

33th Session of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities – Strasbourg, France, 18-20 October 2017

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Debate on „Observation of local elections in Finland (9 April 2017)“

Strasbourg, France, 19 October 2017DD

Dear colleagues,

It is my pleasure to summarise for you the conclusions of the Congress' delegation who observed the local elections held in Finland on 9 April.

You may know that these elections took place in the particular context of the current regionalisation reform in Finland which entails important changes - not only at the regional but also at the local level. Our delegation stayed in the country from 5 to 10 April and comprised 23 members from 18 different countries. Since the Committee of the Regions does not observe elections in EU member countries, we were not joined by our Brussels colleagues this time.

On Election Day, the Congress deployed 10 teams to visit some 150 polling stations in different regions all over the country. It was my pleasure to be part of the team operating in Rovaniemi (Lapland), the Municipality of our dear colleague Liisa ANSALA.

Overall, we can say that, apart from some minor issues - which I will address later -, the 2017 local elections in Finland were very well organised and characterised by a high level of public trust in the electoral process and the administration. We noticed, for example, the important degree of transparency and a well-established voter's registration system. The efforts made by Finnish authorities to strengthen the position of female candidates through gender quotas on candidates' lists are also welcomed by the Congress.

First and foremost, we should like to congratulate Finland for granting only individuals who are permanently residing in a specific Municipality the right to vote at the local level. This is in line with Congress' Recommendation 369(2015) and deserves special mentioning. In this respect, an additional positive element would be enhanced voters' education with regard to non-Finns who have the right to vote and to be elected in local elections.

Despite an overall orderly conduct of these elections, we noticed some minor problems and suggest the authorities to rectify those. Mandatory training for all members of the election administration and all assistants at the level of polling stations could contribute to ensuring a consistent level of knowledge about procedures, for example with regard to the proper sealing and locking of ballot boxes. Enhanced transparency could be achieved by the requirement – for all candidates - to submit information on campaign financing irrespective of the election results.

Further democratic progress could be ensured through the promotion of regional political parties and lists of independent candidates. This could be even considered as a measure backing-up the on-going regional government reform and would be conducive for increased citizen participation.

Let me say that, with regard to the ongoing regional administrative reform, the Congress is very keen on seeing that this process will lead to real and genuine decentralisation at the regional level. According to our interlocutors, one of the major weaknesses of the newly created Regions will be their limited financial capacity, since they will have no right to levy taxes and funding will be provided by the central Government which will also get *de facto* supervisory powers on regional affairs. Even if this goes beyond the tight scope of election observation, we mention it in the Report and we highlight the importance of financial autonomy for these Regions.

Last not least, since our mission to Finland, the Government decided to postpone the implementation of the regionalisation reform by one year. The first regional elections will be held in 2019; however, our recommendation to hold regional elections on a different day than national elections is still relevant as both Parliamentary elections and elections to the European Parliament will be held in Finland in 2019. We do not ignore the administrative and financial burden of organising elections on different days – but we are convinced that the current regional government reform in Finland is too important to take the risk of being overshadowed by national topics.

Thank you for your attention