

# Caucasus ELECTIONSWATCH

A weekly review of elections related processes in the Caucasus Region

29 May 2012

## EU-Georgia Parliamentary Committee flags up important issues connected with the forthcoming elections

**The 14th EU-Georgia Parliamentary Co-operation Committee met in Tbilisi on 2-3 May 2012 under the Chairmanship of David Darchiashvili, representing the Georgian Parliament and Milan Cabrnock representing the European Parliament.**

The meeting approved a document entitled "Final Statement and Recommendations, pursuant to Article 89 of the EU-Georgia Partnership and Cooperation Agreement" which includes 37 articles covering a range of issues.

Several articles relate to the forthcoming elections and electoral processes.

The document "welcomes the efforts made in 2011 by the Georgian political parties and representatives of the civil society to contribute to improving the electoral system in the country, which is meant to improve the internal coherence of the electoral legislation leading potentially to a more pluralistic and balanced composition of the parliament after the 2012 elections; takes note of the adoption of the amendments to the *Law on Political Unions of Citizens* in December 2011; also takes note of the complaints of various stakeholders against the provisions of the law concerning the financing of political parties and the role of the Georgian Chamber of Control in monitoring the financial activities of the political parties meant to ensure transparency in this respect; welcomes the recent initiative of the Georgian government in cooperation with civil society to prepare amendments to the law, which should strengthen the necessary conditions for an equal political playing field and allow for a fair political competition in future elections."

*"calls on the Georgian government to continue with its efforts to ensure the accuracy of the voters lists and asks the EU Delegation in Tbilisi to include this in the focus of its work in the next year."*

**The document puts the spotlight on Georgia's problematic voters list.**

It highlights the importance of a proper electoral process and, in this regard, calls on the Georgian government to continue with its efforts to ensure the accuracy of the voters lists and asks the EU Delegation in Tbilisi to include this in the focus of its work in the next year.

The document from the 14th EU Georgia Parliamentary and Co-operation Committee Also puts its fingers on an issue that many feel constitutes a serious problem in Georgia's electoral process, namely the big difference in standards between what happens in Tbilisi and what happens outside the capital.

The document "stresses the importance of an equal level of transparency and accountability in the different regions of Georgia and calls for particular attention to ensure that the electoral process in areas compactly inhabited by minority groups is equal to that of Tbilisi and other areas."

Finally it "notes the welcoming by the Georgian government of comprehensive domestic and international monitoring of the elections; asks the Georgian government and the election authorities - at national and constituency level - to extend full cooperation to election monitors and not to hinder their activity." ■

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Caucasus Elections Watch is a specialised weekly publication focusing on elections related processes in the Caucasus, with news and analysis compiled by experts with long experience of the region.

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Other countries €10 €

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## Yerevan

Following the May 6 Parliamentary elections negotiations took place between various political parties who will be represented in the new parliament. The ruling Republican Party of Armenia (RPA) led by president Serzh Sargsyan announced on 24 May that it will be entering in coalition only with the small Rule of Law Party (RLP). The other Party which formed part of the governing coalition in the previous parliament, the Prosperous Armenia Party (PAP) decided to stay out of the coalition. The arrangement constitutes a major re-configuration of Armenian politics, although senior members of the Armenian government are arguing that the fact that the PAP will not be in the government does not necessarily mean that it will be in opposition. ■

## Tbilisi

Two Georgian NGOs, GYLA and ISFED issued a joint statement regarding reports of violence against the head of the Khobi District Office of the political coalition Georgian Dream, Mamuka Kardava and demanded an objective, thorough and timely probe into the alleged fact.

According to media reports, Mamuka Kardava was assaulted by four unidentified individuals near a railroad crossing in the village of Nojikhevi, Khobi District on May 20, at around 00:45, when he was driving back home. Mamuka Kardava alleges that one of the assailants managed to get into his stopped car and tried to strangle him. Mamuka Kardava tried to back up but the assailant interfered with the steering wheel and the vehicle crashed into a metal post. He also states that the three assailants forced him out of the crashed car and beat him with a truncheon. The very same night Mamuka Kardava checked in the Khobi District Hospital with multiple injuries.

