

# Counting 'till dawn, when the light comes

by Sebastian Gräfe

A crowded polling station in a northern neighbourhood of the Armenian capital, Yerevan. Lilit Mansurian (name changed by the editor) is an observer from “Yelk”, the most important (and recently founded) opposition party. She loudly calls attention to a man in the polling station who has repeatedly accompanied elderly women to the polling booth, which he does not have the right to do. The chairwoman of the election board intervened only reluctantly, and despite the obvious influencing of the vote, took no action against the group of men milling about in front of the station waiting to accompany voters. Police officers engaged the “election workers” in pleasant small talk, although the new election law stipulates that such groups be disbanded. Confronted with the state of things in the polling station, my Armenian interpreter asked me with alarm: “Can't you step in?”

Sunday, 2 April 2017: I am on duty as an election observer for the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in Yerevan's Arabkir district, a dense area with a large number of buildings packed into a small space. The better-educated and politically-interested citizens with mixed views on the European Union who live here are fought over by both government and the opposition. Many Armenians consider their country an integral part of Europe, particularly as it was the first country to impose Christianity as the state religion in 301, but the government backed away from a European Union Association Agreement in 2013 under Russian pressure.

This spring, a softer deal was signed with the EU in the form of the so-called “Partnership and Cooperation Agreement”. The aforementioned opposition party Yelk favours more cooperation with Europe, while the Republican Party of Armenia, leader of the hitherto existing coalition government, seeks to continue on a pro-Russian course. At this point a majority of Armenian companies are owned by Russians, but entering the Eurasian Economic Union under Moscow's direction failed to bring benefits to the Armenian economy. Instead, the economic sanctions imposed on Russia in the wake of crises in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine ended up having negative effects on the South Caucasus, as well.

Large segments of the population depend on remittances from Armenians living in Russia, while last year, rising electricity prices drove citizens onto the streets. With 5,000 Russian soldiers stationed in Armenia, Moscow also pursues geostrategic interests in the region. The unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Azerbaijan blocks any development towards détente.

This difficult situation served as the backdrop of the Armenian parliamentary elections, to which the OSCE dispatched 250 election observers. I visited ten polling stations in Arabkir on election day together with an American colleague, and observed one count until 4:00am. The results of the count we observed confirmed the opposition's expected success in this part of Yerevan. With a nationwide turnout of slightly over 60 percent, the Republican Party gained 49.15 percent compared to Yelk's 7.78 percent; the former soon decided to continue the current coalition government together with the Armenian Revolutionary Federation.

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Although both voting and counting processes were quite well-organised, the count lasted more than eight hours, further delayed because reports had to be written out by hand. Party representatives were present and illicitly took part in the count. No coherent interpretation existed as to what qualified as an invalid ballot. The next day, it came to light that party workers had taken on false identities and posed as independent observers, sometimes from fictional non-governmental organisations.

Verifying voters' documents and taking fingerprints using machines from Germany and other countries proved time-consuming. Many voters were also frustrated by the complicated voting process, which often led to hold-ups and jams – not to mention the intimidation posed by the so-called “companions” dubiously accompanying voters to the polling station. When OSCE observers witness election fraud or tampering, they have only one option: never step in, but check the corresponding field



↙ Shortly before the opening of the polling station:  
the chairman of the election board shows observers  
that the ballot box is empty before sealing it.



↑ Vote count until three o'clock in morning:  
the papers on the floor are not ballots but envelopes.

↓ A street in the Armenian capital, Yerevan.



on the observation form instead. OSCE observers reported instances of illegal influencing of voters at seven percent of visited stations – high enough to have a substantial impact on the outcome. It was also for this reason that the OSCE spoke of a lack of public confidence in the electoral process.

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The modern technology in the polling station was designed to prevent fraud. While the political opposition in many post-Soviet countries sees new technology like surveillance cameras, computers for document verification and fingerprint collection as a chance to uncover or minimise electoral fraud, the increased use of technology is neglected in many Western European countries due to privacy concerns or the possibility of external manipulation.

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The Armenian opposition's search for more transparency through technology is perfectly understandable; however, when the main obstacles to free and fair elections lie in the country's political culture - shaped by corruption and limited media access - the impact of Western technological aid is limited. Ultimately, the Armenian people will have to push the process towards a more democratic society forward themselves. In this context, the OSCE's statement can help the opposition to better demand new reforms, while, at the same time, the EU and the German government must stay alert and seek to prevent the Caucasus from only being taken into account when the next crisis arrives. ←



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