

International "Election Observers" Whitewash Fraudulent Referendum in Azerbaijan

Referendum Azerbaijan

On Sunday 25 September 2016 Azerbaijan held a hastily called, and controversial, referendum. The European Platform for Democratic Elections (EPDE) has monitored the conduct of international election observer missions. EPDE is highly critical to statements made by international election observers, which stand in sharp contrast to the critical assessment made by local independent citizens' election observers. EPDE sees the statements as attempts at whitewashing an undemocratic and fraudulent Referendum.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), the Committee of Regions of the European Union, the notorious "European Academy for Election Observation" and a series of European politicians, among them Mario David and Manolis Kefalogiannis, members of the European Parliament, have issued overwhelmingly positive assessment of the referendum on amendments to the Constitution of Azerbaijan which will among others significantly increase the power of the President of the Republic. By that the observers stand in sharp contrast to findings of independent local citizens' election observers. The assessment raises doubts over the impartiality, professionalism and honesty of the international observers. By that they damage the reputation of the institutions and parliaments that they represent.

The [PACE mission's statement](#) declares that "the voting process was transparent, well organised, efficient and peaceful throughout polling day, no serious violations were observed during the counting process" and concludes that the referendum "is considered legal and legitimate". The assessment does not take into account the critical human rights situation in the country, the systematic restriction of independent mass media, political opposition and civil society activists that do not allow for an open and fair campaign environment in the country.

The findings and conclusion of the PACE short term observers stand in sharp contrast to the [assessment of local independent citizens' election observers](#) stating that "the Referendum day was marred with violations including ballot-box stuffing, multiple voting, group voting (carousel) and voting of persons without registration". Independent observers noted that voter turnout was artificially raised in majority of polling stations through multiple voting and ballot-box stuffing. "The official turnout does not correspond to real figures." Independent observers conclude that "the Referendum failed to meet requirements of election legislation and international commitments of the country with regards to democratic elections."

Already the November 2015 Parliamentary elections and the October 2013 Presidential elections in Azerbaijan were commented in a biased way by PACE short term observers. [EPDE has criticized these reports](#). By issuing such ungrounded and politically motivated statements PACE violates international standards of election observation and damages the reputation of the Council of Europe. EPDE urgently recommends to PACE to put an end to biased, ungrounded and politically motivated election observation missions.

The PACE mission was led by Aleksandar Nikoloski (“the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”, EPP/CD). Other members of the mission were Andrea Rigoni (Italy, ALDE), Yanaki Stoilov (Bulgaria, SOC), Dominik Tarczynski (Poland, EC), Antonio Gutiérrez (Spain, SOC), Stefan Schennach (Austria, SOC) and the co-rapporteur of the Monitoring Committee Cezar Florin Preda (Romania, EPP/CD).

Similar positive statements were issued in the Azerbaijani mass media by the Committee of the Regions of the European Union, headed by Pauliina Hajanen (Finland, EPP) with members Kurmet Müürespp (Estonia, EPP), Danis Turlais (Latvia, ALDE) and Urmas Sukles (Estonia, ALDE). The group declared that they have visited ten polling stations. No mission report was published by the Committee, no information on their methodology has been made available either. Through statements made in Azerbaijani mass media, members of the Committee declared that “the voting process was well prepared from both technical and organizational points of view” and that “in general the referendum in Azerbaijan is completely valid and its results show the people’s desires.”

Other European politicians made similar positive statements : Lawmaker Carmen Quintanilla (Spain, EPP), member of the European Parliament Manolis Kefalogiannis (Spain, EPP), member of the European Parliament Mario David (Portugal, EPP): *“To sum up, it is the conviction of our delegation that the process of the referendum...has been conducted in a free, open and sound process, in accordance with the best international standards, and that it will definitively express the will of the people of Azerbaijan.”* Lawmaker and member of PACE Predrag Sekulic (Montenegro, SOC), lawmaker and member of PACE María Concepción de Santa Ana (Spain, EPP), lawmaker Sergio Divina, (Italy, Lega Nord): *“We have monitored elections in many countries as observers of the European Union and OSCE. I have observed elections in Azerbaijan before. The voting in Azerbaijan was conducted in line with European standards,”* Nathalie Goulet (France, UDI), Thierry Mariani (France, The Republicans), Michel Voisin (France, The Republicans): *“To tell the truth, we know without observing that everything is all right”*, former member of PACE, Tadeusz Iwinski (Poland, SOC) and Kyriakos Kyriakou-Hadjjiyianni (Cyprus, Democratic Rally Party).

Moverover, neither the PACE mission nor any other among the above mentioned international observers did make any mention of the highly negative opinion which was published on 20 September by the Council of Europe's advisory body on constitutional matters, the [Venice Commission Opinion no 864/2016 \(CDL-PI \(2016\) 010\)](#). The preliminary opinion concludes, among several other critical points, that: *“The new powers of the President introduced by the Draft are unprecedented even in comparative respect; they reduce his political accountability and weaken Parliament even further. The Venice Commission is particularly worried by the introduction of the figure of unelected Vice-Presidents, who may at some moment govern the country, and the President’s prerogative to declare early presidential elections at his/her convenience.”*

EPDE is alarmed at the irresponsible behaviour of the above mentioned “international observers”, it damage the institution of election observation, which should be based on well-established and transparent methodology, and be fair, objective and impartial. The behaviour of these members of parliaments also harms the reputation of the parliaments they are representing. EPDE calls on the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, the

Committee of the Regions of the European Union, the European Parliament, and the national and regional parliaments which these observers claim to represent, to consider if the activities of the elected representatives are in line with the ethical standards and codes of conduct of these parliaments. We also urge these parliaments to review their rules and procedures for participation in international election observation missions.