The statement said that "It is noteworthy that the incident was preceded by a physical and verbal abuse of Mamuka Kardava by an employee of Khobi Gamgeoba (local Governor office), Vladimer Chitanava during a meeting of the Georgian Dream's representatives with population of the village Chaladidi in Khobi Municipality, which was witnessed by ISFED observers.

In an interview with ISFED's representative, head of the Khobi office of the Georgian Dream alleged that the assault was connected with his political activities and stated that officers of law enforcement agencies were involved in it. ■

## Tskhinvali

Alla Dzhioyeva, who last year created a political earthquake in the small self declared republic of South Ossetia, after she challenged the result of presidential elections meant to anoint a Kremlin backed candidate as the future leader of the territory, has now been appointed Vice prime minister.

The November 2011 elections were cancelled after it became apparent that there was election fraud in support of one of the candidates, causing embarrassment for the Russian government which has been the patron of the tiny territory since it seceded from Georgia in the 1990s. Moscow in 2008 recognised South Ossetia as an independent state following a short war with Georgia, but the territory is still considered a part of Georgia by the rest of the international community.

Dzhioyeva did not contest a re-run of the election, which was eventually won by an alternative candidate, Leonid Tibilov. ■



**Alla Dzhioyeva voting in the first round of elections in South Ossetia in November 2011.**

## Ivanishvili launches the election campaign of Georgian Dream

Tens of thousands of people turned up for the launch of the election campaign of Georgia's main opposition group, Georgian Dream, and heard its leader Bidzina Ivanishvili outline his plans for the country's future. This was the biggest opposition show of force in Georgia for many years.

Ivanishvili spoke about his plans for the Georgian Economy and said that he will not make promises that he will not be able to keep.

Ivanishvili said that he came from a hard-working, poor family, who managed to "achieve a huge success in business, while at the same time maintaining integrity", Ivanishvili said he knew "how to change life for the better" for the people. He vowed to "diminish the problem of unemployment to minimum level in the shortest period of time".

"We'll make no promises, which are impossible to deliver on. Each of our promises will be real and well calculated," Ivanishvili said.

"We won't be able to make miracles, but we'll do maximum of what is possible."



He said that detailed program, which "will be finally shaped with your participation", would be presented in the process of election campaign.

The New York Times called the rally the largest in Georgia since the 2003 Rose revolution and said that it estimated that 80,000 people participated. ■

## Saakashvili says that the people will stand firm to safeguard democracy and their future

Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili told the Georgian Parliament meeting in special session on Saturday (26 May 2012) that "Georgia is an unfinished building in terms of democracy building. Because of that it is important to make the October parliamentary election the fairest, freest and exemplary with its highest degree of democracy."

The President was speaking in the new building of the Georgian Parliament which has been re-located from the capital Tbilisi to the country's second city Kutaisi. The special session also marked Georgia's National Day

"Of course, there are people, who are preparing not for the elections, but for using the elections to derail the country from the road of development, for ensuring that the next [NATO] summit does not become an enlargement summit for Georgia. Of course, they have received such instruction - we know it very well - and they are working on that."

"We know that Georgia's neighbour has scheduled large scale military exercises in parallel to our elections and will try to create a pretext in order... to undertake actions during our elections for achieving its desired goal to overthrow the Georgian government. We know everything. We know that such plans do exist; we know that there is inflow of money [from Russia]; we know that everything is being done for that purpose," he said.

"I am sure that our people will stand [firmly] as never before to save democracy and future," he continued. "We know that it is impossible to bring the country's success to the society if people's democratic rights are not protected under the highest standards.

Only free people manage to get rid of unemployment and poverty."

He said relocation of Parliament and de-centralization process in general also aimed at fostering "Abkhazia and Abkhazians to restore contacts with our homeland."

