

Monitoring Committee Meeting, 39th Session of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities – Remote meeting, 17 September 2020

Speech by Stewart Dickson (United Kingdom, ILDG)

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Debate on “ Local and regional elections in major crisis situations”

Thank you, Chair. It is my pleasure to complement the presentation just made by Jos, in particular in view of the practical side of the new Congress report on elections in extraordinary circumstances. Therefore, I will be talking, more specifically, about the Resolution and Recommendation which the members of this Committee will be invited to vote on.

Dear colleagues,

may I say that this report is the first comprehensive document prepared by the Congress exclusively dealing with pandemic-related territorial issues. Thus, this can be a very important contribution to the broader debate on ways to deal with COVID and its aftermath, which will take place in the Congress in the coming weeks and months.

Basically, we are talking about coping with problems, finding practical solutions and learning lessons from this unprecedented situation - which is challenging not only for us as individuals but the democratic functioning of society.

What's the main problem regarding elections in such major crisis? It's the central question whether to hold or postpone elections, and this affects all tiers of government. That is why we as local and regional representatives are concerned. We have to take into account possible consequences of postponing elections, in the same way as we have to consider the challenges of organising elections against the backdrop of threats to the safety, health and ultimately to the life of voters.

In my own country, the United Kingdom, local elections in England were postponed for one year. France, Serbia or Germany organised elections at the local and regional level before the summer despite the further spreading pandemic. Other countries such as Ukraine or Bosnia and Herzegovina are planning local elections against the backdrop of a possible second wave of Corona. This, most evidently, has implications for campaigning, voter and candidate registration and, of course, for the practical organisation of the Election Day as such. The present report addresses all these questions in detail and makes clear that – whether elections are postponed or held – it's a minimum core of fundamental principles of democratic elections that have to be respected by all means.

In a nutshell, this is what we suggest to the member countries of the Council of Europe through our Recommendation to the Committee of Ministers. We also think that the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic can be an opportunity to gather experience and identify best practice examples regarding elections and extreme crisis situations. Moreover, we believe that continued cooperation between Council of Europe institutions, in particular the Venice Commission, should be fostered and an evaluation of best practices in the international context should be carried out.

Turning now to our Resolution, it's the role of election observers that comes into the focus. Paradoxically, when they are needed most, just like is it the case of a pandemic or a natural disaster, observers face unprecedented challenges to their work. This is why one chapter of our report is dedicated to this topic.

Observation of elections has become next to impossible during this year because of travel restrictions, quarantine measures and clear health risks, especially to vulnerable individuals. At the same time, practical feasibility of deploying missions under such circumstances became almost insurmountable. It was for these reasons that our election observation mission to Serbia this spring had to be cancelled.

This approach finds support in the present report which recognises all the obstacles of physical deployment of election observers in times of pandemic or similar exceptional situations. At the same time, it points out that certain activities may be considered necessary for the sake of the integrity of the electoral process.

Therefore, this report identifies several alternative strategies to overcome safety and feasibility concerns while still implementing meaningful activities and maintaining dialogue with major interlocutors. This includes remote meetings with key stakeholders and co-operation with domestic NGOs and international partners. This obviously cannot replace the deployment of a fully-fledged election observation mission, but at least allows for some degree of observation and maintains a platform for the dialogue with local authorities and election stakeholders.

Consequently, the present Resolution tasks the according Congress bodies to develop an alternative strategy for on-site election observation enabling us to respond quickly to invitations by member States, while protecting health and life of observers and respecting mitigation measures and travel restrictions of host countries and home countries of Congress observers.

It makes it clear that any alternative strategies must be of temporary nature only and not they don't constitute a substitute for fully-fledged election observation missions.

Dear colleagues, together with my friend Jos, we recommend all these points for adoption and we hope that this report, together with its Recommendation and Resolution, will enable representatives of local and regional levels to continue adapting to the new reality and that, in cooperation with national authorities, we will succeed in preserving our democratic institutions, in particular free and fair elections.

Thank you for your attention.