

Draft Press Statement

Head of Delegation – Congress Election Observation Mission to Hamburg

3 March 2025

Good morning,

On behalf of the Congress delegation, we welcome you to this press briefing.

Thank you for being here today.

I am David Eray, Head of the Delegation, and I am joined by my Vice-Chair, Güneş Pehlivan. Together, we will present the preliminary conclusions of the Congress observation mission following yesterday's Bürgerschaft elections in Hamburg.

About the Congress

First, let me briefly introduce the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe. The Congress is dedicated to strengthening local and regional democracy across its 46 member states. As part of this work, we have observed over 120 elections in the last two decades. Our election observation missions are unique in that they are carried out by local and regional representatives from across Europe, allowing for a peer-to-peer assessment of democratic standards.

This was the second time the Congress observed elections in Germany. The first mission took place in 2023 for the repeat elections in Berlin. Our presence here was at the invitation of the Hamburg Parliament, and we deeply appreciate their trust and commitment to transparent elections.

Election Day Observations

A 14-member delegation, supported by an electoral expert and Congress staff, was deployed across Hamburg. We met with key stakeholders before election day, including election officials, NGOs, and political representatives, to understand the electoral environment and political climate.

On election day, our teams observed procedures in more than 100 polling stations across all seven districts of Hamburg. We monitored the voting process from opening to closing, including the counting of ballots. One team also observed the counting of postal votes.

We were pleased to see that the election was conducted in a professional and transparent manner. Polling station staff showed great commitment, and no major irregularities were reported. The process was calm, orderly, and well-organized. The counting procedures were handled with diligence and accuracy.

Areas for Consideration

While the election process was well conducted, we would like to highlight some areas for improvement:

1. **Impact of Federal Elections:** The timing of the Bürgerschaft elections, just one week after the federal elections, overshadowed local issues in the campaign. Authorities may wish to consider scheduling future elections to avoid such overlaps.
2. **Campaign Environment:** The campaign was generally competitive and fair. However, some opposition and smaller parties described it as hostile, largely due to national political tensions. Some activists reported feeling unsafe while campaigning. Ensuring a respectful and secure campaign environment is crucial.
3. **Disinformation and Deepfake Risks:** We observed some cases of false information about candidates, parties, and the electoral process spreading on social media. More concerning, however, is the growing risk posed by AI-generated deepfake content. These manipulated videos and images have the potential to deceive voters and distort public debate. This is not just a challenge for Hamburg but a growing threat to democracy worldwide. We encourage authorities at all levels to engage in discussions on how to detect, monitor, and counteract the spread of AI-generated disinformation in real-time.

4. **Political Finance Transparency:** Concerns were raised about the transparency of political funding. Timely and clear reporting of campaign finances is essential for trust and accountability. The Congress and GRECO have previously called for improvements in this area, and progress remains limited.
5. **Gender Representation:** While gender balance is a national priority in Germany, some political parties are not taking sufficient steps to ensure equal representation on their lists. We encourage all parties to take proactive measures in this regard.
6. **Ballot Box Design:** The physical design of ballot boxes was functional and secure. However, they could be aesthetically improved to signify the importance of citizen's votes in Hamburg.
7. **Observer Awareness:** Some polling station workers were unfamiliar with international election observation. Establishing a general framework for election observation in Germany could help ensure a more structured approach. This was also a recommendation following the Berlin elections in 2023.

Conclusion and Next Steps

The issues we highlighted did not significantly impact the overall integrity of the election. However, they could pose risks in the future if left unaddressed.

Strengthening democracy is a collective effort, and we encourage all relevant stakeholders to engage in discussions and improvements.

The elections in Hamburg showcased a vibrant democratic process, with broad participation, including young voters aged 16 and over. This commitment to inclusion strengthens Hamburg's democratic foundations.

In a few minutes, a press release summarizing our findings will be published on the Congress website. Our final report will be discussed at the Congress Plenary Session in Strasbourg in October, where recommendations will be addressed to the German authorities. The report will be publicly available after its adoption.

Thank you for your attention. We are happy to take any questions.