"That's one of the major motivations of Parliament's relocation. David the Builder [Georgian King in 1089-1125] started Georgia's reunification from Kutaisi," Saakashvili said. "Emergence of many centres is the firmest foundation for unity," he said. ■

Source: CEW with civil.ge

**President Saakashvili addressing Georgian law makers in the new building of the Georgian parliament in the country's second city, Kutaisi**



# Georgia's Elastic Constitution

**Yet another set of Constitutional amendments have been adopted by the Georgian Parliament, the latest is a series of changes to the Constitution introduced by the ruling United National Movement (UNM) since it took power in 2003. The UNM has had a quasi-total monopoly in the Georgian parliament since the events around the "Rose Revolution" in November 2003 and could push through constitutional changes without needing the support of other political forces.**

Many constitutional experts agree that tailoring constitutional amendments to suit particular situations or individuals is bad practise, even if technically possible.

According to the latest amendments it is now possible for somebody to be elected to parliament at the age of 21, instead of 25 (see CEW 22 May 2012). More controversially the Constitutional package also included an amendment that would make it possible for a Georgian-born citizen of an EU-member state, who has permanently lived in Georgia in the last 5 years, to run in the October parliamentary elections and presidential election next year.

The Georgian government pushed through the amendment following international concerns raised after opposition leader Bidzina Ivanishvili was stripped of his Georgian citizenship because he also held French citizenship. Ivanishvili offered to renounce his French citizenship but his offer was ignored by the Georgian government. Ivanishvili has asked for his citizenship to be restored through a process of naturalisation but the government has refused. Ivanishvili has said that he will not contest the elections as a foreign citizen and condemned the way the Georgian constitution was being manipulated to serve the political expediency of the moment. In a sharp reaction to the adoption of the amendment, Ivanishvili addressed the Georgian President and asked him to veto it. *"I am not going to gain my political rights at the expense of insulting the constitution and destroying the state. Me and my team need political rights to build the state and constitutional order; not for the purposes opposite of that,"* he said in a statement.

In a response the Chairman of Parliament, David Bakradze, of the UNM said that the

government had created the conditions under which Ivanishvili could contest elections and that it was now up to him whether to use this opportunity or not.

Ivanishvili's citizenship controversy threatens to overshadow forthcoming Parliamentary elections in October. The respected Georgian NGO, Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA) said in a statement on April 5, that the Civil Registry Agency's decision to refuse Bidzina Ivanishvili citizenship through naturalization "is not in line with provisions of the Georgian legislation."

The Civil Registry Agency of the Ministry of Justice said on April 4, that Ivanishvili was not eligible to obtain Georgian citizenship through naturalization process, which he was requesting since January 5; the agency said, Ivanishvili, as a French national, should instead seek regaining his Georgian passport through dual-citizenship process.

GYLA said in its statement, that one of the major differences between these two options of entering into Georgian citizenship – naturalization and dual-citizenship process, is that while pursuing naturalization procedure an applicant should no longer be a citizen of foreign country at the time of receiving Georgian passport through naturalization.

"If at the time of undergoing naturalization process, an applicant has a foreign citizenship, there should be this applicant's declared will that in case of entering into the Georgian citizenship, he/she will renounce citizenship of any other country," GYLA said.

Before applying for citizenship through naturalization, Ivanishvili on December 29, 2011 submitted to the French embassy in Tbilisi a request for launching procedures for renouncing his French citizenship. One of his lawyers, Shalva Tadumadze, said at the time that the move did not mean that Ivanishvili would now become a stateless person; Ivanishvili's French citizenship would only be revoked in case of gaining the Georgian citizenship, the lawyer said.

"The Civil Registry Agency was aware about [Ivanishvili's] willingness to renounce his French citizenship in case of gaining Georgian citizenship. Accordingly, in this particular case, the goal of the law that a person should be only a Georgian citizen after receiving Georgian citizenship through naturalization would have been achieved," GYLA said.

