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Debate on Local Elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina (6 October 2024)

27 March 2025

Dear colleagues,

As deputy-head of delegation, let me introduce the findings of the Congress mission to observe local elections held on 6 October 2024 throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina. These elections were preceded by catastrophic floods two days prior which claimed the lives of 30 people and caused the postponement of voting in five municipalities. The delegation commended the reactivity and the work of the authorities to provide safe voting conditions for all voters in such difficult circumstances.

This was the eleventh time the Congress conducted an election observation mission in the country and our delegation consisted of 25 observers from 20 member States, led by Carla Dejonghe, whom I thank for her commitment as Head of Delegation. The Congress was part of an international election observation mission alongside observers from the OSCE/ODIHR and the European Parliament, which also enabled us to cross-check our observations.

Looking at the overall process, and in comparison to previous elections, the delegation found many positive developments. The 2024 amendments adopted by decision of the High Representative, the international overseer of the peace agreement, helped improve electoral integrity and, importantly, contributed to a less hostile election campaign, with fewer instances of hate speech and disinformation.

The elections were competitive and efficiently managed by the electoral administration. The Central Election Commission, the CEC, worked professionally despite facing

significant challenges and short deadlines, taking proactive steps to investigate violations and ensure the integrity of the elections – notably on early campaigning, hate speech and IT pilot projects. A significant change was the introduction of chairpersons and deputy-chairpersons of polling station commissions appointed by the CEC, which helped solve the problem of the trading of seats, an issue raised by the Congress in the past.

Election day, which Congress observers followed in over 115 polling stations, was largely calm and well-organised. The introduction of new technologies in a number of pilot stations was assessed positively and perceived as a step forward. At the same time, we observed minor procedural mistakes during the opening, voting, and counting processes and some irregularities, including breaches of vote secrecy, delays linked to IT solutions, and a lack of accessibility for voters with mobility impairments. Serious irregularities, such as voter intimidation, tracking of voters and attempts to influence voters, were observed in a small but still high number of polling stations. We recommend:

- improving the accessibility of polling stations,
- considering the introduction of more dissuasive sanctions in case of electoral violations, and
- strengthening the reliability of IT systems

As the Congress often notes, election day is only one side of the coin, and our mission, in line with Congress methodology, also identified a number of concerns in the pre-election period which should not be overlooked. First, the lack of political consensus on electoral reform led the High Representative to adopt wide-ranging amendments shortly before the election period. While these were perceived as a necessary step to improve the integrity of the process, their timing created a degree of legal uncertainty and most Congress interlocutors highly regretted that a solution could not be found by national actors. The CEC faced political pressure and lacked sufficient human and financial resources, leading to some key provisions of the amendments being partly or fully unfulfilled—for instance on appointments of electoral staff and the publication of voters lists. Although some limited efforts were made to better sanction misuse of administrative resources, the pre-election period was marked by an obstinately high number of such allegations. Election dispute resolution mechanisms faced significant

backlogs due to an increase in complaints related to the new amendments and hundreds of complaints were still pending on election day, not allowing for timely remedies.

Voter registers remained a source of concern for the delegation, as deceased/phantom/or non-resident citizens living abroad were sometimes included in the lists for local elections, which is not in line with Congress recommendations and remains to be addressed.

Media coverage of the campaign was also problematic, and we feared that voters were not provided with sufficient information to make informed choices, as political figures often failed to participate in public debates or to clearly articulate their electoral programs. While the media landscape is diverse, it is also highly polarised; public broadcasters are struggling financially; and journalists—particularly in Republika Srpska—faced increasing political pressure. On this matter, we recommend strengthening the enforcement of media legislation and safeguards to protect journalists from political pressure.

Political finance remained another area for improvement as regulation continued to be insufficient, and allegations of underreporting persisted. More proportionate sanctions are needed to deter cases of the non-submission of reports, and we encourage

- further oversight of campaign expenditure, particularly outside election periods
- to limit the use of cash transactions in campaigns,
- and to publish interim reports in a timely manner.

Concerns were raised by Congress interlocutors on potential foreign influence related to political finance and voter registration. Bosnia and Herzegovina's political system continues to be perceived by many interlocutors as vulnerable to such interference and we encourage the authorities to conduct thorough assessments of external influences in local elections and implement safeguards against it.

In the light of our findings, the Congress also invites the authorities to take concrete steps ahead of the 2026 general elections. The reopening of broad and inclusive negotiations on electoral and constitutional reform is essential to addressing provisions

deemed repeatedly in violation of the European Convention on Human Rights and remaining gaps related to the pre-election period. Lasting progress depends on a genuine, cross-party commitment to electoral integrity and local democracy. Strengthening the capacities of the election administration must also be a priority, ensuring that the CEC has the necessary resources and authority to enforce electoral rules in a transparent and timely manner.

To conclude, we also commended the active involvement of women and young people in the elections. Many stepped forward as candidates and played key roles in polling station commissions. At the same time, while gender quotas exist, the representation of women in local decision-making remains disappointingly low and more efforts should be done to support both women and youth as mayoral candidates and heads of lists and strengthen inclusivity of electoral processes.

Thank you for your attention and invite you to approve the draft recommendation.