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EUROPEAN COMMISSION FOR DEMOCRACY THROUGH LAW
(VENICE COMMISSION)

JOINT OPINION
ON PROPOSED AMENDMENTS TO THE LAW
“ON CONDUCTING MEETINGS, ASSEMBLIES,
RALLIES AND DEMONSTRATIONS”
AND TO RELATED PROVISIONS OF THE CRIMINAL CODE
OF THE REPUBLIC OF ARMENIA

(pursuant to discussions in Yerevan on 17 March 2005)

by
the Venice Commission
and OSCE/ODIHR

Endorsed by the Venice Commission
at its 63rd Plenary Session
(Venice, 10-11 June 2005)

on the basis of comments by

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I. Introduction

1. A meeting was held in Yerevan on 17 March 2005, in which the Vice-President of the National Assembly (Mr Tigran Torosyan), the Minister of Justice (Mr David Harutyunyan), representatives of the Venice Commission (Ms Finola Flanagan and Ms Simona Granata), OSCE/ODIHR experts (Mr Neil Jarman and Mr Michael Hamilton) and representatives of the OSCE/ODIHR (Mr Denis Petit and Ms Irina Urumova) participated. This meeting aimed at discussing several issues concerning the compliance of the Law "On Conducting Meetings, Assemblies, Rallies and Demonstrations" as well as related provisions of the Criminal Code and the Code of Administrative Violations with international human rights standards.

2. The discussions took into account previous opinions on the legislation in question from ODIHR and the Venice Commission. They were detailed and far-reaching and allowed for clause-by-clause consideration of the Law and the recent related amendments to both Codes.

3. As a result of this meeting, the Armenian authorities have drafted a law amending the Law "On Conducting Meetings, Assemblies, Rallies and Demonstrations", and have proposed certain amendments to the Criminal Code. The present opinion relates to these proposed changes.

4. In some important respects, the changes proposed as a result of the meeting in March, marked an improvement over the initial version of the proposed amendments. That said, the protracted nature of the discussions, and the need for revised amendments to be drafted and subsequently translated into English, inevitably meant that a number of important points could not be finalized during the meeting of 17 March. Satisfactory conclusion, therefore, was not reached in respect of every issue. Our comments below address the newly revised amendments which had not been previously proposed and commented on in earlier opinions, including those issues which we believe remain outstanding. The wording of some of the amendments appears unclear. This may be due to the quality of their translation into English. We have commented below where we are unsure as to the precise meaning intended.

II. General Observations

5. The law "On Conducting Meetings, Assemblies, Rallies and Demonstrations" exists in the context of Article 44 of the Constitution of the Republic of Armenia, and is supplemented by various other articles in the criminal law. The law must meet the requirements of Article 11 of the European Convention. The text of this law is intended to be the basis of the right of assembly and how the right is guaranteed and protected in national law. The law must meet the required standards.

6. It has been stated in earlier advice that, as a fundamental right, the right to assemble should, insofar as possible, be allowed to be exercised without regulation except where its exercise would pose a threat to public order and where necessity would demand state intervention. A legislative basis for any interference with the right is required by the European Convention on Human Rights. Whilst it is not essential to have a specific law on public events and assemblies states may have such a law but it must be limited to setting out the legislative bases for permissible interferences by state authorities. Any system of notification for holding assemblies must not impair or prevent the lawful exercise of the right. The law as adopted and the proposed amendments set out in great detail the conditions for

exercising the constitutionally guaranteed right of assembly. Specific criticisms have already been made but only some of these have been addressed in the proposed amendments.

7. The law still presents substantial shortcomings as detailed in previous advice. It continues to be excessively detailed with excessive differentiation between different categories of event in a manner which is not properly linked to permissible reasons for restrictions. This is so even though the bases for legitimate restriction as contained in the European Convention Article 11 are set out in Article 1 of the law.