GYLA also cited the January 30, 2009 presidential order number 39, and a

citizenship application form to back its claim that the Civil Registry Agency's decision was not in accordance to the law. The group said that a citizenship application form contains one line in which an applicant is required to state that in case of being granted Georgian citizenship he/she agrees to renounce citizenship of a foreign country and has to indicate that country.

GYLA says this formulation in the application form "unambiguously" shows that an applicant has the right to renounce foreign citizenship only after receiving the Georgian citizenship.

"The goal of the Georgian legislation is that after gaining Georgian citizenship through naturalization, a person should not remain a citizen of any other country. In this particular case, this goal was easily achievable – the Georgian President could have issued a decree on granting Georgian citizenship to a person, which would have been enforced not immediately (to avoid that a person would become a citizen of two countries simultaneously), but only after receiving an official document from the relevant French authorities on satisfying [Ivanishvili's] application on renouncing French citizenship," GYLA said.

The Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili, speaking in Chicago at an event on the margins of the NATO Summit, said that by amending the constitution to allow Ivanishvili, to run in elections, the Georgian authorities have "undermined a plot to de-legitimize" the October elections.

"There was a change to the Georgian constitution where even if you are not a Georgian citizen and you are a European Union citizen you can run for anything," he said. "Basically we undermined what was a plot to de-legitimize our elections," Saakashvili continued, "because, I think, what the enemies of the Georgian democracy want is Georgia to... look like the country that deprives its opposition election rights or some other things,"

"How many countries allow participation of non-citizens in presidential and parliamentary elections? We do, and the reason why we do it is that we do not want anybody to undermine... the reality that Georgia is a democracy," he said. "That's what we basically did by this constitutional change." ■

Source: CEW with civil.ge

*“Basically we undermined what was a plot to de-legitimize our elections... because, I think, what the enemies of the Georgian democracy want is Georgia to... look like the country that deprives its opposition election rights or some other things.”*

Georgian President  
Mikhail Saakashvili

*“I am not going to gain my political rights at the expense of insulting the constitution and destroying the state. Me and my team need the political rights for building the state and constitutional order not for the purposes opposite of that.”*

Bidzina Ivanishvili, Leader of the  
Georgian Dream Coalition.

## ISFED issues first monitoring report



The Georgian NGO “International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED)” has issued its first report based on the monitoring of the pre-election environment in 73 districts of Georgia through its long-term observers (LTOs). The first interim report covers the period from April 1 to May 4, 2012 with some reference to events that occurred before that but were on-going during the monitoring period.

A press release from ISFED on 22 May stated that “possible cases of political intimidation have been observed during the monitoring period. Among them: 10 cases of dismissal from work, 10 cases of threats, 6 cases of intimidation with political motive on business/private owners and 3 cases of hindering journalist activity.

The Georgian website Messenger Online reported on 23 May that “almost all violations mentioned in the report have been carried out against supporters of the Georgian Dream coalition and their relatives. The difficulties concerning office rental instances were also related to the coalition, as coalition members had negotiated agreements on the rental of office spaces, but due to the pressure placed on the owners through the local government representatives, members were refused the rental space for their offices.”

Source: CEW

## Journalists demonstrate against rights abuses and increasing harassment in Tbilisi

On Friday, May 25, journalists from across Georgia demonstrated in front of the Ministry of Justice in Tbilisi to protest the recent escalation of rights abuses and intimidation against journalists.

Democracy and Freedom Watch (DF Watch) in Georgia reported that a year after the violent police break-up of the May 26, 2011 peaceful demonstrations, there have been a wide range of complaints with regards to state officials and security personnel interrupting the work of journalists over the past couple of months. On May 21, the Georgian Public Defender, Giorgi Thugushi demanded an inquiry into allegations of harassment against journalists by the Prosecutor’s Office.

