

Congress Election Observation Mission to North Macedonia

Local Elections, 19 October 2025

20 October 2025- 15 :00

DRAFT STATEMENT OF THE HEAD OF DELEGATION, Ms Gobnait NI MHUIMNECAIN, Ireland

Ladies and Gentlemen, Good afternoon,

I also wish you a very warm welcome to this joint press conference of International Election Observation Missions.

The Congress of the Council of Europe very much appreciated the cooperation with our partner of the OSCE/ODIHR and the European Parliament during this mission.

I also thank the authorities of North Macedonia for their invitation to observe these local elections.

I was pleased to be the Head of the delegation of elected members of the Congress of local and regional authorities. The Congress is one of the political assemblies of the Council of Europe, responsible for strengthening local and regional democracy in its 46 member States. It represents over 130 000 local and regional authorities. It regularly observes local and regional elections in Council of Europe member States and beyond.

Congress members who observe the elections are local and regional elected representatives themselves. This peer-to-peer mechanism allows us to observe electoral processes in our member states and to monitor the application of common democratic standards at subnational level.

On this mission, our delegation comprised 15 observers, coming from 14 countries. We observed voting procedures in close to 72 polling stations across the country, from opening until closing. In addition, we followed the counting process in 7 polling stations.

The Congress delegation also held preliminary meetings on 17 and 18 October with a wide range of key stakeholders, including the election administration, the media, NGOs, the State Secretary on Local Self-Government, and candidates and representatives of various political parties, plus independent candidates.

I fully concur with what Matteo MECACCI has just said.

We welcome the fact that election day was well-organised and it was assessed positively by Congress observers and we congratulate the Election Management Boards.

Voting was calm and orderly and we were pleased to see the peaceful manner in which it was conducted after a competitive campaign in which a wide range of parties, and candidates were motivated to participate.

We also welcome that since the last Congress election observation mission, election board members have received a higher standard of training which has increased the operational capacities of the Electoral Management Boards alongside their positive efforts to enhance the use of biometric identification.

There were technical glitches with those machines, which we saw at first hand, and we hope that these can be addressed for the next elections, helping to ensure that the starting time is always observed and procedures are not interrupted.

North Macedonia is ahead of many other European countries in adopting this technology and it worth every effort to further improve it.

Similarly, we saw that some voters needed help to ensure that they put their ballot papers in the right boxes, as the distinguishing colours of the forms were quite pale.

We recommend looking at how the distinction can be made even clearer.

We were also pleased to see the widespread provision of voting booths for people with disabilities.

But we regret that most polling stations were not fully accessible to voters with mobility impairments despite ongoing efforts by the authorities.

The authorities should increase their efforts to ensure greater access in practice and as a matter of priority.

These are not just procedural points.

Addressing them will ensure an even smoother election day and further enhance all voters' experience.

Another positive point is the introduction earlier this year of a definition and register for online media outlets.

This is intended to improve transparency, complementing the requirement in the Electoral Code for fair media coverage.

However, we regret that the current rules around parties' allocation and purchase of media air time has resulted in the effective exclusion of smaller parties and independent candidates.

The absence of local media, particularly outside the capital, is also a major issue, limiting coverage of local issues — which should be central to a local election campaign — and contributing to the prominence of national topics, further polarising the electoral environment.

We are concerned that several of the recommendations made by the Congress following the 2017 local elections have not been addressed.

Certainly, the legal provisions supporting gender balance on candidate lists has resulted in the consistent election of women to more than one third of council seats.

However, the situation for mayoral candidates is very different, where there is no mechanism to ensure women candidates.

This, exacerbated by the reality of gender-based violence and intimidation, including physical assault and hate speech online, means that women remain drastically under-represented.

All political parties have a role to play in addressing this.

No woman should have to weigh her safety against her right to stand for elections.

So, the low number of women mayoral candidates and the lack of accessibility for voters with disabilities and older people remain serious concerns when it comes to inclusion.

The Congress also previously recommended paying further attention to the accuracy of voter lists.

It is clear that this remains an issue within the country.

Equally, we heard widespread concerns about the misuse of state resources in the lead up to the elections in the context of a widely-shared perception of corruption.

Certainly, this election campaign showed the way in which local issues can be crowded out by national debate – in a highly polarised and politicised environment.

This is to the detriment of local voters, and their needs and their rightful expectations – including the country's youth, many of whom are deeply disillusioned.

More generally, I take this opportunity to say that, yes, vibrant local democracy requires the highest election standards, of course.

But it also needs a virtuous cycle of good governance, institutions and services that meet local needs, and actively engaged people, and civil society organisations.

The European Charter of Local Self-Government - ratified by North Macedonia - helps countries to achieve that and is monitored by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities across the 46 Council of Europe member states.

We look forward to working with the country's authorities, at every level, in the months and years ahead to build on the progress that has been made.

Following this mission, we will prepare a report together with recommendations addressed to the authorities of North Macedonia.

This will be presented for adoption at the Congress session in Strasbourg next March.

Once again, I thank all the members of this joint international election observation mission and look forward to answering any questions.