8. Blanket restrictions, such as those contained in Article 7(6), Articles 9(3)(1) – 9(3)(4) and Article 10(3) preclude the consideration of the individual circumstances of each case and therefore run counter to the principle that restrictions be proportionate to the legitimate aim being pursued. We recommend that these provisions be deleted from the legislation given that local self-governance bodies retain the general discretion to impose restrictions on events where the legitimate aims in Article 11(2) of the European Convention on Human Rights are engaged.

9. We would emphasize that how this law is interpreted and implemented will also be of great significance in terms of its compliance with international human rights standards. In this regard, the European Court of Human Rights has stated that the right to peaceful assembly should not be interpreted restrictively and any restrictions should be construed narrowly, and that in general, rights must be “practical and effective” not “theoretical or illusory.”

10. There have been reports by international and domestic non-government organizations¹ that document past restrictions on people travelling to demonstrations, the rejection of applications to hold demonstrations on the basis of either insufficient or illegitimate grounds, and the use of excessive force by the police. These, together with recent reports concerning the policing of demonstrations relating to the A1+ Television Company,² emphasize the need to clearly establish proportionality as the guiding principle in the regulation of public assemblies.

11. In light of the above, it is vitally important that the government consult with local NGOs, civil society representatives and other relevant stakeholders both before finalizing amendments to the law and also after any reforms have been adopted. Such groups will clearly be affected by the legislation in different ways, and it is imperative that their experience and views be given serious consideration so that the legislation, and the procedures and working practices which develop around it, will work to the mutual benefit of all concerned.³ Such consultation can help foster a spirit of co-operation rather than confrontation, and can also improve understanding of the government’s intentions in bringing forward these amendments.

¹ For instance, Human Rights Watch [*Cycle of Repression: Human Rights Violations in Armenia. Human Rights Watch Briefing Paper*, May 2004, <http://www.hrw.org/backgrounder/eca/armenia/0504/armenia-election.pdf>], Helsinki Association [*Annual Report on Human Rights in Armenia for the Year of 2004 prepared by Helsinki Association*, Yerevan 2005, pp.14-17] and Partnership for Open Society [<http://www.csi.am/eng/index.php?goto=news&id=59>].

² <http://www.hra.am/old/eng/index1.php?goto=news&id=1938> ;
<http://www.hra.am/old/eng/index1.php?goto=news&id=1939>;
<http://www.hra.am/old/eng/index1.php?goto=news&id=1943>.

³ See also our comments in relation to Article 9(3)(2) below.

12. Given that any new legislation inevitably entails a process of ‘bedding in’ and fine tuning, it will be important to monitor the operation of the law. In this regard, it may be beneficial to insert into the law a clause which places a duty upon those bodies charged with its administration (principally local self-governance bodies) to “keep under review, and make such recommendations as they think fit to the Government concerning, the operation of this Law”. We recommend that some official means of monitoring the application of the law, and of collating relevant statistics, should be devised.

IV. Analysis of the proposed amendments to the law “On Conducting Meetings, Assemblies, Rallies and Demonstrations”

Article 1

13. The proposal is to include in the law the reasons for restriction which are permitted by Article 11(2) of the Convention. Given that the Armenian legislature has pursued a policy of detailed regulation of the exercise of the right of assembly, the setting out in the law of the only circumstances in which restrictions are permissible in this manner is welcomed. Though, in order to improve its coherence, we would suggest that the article be altered to read:

1.1 The objective of this law is to create the necessary conditions for citizens of the Republic of Armenia, foreign citizens, stateless persons (hereafter referred to as citizens) and legal persons to exercise their constitutional right to conduct peaceful, weaponless meetings, assemblies, rallies and demonstrations.

1.2 The exercise of this right is not subject to any restriction except in cases prescribed by the Law and which are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security or public safety, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health and morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others. This article does not prevent the imposition of lawful restrictions on the exercise of police and state administrations.

1.3 This law regulates relations pertinent to conducting peaceful meetings, assemblies, rallies (processions) or demonstrations (including pickets), as well as other events.

