

**36th Session of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (2-4 April 2019)**

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*Check against delivery - Seul le prononcé fait foi*

**Debate on the “Information report on the assessment of local government elections in Poland (21 October 2018)”**

**Strasbourg, 2 April 2019**

Dear colleagues,

On 21 October 2018, the Polish voters elected their local government representatives, and I was pleased to be the Head of Delegation of the Electoral Assessment Mission that visited Poland from 18 to 22 October. At the February meeting in Belgrade, my colleague Violeta CRUDU, a member of our Delegation, had already the opportunity to give the members of the Monitoring Committee a brief insight into our observations. Today, I will try to give you some additional information.

The October 2018 mission was the first election observation activity ever organised by the Congress in this country. The invitation issued by the National Electoral Commission of Poland came somewhat late, but in view of the current political challenges it was important for the Congress to make this observation possible, nonetheless.

Technically speaking, it was an electoral assessment involving less members of the Congress compared to fully-fledged missions. On Election Day, 12 Congress observers operating in six teams were deployed to different Municipalities including the Capital City Warsaw, Lodz, Lublin, Krakow and Wroclaw and the adjacent rural areas. All in all, we observed the voting and counting in some 80 polling stations.

Overall, the Election Day was calm, well organised and uneventful in most places we visited. However, there has been a lot of criticism inside and outside of Poland in the months prior to these elections, further to the changes in the judiciary system which had caused concerns about the European future of the country.

Also, we can say that the 2018 local government elections had a somewhat national dimension, in that they were the first elections since the PiS Parliamentary election victory in 2015 and therefore considered to be an important political test ahead of the forthcoming European elections in May, the Parliamentary elections to be held later this year and the Presidential vote planned for 2020.

A glance at the results shows that the governing party PiS, with about 34% of the votes in the regional assemblies, is ahead of the opposition "Civic Platform" with about 27%. In large cities, nota bene in the Capital City, the opposition scored well and Warsaw has with Rafal TRZASKOWSKI a new Mayor of the opposition party.

Considering the complexity of the multi-level local electoral process in Poland, we would like to highlight with satisfaction the high level of trust in the electoral management in Poland and that voters were able to express their will freely and without intimidations. The turnout was remarkably high, reflecting the great interest of the population in grassroots decisions.

However, there is room for improvement and I would like to point out some issues:

The introduction of amendments to the Electoral Code less than one year prior to the elections, besides raising concerns and creating uncertainty, is contrary to the recommendations of the Venice Commission. The main concerns expressed by several interlocutors of our Delegation included changes to determine the validity of the elections in case of contested results, but also the new definition of a valid mark on the ballot. Clear and simple instructions could bring an improvement for future elections.

We also have some remarks regarding the practical organisation of the voting: the set-up and size of polling stations did not always ensure the secrecy of the vote. This was aggravated by cases of group and family voting, inconsistencies regarding the proper sealing of ballot boxes and occasional understaffed electoral commissions or insufficiently trained members of the Precinct Election Commissions. This has influenced the functioning of electoral commissions.

Those Congress teams who were present in some selected polling stations to follow the handover between the two commissions for the counting procedure found this procedure lengthy and overly complicated. We consider this as a concrete starting point for looking for possibilities to improve this for future elections.

A positive change is the introduction of domestic election observers. The 2018 local government elections were the first elections in which domestic observers were officially allowed to carry out observation activities. Therefore, we encourage civil society in Poland to further engage in election observation as it can help improving electoral standards and practices.

Let me end by reminding us of a sad event that worries us all: I told you that the Election Day was calm and orderly - in the chargon of observers we say "uneventful" and we mean the day was without incidents or violence. However, the brutal murder of the Mayor of Dansk, Pawel ADAMOWICZ, that occurred only a few weeks after these elections, dramatically showed us how fragile our society is and how dangerous political office can be today, especially in a heated and polarised atmosphere.

Therefore, I think the lesson we should learn from these local elections in Poland is this:

we must ensure a peaceful political climate, we must defend the fundamental freedoms and democratic values of a society and we need to seek that the interplay between majority and opposition remains fair, open and respectful.

Thank you for your attention.