

Observing local and regional elections

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe

Voting rights are fundamental rights



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Election observation by international organisations plays an important role in providing accurate and impartial assessments on electoral processes. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities has a specific mandate to observe local and regional elections

in the 47 Council of Europe member states. Since 1990, some 100 election observation missions have been organised. This activity complements the Congress monitoring of implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government.

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The Congress

Le Congrès

COUNCIL OF EUROPE

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Why observe local and regional elections?

Election observation is a priority for the Congress of the Council of Europe. It helps to ensure the integrity of elections and build voter confidence at grassroots level.



Congress delegations observe the whole electoral process.

The Council of Europe began to observe elections after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 as part of the process for the accession of a certain number of new democracies. With the aim of supplementing the Parliamentary Assembly's work on national parliamentary and presidential elections, the Congress – as the guarantor of local and regional democracy – was given the task of observing local and regional elections.

The right of citizens to exercise their democratic choice by universal, equal, free and direct suffrage and by secret ballot is the basis for political participation at local and regional level and is enshrined in the preamble of the Additional Protocol to the European Charter of Local Self-Government.

Election observation enhances the integrity of elections, on the one hand by deterring and exposing irregularities and fraud, and on the other by producing recommendations for improving electoral procedures.

Election observation, a priority for the Congress

When adopting the political priorities of the Congress in 2010, its members decided to step up election observation as one of its key areas of activity and agreed on a policy for improving its quality and increasing its impact.

Adopted in June 2010, **Resolution 306 (2010)** lays down **new rules and strategies for election observation** and sets out detailed arrangements for their implementation. These cover the whole election process as well as the essential preconditions for genuinely democratic elections: the legal and political context, the role of the media, the election campaign and post-electoral situation etc. Appended to the text are rules for the practical organisation of Congress observation missions and a code of conduct for Congress observers

How does the Congress observe elections?

The Congress uses a peer review mechanism to evaluate local and regional election processes.



Citizens exercising their right to vote during the local elections in Ukraine, October 2010.

"The rights of citizens to vote – and to be elected – at periodic, genuine democratic elections are internationally recognised human rights. Genuine democratic elections cannot be achieved unless a wide range of other human rights and fundamental freedoms can be exercised without discrimination..."

Congress Resolution 306(2010)

How does the Congress observe elections?

The Congress organises observation missions following an official invitation from the relevant national authorities (for example, a ministry or the Central Election Commission) in one of the Council of Europe member states. Although the Congress can observe

elections in all 47 member states, it focuses in particular on countries where the political monitoring process has brought to light shortcomings and/or concerns with regard to local and regional democracy.

Who are the observers?

The Congress observers are elected local and regional politicians from the 47

Council of Europe member states. In other words, observation takes place in a peer review context. Their specific role as observers contributes to the legitimacy and credibility of the election process at local and regional level.

Each delegation's composition reflects a political and geographical balance and gender parity. Members of the European Union's Committee of the Regions (COR) also participate in Congress election observation missions. Each delegation comprises 10 to 15 members, including a rapporteur appointed for the mission in question.

The Code of conduct for congress observers, adopted in 2010, details the commitments to be respected by the participants of Congress observation missions. This code is in line with the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation developed under UN auspices and endorsed by more than twenty international organisations since 2005, among which is the Congress.

Stages in the observation process

In the interest of a consolidated assessment, the Congress widened the scope of observation examining the whole process as well as key factors for the functioning of democracy.

Run-up to the election

All observation missions are preceded by pre-election visits conducted by a three- to five-member delegation a few weeks before the election itself. The delegation's task is to assess the overall political situation in the country, the election campaign and the legal framework in which the election is taking place.

Polling day

During the mission itself, various meetings are held to evaluate the state of electoral democracy before polling day. Governmental bodies, local and regional elected representatives, the public authorities (election commissions), political parties (majority and opposition), the media, diplomatic

circles and civil society are represented at these meetings.

