



## EPDE Policy Alert #3

### Armenia to expand proportional representation to municipal elections with tri-partisan bill

MPs from all three parliamentary factions (*My Step, Prosperous Armenia, and Bright Armenia*) have sponsored [Bill G-567](#) to make changes to how municipal councils and mayors are elected. Specifically, mayors in the largest cities and towns will no longer be directly-elected but chosen by city councils, who will also be given the power to remove them mid-term.<sup>1</sup>

#### What sparked the reform?

Nikol Pashinyan's My Step government identified electoral reform as a priority policy area as early as May 2018. With Armenia's second- and third-largest cities, Gyumri and Vanadzor, scheduled to hold municipal elections in 2021, municipal-level reform has taken precedence over broader national-level changes due to its urgency. The previous elections in these two cities took place in October 2016 but led to boycotts of city council sessions by opposition parties who felt short-changed by the seat allocation and mayor selection processes.<sup>2</sup>

#### Major Highlights

Currently, almost all of Armenia's 502 municipalities elect their mayors and city council members through a single non-transferrable vote (SNTV) majoritarian system. The three exceptions are the largest cities of Yerevan, Gyumri, and Vanadzor, which use closed party list proportional representation (PR). **Bill G-567 will expand closed-list PR to all communities with more than 4000 registered voters** (82 additional municipalities). Smaller communities would keep their current majoritarian system; though, ongoing amalgamations are expected to further shrink their number.

The PR system includes a **"1 in 3" gender quota**, such that each set of three sequential names on a party's candidate roster must include at least one candidate from each gender. The majoritarian system does not include a gender quota.

The **electoral threshold is being reduced to 4%** for political parties and 6% if multiple parties contest together as a bloc with a single list, down from 6% and 8% respectively.

Crucially, the proposed bill would **eliminate the practice of bonus seats**. Under the current rules, a party that would otherwise receive between 40-50% of the council seats is artificially allocated additional bonus seats to give them a majority. This clause was triggered in the 2016 Gyumri election and proved to be very controversial with opposition parties, who had their seats reduced as a result.

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<sup>1</sup> Austrian Development Cooperation, through the Council of Europe's Democratic Development, Decentralisation and Good Governance in Armenia project, provided funding toward development of the draft by local experts, including public consultation.

<sup>2</sup> For more details, see: <https://www.evnreport.com/politics/why-the-2016-gyumri-and-vanadzor-municipal-election-results-were-boycotted>.



## Would A Political Party By Another Name Smell As Sweet?

The bill has attracted some vocal opponents, especially among current long-time incumbent mayors. Currently, most candidates in majoritarian municipal elections do not run under a party banner. Though they are officially non-partisan independents, many incumbent mayors have a history of cooperating with the Republican Party of Armenia of former President Serzh Sargsyan over the years that it was in government.

A party is permitted to include independent candidates on their candidate roster (without requiring them to formally join the party). However, individual candidates would no longer be able to run alone in the largest cities.

Due to the Soviet legacy and post-independence reality of a single dominant party in Armenia, membership in a political party continues to be stigmatized in some circles, who want to keep an “independent” label, even if they need to come together to contest as a group—the minimum list size to register is 15 candidates. They have led calls to allow groups of citizens to register “non-partisan” lists, called civic initiatives, in the PR municipal elections, without officially registering as a political party. The main motivation would be to avoid the “political party” moniker, even if the group would function very similar to one.

MPs from all three parliamentary factions sponsoring the bill have rejected this feedback, arguing that the registration of new official parties has been simplified through [changes to the Law on Political Parties](#) (which are expected to be adopted soon) and that strengthening the multi-party system would be good for Armenia’s democracy. Notably, a requirement for parties to have members from different regions of Armenia is being removed.

### Timeline for Adoption

The bill has been published on the Parliament’s website but has not yet been included on the agenda of the Standing Committee on Territorial Administration, Local Self-Government, Agriculture and Environment. It is likely to pass the two required readings by the end of the summer, with support from all three parliamentary factions. Participants in public consultations on the bill included EPDE members Transparency International Anticorruption Center and Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly – Vanadzor. Feedback from the Central Electoral Commission was also incorporated into the draft.

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