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Ref. CG-PR013(2012)

Congress welcomes improvements for local democracy in Serbia despite the predominance of Presidential elections on 6 May

Belgrade, 7 May 2012 - Today, a delegation from the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe has concluded its mission to observe the local and provincial part of the elections carried out in Serbia on 6 May 2012. For the first time, three elections – at presidential, parliamentary and grassroots level – were held concurrently throughout the country. “This has led to organisational challenges for the election administration in over 8000 polling stations and to the fact that local elections were largely overshadowed by the national vote,” stated Nigel Mermagen (United Kingdom, ILDG), Head of the Congress delegation, at a press conference in Belgrade. He also referred to improvements in the legal framework and the electoral system of Serbia which had positive effects on the identification of local leadership in Serbia. Matters of concern from Congress perspective remain the infringement of the secrecy of the vote, the lack of transparency of media ownership and the situation of the Roma minority who seems to be particularly vulnerable to possible electoral malpractices.

On Election Day, observation teams from the Council of Europe Congress – the delegation comprised 13 members including two members of the EU Committee of the Regions from nine different countries – were deployed to seven areas and visited around 300 polling stations throughout Serbia*).

Presenting the first conclusions, the Head of the delegation confirmed that - with the exception of some incidents in certain regions - the elections were conducted in an overall calm and orderly manner. Polling stations were well organised within the restrictions caused by the limited space available, especially in view of the large number of members of the polling boards. However, as already during local elections in 2008, the equipment of polling stations remains a matter of concern. “Simple cardboard separations at tables instead of proper polling booths compromised the secrecy of the vote in most of the polling stations visited. Even if it seems that voters have got used to this situation, it must be said that this is not compatible to European standards”, underlined the Rapporteur of the Congress.

According to the amended legal framework of elections in Serbia, mandates are now allocated to the order in which candidates appear on the candidates lists. Also, the so-called blank resignations of candidates have been abolished. “This was amongst recommendations made by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities already in 2008 and is, particularly from the perspective of local democracy, mostly welcome because it helps to better identify local leadership”, stressed Mr Mermagen. Furthermore, he pointed to the fact that - according to Congress’ observations - the newly introduced single unified voter register did not cause significant problems. “Although, we are aware of inconsistencies of voters lists in the southern part of the country and of the relatively high number of voters compared to the total number of citizens which raised some questions,” Mr Mermagen added.

The lack of transparency in media ownership and unclear financing, in particular of local media, should be also addressed, according to the Congress observers. “With regard to campaign reporting, local issues were largely overshadowed by the Presidential vote. Given the difficult financial situation of Serbia’s municipalities and the high unemployment rate, notably in small towns and rural areas, this is regrettable”, said Mr Mermagen. He also mentioned that according to some Congress interlocutors the Roma community was considered as specifically vulnerable to possible electoral malpractices, for example vote-buying. “In addition, overcrowded polling stations in some areas have led to long waiting queues and there were cases of family voting observed by members of the Congress teams.”

The final Congress Report on the observation of local and provincial elections in Serbia will be debated at the Plenary Session in October 2012.

*) Congress deployment areas on 6 May 2012: Belgrade and vicinities (Smederovo and Pancevo), Nis, Presevo/Vranje, Novi Pazar (Sandzak area), Novi Sad and Sremska Mitrovica, Subotica and Kaniža (Vojvodina).

[Press release in Serbian](#)

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