

Congress Observation mission of the local elections in Turkey held on 31 March 2019

Press conference in Ankara on 1 April 2019

Statement by Andrew DAWSON (ECR, United Kingdom)

Good morning ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for being here.

I believe it is appropriate that I commence my remarks by thanking the Turkish Authorities for inviting the Congress of the Council of Europe to observe the local elections held here yesterday.

The Council of Europe is conscious that Turkish election law does not include provisions covering election observation by international observers. Given that the Congress very much welcomed the invitation to observe these elections. We've also seen the invitation as proof of Turkey's continuing close co-operation with the Council of Europe. Turkey has been a member of the Council of Europe since 1950 - almost as long as the Council has existed.

I will turn first to the technical aspects of our mission; I will then make some broader comments based on our observations.

The Council of Europe's monitoring mission saw us deploy 22 observers from 20 different European countries. We were divided into 10 teams and were deployed throughout Turkey. We witnessed voting taking place in around 140 polling stations.

Prior to this deployment we held a series of meetings with many interlocutors in Ankara both immediately prior to Election Day and at an earlier preparatory mission visit in March.

I place on record both my, and the Council of Europe's thanks and gratitude to the people we met and for answering our many questions - some of which would have been testing and difficult.

We observed voting in various locations which included included Ankara, Istanbul, Izmir, Antalya, Adana, Erzurum and Diyarbakir. Our observations started before the polls opened, continued during voting and ended observing some of the counts being conducted by the Ballot Box Committees.

My team observed the elections in Ankara and some adjacent rural municipalities. I can say personally that in most locations our teams were positively welcomed and that I drank much tea and coffee during the day.

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 saw the Ballot Box Committees performed their technical, procedural tasks competently. Congress observers have reported that they were given full access to the voting procedures, mostly in an open and friendly way.

Unfortunately as many of you will already know Election Day was overshadowed by deaths. We extend our condolences to the families and friends of the deceased.

However, without in any way minimising the tragedy of those deaths it is appropriate for us to note that the elections were conducted in an orderly way.

We were 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 that is what democracy is all about! I was really struck by many of the contested mukhtar elections. From what I saw they were wonderfully "robust" but could do with being regulated.

We were very impressed by the technical proficiency of the election at all levels from the Supreme Election Council down to the individual Ballot Box Committees. The logistics involved in providing country-wide local government elections in country as large and diverse as Turkey are impressive.

The registration of some 350 voters per Ballot Box Committees makes 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 estimate that more than 0.75 million people were involved in running these elections it could well have been much more than this.

We did see some crowded polling stations - ideally this should be avoided. However we did note that Turkish procedures meant that it could take several minutes for a person to vote - once all the various checks and procedures had been carried out.

There were provisions in place in most polling stations we visited, to allow elderly and disabled people to use a ballot box at the ground floor. My team also spoke to one mobile ballot box committee.

We were told by the authorities that some 60,000 law enforcement officers were deployed to the regions, to ensure security on Election 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. I personally found it strange to see heavily armed Gendarmes both outside and inside a polling station. I am not used to seeing voting where there are automatic weapons very obviously on display. I must thank our security detail who were very professional and helpful - and even enjoyed British humour.

However, sound election administration and technical skills implementing the law are only parts of the overall picture that makes up the assessment of elections.

In order to assess elections as being genuinely democratic and in accordance with the Council of Europe principles of democracy, rule of law and human rights, it needs more:

It needs a political environment where there is genuine freedom of expression, where all citizens can express their opinions without fear. Citizens must be able to criticise and question those in power freely and without fear of reprisals or repression. This requires a media that genuinely offers plurality, and that is objectively fair to all political parties in all respects.

It needs an atmosphere where media freedom is absolutely ensured. Where journalists can carry out their reporting and commentary without running the risk of being fired for making regime-critical reports or perhaps ending up in prison just for expressing their legal and legitimate views.

There should be equal access for all parties running in elections to the media. Voters need to be able to get a balanced picture of the contestants' programmes and objectives. An equal playing field for all is an absolute prerequisite for an election campaign to be called fair and free.

It also requires a fair and reasonable legal framework overseen by a robust judiciary - willing to uphold the rule of law without fear or favour.

That legal framework, and this is essential for us from the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities must allow locally elected representatives to exercise their political mandate - freely and without fear of accusations and repressions for supposed terrorist connections.

It also requires that state resources are not used to favour one political party over another.

I must mention the role and participation of women in the democratic processes. We were disappointed not to see more women in charge of Ballot Box Committees and taking a leading role in politics more generally. However we were pleased to see many younger women acting as observers - this is a positive sign for the future.

I acknowledge and the Council of Europe acknowledges the security difficulties that Turkey faces. However it is my view that when democracy is under threat the answer is not less democracy but more democracy.

We also note that Turkey's definition of terrorism is not consistent with Council of Europe standards, notably the case law of the European Court of Human Rights.

With all this being said, I am afraid, we from the Congress of the Council of Europe are not fully convinced that Turkey currently has the free and fair electoral environment which is necessary for genuinely democratic elections in line with European values and principles.

But we do take the fact that many parties have been successful as a positive sign of Turkey's democratic resilience. Hope for the future is important for a country that is currently going through difficult times, not only politically but also economically.

I must mention the Kurdish question. This brings me to the Recommendation the Congress made in March 2017. That recommendation urged the Turkish authorities to restrict the measures on government appointing trustees and to restore the capacity of Municipal Councils to choose for themselves a suitable replacement mayor in cases where a mayor is removed or suspended from office.

We are not turning a blind eye to Turkey's absolute right and necessity to protect its integrity and security. We support and respect them in defending their state and their people. However we do not accept assertions that assume every HDP mayor is or could be a terrorist or has terrorist connections. Please continue your policy of 'normalisation.'

We therefore call on the Turkish authorities to take the 31 March local elections as an opportunity to change course. The local representatives elected yesterday must be able to exercise their mandate freely and in accordance with the European Charter of Local Self-Government of the Congress of the

Council of Europe to which Turkey is a Party. This also means ensuring that each municipality has sufficient resources to carry out its functions.

These elections are a chance for the full reinstatement of the principle of direct democratic mandate in Turkey: please seize this opportunity.