



PRESS RELEASE

Budapest, 10 June, 2024 – Following the 9 June 2024 elections held in Hungary, the European Network of Election Monitoring Organizations (ENEMO) presented its Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions during the press-conference held at the V30 Center, in the framework of its international election observation mission (EOM) to the 2024 Municipal Elections in Hungary.

Head of the ENEMO Mission, Mr. Pierre Peytier, presented the key message from ENEMO’s preliminary statement: *“The 9 June elections were significantly affected by several shortcomings in the legal framework, unequal opportunities in the electoral race, media bias, inflammatory rhetoric and instances of shadow funding, which is cause for utmost concern. Together with these detrimental aspects, the frequent blurring of lines between party and state negatively impacted the process in favor of ruling parties. The election administration generally functioned in an efficient and professional manner, and Election Day procedures were for the most part adequately followed.”*

In addition to the complexity and over-regulations of several aspects of electoral processes, the mission has identified significant legal gaps in several key areas, including campaign finance, misuse of administrative resources, and media regulations. These areas lack sufficient regulation, which poses challenges to electoral contestants, non-partisan observers and independent media outlets. Ms. Nino Rizhamadze, Election Administration Analyst/Legal Analyst, said: *“ENEMO assesses that the legislative amendment process lacked broad consultations and consensus among stakeholders, and further failed to address key previous recommendations. Furthermore, the adoption of the Sovereignty Protection Act negatively impacted the state of media and civil society. Additionally, amending the framework six months ahead of election day is at odds with international good practice.”*

Despite the inherent complexity of the elections, the election administration at the national level, as well as at the observed territorial and local levels, generally complied with legal requirements and followed deadlines. ENEMO notes the overall trust from stakeholders in the professionalism, transparency and impartiality of election commissions and offices at all levels, though some concerns were raised regarding the appointment process of election commission members potentially favoring the ruling majority party. Ms. Rizhamadze added: *“Almost all observed EMBs demonstrated transparency and were open to ENEMO observers. This includes the NEC and NEO, which operated in a professional, collegial and transparent manner. Furthermore, the cooperation between observed commissions and offices was professional and collaborative.”*

Regarding the political background in these elections, Ms. Kristina Kostelac, Political Analyst, said: *“The political atmosphere in Hungary leading up to the municipal elections was marked by significant turmoil and distrust, exacerbated by a clemency scandal that led to high-profile resignations. Several large events were held prior to election day, including the Peace March where Viktor Orbán promised a record-breaking mobilization and a major election victory, and Peter Magyar’s campaign closing event just a day before the polls.”* She added that only 48 hours before the start of voting, Fidesz’s candidate for the mayor of Budapest, Alexandra Szentkirályi, withdrew from the mayoral race and asked all of her and Fidesz’s supporters to vote for supposedly independent candidate Dávid Vitézy on the mayoral ballot. ENEMO raises concerns about such tactics used to misinform voters in an attempt to affect election results.

When it comes to candidate registration in the elections, Ms. Kostelac stated: *“ENEMO assesses that the candidate registration process was generally inclusive and transparent. However, some opposition parties*

struggled to collect enough signatures in local communities, or faced challenges in forming the list of candidates. The majority of candidacies rejected were due to an insufficient number of valid signatures collected, or their decision to withdraw”. The mission was informed of some 859 settlements out of 3,178 mayoral races with only one candidate running for mayor, which ENEMO assesses as damaging to the competitiveness of the elections in those settlements.

Regarding the electoral campaign, Ms. Kostelac said: *“In the weeks leading up to the municipal elections, the campaign intensified significantly. ENEMO observers reported concerns about unethical data usage, such as sending political messages via emails, as well as misuse of state resources. ENEMO observers identified several instances of misuse of state resources for campaigning. Local authorities obstructed opposition candidates by making it difficult to obtain campaign permits and pressuring public employees to support or vote for the ruling party”.*

She added on campaign finance that *“Campaign finance rules for municipal elections in Hungary starkly contradict the standards set by the Venice Commission. ENEMO highlights that spending by political parties should be limited to ensure equality of opportunity. There are no legal limits on campaign spending for municipal elections, in sharp contrast to the regulated limits for parliamentary elections. The glaring discrepancy between legal limits on campaign spending for municipal and parliamentary elections permits unrestricted spending, resulting in a severely uneven playing field that disadvantages smaller parties and independent candidates. Moreover, it flagrantly violates the principle of strict or proportional equality thereby undermining the democratic process.”* ENEMO raises serious concerns about shadow funding practices, through the use of government-organized NGOs, state companies, and unreported funding sources. The deployment of GONGOs facilitates indirect state support for ruling party campaigns, significantly blurring the lines between state resources and political financing.

Regarding the media environment, Ms. Teodora Gilic, Media Analyst, said: *“ENEMO expresses concerns over the low level of internal pluralism among Hungarian media, and the evident polarization of media outlets along political lines. ENEMO further assesses that the campaign was affected by significant discrimination against independent media by Fidesz-affiliated political actors and the government, both at the national and local levels.”* In addition, ENEMO assesses that contestants in municipal elections did not enjoy equal access to media representation. Political pressure was evident in both national and local media, particularly in municipalities where the ruling party was in power. Bias in media coverage was further evidenced by several pro-government media actively participating in Fidesz’s campaign.

Ms. Ana Mihajlovic, Deputy Head of Mission, presented ENEMO’s preliminary assessment of the voter registration process: *“Generally, ENEMO assesses that the Central Electoral Register administered by the NEO enjoys the trust of the public and stakeholders. However, the number of voters in the register decreased in all municipalities compared to previous municipal elections in 2019, leading to the redrawing of electoral boundaries in December 2023. This impacted the size of some municipalities and therefore affected the electoral system for those settlements. ENEMO assesses that the redrawing of electoral boundaries based on updates to the voters’ list six months before the election is at odds with international standards.”* She added: *“ENEMO observers reported on allegations related to data leaks of voters’ personal information, including voter data being sold to nominating organizations and candidates for voter outreach purposes. ENEMO additionally raises concerns regarding reports of pressure on voters, and in some instances multiple voters unlawfully registered at the same address, including in one Budapest district, allegedly with an intention to affect the outcome of the mayoral election and holding the risk of undue influence on voters.”*

Ms. Mihajlovic also delivered the mission’s general Election Day assessment: *“On Election Day, ENEMO observation teams observed at 63 polling stations, as well as the intake of election materials and tabulation of results in 4 Local Election Offices. Based on the mission’s observation, in the limited number*

of polling stations observed, Election Day procedures were generally conducted efficiently and in accordance with the law.”

Mr. Pierre Peytier concluded the press conference by stating that the mission will continue to follow the process and final tabulation of results, as well as post-election complaints. ENEMO’s EOM will issue a Final Report complete with a full assessment and recommendations approximately two months after the election.

This press release will also be available in Hungarian on ENEMO’s website, www.enemo.eu.

For further information, please contact the Head of Mission at pierre.peytier@enemo.eu or +36 202 326 786.