Observers are then deployed countrywide to observe polling day.

Recommendations

After each observation mission, the Congress delegation publishes a preliminary declaration, which is usually presented at a press conference held on the spot. The Congress member appointed as rapporteur for the mission subsequently drafts a report.

The report covers not only election procedures and the observations made on election day, particularly during voting and vote-counting, but also the overall political situation in the country, including aspects relating to human rights and fundamental freedoms, the climate in which the election campaign took place and the progress of democracy.



Congress observers during local elections in Ukraine, October 2010.

The report is submitted to the Bureau of the Congress. It is then examined and adopted in plenary session. A recommendation (addressed to the national authorities) and a resolution mark the end of the observation process.



Günther Krug, Rapporteur of the Congress, presents the report on Municipal elections in Georgia to the Congress 19th Session

The Congress training local election observers ...

The Congress organises workshops for its members to better understand this activity and raise awareness of its importance. Several training materials have been developed in this context, notably a video presenting each step of an observation mission.

Partnerships to ensure progress in electoral matters

The Congress follows up its recommendations by putting in place specific programmes and partnerships with key institutions working for genuinely democratic local and regional elections all over Europe.



Presentation of joint preliminary findings by OSCE/ODIHR and the Congress in framework of the local elections in Albania, May 2011.

Follow-up to recommendations

To ensure appropriate follow-up to its recommendations and the implementation of tangible results, the Congress puts in place a post-election assistance procedure. This involves mandating the relevant Congress bodies, in particular the Institutional Committee, to supervise the implementation of specific measures. If there is no improvement, the Congress may refer the matter to other Council of Europe bodies and, for example, request an opinion from the Venice Commission or ask the Parliamentary Assembly to look into the question as part of the monitoring process.

The Congress also sets up co-operation programmes with the national, regional and local authorities to address the

issues identified during observation missions.

These programmes involve not only local and regional elected representatives in the countries concerned but also local and regional elected representatives from other European countries who are willing to share their experience and expertise as part of a peer exchange process.

Partnerships...

... with the EU Committee of the Regions

As part of its co-operation activities with the European Union, the Congress invites the members of the COR to join its delegation on observation missions. When the report is presented, representatives of both institutions are invited in order to ensure reciprocity.

... with national associations of local authorities.

The Congress has also intensified its co-operation with the national associations by organising training sessions for their members on election observation and giving them the opportunity to participate in Congress missions.

... with the OSCE

If it is not the only international institution observing local or regional elections in a particular country, the Congress may join with the other institutions to form an international election observation mission (IEOM). Polling is followed by a joint press conference and a preliminary declaration. The Congress co-operates closely with OSCE/ODIHR in this context.

20 years of observation

Facts and figures....

- To date, over 100 missions election observation missions have been carried out by the Congress.
- 24 countries have been visited (amongst them, also some non-member states such as Israel in 2008).
- Pending on the member states' election schedules, the Congress is invited to observe between three and five local/regional elections each year.
- Over 200 Congress members have already participated in one of its observation missions.
- The first Congress observation mission was carried out in the Czech Republic in 1990.

The Congress, a political assembly of local and regional elected representatives

The voice of cities and regions in Europe

The Congress is a political assembly composed of 636 elected representatives – mayors, governors, councillors etc – representing more than 200 000 local and regional authorities in the 47 Council of Europe member states. It acts as European advocate for all of these elected representatives.

The Congress promotes devolution through the transfer of political powers and financial resources to municipalities and regions. It reinforces local and regional democracy by permanently monitoring the due application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government; observing local and regional elections, and issuing recommendations to the governments of the 47 Council of Europe member states. It maintains an ongoing dialogue with the member States in the Committee of Ministers, as well as with other institutions of the Council of Europe such as the Parliamentary Assembly. It ensures that policy decisions are made at the level closest to the citizen and strives for a vibrant grassroots democracy in an increasingly globalised world.

The Congress upholds local and regional self-government, democracy and human rights at local level.

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