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Meeting on young voters' awareness raising about the role of the electoral process in a democratic system

Chisinau, 13-14 February 2012

**Hotel Jazz
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On 13-14 February 2012, representatives of the Ministries of Education and civil society from the Eastern Partnership (EaP) Facility countries took part in a meeting held in Chisinau (Republic of Moldova) devoted to young voters' awareness raising about the role of the electoral process in a democratic system. The aim of the meeting was to exchange experiences on teaching in high schools about the role of elections in democracy. Council of Europe experts on young voters' education and elections contributed to the discussion and presented different approaches to the subject. A representative of the European Union Delegation in Chisinau as well the Head of the Chisinau Office, also attended this event and provided introductory remarks (see list of participants appended).

After the introductory remarks, the Council of Europe Secretariat briefly explained the context of the EaP Facility, of which this project is part. Its aim is to create regional networks and platforms in a multilateral shape, respecting differences between the countries. Free and fair elections being one of the fundamental elements of a democracy, the support to these is therefore an important component of the EaP Facility.

In the first part of the meeting, participants had the opportunity to listen to three experts on young voters' education and elections: Mr Kars Veling, Director of the Dutch organisation "ProDemos-House for Democracy and the Rule of Law"; Ms Zvezdana Dragovic, Acting Executive Director of the Association of Election Officials of Bosnia and Herzegovina (AEOBiH), and Mr Alex Sergent, representative of the NGO Catch 21 from United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Mr Kars Veling illustrated the activities of ProDemos, a Dutch organisation whose task is to inform people about democracy and rule of law, and get them involved. ProDemos believes that democracy and the rule of law cannot be taken for granted but need to be actively promoted. Mr Veling introduced the 'VoteMatch', a nation-wide online tool that aims to help people decide which political party they should vote for. He went on explaining that the pre-election period is a particularly busy time for VoteMatch: as an example, he referred to the most recent national elections, when this online tool was used over four million times (among a total of twelve million Dutch voters).

An example of involvement of youth in democracy, carried out in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) was presented by Ms Zvezdana Dragovic from the Association of Election Officials of Bosnia and Herzegovina (AEOBiH). The EOBiH was founded in 1999 with the goal to provide an independent forum for exchange of information among election officials in BiH and to contribute to the advancement of democracy in BiH by ensuring the fairness of and public confidence in the electoral process. Ms Dragovic presented the project entitled: "Youth for Youth/ First time Voter", which was implemented in BiH with the goal to increase the interest of young people (turning 18 years old, thus first-time voters) in the electoral and political life in their country.

Mr Alex Sergent from the British NGO Catch 21 presented the role that social media can play in reaching out to youngsters. He explained to participants that his NGO is a charitable production company which produces videos and other new media content to help engage young people with politics and their communities; it is the first political internet television channel based at Westminster – run by young people for young people. This NGO organises video conferences with politicians, political activists and representatives of a number of political movement in order to inform young people

about current political issues, political parties and elections, with a view to motivating young people to participate in elections both as voters and candidates.

After presentation of their programmes provided by the CoE experts, representatives of Ministries of Education from five countries of the EaP Facility provided a short overview of their experience, best practices, lessons learned and limitations in the field of participation of youth in electoral process.

It appeared from the presentations that each of the five countries had developed its own strategy for civic education, with the production of a number of manuals and textbooks for teachers and students.

In Georgia, elections are mentioned at the school level as “Participation in school self Governance”, and Council of Europe’s publications “Living in Democracy” and “How all teachers can support Citizenship and Human Rights education” are used. In Ukraine, students receive formal education on electoral matters during the age range 12-17. With regard to Armenia, civic education is based on different standards, such as: the understanding of the concepts of democracy and freedom; knowledge about other governance systems (monarchy, oligarchy) and understanding about the concept of constitutionality (rule of majority, protection of minority rights, etc); understanding of democratic elections as a main institute for a democratic representative government. Moldovan students also receive basic knowledge on elections. The representative of Azerbaijan explained that students in higher classes receive some kind of education on elections but promotion of legal and human rights education still remains weak.

With respect to representatives of non-governmental organisations, these provided a short overview of their activities targeted at mobilising youth and engaging them in the development of democratic processes (some selected examples are presented below). All present NGOs showed good will to co-operate with the Ministries of Educations in the field of the elections.

The Georgian “new Generation - new Initiative” (nGnI), a prominent NGO which was founded by several youth nongovernmental organisations in November 2003, described its activities in the fields of: foster democratic elections in Georgia; support Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic integration; contribute to the active involvement of youth in civil society processes. Apart from carrying out election observation, the nGnI is paying a special attention to the Voters Outreaching Campaigns, especially to the young voters and minorities.

The National Youth Council of Moldova has experience in pre-electoral activism, in informing citizens and mobilizing voters in view of elections, trough preparation and dissemination of printed material.

The Armenian "The Future is yours" charitable, social NGO, started its activities in 2003 by implementing projects in relevant spheres such as education, culture, social life, civil society, human rights, environment, as well as projects aimed at development of voluntary service in Armenia and others. The organisation within the framework of its mission implements a wide range of educational, informative and cultural projects in Yerevan and regions of Armenia as well as international and regional projects on developing legal consciousness of the youth. For further development of the society this NGO took in consideration, as an important precondition, the youth education.

Conclusions

Following presentations of the CoE experts, as well as presentations of the participants, people who attended the workshop had the opportunity to discuss how to raise young voters' awareness about the electoral process in a democratic system, from the angle of being both a voter and candidate. Participants agreed that the programme of education on elections in high schools should be improved.

The workshop was an excellent occasion for the representatives of the Ministries of Education and non-governmental organisations to meet and exchange views on this common subject. Participants agreed that this meeting was an opportunity to build new bridges for future co-operation. NGOs representatives expressed their readiness and willingness to participate in a training of trainers' process which would train teachers in the future.

The proposals for the next step were agreed as follows:

- 1) On the basis of the discussions held during the meeting, the CoE will prepare a model curriculum for the practical training on electoral campaign and voting in polling stations for young students (16 -18 years old);
- 2) A follow – up meeting with the same group of participants to be organised in the summer in Tbilisi, notably to discuss the concrete implementation of the trainings.