Article 7

14. Article 7(6) provides for the prohibition of events “in the proximity of healthcare, pre-school and education institutions in case such actions disrupt regular operation of those institutions”. We have already stated our objection to blanket provisions (particularly those pertaining to the location of public events) because they preclude consideration of the issue of proportionality and whether the restriction is for a relevant and sufficient reason. Furthermore, to justify restrictions on the basis of speculation that disruption *may* occur does not satisfy the interpretative obligation that restrictions be narrowly construed. Therefore, we believe that this provision is neither reasonable nor necessary. Universities, for example, are frequently the site of protests and demonstrations. Similarly, protests about the adequacy of healthcare provision might properly be directed at the healthcare institutions themselves. Restrictions can legitimately be imposed upon assemblies in these locations where they raise

specific concerns pertaining to public order, health or morals, or the rights and freedoms of others etc. Such is already provided for elsewhere in the legislation.

Article 9

15. We remain deeply concerned about the necessity and proportionality of the blanket prohibitions contained in Article 9(3). The prohibitions are not linked to a permissible reason for restriction. This provision undermines the fundamental presumption (as provided for in Article 1) that the right to freedom of peaceful assembly is guaranteed to everyone who has the intention of organising a peaceful demonstration. International best practice is clear that participants in public events must be able to communicate their message effectively. American jurisprudence, for example, holds that the organizer must be afforded an alternative forum that is both accessible and situated in an area where the intended audience is expected to pass. Thus, in assessing the proportionality of restrictions, a court is likely to consider the speaker's intended audience and the extent to which the notified location contributes to the speaker's message.

16. Clearly, individuals and NGOs with local knowledge and expertise in the laws of the Republic of Armenia will be better placed than we are to comment upon the need to restrict events in the locations listed in Articles 9(3)(1) and 9(3)(2). In our opinion, though, the phrase "areas or units of special, utmost important significance" in Article 9(3)(3) affords much too broad a discretion, and contains the potential for the imposition of unnecessary and disproportionate restrictions. It also increases the likelihood of discriminatory, content-based restrictions being imposed on certain types of protest (such as demonstrations against military actions or arbitrary detentions). For similar reasons, we believe there is no justification for Article 9(3)(4).

17. We recommend that the provisions in Articles 9(3)(1) – 9(3)(4) be deleted entirely given that Article 13 already contains adequate provision for restrictions to be imposed in any situation where, for example, there is a present and real danger to life or the well-being of persons.

18. Furthermore, Article 13(3) provides that any prohibition of a mass public event may be appealed in court and it will ultimately be for the court to rule upon the proportionality of any restriction on the facts of the specific case. Article 9, however, effectively excludes the right of appeal in certain circumstances by arbitrarily prohibiting all events from specific locations on a statutory basis (as reiterated by

19. Article 13(1)(4)). At the very least, we recommend that any future discussion should address the necessity of the provisions in Articles 9(3)(1) – 9(3)(4), and similarly the provisions in Article 7(6) (see above).

Article 10

20. For the same reasons as are set out in relation to Article 9(3)(3), we consider that the prohibition on assemblies in "areas delineated by the Government of the Republic of Armenia" in Article 10(3) affords too broad a discretion and should be deleted. Nor is there, in our opinion, any justification for having special rules in relation to assemblies relating to "election or referendum campaign[s]". For this reason also, we recommend that Article 10(3) be deleted.

21. The wording in Article 10(4), “the notification is legal and will be considered, in case it is submitted” requires further clarification (although the ambiguity may be due to the translation of this phrase into English). If it is intended to mean that notifications which do not comply with the procedural requirements in Article 10(4) will, nonetheless, be viewed as having been submitted and will be considered (as is suggested by the proposed amendments to Article 12(1)), then this revision is welcome.

