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Debate on observation of local elections in Türkiye (31 March 2024) (Part 1)

17 October 2024

Dear colleagues,

I am pleased to present the findings of the Congress mission to observe the local elections in Türkiye, held on 31 March 2024, for which I was Head of delegation together with Vladimir Prebilić, as Deputy Head.

31 March was the third time that the Congress had observed the elections in Türkiye after the 2019 general local elections and the repeat elections in Istanbul. As in 2019, it was the only accredited international mission on the ground, once again highlighting the importance of the Congress' mandate to observe local and regional elections and the importance of receiving invitations from national authorities.

The Congress delegation consisted of 20 Congress members, one expert and the Secretariat, and visited over 140 polling stations on polling day in eleven provinces. Unfortunately, one of our members was refused the necessary accreditation to take part in the deployment, a first time for the Congress. The draft recommendation submitted for adoption today mentions this issue, which I hope will not happen again.

This mission took place in the middle of the month of Ramadan and in a particularly complex climate marked by a complicated economic situation and delays in the reconstruction of areas affected by the deadly earthquakes of 2023.
Overall, we felt that the elections were conducted in a calm and professional manner. Our delegation praised the impressive commitment of Turkish citizens to local democracy, both as voters and as candidates. The turnout reached 78%, a lower rate than usual in Türkiye but still very high compared to many Council of Europe member States.

Election day was well organised, despite representing an important technical challenge, with over 200 000 polling stations and over 57 million registered voters. The Congress observers noted some inconsistencies which created some tensions and confusion, for which improvements are recommended, in particular with regard to:

- The under-regulation of the elections to the post of mukhtar (neighbourhood or village representative);
- the presence of many people on the premises;
- and the credible reports of displacement of voters (particularly security forces) in the east of the country with the aim of changing the composition of the electorate.

However, as the Congress often repeats, technical organisation on election day is only one side of the coin. Other criteria need to be met in order to establish conditions that are fully conducive to the holding of democratic elections. It is by understanding the campaign environment as a whole and the state of local democracy in Türkiye that we identified in the report areas where some important limitations remain, particularly with regard to human rights and the rule of law.

As you can see, the draft recommendation is substantial and raises some major issues. Most of these points had already been noted by Congress in 2019 and few improvements have been made to the legal framework since then.

First, the campaign conditions have not yet made it possible to ensure full and fair competition between the various candidates, a sine qua non of local democracy. Whether due to restrictions on the right to stand, the brevity of the official campaign (only 10 days), credible allegations of misuse of state resources or the very weak regulations applied to party and campaign finances, equality of opportunity between candidates remained limited.

The non-application of provisions relating to media impartiality, particularly on the public channels, and the omnipresence of the President of the Republic have also failed to ensure fairness in media coverage and have further blurred the separation between the state and the ruling party.

In spite of this worrying lack of equal campaigning conditions, the campaign managed to remain competitive and voters were able to choose from a wide range of political alternatives, which was reflected in the results as the 2024 elections confirmed a certain form of political alternation. The opposition's victory or re-election in the country's largest cities showed the resilience of Turkish democracy. Indeed, the results were quickly and widely accepted, in a welcome development, deviating from the 2019 elections.

My colleague Vladimir Prebilic will present some of the key recommendations proposed by our election observation delegation. Thank you for your attention