
Clean vote crucially important for Armenia's ties with EU.

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The freedom and fairness of parliamentary elections due in Armenia next spring will be "crucially important" for the Armenian government's drive to forge closer political and economic links with the European Union, a senior EU official said on Monday.

Peter Semneby, the EU representative to the South Caucasus, warned that a repeat of serious electoral fraud would seriously jeopardize Yerevan's participation in the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) program that provides for a privileged partnership with the 25-nation bloc. Speaking during a regular visit in Yerevan, he said the plan of ENP-related actions which the Armenian government is currently discussing with the EU will include a pledge to conduct the upcoming polls in accordance "European values, standards and norms."

"The elections that will follow the entry into force of the action plan will be a crucially important test for Armenia in terms of the quality of its future relationship with the European Union," Semneby told a news conference after talks with senior Armenian officials.

"After all, Armenia has committed itself and has confirmed in the far-reaching and detailed document, which will regulate the Armenia-EU relationship, that free and fair elections are a top priority," he said. "That is why I expect the elections to be free and fair."

The EU has always added its voice to Western criticism of the Armenian authorities' handling of elections. In particular, the bloc questioned their "commitment to democracy" in the wake of last November's constitutional referendum which was marred by allegations of massive vote rigging. However, EU pressure for Armenia's democratization was otherwise minimal until recently.

The EU signaled its intention to press harder for political reform in February when its External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner visited Yerevan and raised the issue with Armenian leaders. They assured her that they will do their best to tackle the chronic vote rigging.

Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian said the issue was high on the agenda of his talks with Semneby. He said Yerevan is close to completing its negotiations with the EU on the ENP action plan and will publicize the document "soon." "The Armenian side is having virtually no problems [in the talks,]" he said. "There are a number of minor outstanding issues which we think will be sorted out in the course of next week."

Semneby's itinerary in Yerevan also included a meeting with President Robert Kocharian, who unexpectedly cancelled a planned visit to Moscow on Friday ostensibly due to what his office described as an "acute viral disease of respiratory tract." The meeting was apparently not held in the presidential palace in Yerevan, with photographs released by the presidential press service showing Kocharian wearing casual clothes. The EU official said the Armenian leader looked well.

Oskanian said he has only spoken with Kocharian by phone since

Friday. "His voice was a bit hoarse, but he seems to have almost recuperated," he said.
