

Congress election observation mission – Local elections in Finland held on 9 April 2017

Statement by Mrs Lelia HUNZIKER (Switzerland, SOC), Head of the Congress delegation

Monday, 10 April 2017

Good morning, dear ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for joining us at this press briefing on the day after the local elections held in more than 300 Finnish municipalities.

My name is Lelia Hunziker and I am the Head of a delegation from the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities. This is an institution of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg and we are responsible for the strengthening of local and regional democracy in the 47 member countries of the Council of Europe. Observing local and regional elections in Europe is a specific mandate given to the Congress by the member States of the Council of Europe.

The Council of Europe, you may know it, is a leading human rights Organisation in Europe and it comprises also countries which are not members of the European Union, for example my own home country Switzerland.

I am a local Councillor in the Swiss city of Aarau. Together with my colleagues - who have all elected mandates in their home countries - we were invited by the Finnish authorities to observe yesterday's elections.

Already on Thursday and on Friday, we held preparatory meetings with ministries in charge of the elections and of local government, with party representatives, candidates and with the media. In total, our delegation included 24 members from 18 different countries - and yesterday we deployed 10 teams all over the country. We observed elections in:

HELSINKI
TAMPERE
VAASA
JOENSUU
OULU
KUOPIO
JYVAESKYLAE.

I was operating with 2 teams in ROVANIEMI.

Overall, we were able to visit some 150 polling stations (or polling boards, as you call them here in Finland). Some members of our delegation also observed the counting.

We can say that the voting day was organised in a highly professional manner and procedures were fully in line with European standards for free, fair and transparent elections. The polling stations we visited were well equipped and accessible also to people with disabilities.

Finland has a well-established system of voters' registration, recently also based on a sound computer population register and the counting was carried out, in those places we were present, in an open way.

Transparency was - overall - a positive feature of these elections. We appreciated very much that the very first voter is given the opportunity to check the ballot box and the materials. We think that this is good practice and an example for other Council of Europe countries.

Another positive legal feature of local elections in Finland is the fact that only individuals who are permanently residing in a specific municipality have the right to vote at local level. We from the Congress appreciate this provision very much - we are convinced that there should be a close link between a voter and the municipality. This is also exemplary to other member States of the Council of Europe.

It was also interesting to observe for many of my colleagues on this delegation how the system of advance voting functions in Finland and that early voting - used by roughly 40 percent of the electorate - has become the backbone of voting.

In my own country, in Switzerland, we are also used to vote in advance, we do it by postal vote. But there are many countries in Europe where the voters prefer to express themselves in the polling station on the Election Day.

Let me add a few words on areas where there is room for improvement, in our view.

Firstly, we noticed that there is a need for a more consistent system of sealing of the ballot boxes. Some of our observers proposed also to revise the part of the counting procedure carried out at the level of polling station commissions.

We think that all this can be easily recovered. Some sort of compulsory and systematic training of members of the polling station commissions could be of help.

Further reflection is probably needed to make it easier for candidates who want to run in local elections outside the established party system. We from the Congress consider it as important to strengthen also the role of independent candidates at the local and regional level.

Let me conclude by referring to an issue which was very much in the foreground of the public debate during the electoral campaign - I am talking about the regional administrative reform. We had many in-depth discussions over the last few days with different stakeholders.

Many of our interlocutors told us that this reform was necessary because it will improve the access to health and social services for the population everywhere in Finland. Of course, we can follow this argument.

However, we are concerned about the fact that regions in Finland will be given new responsibilities without the necessary financial autonomy. There is danger that this could result in a sort of decentralization of centrally allocated funds instead of real regionalization.

At the same time, there is a need for a redefinition of the new role of the municipalities who were in charge of health and social services in the past. Most important, the citizens need to be involved in this process and the level of information and awareness of the changes needs to be increased.

All in all, we believe that this involves for Finland some challenges at the grassroots' level in the coming years.

At the same time, there are very positive examples in place on the engagement of residents in local and regional decision-making and the increase of citizen participation, for example in Rovaniemi, in the Lapland region.

On this basis, also future challenges are manageable, in our opinion. As far as the Congress is concerned, as in the past, we stand ready to support Finland in each and every respect.

Thank you for your attention - and I am happy to reply to your questions.