

## **Congress Election Observation Mission to Podgorica – Local Elections, 29 September 2024**

Draft statement by the Head of delegation, Randi MONDORF (Denmark, R, ILDG)

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Good morning,

I would like to wish you a very warm welcome to this press conference of the Congress Election Observation Mission on the local elections which took place yesterday in the Capital city. As Head of this delegation, I am delighted to share with you the preliminary conclusions of this mission.

We are members of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities which is a political assembly of the Council of Europe, responsible for strengthening local and regional democracy in its 46 member States, representing more than 130,000 local and regional authorities.

The Congress regularly observes local and regional elections in member states. Our unique feature is that the members of our assembly who observe the elections are all local and regional representatives. This peer-to-peer mechanism allows us to compare the different systems used in Europe and to monitor the application of common democratic standards at local level. This was the first time that the Congress has observed elections in Montenegro since independence and we would like to thank the City Assembly of Podgorica for inviting us.

Our delegation consisted of five members of the Congress, one expert and three members of the Secretariat, representing seven Council of Europe countries, and was the only international delegation to these early elections. We observed

the voting process in some 55 polling stations across the city, from opening to closing and counting.

Prior to this, the delegation met with relevant stakeholders of the national and local authorities, the election administration, media, NGOs involved in the elections, as well as with candidates and party representatives.

What we saw yesterday was an overall calm and orderly election day, and procedures were largely followed in the places visited by the Congress observers. We were also very pleased to see the number of women chairpersons and polling boards members. We thank all those we met yesterday for their friendliness and willingness to talk to us.

At the same time, the delegation observed some procedural inconsistencies, particularly in the opening and closing procedures. The procedure for sealing ballot boxes could be modernised, and the counting process standardised, as we saw some significant differences between polling stations, with counting procedures sometimes rushed and disorganised.

Equally important were the observations made throughout the day, and even more so during the counting, on the blurred distinction between polling station officials and party representatives and on the inconsistencies regarding the number of commissioners present in the premises. We also saw a few cases of non-commissioners interfering and often wondered who was doing what. We recommend that steps be taken to professionalise election administration, which could include systematic and compulsory training and certification for all officials by the election administration and a requirement for all accredited persons to wear visible accreditation badges.

The delegation welcomed the fact that the use of electronic identification seemed to ensure greater confidence in the identification process, but shared some of the concerns expressed during preparatory meetings about the

accuracy of voter lists and called for clarification of residency requirements and an open dialogue on this issue.

Polling station secrecy and access to polling stations for people with disabilities was also a concern for us from the Congress. Many of the polling stations visited by our teams yesterday were not accessible to voters with reduced mobility, but the mobile boxes worked efficiently. The positioning of the polling booths did not provide the necessary distance between the voters and the commissioners and in some cases compromised the secrecy of the vote.

However, as we often observe, the administration of elections, is only one side of the coin. We need to look beyond that - at what happened before polling day.

First and foremost, the delegation found many loopholes and gaps in the current legal framework governing local elections. To name but a few, the lack of final control by the State Election Commission over some decisions of the municipal commission, including on the registration of candidates, could be changed. Another example: the investigative and sanctioning powers of the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption do not seem to be commensurate with the seriousness of potential violations, and sanctions are not sufficiently dissuasive. We fully appreciate the work being done on electoral law reform and encourage the authorities to adopt a comprehensive legal framework as soon as possible to address some of these long-standing legal gaps.

Trust is also a key word when we talk about the campaign environment, which in the weeks leading up to election day was marked by recurring allegations of misuse of administrative resources and state positions, which were insufficiently investigated and sanctioned. More should be done to ensure a level playing field for all candidates, including the establishment of effective tools to track overspending, underreporting and third-party donations.

We regretted that local issues were largely overshadowed by personal politics and national agendas. While a few lists focused on issues close to citizens, much

of the debate revolved around senior officials and sometimes international politics, representing a missed opportunity for local democracy.

On the positive side, despite some negative campaigning, all candidates were able to campaign freely and all lists actively participated in televised debates, a first for local elections in Podgorica. The media, both public and private, covered the campaign extensively, but the independence and ownership of the media remain important challenges. The delegation was concerned to hear some reports of bias and foreign influence in the mainstream media. In addition, while lists respected the gender quota, only one woman was at the top of the list and women were unfortunately largely under-represented in the debates.

In conclusion, I would like to address the overall state of local democracy in Podgorica, as this remains the most significant finding of our mission. The 2024 local elections were only partially conducive to strengthening local democracy in Montenegro. The campaign and the lower turnout were clear indicators that much more needs to be done in the near future to promote local democratic consolidation, as voters were only marginally asked what mattered for them at local level.

We hope that constructive and open dialogue about local self-government and electoral law will contribute to the development of local democratic consciousness and debate. A unique election day, dedicated to local elections, could also be a marker for stronger local democracy and would only do justice to the role of municipalities in citizens' daily lives. We believe that Montenegro can achieve greater local democracy and local elections are the ideal starting point to do so.

This brings me to the end of my statement. Already next February, the Congress Monitoring Committee will discuss a draft report, before adoption at the March 2025 Congress session in Strasbourg.

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