

## **Congress Election Observation Mission to Albania – Local Elections, 14 May 2023**

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Draft statement of the Head of delegation, Congress member Mr Stewart DICKSON, United-Kingdom

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Dear ladies and gentlemen,

I also wish you a very warm welcome to this joint press conference of the International Election Observation Mission. The Congress very much appreciated the good cooperation with our partners of the OSCE/ODIHR and the European Parliament during this mission.

I was pleased to be the Head of the delegation of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities. The Congress is a body of the Council of Europe, responsible for strengthening local and regional democracy in its 46 members States. The Congress represents over 130 000 local and regional authorities. It regularly observes local and regional elections in Council of Europe member States and beyond. Our specificity is that Congress members who observe the elections are local and regional elected representatives. This peer-to-peer mechanism allows us to compare different electoral systems in Europe and to monitor the application of common democratic standards at subnational level.

On this mission, the delegation of the Congress observing the local elections in Albania comprised 15 Congress members, one expert and four members of the Secretariat from 16 Council of Europe countries. We observed voting procedures in close to 110 polling stations across the country, from opening until the closing. We were also able to follow the counting in two polling stations equipped with voting machines.

The Election Day deployment was preceded by meetings with key stakeholders from the election administration, the media, NGOs, and candidates and representatives of various political parties on 12 and 13 May.

I won't repeat what Ambassador Glover already said about the main features of these 2023 local elections because I fully concur with that and with the positive developments observed.

What we saw was an overall calm and transparent Election Day. We welcome the peaceful manner in which the elections were conducted.

However, based on the existing electoral standards and our experience as observers in Council of Europe member States, some long standing matters of concern related to Albania for the Congress remain unaddressed. These include technical and procedural difficulties on Election Day, low representation of women, both as candidates and in election administration, a lack of accessibility of polling stations for voters with disabilities

For instance, our observers noted several issues related to the use of technologies in voting procedures, which caused delays in opening polling stations, problems with voters' identification and occasionally compromised the secrecy of the vote. These should be addressed as a priority to strengthen voters' trust in elections.

However, good electoral management is just one important aspect of electoral processes. Equally important is what happened before the polling day.

In this respect, we regretted that matters of local interests were completely overshadowed as a result of a highly polarised campaign led primarily by political party leaders at national level.

Let me highlight that local elections should be a vehicle for local people to decide through their votes and those who they vote for, their priorities on local issues, which unfortunately, as in previous occasions, was not the case in these elections. Although many candidates competed in these local elections, we are concerned that genuine debates and local political programmes were missing.

In addition, some previous Congress recommendations stemming from past observation missions in Albania remain unaddressed including the modalities of appointment and dismissal of members of electoral bodies and their training, in order to ensure professionalism of the whole electoral administration.

As previously noted, our delegation also encourages the authorities to revise provisions related to independent candidates as well as clarify

residence requirements for voter registration at local level, in the light of the Congress recommendation on Electoral lists and voters residing de facto abroad.

Following this mission, we will prepare a report together with our recommendations to be addressed to the authorities of Albania, which will be presented for adoption at the next Congress session in Strasbourg in October.

Let me conclude by thanking all the members of this international election observation mission. We were delighted to work alongside the OSCE/ODIHR and the European Parliament on these elections. Joint missions enable us to further cross-check observations made on Election Day and to consolidate our recommendations.

I thank you for your attention and I am happy to take questions, if there are any.