22. See also comments below, on Article 14 in relation to spontaneous demonstrations.

Article 11

23. The amendment to Article 11(2) in relation to stateless persons is welcome. It may, however, introduce an unintended anomaly in that citizens who do not hold a current passport – or who have lost their passport – would not be able to satisfy this provision as currently worded. A possible solution would be for Article 11(1)(2) simply to require that notification include any document certifying the identity of the organizer.

24. Article 11(5) also requires further clarification. We believe that this article should state that it is the responsibility of the authorities (not the organiser) to send a copy of the notification to the police.

Article 12

25. Article 12(6) states that:

In the result of consideration of the notification, in the absence of the circumstances referred to in Article 13, the notification about a mass public event is taken into consideration.

26. Again, it is possible that our concerns arise from the translation of this provision, but it is unclear what precisely the sentence means. It should, perhaps, state that in the absence of the circumstances referred to in Article 13, the event will be facilitated according to the terms of the submitted notification.

Article 13

27. We welcome the removal of the prohibition of mass public events where the event might result in traffic disruption (former Article 13(1)(6)). This prohibition had previously been criticised as excessive.

28. However, we do not believe it to be necessary to include the phrase “in the mentioned areas or at interstate highways as long that” in Article 13(1)(6). It is permissible to restrict assemblies where it is proportionate and necessary to protect the rights and freedoms of others. It is not therefore necessary to have a special provision relating to highways. We were also unsure whether it was intended that this provision apply only to “rallies” or whether it should also apply to all mass public events (given that static assemblies may also be organized on the highway). We would suggest that this sub-section be revised to read “the continuation of the public event will result in the unreasonable infringement of the rights and freedoms of other people.”

29. We welcome the removal of the prohibition on counter-demonstrations contained in article 13(7). We had criticised in earlier opinions the prohibition on such demonstrations which should generally be allowed. Article 13(2), which provides for prohibition where

“some other event that precludes convention of the event takes place on the mentioned date, time and location” should be clarified so as to ensure that this provision is not used to prohibit counter-demonstrations.

30. Article 13(4) currently requires the authorities to offer organisers an alternative date or time if an event is prohibited under 13(1)(2) and 13(1)(3). We believe that Article 13(1)(6) – whereby an event may be restricted if it infringes upon the rights and freedoms of others – should also be included in this requirement. As we emphasized during discussions on 17 March, we believe that the authorities and the organisers should explore alternatives for allowing an event (such as requiring that a rally proceeds along one side of the road to allow for the passage of vehicular traffic) rather than imposing a simple and outright ban. One way of allowing for this in the legislation would be to include reference to ‘manner’ in Article 13(4) in addition to the ‘time’ and ‘place’ restrictions already referred to. One possible draft of Article 13(4) would therefore be:

Should the authorized body find that there are grounds to restrict a mass public event pursuant to points 2, 3 or 6 of para. 1 of this Article, the authorized body shall offer to the organizer other dates (in the place and at the time specified in the notification) or other hours (in the place and on the date specified in the notification) or shall impose other proportionate conditions upon the manner of the event (on the same date, at the same time and in the same place specified in the notification).

Article 14

31. In previous advices the fact that the law would not permit spontaneous demonstrations except for “non-mass” assemblies was the subject of particular criticism. The new Article 14(1)(1) would appear indirectly to allow spontaneous mass public events to continue where they evolve out of non-mass public events because the police are not given the discretion to stop them. However, it is not at all clear that spontaneous events are in general permitted and the law continues to be unsatisfactory in this regard. We would recommend an addition be made to Article 10 specifying the contexts under which spontaneous mass demonstrations would be regarded as lawful.

V. Analysis of the proposed amendments to the Criminal Code

32. We note the changes that have been proposed to Article 225 of the Criminal Code. However, whilst the term ‘illegal public event’ has been removed from the sub-clauses 225.1 and 225.2, it remains in the text of the main clause. The reservations that we expressed in the previous draft opinions therefore remain. We would recommend that Article 225 be redrafted to read ‘Organisation and holding of a public event that violates the requests of the law’.

33. We welcome the deletion of the proposed new Article 258 of the Criminal Code.