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PRESS CONFERENCE

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Statement by Antonio LÓPEZ-ISTÚRIZ WHITE

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PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

Georgia - 26 October 2024

Georgian elections raise further concerns about democratic backsliding

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Gamarjoba,

My name is Antonio Lopez-Isturiz White, I am a Spanish Member of the European Parliament and I am leading a delegation of 7 Members representing 5 countries and 5 political groups.

We came here as part of the OSCE/ODIHR international election observation mission.

Let me first thank all my colleagues from the other three parliamentary assemblies and the ODIHR for the excellent cooperation.

Our delegation broadly subscribes to the statement of the preliminary findings and conclusions of the international election observation mission.

When we assess these elections, we cannot just consider the Election Day itself. Elections are very much about what transpired before and will happen after the day of elections.

In this respect let me say a word on the work of the international election observation. It has been reported by the press and the ruling party on election night that “international observers comment positively on elections”. How is it possible when we are holding our press conference only now? Reliable election observation is the one based on long term observation, deep analysis of the entire context of the electoral process, before; during and after the election day. This is the reason we are here, today, all together to tell you what are the findings of a serious, long term election observation.

Let me now turn to the broader context.

Georgia was granted candidate status in December 2023 on the understanding that it would fulfil conditions and take steps set out in the Commission’s recommendation of 8 November 2023. Instead of using this historic opportunity, the Georgian Parliament adopted several controversial laws, which had very negative consequences for Georgia’s European aspirations. The most prominent of them is the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence. It was adopted despite mass protests by Georgian citizens and repeated calls from Georgia’s European partners to withdraw the draft law that, in spirit and content, contradicts EU norms and values. Georgia’s EU accession process was effectively frozen as a direct consequence of its adoption. It is a regrettable development, considering that Georgia was once a champion of democratic progress with Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

During the electoral campaign, the ruling party used anti-Western and hostile rhetoric, targeting Georgia’s democratic partners, in particular the European Union, its politicians and diplomats, promoted Russian

disinformation, manipulation and conspiracy theories. Paradoxically, the government further claimed that it was continuing Georgia's European integration.

We also regretted the fact that less than a year before the elections, the Georgian Parliament adopted amendments to the country's Electoral Code that modified fundamental aspects of the country's electoral legislation, abolishing mandatory parliamentary quotas for women on parliamentary candidate lists and changing the composition of the Central Election Commission.

We were particularly concerned about the reports of the violence, intimidation, hate speech, persecution and repression against the opposition, civil society and independent media. The ruling party further heightened the tensions by stating its intention to seek legal action for banning certain opposition parties.

The Georgian people were presented with stark choices. The ruling party claimed that choosing between itself and the opposition was a choice between peace and war, whereas the opposition presented it as a referendum on Georgia's geopolitical orientation.

Although outwardly the campaign was quite subdued, there were signs that efforts were underway to undermine and manipulate the vote. Once again, there were reports of misuse of public resources and administrative capacity for the benefit of the ruling party, pressure exerted on civil servants to participate in campaign events and vote. We were alerted by various interlocutors about confiscation of identification documents. There were examples of institutions such as the newly-established Anti-

Corruption Bureau being instrumentalised for political purposes during the campaign. All of the above measures taken together paint a clear picture of a sophisticated, widespread and well-orchestrated scheme.

Let me now say a few words about the Election Day.

Election day

On Sunday, our delegation observed the vote and the counting in many cities and regions: Tbilisi, Mtskheta, Gori, Telavi, Lagodekhi, Marneuli, Bolnisi.

We met many attentive and dedicated staff working in the polling stations. Their job was particularly challenging this year, and not only for political reasons. It was the first time that a fully proportional representation system was used. It was also the first time that electronic devices were used for voter identification and counting in the vast majority of the polling stations. This was a challenge for some voters but also for some members of precinct election commissions. We were surprised to see cameras in all precincts, which was not foreseen by the current legislation.

Our European Parliament teams witnessed in some precincts high tension, confusion and chaos, in one case - ballot box stuffing, physical assault on observers attempting to report on violations, observer and media removal from polling stations, tearing up of observer complaints, intimidation of voters inside and outside of polling stations, presence of multiple party-affiliated observers posing as citizen observers, furthermore voting secrecy was not always ensured.

We support the continuous commitment of the Georgian people to the democracy, sovereignty and freedom of their country.

We express deep concern about the democratic backsliding in Georgia. The conduct of yesterday's election is unfortunately evidence to that effect. We fear that the climate of hatred and intimidation we witnessed on the Election day could seriously undermine the political process in Georgia.

It is important that the reported violations during the election day are investigated and addressed. We invite the Georgian authorities to fully implement the recommendations of the OSCE/ODIHR international election observation mission. Georgians cast their vote yesterday, choosing among different parties and coalitions. This democratic choice is a fundamental right and taking legal steps to ban opposing parties is unacceptable for a democracy. We will continue to support democratic aspirations of the Georgian people.

Thank you very much for your attention.

Didi madloba.