasizing that respect for human rights must always be regarded as a precondition for the functioning of democracy.

Azerbaijan wants to be taken seriously as an aspiring democratic state. Exactly this the Council of Europe should do when it comes to assessing Azerbaijan's performance as such. Only that is a constructive way forward.

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