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Municipal vote in Bulgaria: Congress praises solid legal framework, but calls for improved integrity of elections at grassroots level

Sofia, 24 October 2011. – A delegation from the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities – including 13 members from 10 Council of Europe member countries – carried out an election observation mission to assess the local elections in Bulgaria on 23 October 2011, held simultaneously with the presidential vote in the country.

“As a preliminary conclusion we can say that the local part of these elections was carried out – largely – in a calm and orderly manner and on the basis of a solid legal framework for democratic elections. In general, electoral staff were well aware of the regulations and voters understood the procedures. Competition between political contestants was vivid and – with the exception of some incidents – marked by democratic conduct”, said Congress Head of Delegation and Rapporteur, Mihkel Juhkami (Estonia), at a press conference in Sofia today.

However, the Congress Rapporteur referred to administrative problems which were raised during the meetings with different Congress interlocutors in Sofia, not least, in respect of an unbalanced composition of election commissions at all levels. Also, huge crowds of voters in front of the polling stations just before the closing time urged the Central Election Commission, at the end of Election Day, to extend the opening hours of the polling stations.

In addition, Juhkami referred to information received about vote-buying, in particular among the vulnerable Roma population, and in respect of controlled vote (collective pressure vote) and attempts to manipulate the vote. “The Congress stands ready to assist the Bulgarian authorities, in particular at local and regional level, in order to improve the integrity of local elections”, he stated.

With regard to the media coverage of the local campaign in Bulgaria, the Congress Rapporteur called for a more equal access for local actors. “According to our interlocutors, local themes generated more interest among the population than the presidential vote. At the same time, in the media, the local elections were clearly overshadowed by the presidential competition. As representatives of local and regional politicians in Europe, we do regret this situation”, Juhkami stressed.

A report on the observation of the municipal elections of 23 October –carried out in approximately 120 polling stations throughout Bulgaria – will be on the agenda of the Congress Plenary Session in March 2011.

The Congress has two chambers, the Chamber of Local Authorities and the Chamber of Regions. It brings together 318 full and 318 substitute members representing more than 200 000 European territorial communities.

President of the Congress: Keith Whitmore (United Kingdom, ILDG), President of the Chamber of Regions: Herwig van Staa (Austria, EPP/CD), President of the Chamber of Local Authorities: Jean-Claude Frécon (France, SOC)

Political Groups: Socialist Group (SOC), Group of the European People’s Party – Christian Democrats (EPP/CD), Independent and Liberal Democrat Group (ILDG).