

Forthcoming elections will be a litmus test of Ukraine's commitment to democratic principles, says PACE delegation

Kyiv, 22.09.2012 – The forthcoming parliamentary elections in Ukraine will be a litmus test of Ukraine's commitment to democratic principles as a step towards further European integration, a pre-electoral delegation of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE)¹ said at the end of a two-day visit to Kyiv (20 and 21 September).

The seven-member delegation, which met representatives of all the main parties running as well as election officials and civil society groups, urged a number of steps aimed at ensuring Ukrainian voters are able to make a free choice among genuine alternatives on 28 October, in line with Ukraine's commitments to the Council of Europe.

The delegation called for greater media pluralism in the run-up to election day, urging the authorities and both public and private media outlets – particularly television – to ensure that parties contesting the elections receive balanced, unbiased coverage of their platforms and policies. It encouraged Ukraine's journalists to be bold and fair in their reporting, and resist any tendency towards self-censorship, in order to serve the wider public interest. In this context, it expressed its great concern about the draft law on criminalisation of defamation and strongly urged the parliament to take into account the opinion of Council of Europe experts on the draft law before finally adopting it.

The delegation expressed its satisfaction that, for the first time, all domestic observers will be able to follow the voting, the count and tabulation. It welcomed their contribution, and encouraged Ukraine's civil society to play a full and active role in the election process, including by making use of the opportunities offered by social media and the internet. In this context, the delegation invites the authorities to clarify the rules surrounding the use of web-cams in polling stations in order to avoid confusion.

The pre-electoral period has been overshadowed by the imprisonment of former government members and opposition leaders Yulia Tymoshenko and Yuri Lutsenko, who are unable to stand. It shares the concerns expressed by the Assembly about the trials and imprisonment of these persons, and reaffirmed the Assembly's call for them to be released, by all legal means, before the elections take place. At the same time, this issue should not be used to de-legitimise the elections before they have taken place. The election should be judged on all elements affecting the whole process.

The "oligarchization" of Ukraine's politics, the merging of political and economic interests, is a matter for serious concern. The delegation called upon state actors and electoral contestants to refrain from abusing administrative resources, as well as private economic means, to manipulate the election process and distort the will of the people. It urged politicians to try to engage on the issues, and to put the public interest ahead of their own self-interest, in order to counter an overwhelming lack of confidence in politics and political institutions on the part of many voters.

Finally, the delegation called on the authorities and all electoral participants to take all steps necessary to ensure that these elections are conducted with full respect for democratic principles and the country's obligations to the Council of Europe. Only by doing so can public faith in the electoral process, and therefore ultimately in the outcome, be fully restored.

A full delegation of around 40 Assembly members will return to the country to observe the voting, alongside other international observers, before making a joint final assessment.

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1. The pre-electoral delegation consisted of Andreas Gross (Switzerland, SOC), head of delegation, Andres Herkel (Estonia, EPP/CD), Andrea Rigoni (Italy, ALDE), Mevlüt Cavuşoğlu (Turkey, EDG) and Andrej Hunko (Germany, UEL), as well as Mailis Reps (Estonia, ALDE) and Marietta de Pourbaix-Lundin (Sweden, EPP/CD), the Assembly's monitoring co-rapporteurs for Ukraine.