The abuses, which range from journalists being denied access to events, having the footage on their cameras deleted by security forces, being physically assaulted and threatened by state security officers, are occurring against journalists mainly in or from

the regions and who are not associated with the major TV networks. Complainants have noted that journalists from the three major TV networks in Georgia, Rustavi 2, Channel 1, and Imedi, are generally allowed access to events and are not targets of abuse.

Released on May 24, the recent U.S. Human Rights Report on Georgia notes that “[w]hile independent media were active and expressed a wide variety of views, the three largest television broadcasters [Rustavi 2 TV; Imedi TV and Georgian Public Broadcaster] reportedly had close ties to the government, and direct or indirect government influence over media outlets remained a concern.”

President Saakashvili, upon coming to power in 2004, promised to meet with independent journalists regularly. Solidarity for Freedom of Media, a media advocacy group, has pointed out that despite his stated commitment he has only done so twice. The demonstrators want to meet with the President to ask why these allegations have not been investigated.

Furthermore, the demonstrators demanded that the government initiate a neutral investigation into these abuses. According to DF Watch, the journalists claim that “20 cases of harassment of journalists happened in last two months. The government refuses to investigate these incidents. No offending official has been punished.”

The most recent incident, on May 20, involved journalist Gela Mtvlishvili. DF Watch reports that Mtvlishvili was filming a police building in Tianeti, when he was approached by a policeman in civilian clothing. His camera was taken away, and he was detained and beaten and was denied the right to call a lawyer. Once he was released his camera was returned to him. The files on the camera, however, had all been deleted.

In response to the protest, government spokesperson, Pavle Kublahsvili, said that there were a lot of exaggerated accusations against state security officials. However, he said that it was good that there is a reaction whenever something happens because this can avoid further similar incidents in the future. He invited journalists to refer complaints to the Prosecutor’s Office.

However, the U.S. Human Rights Report on Georgia highlights that “shortfalls in the rule of law, such as concerns about ensuring the judiciary’s independent and even-handed application of due process protections” continue to pose challenges for effective justice in the country. ■

Source: CEW with DFWatch

# A Credible Voters List is essential for voter confidence in Georgia.

**Issues surrounding the voters' list that have marred previous elections in Georgia - multiple entries, the persistence of deceased voters, and errors in voter information - continue to cause anxiety and low confidence in the democratic process amongst stakeholders and the Georgian electorate.**

Issues surrounding the voters' list that have marred previous elections in Georgia - multiple entries, the persistence of deceased voters, and errors in voter information - continue to cause anxiety and low confidence in the democratic process amongst stakeholders and the Georgian electorate.

In an effort to increase confidence in the process a state funded commission was established last year with a view to ascertain the accuracy of the list. The Voters List Verification Commission (VLVC) is chaired by Mamuka Katsitadze of the New Rights Party, and consists of members of the ruling party and some opposition parties' representatives, as well as representatives from several civil society groups.

August 1, 2012 has been set as a deadline for the commission to complete rechecking the list - after which it should be handed over to the Central Election Commission (CEC). The VLVC is also authorized to continue monitoring the voters' lists after August 1. The Commission launched door-to-door campaign on April 24 as part of rechecking the accuracy of the voter register ahead of the October parliamentary elections.

11,100 field observers, known as registrants, recruited by the VLVC, were tasked to visit every household in Georgia to ensure the accuracy of the list.

The work of the VLVC has however already been marred by some controversy. Leading Georgian NGOs who are normally the most reliable in monitoring the election process,

such as Transparency International, GYLA and ISFED have refused to participate in the commission, claiming that the compilation of the Voters List is a primary duty of the Central Election Commission. They are however engaged in verifying the list's accuracy. Some political parties are also accusing the VLVC of not being transparent in its work. One party leader complained that when they asked to be provided with a copy of the voters list as it stands they were given a list with millions of names not split up in streets or districts and thus impossible to verify.

