

Congress' Electoral Assessment Mission to Georgia – 20-23 October 2017
Congress and OSCE/ODIHR joint Press Conference

Statement by Stewart DICKSON (United Kingdom), Congress' Thematic Spokesperson on observation of local and regional elections

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Tbilisi, 22 October 2017

Dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to share with you this afternoon, on behalf of the Congress Electoral Assessment Mission, impressions of the Election Day and of the meetings we held with different stakeholders prior to these elections in Tbilisi.

Since our Congress of Local and Regional Authorities was meeting in plenary this week in Strasbourg, it was not possible to deploy a larger team to Georgia. But despite the small size of our Delegation, I think we can say that we were able to focus on the essentials of these local elections.

We appreciated very much the cooperation with our colleagues from OSCE/ODIHR, Corien JONKER and her team. The validation of the work of our Congress Delegation was enhanced by the observations of some 200 ODIHR observers in the field and the high-quality of the data processing carried out by their statisticians.

The Election Day, also from our perspective, was calm and mainly uneventful in some 30 polling stations our three teams visited, which is usually a good sign for elections. In the large majority of the places we went, the electoral procedures were followed carefully by the commission members. However, it appears that there was some confusion in certain polling stations about the collection of information with regard to individuals who had cast their vote by domestic observers or rather party proxies. We were also informed by civil society observers of serious incidents in specific electoral districts.

Concerning electoral rules we can say that there is a conducive legal framework and there are very many regulations in order to manage the elections in practical terms. The law currently allows voters who are registered at a permanent or a temporary address to cast a ballot in local elections. What we would like to mention in this respect is Congress Recommendation 369 from 2015 which provides that only voters who are permanently residing in a specific municipality should be enfranchised at the local level. This is a recommendation, not an obligation, of course, but the Congress would welcome if the Georgian authorities could take this into consideration for future reforms. This would also complement their efforts to establish the accuracy of voters' lists which is very welcome by the Congress.

During our meetings with different stakeholders prior to the Election Day we also heard reports about misuse of public resources during the campaign - which is particularly relevant for the local level. It is not always easy to substantiate such allegations and a few have been brought to the attention of the courts.

However, the Congress has been working on this issue - which is a problem observed not only during elections in Georgia - and there is a manual being prepared, specifically for local elected representatives in Council of Europe member States and their role during electoral processes. We look forward to cooperating with the Georgian authorities in this respect.

Lastly, allow me to mention the situation of local self-government in this country which is at the very center of the elections held yesterday. Decentralization and the strengthening of municipalities and regions are still in the early stages of development. At the same time, the recent past has been characterised by a sort of exodus from the rural areas and regions into the capital city Tbilisi. All the more it's important for Georgia to strengthen the capacities of local authorities and to continue decentralisation also in terms of financial devolution.

Let me conclude by saying that complexity of the current electoral system with regard to the election of council members in smaller municipalities does not make it easy for people to understand who is in charge for what at the local level. Also this is food for thought for possible future reforms in the interest of efficient local government for the citizens of Georgia's municipalities and regions.

Thank you for your attention.