

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased to be here today and speak about the Congress mission to observe the local elections held in Turkey on 31 March. I will also comment briefly on what has happened after this vote and on the decision by the Supreme Election Board to re-run the mayoral elections in Istanbul, further to complaints by the Government.

I was delighted to lead this international delegation composed of 22 councillors from more than 20 countries.

Prior to this deployment we held a series of meetings with interlocutors in Ankara, both immediately prior to the Election Day and during an earlier preparatory visit mid-March. These briefings were invaluable and we heard about the absence of a “level playing field” in the campaign and the apparent use of administrative resources to favour one party over the other – and the political posters displayed everywhere in Ankara, all of which showed President Erdogan, were an impressive evidence of this lack of equal conditions for all. Many courageous people came to talk to us, notably from NGOs and the media, knowing that what they said to us could lead to them suffering intimidation, if not detention.

On the Election Day, we observed the voting in some 140 polling stations in Ankara, Istanbul, Antalya, Adana, Diyarbakir, Izmir and Erzurum, from the opening to the counting at the end of the day that was conducted by the Ballot Box Committees.

Apart from some isolated inconsistencies observed - for example, regarding the signing of the voters' lists and the sealing of the ballot boxes, from what we could see, the Ballot Box Committees performed their technical and procedural tasks competently. Their technical proficiency seemed, by and large, convincing to us. The logistics involved in country-wide local government elections in a country as large and diverse as Turkey are challenging.

The registration of some 350 voters per Ballot Box Committees made voting smooth and counting faster but it does bring challenges. You need at least 4 people to run a Ballot Box Committee leaving aside observers. I estimated that more than 0.75 million people were involved in running these elections it could well have been much more than this.

We were also very impressed by the great interest in these elections shown by the citizens. A turnout rate of 84% is a sign of healthy democratic interest and awareness. The voters had a broad choice of political parties, 13 in total. There were around 280,000 candidates for the different offices - mayors, councillors and mukhtars - throughout the country. Some municipalities were heavily contested and brought tight races.

From what we heard from the representatives of the Supreme Election Council, the Turkish voting system should be secure. The President of the Council boasted to us that the Turkish system should be used by the rest of Europe. As I said before, based on our own observations on the Election Day, we had no reason to doubt it.

However, in the aftermath of the decision by the Supreme Council to repeat the Istanbul mayoral elections, I have to admit that this self-assessment makes me a little thoughtful. But let me first continue with the observations we have made on 31 March.

We were told by the authorities that some 60,000 law enforcement officers were deployed to the regions, to ensure security on the E-Day - also an impressive figure. At the same time, it seemed that there was a massive deployment of security forces in some places - we counted up to 25 police officers in one polling station and found policemen in each and every polling station, at least temporarily.

However, sound administration and technical skills implementing the law are only parts of the overall picture that makes up the assessment of elections. Therefore, in a preliminary statement that we presented at a press conference on 1 April in Ankara, we made clear that the Congress delegation was not fully convinced of Turkey's capacity to fulfil the conditions ensuring a free and fair electoral environment which is necessary for genuinely democratic elections.

Citizens must be able to criticise and question those in power freely and without fear of reprisals or repression. The media must offer genuine plurality and be objectively fair to all political parties. Journalists must be able to carry out their reporting without running the risk of being fired for making regime-critical reports or perhaps ending up in prison. It also requires an effective mechanism to prevent misuse of administrative resources during the electoral campaign.

Of course, essential in this respect is a sound and stable legal framework overseen by a robust judiciary - willing to uphold the rule of law without fear or favour. And that is what worries us the most now, given the developments further to the 31 March elections.

The fact that the Supreme Election Council, based on their previous dismissal from public service under the state of emergency, did not confirm those HDP mayoral candidates who were successful in the southeast of the country but entrusted instead the second-ranked candidates with the office of mayor, is for us a sign not only of the lack of legal certainty but also of democratic understanding. The President of Congress condemned this decision by the Supreme Council in a statement of 12 April and made clear that rules that applied before the Election Day must also apply after the Election Day. Local elected representatives must be able to exercise their political mandate freely and without fear of accusations and repressions for supposed terrorist connections.

As for the decision by the Supreme Election Council to repeat the mayoral elections in Istanbul on 23 June, we are very concerned about the process that has led to this decision, accompanied by the lack of transparency and inconsistencies. I mention only that the allegedly unlawful composition of Ballot Box Commissions (AKP claimed that some chairpersons and members of these commissions were not civil servants, as required by law) did not lead to the re-run of Provincial Council, City Council and District Mayor elections in Istanbul – but only to the rerun of the Istanbul Metropolitan Mayor elections in which the AKP Yildirim was defeated by the CHP opposition candidate Imamoglu by approximately 14,000 votes on 31 March.

This casts serious doubts over the impartiality of the Supreme Election Council in taking this extraordinary decision, especially after reports we have received about pressure exerted by the Government and interference in the work of the Council.

The Congress is now following the situation closely and is ready to take all adequate measures in the run-up to the repeat elections in Istanbul including the deployment of an observation mission, provided the official invitation arrives in due time.

Thank you for your attention.