## A troubled history

Voters' list issues date back to the November 2003 parliamentary elections. A report by LINKS issued at the time described the compilation of the voters' list as "the single most significant flaw in the 2003 parliamentary elections."

Coordinated by the Central Election Committee (CEC), the compilation of the list began in the spring of 2003 and involved data collection from the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Refugees and Settlement as well as Georgian consulates abroad.

It was noted immediately after the release of the preliminary list on October 8, that significant irregularities existed. Following the period of public scrutiny, several District Electoral Commissions (DEC) did not return the corrected lists in time with the legal requirements as stipulated in the Unified Electoral Code (UEC). The Autonomous Republic of Adjara compiled its own list which it refused to submit to the CEC before the polls opened. Adjara's list raised further questions surrounding the legitimacy of the voters' list as the total electorate was listed as 20% greater than those registered in the same area for the Presidential elections of 2000.

The final voters' list was published on October 28, 2003, just five days prior to the polls, as opposed to the requisite ten days as stipulated by the UEC. Voters were only given two days to scrutinize and initiate cumbersome procedures for amendment. The inconsistencies with the voters' list in 2003 resulted in widespread confusion at the polls and the exclusion of an estimated ten percent of the electorate from voting. International observers noted carousel voting, multiple voting and ballot stuffing amongst other irregularities.

In light of the lack of confidence in the voters' list of the 2003 parliamentary elections, the CEC compiled a new list for the Extraordinary Presidential elections held on the 4th of January 2004. Compilation was devolved down to the DEC and Precinct Electoral Commissions (PEC). The CEC also allowed voters to register on election-day. The LINKS report notes that this process was not fully transparent. As well as individuals being turned away for not having the correct identification documents or being in the wrong precinct on election day, others were added to the lists even if they already possessed registration slips. Moreover, proxy voting and multiple voting were witnessed by observers.

Given the issue surrounding the credibility of the 2003/4 election cycle, the CEC took some steps to address the issue ahead of the 2008 election. In November 2007, the CEC undertook a nation-wide door-to-door voters' list verification exercise which resulted in the addition of 65,000 voter records and the removal of 28,000 deceased persons. The voters' list was then made public and citizens were encouraged to verify it and send in any requests for amendments via the internet, a CEC hotline, or in person at their local PEC. The final list included 3,352,448 voters. Additionally, the CEC continued to allow voters to register on election day; resulting in the registration of a further 85,000 voters.

The Joint Electoral Observation Mission of the OSCE and Council of Europe (JEOM) noted that despite these positive steps, inaccuracies remained a concern for many stakeholders. At least six complaints were submitted to the CEC by opposition parties claiming more than 40,000 records as inaccurate, including multiple and incomplete records, omissions of eligible voters, spelling errors, and deceased persons remaining on the list.

On the recommendation of international observers, the CEC decided to abolish election day voter-registration for the May 2008 parliamentary elections. Moreover, the CEC extended the period for public scrutiny of the voters list from 12 to 19 days. Over 29,000 entries were corrected during this period. The total number of registered voters for the 2008 parliamentary elections was listed as 3,456,936.

According to OSCE observation reports, there was concern as to whether the voters registered actually resided in the indicated residency. In Tbilisi, for example, the OSCE found that 672 addresses without an apartment number had more than ten persons registered at the address, affecting some 12,119 voters. There were also allegations by opposition parties that the voters list was inflated and that discrepancies surrounding multiple entries and deceased persons still remained.

## In some areas inaccuracies have increased

The International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) conducted an independent audit of the 2008 and 2011 voters' lists. While there has been an overall improvement in comprehensiveness and accuracy in the lists (just 0.2% of the sample interviewed in 2011 were unregistered, compared to 1.3% in 2008) discrepancies persist. Notably with regard to accuracy of address data errors have actually increased since 2008.

The auditors recommended Georgia conduct a comprehensive census prior to the next election in order to have an accurate picture of how many people are indeed eligible to vote. Furthermore, ISFED called for the implementation of positive incentives for eligible voters to report either moving address, emigration or the death of a relative. The OSCE, for its part has recommended better coordination between the CEC and the Ministries involved in supplying population data.

