



Yerevan, 17 November 2021

EPDE Policy Alert #10

Two Down, One To Go: Armenia's 2021 Local Elections

In the wake of the early parliamentary election on June 20, 2021, 54% of the electorate will have a second chance to vote during the autumn 2021 local elections. Several communities have already held their city council elections on October 17 and November 14, but the biggest wave will take place on December 5.

Our [previous Policy Alert](#) provided the background to Armenia's ongoing city council elections, which were expanded and delayed due to a country-wide municipal amalgamation process. On October 17, 2021, Dilijan and four cities in Syunik region (Goris, Meghri, Tatev, and Tegh) held their city council election using the proportional model of party lists for the first time. They were joined by Gyumri, the second-largest city, which was using the proportional model for the second time, and three smaller villages which continued to use the majoritarian system because they have fewer than 4000 registered voters.

On November 14, 2021, three additional cities (Kapan, Ijevan, and Stepanavan) also held their first proportional vote, along with two smaller villages. It is on December 5, however, when a total of 36 municipalities will hold their local election on the same day, together representing 43.5% of the electorate. The event could be viewed as an effective second-round after the early parliamentary election that was held on June 20, earlier this year.

Showing Up Is Half the Battle

In contrast to the winner-take-all mayoral races that most of Armenia's cities used until the [2020 reforms](#), **the new proportional model ensures that even those parties who do not come in first are still represented on the city council**, as long as they meet the threshold of 4%. In fact, in Gyumri, Tatev, and Meghri, no single party secured an outright majority of the votes. In these cities, coalitions of two parties agreed to share governing responsibility in arrangements where a member of the junior partner party would be selected as the Deputy Mayor. In the six cities where one party did receive an outright majority of the votes, their challengers still receive seats on the council, where they can continue to act as a check on the local administration.

Only in Gyumri, where there were 10 parties running, did more than one party fail to meet the 4% threshold. Most local races have between two and four parties running.



Trust the Process

There have been examples where administrative resources were misused to provide an advantage during the elections so far. Most notably, incumbent mayors have been replaced by regional governors with members of the national ruling party ahead of the elections. In Tegh, a significant number of candidates from the sole opposition party were pressured into withdrawing.

However, the elections are genuinely competitive, as was the early parliamentary election in June. In Tatev, the ruling Civil Contract Party received the most votes but was one seat shy of an outright majority. Established Electoral Dispute Resolution (EDR) procedures were followed to conduct recounts and challenge the result in court. In the end, the seat count remained unchanged, with the two opposition parties agreeing to a coalition that excluded the ruling party. **This new dynamic provides room for political parties to become more institutionalized.**

In contrast, the first proportional elections in Gyumri and Vanadzor in 2016 were followed by boycotts of city council sessions by the opposition, due to an artificial majority created by bonus seats and a lack of accountability in the mayor selection vote. These issues have been rectified through electoral reforms, yielding results that all sides accept as legitimate.

Mind the Gaps

Nevertheless, additional shortcomings in legislation have been identified. In Sevan, which will hold its election on December 5, one of the political parties skirted the 1-in-3 gender quota by having its female candidates withdraw from the race after the candidate list had been submitted and accepted. Currently, the legislation would allow for them to have a single-sex caucus as a result.

In Talin, the same political party submitted a candidate list as an electoral alliance, although the other party in the alliance did not actually contribute any candidates to the list. Registering as an alliance instead of a party allows them to campaign under a different brand. After January 1, 2022, all electoral alliances must include the names of their constituent parties in brackets for greater transparency, but this provision will not apply to the elections this autumn.

Following the elections, in 2022, there will be an effort to make further amendments to the Electoral Code, incorporating lessons learned.

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This issue is part of a series of EPDE Policy Alerts to inform relevant stakeholders and decision makers in the European Union, the Eastern Partnership, and globally about reforms in the field of electoral legislation and administration. Please feel free to forward and share our analysis.

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EPDE is financially supported by the Federal Foreign Office of Germany and the European Union. The here expressed opinion does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the donors.



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