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NDI DELEGATION CONCLUDES THAT KEY ASPECTS OF GEORGIAN ELECTION WERE IN LINE WITH DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES; BUT IDENTIFIES FLAWS IN THE PROCESS

TBILISI – Key aspects of Georgia's Jan. 5 presidential election were in line with democratic principles, but there also were flaws in the process, an international observer delegation from the National Democratic Institute (NDI) concluded today.

“The delegation has not received evidence to date that the election results will fail to reflect the will of the people, but the problems observed should be addressed to enhance the integrity of future elections,” NDI said in a statement released at a press conference here. “Otherwise, these problems can erode public confidence in Georgia's political institutions and accentuate political polarization.”

To correct the shortcomings identified by the delegation members, NDI offered a number of recommendations that could be implemented for Georgia's parliamentary elections anticipated within the next few months as well as others that could be carried out over the longer term.

The Rt. Hon. Kim Campbell, former prime minister, defense minister and justice minister of Canada, headed the 24-member delegation, which also included political and civic leaders, regional and election experts, media specialists and human rights activists from seven countries. Its work was informed by an NDI pre-election assessment mission that visited Georgia Dec. 10-14.

NDI noted that many Georgians expressed the view that Jan. 5 represented the most open and competitive presidential election in their country's history. “The electorate showed that it could be passionately partisan and simultaneously committed to the democratic process and, in this, defied many pessimistic predictions,” the statement said, noting that a significant number of voters turned out considering the low temperatures and heavy snow.

But while voting proceeded in a peaceful and, in most locations, orderly manner, the complexity of election procedures and the apparent insufficient training of election workers led to chaotic conditions in certain polling stations. These conditions involved both voting and, especially, counting procedures, NDI said. Still, most of its delegates described these issues as “flawed not fraud.”

NDI listed problems with voting lists, inconsistent application and checking of the invisible ink that was supposed to deter multiple voting, overcrowded conditions in polling stations that could be intimidating to voters, inappropriate actions by party observers seeking to guide voters and manage election procedures, and problems in minority communities that blurred the line between how to vote and for whom to vote.

Particularly troublesome, NDI said, were the complex and poorly understood counting procedures, which led to agonizingly slow tabulations, and confusing and inconsistently applied procedures for dealing with those who registered on election day.

But the NDI observers also noted a spirit of cooperation among many local election commissioners and said it believed the multi-party character of the local election commission provided needed checks on potential abuses. In addition, the large number of domestic observers added to the transparency of the process.

“As Georgia moves toward parliamentary elections and beyond, we encourage political leaders to identify and pursue opportunities for constructive dialogue, adopt a more consultative attitude to the public between elections, and increase the transparency of decision making at all levels,” NDI said.

“The delegation is convinced that if concerted and immediate steps are taken to share political responsibility and to use parliament and other forums to promote consensus on political reform, then the Georgian people will look back at this election as an important milestone. We hope that all political leaders seize this opportunity to respond to the hopes and aspirations of the Georgian people.”

NDI is a nonprofit organization working to strengthen and expand democracy worldwide. The Institute works with democrats in every region to strengthen political and civic organizations, safeguard elections, and promote citizen participation, openness and accountability in government.

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