

Congress Election Observation Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina – Local Elections, 6 October 2024

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Draft statement of the Head of Delegation, Carla Dejonghe (Belgium, ILDG)

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Good afternoon,

In my capacity as Head of Delegation of the Congress, I would also like to welcome you to this joint press conference of the International Election Observation Mission.

I should like to thank the authorities of Bosnia and Herzegovina for their invitation addressed to the Congress to observe these local elections.

Before starting, I would also like to express my thoughts for the victims and their families of this week's tragic floods.

The Congress very much appreciated the cooperation with our partners from the OSCE/ODIHR and the European Parliament during this mission. Joint missions are absolutely essential, as they enable us to further cross-check observations made on Election Day and to consolidate our recommendations.

The Congress is a political assembly of the Council of Europe, responsible for strengthening local and regional democracy in its 46 member States.

Its mandate includes the observation of local and regional elections in Council of Europe member states. This peer-to-peer mechanism allows us to compare electoral systems in Europe and to monitor the application of common democratic standards at sub-national level. This was the eleventh time we conducted such a mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The Congress delegation to this mission consisted of 25 observers from 20 Council of Europe countries. It also held preliminary meetings with a wide range of stakeholders last week.

I fully agree with what Corien JONKER said about the main features of these elections, and I would like to say a few words, based on the Congress experience in observing local and regional elections in the 46 Member States.

We also welcome the technical improvements resulting from the 2024 amendments on the Electoral Law, which aimed to ensure that some technical aspects of the electoral process are more in line with past Congress recommendations and provide for stronger integrity safeguards. In particular, we were satisfied to see the efforts made to depoliticise lower-level commissions, increase transparency of campaign financing, and gradually introduce new technologies through pilot projects, although further improvements are needed.

At the same time, we regretted that the short timeframe to carry out the changes brought by the amendments and the lack of resources of the election administration, did not provide sufficient time for practical implementation as well as training and awareness raising of voters, candidates and members of the electoral administration alike.

In addition, these amendments did not solve issues related to the residence requirements for local elections. Only citizens *actually* residing in a municipality should be allowed to vote on election day. The Congress recalls that the existence of a genuine link in local elections between citizens and the place in which they cast their ballot is a fundamental pillar of local democracy.

Let me now move on to our observation of the election day. We observed procedures in 115 polling stations across the country, including in some equipped with new technology.

What we saw was an overall calm and transparent process and we welcome a generally well-organised election day although marked by shortcomings on the secrecy of the vote. We consider that efforts to maintain secrecy are essential.

Indeed, all Congress observers agreed that the current layout of polling stations, while contributing to reduce fraud in the booths, does not fully maintain the voting privacy. Breaches of the secrecy were also noted during

the scanning or folding of ballot papers and, in very few, but concerning cases, of tracking of voters by party observers.

Some other procedural inconsistencies were noted, notably during opening and counting which highlighted the need for further training.

We also regretted that, once more, the large majority of polling stations visited were not fully accessible to voters with mobility impairments, a situation that had been raised by Congress observers in the past and has to be addressed again.

Allow me to continue on our observations on the election campaign.

The Congress observers noted that the tone of the campaign seemed to have improved since the last elections and was less hostile. As our interlocutors mentioned, hate speech and disinformation were less prevalent in this campaign, but foreign interference in local politics remained a concern.

In this context, as a local elected representative, I would like to reiterate that local democracy is fundamentally about addressing the immediate needs and expectations of the community. This should always remain the primary goal of every local election, regardless of the country. However, we observed that some candidates struggled to clearly articulate what they would do, if elected. To strengthen the democratic process, it is therefore crucial to address the vulnerability of the media and encourage candidates to engage in debates that focus on their specific policies and programmes.

Let me conclude by stressing that for Bosnia and Herzegovina's local democracy to continue to progress, efforts to increase public engagement and trust are needed, as yesterday's low turnout indicates.

In that regard, we particularly regret that the number of female candidates for mayoral positions remains very low, underlining the need for targeted efforts to improve the representation of women in local leadership. In particular new rules are needed that would ensure gender balance in the mayoral race.

Following this mission, we will prepare a report together with our recommendations to be addressed to the authorities of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which will be presented for adoption at the next Congress session in Strasbourg in March 2025.

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

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