

## **31th Congress' Plenary Session – Thursday, 20 October 2016 (Hemicycle)**

### **Information Report on the observation of local and provincial elections in Serbia (24 April 2016)**

Speaking Notes by Karim VAN OVERMEIRE, Belgium (R, NR)

Dear colleagues,

I am very pleased to talk to you today about the local and provincial elections held in Serbia on 24 April this year. I am aware that this debate comes a little late, but due to the fact that the Congress is meeting only twice a year in plenary session, it was not possible to present this Report earlier. Nonetheless, I think it deserves a discussion.

You may know that the Congress was invited by the Serbian authorities to observe the local vote and provincial elections in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina organised on 24 April 2016 and decided to deploy an Electoral Assessment Mission, which is an observation mission of reduced scope. On the same day, early Parliamentary elections took place in Serbia and were observed by our colleagues from the Parliamentary Assembly together with OSCE-ODIHR.

The “Super Sunday”, conducted for yet another time in Serbia, overshadowed largely the local vote and was seen as a way to consolidate the position of the ruling coalition led by Prime Minister Aleksandar VUCIC and his Serbian Progressive Party. In contrast, the provincial elections were much discussed because of the forecasted loss of the Democratic Party in its last stronghold Vojvodina.

In conclusion, to a large extent, the SNS was able to consolidate its position at all tiers of Government. The re-election confirmed the Prime Minister's EU accession path that Mr VUCIC aims to pursue while, at the same time, maintaining ties with Russia.

Likewise, the April elections in Serbia saw the emergence of new political forces such as the party "Enough is Enough" and the re-establishment of actors like the Serbian Radical Party, which in these elections managed to become a major player, after being again under the leadership of Vojislav SESJEL who was acquitted of all charges by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in late March.

In the aftermath, opposition parties jointly urged for a reform of the election legislation and called for full investigations into irregularities. Following allegations of manipulations and findings of "severe logical and computational errors", the elections for Parliament were repeated in 15 polling stations on 4 May. The outcome of the repeated vote enabled the "Democratic Party of Serbia - Dveri Coalition" and the coalition "SDS-LPD-LSV" to pass the minimum threshold and enter Parliament.

But let us come back to the local and provincial part of the E-Day.

First of all, it was a great honor for me to lead this delegation comprising 12 members including two colleagues from the EU Committee of the Regions. On Election Day, our six teams visited some 120 polling stations throughout the country with a special attention, as I said, to the elections held in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina. Apart from isolated irregularities observed by our teams, polling was organised in a calm and orderly manner, generally in line with the according legislation. However, the vote counting – which is always a crucial moment of Elections Day – proved to be difficult, mainly, due to a lack of clear regulations and instructions. As a result, technical errors and procedural irregularities were reported by our observers.

More generally speaking, I should like to draw your attention to the following recommendations by the Congress and you can find more ample information in the present Information Report:

**Firstly, there is a need to revise several pieces of legislation with regard to voters' and candidates' registration:** The Unified Voters' Register contributed to more accurate voters' lists in Serbia but shortcomings do remain and the Congress encourages the authorities to clarify, in particular, the situation of voters residing *de facto* abroad.

The criteria for the registration of minority parties lack clarity. Parties without actually representing a minority were registered as minority parties in order to obtain exemption from the threshold for participation in the allocation of seats. In addition, a large number of forged supporting signatures and stamps were noticed during these elections.

**Secondly, there is room for improvement of the practical side of the electoral management:** The large size of Polling Boards – in the so-called “extended composition” some commissions consisted of more than 50 members - has contributed to a complex set-up of polling stations.

Therefore, the Congress supports the idea of granting members of extended Polling Boards the status of accredited partisan observers. In order to better protect the secrecy of the vote, we suggest introducing proper polling booths instead of the cardboard separations currently in use. We also believe that members of electoral commissions should have more systematic training.

**Thirdly, electoral fraud and corruption:** We heard complaints about pressure exerted on voters and public service employees and received reports of vote-buying and misuse of administrative resources. All these issues – including the forged supporting signatures and stamps I mentioned before - need to be taken

seriously by the authorities and safeguards against such wrongdoing should be introduced, well in advance before the next elections.

**Last not least - the media:** In order to enable voters to make an informed choice with the help of balanced media coverage, the Congress underlines the need of strengthening media freedom and improving the working conditions of journalists as well as ethical standards and professional skills.

Dear colleagues, there is no genuine democracy without the proper functioning of the media – this has also to do with the urgent need to strengthen citizens' trust in electoral and democratic processes in Serbia. Allegations of vote-buying, misuse of administrative resources and fraudulent behaviour should not be taken lightly – despite a comfortable basis of power for the present Government.

Finally, I should like to recall what was stated by the Congress in 2012, after the last local elections: in the interest of a clear profile of local elections, concurrent elections at different tiers of government on one and the same day should be avoided – as far as possible.

Thank you for your attention!