

Speaking Notes - Steward DICKSON, (United Kingdom, ILDG), Congress' member

Thursday 30 March 2017

Dear Colleagues,

It is my pleasure to present to you today the conclusions of the election observation mission carried out by the Congress in Bosnia and Herzegovina in October 2016. It was my honour to lead a delegation composed of 32 members including five colleagues from the EU Committee of the Regions. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Adam BANASZAK, Spokesperson of the Committee of the Regions, for being with us today – the participation of members of the Committee of the Regions in this mission constituted, once again, an example of the fruitful co-operation between our institutions.

Our presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina from 28 September to 3 October 2016 was all the more important as we were the only international delegation present in the country to observe the local elections held on 2 October. On Election Day, our delegation – divided into 12 observers' teams – was able to observe voting and part of the counting process in some 250 polling stations throughout the country.

Let me first briefly mention that the 2 October local elections were held against the background of a challenging economic situation, continuing tensions between the central authorities and Republika Srpska as well as a general growing electoral fatigue among voters. In particular, the referendum on the National Day of Republika Sprbska – which was organised only a week before the local elections – surely increased divisions

and tensions. Overall, the electoral campaign focused on general political debates rather than on local issues and reinforced political allegiance based on ethnic identity.

In this context of widespread distrust, I would like to highlight that the presence of active members of the civil society in polling stations – notably representatives of the coalition of NGOs “Pop Lupom” – played an important role in improving citizens’ trust in the electoral process.

With respect to general conclusions, on Election Day, voting was held in a calm and orderly manner, with the exception of a few violent incidents which cast a shadow over the elections – I will comment on these incidents in a minute. The ballot was technically well prepared, in accordance with international standards for democratic elections. Clear efforts had been made by the election administration – and notably by the Central Election Commission – to organise these local elections in a timely, professional and transparent manner.

I would like to emphasise improvements related to reforms of counting procedures and of the system of so-called “tendered ballots”. The implementation of the newly-adopted 40 per cent gender quota on candidates’ lists for local councils was also a major achievement with regard to women’s participation in local elections.

However, the Congress regrets that a few violent incidents took place on Election Day as in Srebrenica and in Stolac. In Srebrenica, following rumours over electoral fraud and ethnic tensions, recount was organised in five polling stations and the final results arrived only two weeks after Election Day. In Stolac, incidents during polling led to the cancellation of the elections. Voting was repeated on 19 February 2017 and, according to citizens’ observers, were held in a calm and orderly manner.

Let me now refer to several issues that are at the core of the Recommendation.

First of all, regarding the election administration. systematic and high-quality training of members of polling stations commissions would foster professionalism in the whole

election administration and eliminate procedural uncertainties on Election Day. Moreover, in order to achieve de-politicisation of the election administration, the Congress encourages the authorities to overhaul the conditions of appointment and dismissal of members of polling stations commissions, not least in order to avoid trading of positions in these commissions.

Secondly, the recurring issue of quality of voters' list. Despite the efforts made by the authorities, the process of updating the lists still needs to be overhauled – notably to make sure that deceased voters are de-registered. Moreover, the presence of voters residing de facto abroad on voters' lists raises two challenges. Firstly, it is at odds with the idea expressed in Congress' Recommendation 369 according to which a "genuine link" should exist between a voter and the place in which she or he casts her or his ballot at local level. Moreover, the possibility to request ballots for out-of-the-country voting allegedly led to electoral fraud and safeguards should be introduced for future elections.

Then, efforts should be made to ensure a real level playing field for all candidates, including for independent candidates or candidates from small parties, who should receive fair media coverage. Female candidates should also be guaranteed the right to stand for election on an equal basis and to serve for the whole duration of the term for which they have been elected.

More generally, allegations of vote-buying and misuse of administrative resources call for more transparency of political parties and campaign financing. In this respect, it is crucial that the existing legislation is fully implemented and that appropriate and effective sanctions are applied in a timely manner in order to increase trust in the electoral process.

Last but not least, let me highlight that the current situation of local democracy in the City of Mostar is critical. As in 2012, no local elections were held in Mostar on 2 October 2016. This constitutes a serious breach in the right to self-government of a population of about 130,000 and is a major matter of concern for the Congress.

Finally, I would like to thank my colleague Carla DEJONGHE for having participated in a post-electoral conference in Sarajevo at the end of February. She had the opportunity to present our preliminary findings and held fruitful discussions with several stakeholders including the Central Election Commission. I take this opportunity to reaffirm before you the will of the Congress to engage in a post-electoral dialogue with the authorities of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the very near future.

Thank you for your attention!