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EUROPEAN COMMISSION FOR DEMOCRACY THROUGH LAW
(VENICE COMMISSION)

IN CO-OPERATION WITH

THE MINISTRY OF INTERIOR OF BELGIUM

WITH THE FINANCIAL SUPPORT OF

THE EUROPEAN UNION
THE GOVERNMENT OF LUXEMBOURG
THE GOVERNMENT OF NORWAY

**12th EUROPEAN CONFERENCE
OF ELECTORAL MANAGEMENT BODIES
“ENSURING NEUTRALITY, IMPARTIALITY
AND TRANSPARENCY IN ELECTIONS:
THE ROLE OF ELECTORAL MANAGEMENT BODIES”**

Monday and Tuesday, 30-31 March 2015

**Conference Centre "Egmont"
Place du Petit Sablon, 8bis – B-1000 BRUSSELS**

SYNOPSIS

The Venice Commission of the Council of Europe organised in co-operation with the Ministry of Interior of Belgium the twelfth European Conference of Electoral Management Bodies in Brussels, Belgium, on 30-31 March 2015.

The topic of the Conference was “**Ensuring neutrality, impartiality and transparency in elections: the role of electoral management bodies**”. The participants debated more specifically on three main issues:

- The essential elements for neutral, impartial and transparent elections;
- Functioning of electoral management bodies: good practice; and
- The complementary tools to the work of electoral management bodies: electoral disputes, election observation and media coverage.

Mr **Jan Van Coillie**, Advisor to the Office of Mr **Jan Jambon**, Vice-Prime Minister and Minister of Interior of Belgium, opened the Conference on behalf of the Vice-Prime Minister, followed by Ambassador Ms **Astrid Emilie Helle**, Permanent Representative of Norway to the Council of Europe, Chair of the Rapporteurs Group on Democracy of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, and Mr **Gianni Buquicchio**, President of the Venice Commission.

160 participants attended the Conference. The participants came from national electoral management bodies and other bodies involved in the electoral field from 25 European countries and 25 other countries. In total, 50 countries participated in the Conference.

The European Parliament and the European External Action Service of the European Union also participated in the Conference. The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe/Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR), the Organization of American States (OAS), the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), the Association of European Election Officials (ACEEEO) and several other institutions active in the electoral field were also represented at the Conference.

Representatives of the Venice Commission, the Parliamentary Assembly, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and other Council of Europe Directorates also attended the Conference.

The **conclusions** of the Conference are appended to this synopsis.

The **thirteenth European Conference of Electoral Management Bodies** will take place in **Bucharest, Romania**, on **14-15 April 2016**.

The participants in the Conference

1. *Considering* that transparency, neutrality and impartiality are essential elements of the international standards in the field of election management;
2. *Reminding* that international standards, based *inter alia* on the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights, provide for the neutrality and impartiality of electoral management bodies and public authorities;
3. *Referring* to the Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters of the Venice Commission regarding the principles of equality of opportunity and freedom of voters to form an opinion;
4. *Referring* to the Reports of the Venice Commission and of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on the timeline and inventory of political criteria for assessing an election, which evaluate the essential criteria for neutral, impartial and transparent elections;
5. *Referring* to the Report of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe on the criteria for standing for local and regional elections;
6. *Underlining* national good practice on the functioning of electoral management bodies, regarding the neutrality, the impartiality and the transparency of electoral management bodies while performing their duties; *referring* in particular to national case-law in this field;
7. *Reminding* the importance of other preconditions of elections held in conformity with international standards, such as an effective system of appeal, election observation and balanced media coverage of electoral campaigns;
8. *Recommended* that domestic legislation provide measures for reinforcing the legal status of members of electoral commissions (where such exist), *inter alia* by:
 - a. ensuring clear and foreseeable rules of appointment of electoral commissions' members;
 - b. reinforcing the protection of members of electoral commissions while performing their duties, notably in the decision-making process;
 - c. establishing clear rules concerning disciplinary proceedings against members of electoral commissions; and in particular, ensuring that members may be recalled only for exceptional and explicit reasons;
9. *Underlined* the importance for the electoral management bodies to ensure, when competent, the equality of opportunities between candidates, *inter alia* by:
 - a. applying the legislation in an equal manner to all stakeholders;
 - b. ensuring harmonised and impartial rules and procedures in candidate registration;
 - c. ensuring balance among candidates during electoral campaigns;

10. *Underlined* the importance of guaranteeing transparency and efficiency in the functioning and working methods of electoral management bodies, notably by:

- a. improving the visibility and transparency of their activities by making the best use of technology in publishing the agendas and decisions and by making sessions accessible to the public;
- b. ensuring clear decision-making processes and electoral management procedures;

11. *Stressed* that, when EMBs have a role in dealing with complaints, they should do so in a transparent, impartial, neutral, open, uniform and timely way; and should follow clear rules and procedures that are consistent with due process of law in their respective jurisdiction;

12. *Underlined* the importance of election observation, which is a key factor to reinforce transparency and impartiality in elections, *inter alia* by:

- a. election observation, notably long-term missions, by international institutions and domestic non-governmental organisations;
- b. training election observers;

13. *Recommended* to consider using media monitoring as a useful tool to identify shortcomings during electoral processes, by ensuring:

- a. fair access to media and equitable treatment of lists and candidates;
- b. possibilities for developing soft regulations, such as codes of conduct;
- c. transparency regarding media ownership.