Both the OSCE and ISFED called upon the Georgian authorities to ensure that the list is made available for public scrutiny well in advance and that all attempts are made to correct discrepancies to ensure the public continues to gain confidence in the democratic process in Georgia.

Some diplomats in Tbilisi believe that the Georgian government now has at its disposal enough data to be able to compile an accurate voters list if it wants to. It does seem that part of the problem has been resolved, namely the omission of names of people eligible to vote. The other aspect of the problem involving people who are registered in several places remains. Since this could make it possible for multiple or carousel voting to take place, it is important that the list is corrected in time.

Many observers also insist that the Central Election Commission is the body that must be held ultimately accountable for the accuracy of the Voters List and that the process of devolving different aspects of the electoral process to different agencies is a negative development.

According to one international monitor who observed previous Georgian elections the issue of the voter's list is at heart of public trust in the electoral process. "Political parties and NGOs should be able to scrutinise the voters list and should be given all the assistance to do so. However the ultimate responsibility for compiling the list must remain with the Central Elections Commission". ■

Source: CEW



**Mamuka Katsitadze, the Chairman of the Voters List Verification Commission (VLVC) addressing a press conference in April.**

# The European Parliament expects elections in the three south caucasus countries to be free, fair and transparent.



**Caucasus Elections Watch interviews Evgeni Kirilov MEP, Rapporteur of the European Parliament on developing a strategy for the South Caucasus.**

**CEW: This month we have seen the start of an election cycle in the South Caucasus, with important elections in all the three countries scheduled over the next two years. What are the expectations of the European Parliament from this process?**

**E. Kirilov:** The European Parliament has always followed very closely the democratisation processes in all the three South Caucasus countries. A special focus is given particularly on the electoral process as a corner stone of any functioning democratic system. Therefore the European Parliament expects from its three partners in the region to continue with the democratic reforms and to ensure that the forthcoming important elections in the next three years will respond to the European standards and will be free, fair and transparent.

**CEW: Why are these elections important for the future relations between the region and the EU?**

**E. Kirilov:** As you know the EU and the three South Caucasus countries have recently started negotiations on association agreements. This shows the interest of the partners to come closer to EU values and standards, and the willingness and commitment of both sides to increase their cooperation and to enhance their political and economic relations with special emphasis on democracy building.

It is in the interest of the EU to have stable and democratic states in this strategically important immediate neighbourhood. For the EU, democratic elections mean stability, and investment in a more peaceful and more prosperous future for the whole region. More reforms and progress towards further democratisation will lead to more technical and financial support in accordance with the principle of "more for more".

**CEW: How can the European Parliament support the election processes in the South Caucasus?**

**E. Kirilov:** The European Parliament sends election observation missions to all the three countries in the region. It follows very closely the pre-election situation, the conduct of the elections, and the post-election developments. The Parliament adopts resolutions in which it lays down its concerns and recommendations regarding the respective electoral

process. It is particularly vigilant with regards to the freedom of media and expression, the rights and representation of the opposition, and the role of civil society in scrutinising the electoral process and making it more transparent.

*"is particularly vigilant with regards to the freedom of media and expression, the rights and representation of the opposition, and the role of civil society in scrutinising the electoral process and making it more transparent."*

We are aware that democratization is a long process that requires efforts and dedication on behalf of the people and their leaders. We recognize that some progress is achieved in many areas of all the three countries. There are of course many challenges that remain, and where we would like to see results during the forthcoming elections. So it is very important not to backslide from what has been already achieved. I hope that political maturity will prevail and this will not happen.

The European Parliament is also very active in the region through its relations with the national parliaments. These are the bilateral partnership and cooperation committees (PCCs) and the multilateral EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly which, among other things, discuss issues related to democratic standards and the need for freer and fairer elections in the South Caucasus.. ■

