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Speech by David ERAY, Switzerland (R, EPP/CCE)

Check against delivery – Seul le prononcé fait foi

Report on the observation of local elections in the Republic of Slovenia (20 November 2022)

Strasbourg, France, 22 March 2023

Dear colleagues,

It is with great pleasure that I present to this Chamber today the findings of the election observation mission to Slovenia which was carried out from 17 to 21 November 2022, to observe the local elections on 20 November 2022. Upon invitation by the Minister of Public Administration, the Congress deployed an election observation mission, consisting of 19 members from 14 countries and I was pleased to be the Head of delegation for this mission.

Ahead of the Election Day, the Congress delegation met different stakeholders, namely diplomatic personnel based in Ljubljana, representatives of the Ministry of Public Administration, state authorities responsible for local self-government as well as the State Election Commission. In addition, we also had the possibility to exchange views with mayors and local councillors in Ljubljana, Koper and Maribor and we held meetings with civil society organisations, the media, political parties and representatives of recognised national minorities. During this wide range of preliminary meetings, we noted with satisfaction that the preparations for the local elections were conducted efficiently by a highly decentralised election administration.

The November elections were the first local elections after the formation of a new Government in Slovenia. Despite 2022 presenting a “super election year”, the election campaign was still dominated by political issues and concerns of local importance, which is another proof of the vivid local democracy in Slovenia. The campaign was competitive to the notable exception of a high number of municipalities where long-standing incumbent mayors ran unopposed. To illustrate: in 51 municipalities, mayors were running for re-election without any competition and in 58 municipalities they only had to face one opponent.

On the Election Day itself, eight Congress teams were deployed all over the country and visited some 120 randomly selected polling stations. We observed a generally calm, peaceful and orderly Election Day without major incidents or anomalies, managed by the electoral staff in a highly professional manner. The atmosphere was calm and sometimes even festive, and we saw many parents bringing their children to the polling station to show them how to vote. The delegation followed the closing and part of the counting procedures in seven selected polling stations and identified no shortcomings or irregularities. The Electoral Board members, which, in the polling stations visited, were predominantly women, were well aware of their tasks and carried out the procedures in an orderly and efficient manner.

Overall, the delegation commended the high degree of confidence and trust in the organisation of the 2022 local elections, which was also specifically highlighted by Congress interlocutors. In particular, the delegation was pleased with the specific voting and representation rights at local level granted to citizens members of one of the three recognised communities, namely the Hungarian, Italian and Roma communities.

However, despite this generally positive assessment of the elections, we also noted certain issues, some of them long-standing.

First of all, as mentioned before, close to a quarter of the races for the position of mayors were held without actual competition, leading to a great majority of incumbent mayors being re-elected. In this regard, the Congress delegation underlines the strong power of incumbency. High numbers of consecutive mandates can lead to an accumulation of power, incrustated structures, lack of transparency and pose increased risks of misuse of administrative resources. Furthermore, this confronts new comers with difficulties when wanting to run in mayoral races and is particularly challenging for the participation of women and youth in local politics.

In this regard, I would like to recall, that, while I warmly welcome the first-time election of a woman as president of Slovenia in November 2022, progress remains to be made with regard to the election of women as mayors, as they only represent 13% of elected mayors. Further efforts should be considered to ensure all conditions are met for their broader participation in mayoral races.

Another issue noted by the delegation was the existing low ceiling for campaigns expenditures, which can lead candidates to turn to creative ways for the collection and reporting of donations. This is particularly relevant in a country like Slovenia, which traditionally knows a high number of non-partisan candidates and independent lists.

Furthermore, our delegation was concerned that some notable differences in municipal regulations and procedures led to some discrepancies on the Election Day including inter alia, the sealing of ballot boxes not being standardised, voters having difficulties identifying the right ballot boxes and/or voters unfolding ballots before throwing them in the boxes, which in some instances compromised the secrecy of the vote. Also, the number of registered voters per polling station varied greatly from a few hundreds to nearly 3 000 and resulted in increased waiting times and unnecessary stress for electoral staff.

Finally, we noted that even though specific voting rights are given to the three recognised communities (Italian, Hungarian and Roma), some minorities, such as the German-speaking community and citizens from former Yugoslavia, are still not considered autochthonous and are therefore not given specific voting or representation rights at local level.

The draft recommendation that you will have to vote on after our debate invites the authorities of Slovenia to :

- First, entrust the State Election Commission with coordination and oversight powers, especially regarding unified procedures in the whole country for polling station set-up, the treatment of ballot boxes and setting a maximum number of registered voters per polling station.
- Secondly, to consider introducing regulations to set a maximum number of mandates for mayors and to balance the benefit of incumbency in order to ensure competitiveness and a level playing field for all candidates, including youth and women.
- Thirdly, the authorities of Slovenia should consider the introducing of provisions to strengthen the participation of women in mayoral races to support equal representation at local level.
- Authorities are also invited to strengthen the regulatory framework ensuring transparency and accountability of campaign and party finances,
- And finally, the Congress invites the authorities to consider granting political rights at local levels for representatives of other minorities than the three recognised communities and to take more steps to prevent hate speech during campaigns, in particular targeted towards the Roma community.

I recommend the adoption of this draft recommendation and thank you for your attention.