



2030 M Street N.W.
Fifth Floor
Washington, D.C. 20036
Phone: (202) 728-5500
Fax: (202) 728-5520
<http://www.ndi.org>

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Contact: NDI Country Director for Georgia,
Mary O'Hagan, MO'Hagan@ndi.org, +995-
32-935-830; or Kathy Gest in Washington,
kgest@ndi.org, + 1-202-728-5535

NDI URGES STEPS TO IMPROVE TRUST AND TRANSPARENCY FOR GEORGIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Polarization threatening democracy can be addressed and reversed

TBILISI (December 14, 2007) – For Georgia's democracy to advance in the current dangerously polarized political environment, steps must be taken to ensure transparency and trust in the processes surrounding the presidential election scheduled for Jan. 5, a pre-election assessment delegation by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) has concluded.

“The atmosphere of the current electoral campaign is deeply disturbing,” the delegation said in a six-page statement. “It is characterized by accusation and counter accusation, a loss of trust, a dearth of dialogue and predictions of civil unrest in the immediate aftermath of the election.”

But while polarization threatens the social and economic wellbeing of the country and its nascent democratic institutions, “it is the delegation's view that these trends can be addressed and reversed,” the statement said.

The delegation's findings were based on interviews, carried out in Tbilisi Dec. 10-14, with Georgian political and civic leaders including presidential candidates, campaign representatives, senior government and parliamentary officials, election authorities, non-governmental organizations, domestic election groups, and representatives of the media and the international community. The delegation was composed of Frances Fitzgerald (Ireland), leader of the opposition of the Upper House of the Irish Parliament; Tom Dine (United States), former president of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty; Kenneth Wollack (United States), president of NDI; Laura Jewett (United States), NDI's regional director for Eurasia, and Mary O'Hagan (United Kingdom), resident director of NDI in Georgia.

The delegation said that lack of trust in the process is exemplified by claims of abuse of administrative resources, unbalanced news coverage and intimidation of civic groups, party activists and prospective voters. It noted that concerns also have been raised about the integrity of voters list, the secrecy of the ballot, the impartiality of election administration officials and the potential for fraud arising from registration of voters on election day.

“NDI's experience worldwide has found that confidence in an electoral system and a perception of fairness are as important as the letter of the law,” the NDI statement said. “Genuine democratic elections require that the public, including the political contestants, have confidence that the results of the elections will reflect accurately the free choice of the voters and that the outcome will be respected. Therefore, when concerns are raised about the fairness of an electoral system, additional safeguards, as added measures of transparency, should be introduced even if the law meets otherwise acceptable standards. This is particularly true in countries where a history of fair political competition has not yet been established.”

The delegation made a number of recommendations in response to requests from Georgian political and civic leaders. They included:

Political Parties and Campaigns

- All participants have a responsibility to document and present irregularities, advocate for improvements and participate fully in all aspects of the process, both in the administration of the election and the campaign itself.
- All parties are responsible for the actions of their activists. Public trust might be enhanced if parties developed, published and enforced codes of conduct for all those involved in their campaigns.
- All election participants should respect the roles of domestic and international monitors and to desist from any form of intimidation or other interference in their work.

Government

- The newly created Inter-Agency Task Force should make every effort to respond fairly and expeditiously to real and expressed concerns brought to its attention.
- Engagement with domestic monitoring groups by the Inter-Agency Task Force should be continued though Jan. 5 and beyond.
- The Task Force should cooperate on an ongoing basis with other bodies receiving electoral complaints. These bodies include the Central Election Commission (CEC) and the Public Defender (Ombudsman).
- A forthcoming code of conduct for public employees should be published and widely disseminated as quickly as possible, and strictly enforced.
- Greater efforts must be made to define and respect the boundary between the governing party and the state in the election period.

Election Administration

- Voters must believe their ballots will be cast in secret. The CEC should consider covering voting booths and providing public information about the role of cameras in polling stations that were originally installed to deter misconduct.
- Every effort should be made to install fax machines in all polling sites so that preliminary results can be transmitted directly from Precinct Election Commissions to the CEC and published on the CEC website as soon as possible.
- In view of concerns about the integrity of the voters list, the CEC should publish the results of a recent door-to-door campaign to check the voters list.

Media

- The media are an essential part of this election. Each news outlet, electronic and print, has a responsibility to be accurate and balanced.
- Media monitoring efforts should include published assessments of both qualitative and quantitative assessments. Media outlets should respond quickly to those findings.
- Presidential candidates should take part in debates in order to demonstrate constructive political discourse and as a means to enable voters to make an informed choice.

The Pre-Election Assessment Delegation's full statement is available on the NDI website at www.ndi.org.