

Democratic Elections

Local and regional elections: Recurring and transversal issues

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Congress of Local and Regional Authorities
of the Council of Europe

The Congress



Le Congrès

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The situation of independent candidates and the opposition in local and regional elections

Independent candidates and the opposition are a central element of democratic pluralism. Indeed, independent candidates represent an increasingly important electoral alternative in the face of growing disenchantment with political parties, particularly at the local and regional level. The Congress encourages national authorities to limit the obstacles faced by independent candidates at the various stages of the electoral process, so that they can stand in local and regional elections on an equal footing with candidates from political parties..

<http://www.coe.int/congress-independent-candidates>



Beyond elections: The use of deliberative methods in European municipalities and regions

Citizen participation is increasingly utilised by governments to complement representative democracy. Deliberative methods have become the most important and innovative element of citizen participation. The Congress proposes guidelines for municipalities and regions, illustrated by case studies at local and regional levels: Mostar (Bosnia-Herzegovina), Oud-Heverlee (Belgium), Scotland's Climate Assembly (UK) and Ostbelgien (Belgium).

<http://www.coe.int/congress-deliberative-methods>



Holding referendums at local level

Local referendums are essential to sound out the will of citizens on concrete issues that directly affect their daily lives. The Congress has adopted guidelines for member States to use local referendums responsibly, in line with Council of Europe standards, including the European Charter of Local Self-Government and the Venice Commission's Revised Code of Good Practice on Referendums. It also highlights the risks associated with local referendums and proposes mitigation strategies and best practices in this regard.

<http://www.coe.int/congress-local-referendums>



Local and regional elections in major crisis situations

In the context of major crises, the democratic legitimacy provided by free and fair elections is more essential than ever. However, holding local and regional elections may present difficulties that lead to the postponement of elections or prevent the observation of elections on the ground. Nevertheless, the Congress insists on a core set of principles that must be respected. The Congress report provides guidelines based on international standards and best practices for the holding and postponement of local and regional elections in times of major crisis.

www.coe.int/congress-elections-crisis



Voting rights at local level for the integration of migrants and displaced persons

In the context of current migration flows in Europe, participation in local elections is a key factor for the sustainable integration of populations who, for various reasons, reside outside their place of origin. The Congress recommends that national legislation enables displaced persons to exercise their right to vote by facilitating the procedures for changing residence and registering to vote. With regard to migrants, the norm is to grant foreign residents the right to vote in local elections, in accordance with the Council of Europe Convention on the Participation of Foreigners in Public Life at Local Level.

www.coe.int/congress-voting-IDPs



Administrative resources and fair elections

Candidates who abuse administrative resources in electoral processes are not only behaving unfairly towards their competitors; they are undermining the foundations of the democratic culture that is inseparable from the concept of fairness. This guide contains concrete examples of such unfair behaviour and explains why this problem must be taken seriously by Council of Europe member States, especially at a territorial level.

www.coe.int/congress-administrative-resources



Criteria for standing in local and regional elections

The right to stand in elections, whether at the local, regional or national level, and to participate in the management of public affairs is one of the pillars of any democracy. The Congress calls on governments to review their legislation with a view to eliminating unnecessary restrictions and giving the largest possible proportion of the electorate the opportunity to stand for election. The report addresses personal eligibility requirements, ineligibility rules, as well as incompatibilities, gender balance and practical measures.

www.coe.int/congress-criteria-elections



Electoral lists and voters residing de facto abroad

The issue of the electoral lists and voters residing de facto abroad must be examined in the light of the right to political participation and universal suffrage, and the permissible restrictions of that right, in particular regarding residency requirements. This report by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe examines international standards and domestic legislation applicable to voters residing de facto abroad, based on national studies conducted in sixteen Council of Europe member States.

www.coe.int/congress-electoral-lists



Voting at 16 – Consequences on youth participation at local and regional level

The Congress adopted a report calling for the promotion of the issue of lowering the voting age to sixteen in local and regional elections. The report is based on a comparative analysis of current practices regarding voting conditions at a territorial level in the different Council of Europe member States. It also highlights a number of related issues, such as the gradual lowering of the age for standing for election and systematic civil and political education in schools.

www.coe.int/congress-vote-16



OBSERVATION OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL ELECTIONS

Twenty years of experience of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities

Over 100 local and regional election observation missions



Nowadays, election observation is widely recognized as a tool for measuring a country's democratic development and as a means of improving electoral processes. The Parliamentary Assembly and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities are the two political assemblies of the Council of Europe mandated by the Committee of Ministers to observe elections in their respective fields. The Congress has organised around 115 local and regional election observation missions since 2001, mainly in Council of Europe member States and sometimes beyond.

How does the Congress organise election observation?



On average, the Congress carries out between three and five observation missions per year, at the official request of the national authorities concerned. A major feature of the Congress methodology is that observers are local and regional elected representatives from the 46 Council of Europe member States. The Congress arranges a delegation to observe the election, which consists of 10 to 15 of its members. Before the election day, several meetings are held to assess the state of electoral democracy, with the participation of government institutions, local and regional elected officials, representatives of public administration (electoral commissions), political parties (of government and the opposition), the media, diplomatic community and civil society.

Conclusions and monitoring



At the end of each election observation mission, the Congress delegation issues a preliminary statement. Thereafter, a report is prepared by the member of Congress designated as rapporteur for the mission. Their report covers not only the processes and facts observed on election day – especially during the voting and counting process – but also the general political situation in the country, including the status of fundamental rights and freedoms, the atmosphere in which the election campaign was conducted, and the progress made in terms of democracy.

Recurring and transversal issues



Approximately every three years, the Congress adopts a report which analyses the positive developments and challenges in the implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government and in the observance of European electoral standards at local and regional level in the Council of Europe member States. In addition to country reports and periodic reports on recurring problems, the Congress specifically examines broader transversal issues.

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities observes territorial elections in the 46 member States of the Council of Europe and sometimes beyond, further to the invitation of the national authorities concerned. This activity is complementary to the monitoring of the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, a legal reference instrument for local democracy in Europe. To date, more than 100 election observation missions have been carried out by the Congress.

In addition to observation missions and country reports, the Congress regularly examines recurring and transversal issues related to local and regional elections. It has adopted a series of reports on independent candidates and opposition, deliberative methods, referendums at local level, elections in major crisis situations, the right to vote for migrants and displaced persons, misuse of administrative resources, criteria for standing in elections, voters residing abroad and voting at 16.

The “Democratic Elections” series includes the according recommendations of the Congress.

www.coe.int

The Council of Europe is the continent’s leading human rights organisation. It comprises 46 member States, including all members of the European Union. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities is an institution of the Council of Europe, responsible for strengthening local and regional democracy in its 46 member states. Composed of two chambers – the Chamber of Local Authorities and the Chamber of Regions – and three committees, it brings together 612 elected officials representing more than 130 000 local and regional authorities.

