

Congress Election Observation Mission to Türkiye – Local Elections,

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Draft statement of the Head of delegation, David ERAY (Switzerland, R, EPP/CCE), and Deputy Head of delegation, Vladimir PREBILIC (Slovenia, L, SOC)

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Dear ladies and gentlemen,

A very warm welcome to this press conference of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe – and thank you for joining us this morning.

My name is David Eray from Switzerland, head of the delegation.

Together with the Deputy Head of delegation, Vladimir Prebilic from Slovenia, we are pleased to present the preliminary conclusions of the Congress observation mission today.

The Congress of the Council of Europe is one of the political assemblies of the Council of Europe, representing over 130000 local and regional authorities, and responsible for strengthening local and regional democracy in its 46 member States. The Congress has been observing over 120 elections over the last twenty years.

The congress mandate includes the observation of local and regional elections by elected representatives in Council of Europe member States. This peer-to-peer mechanism allows us to compare electoral systems in Europe and to monitor the application of common democratic standards at subnational level. This was the third time the Congress observed elections in Türkiye and the delegation was grateful to the Turkish authorities be invited to observe these 2024 local elections.

However, we regretted that, for the first time in over 120 Congress missions, one delegation member was not granted accreditation. We believe that the authorities of the inviting country should not intervene in the composition of the election observation mission, which was approved by the three Presidents of the Congress.

The delegation of the Congress deployed to observe the local elections comprised 19 Congress members, one expert and four members of the Secretariat, representing altogether 16 member states of the Council of Europe. We observed voting procedures in more than 140 polling stations across Türkiye, including in the capital, Ankara, and in Istanbul. We were able to follow the procedures from opening to closing of the polling station including the counting of the votes.

This on-site mission was preceded by meetings with a wide range of key stakeholders on electoral matters.

This was done online on 7 and 8 March and in Ankara on 29 and 30 March.

Information was also provided to the delegation by relevant Turkish authorities, civil society organisations, media representatives, candidates and political party representatives.

The Election Day was overall calm and organised in a professional manner, with a high turnout of about 78.5% showing a strong commitment of citizens to local representative democracy. We acknowledge the logistical organisation that made it possible to handle the large number of voters in a smooth process.

Despite guidelines issued by the Supreme Electoral Council to effectively handle counting, we observed that the counting procedures, while overall transparent, were in some instances rushed and not applied homogeneously, due to the coincidence with the breaking of the fast, since the elections were held during the month of Ramadan, and also due to undue interference of mukhtar candidates on election administration.

We witnessed on election day that the organisation and role of those present at the polling stations was not consistently clear. This seems to be due to the

mixing of roles between political party representatives, candidates for mukhtars, observers, lawyers, public security agents and civil servants.

Acknowledging the importance of the Mukhtar-elections, we also observed that the coexistence of different regulations for the local/regional elections and for the Mukhtar elections, tend to create some confusion at the polling stations. For instance, the practice of not having official ballot papers for the Mukhtar elections but ballots brought by the candidates themselves and distributed outside – and sometimes even inside – the polling stations implies that quite different electoral rules have to be administered for the different elections held on the same day.

When the Mukhtar-ballots are placed on a table inside the polling station, this could – when the elector takes the ballot paper - deprive the secrecy of the vote. The overwhelming presence – and even campaigning – of the Mukhtar-candidates at the polling stations can leave the impression with the voters that the Mukhtar elections are the most important ones despite their limited responsibilities.

Let me however strongly underline that electoral management is only one side of the coin. We need to look beyond the election day to create the conditions for a vibrant local democracy – to look at what happened before the polling day and what will happen after these elections. Based on existing electoral standards and our experience as observers in Council of Europe member States, some long-standing concerns related to Türkiye remain unaddressed. In addition, recommendations addressed to Turkish authorities following the 2019 local elections are still valid.

In line with the Council of Europe principles of democracy, rule of law and human rights, more needs to be done to ensure a political and media environment where there is genuine freedom of expression and a reasonable and well-implemented framework overseen by an independent judiciary.

While we welcome the competitive nature of these elections and that voters were able to choose between many alternative options, we can only note that the 2024 local elections in Türkiye took place in a starkly polarised environment, and were only partially conducive to local democracy.

The public broadcast media did not meet its legal obligation to provide impartial coverage of the campaign and equal opportunities for all political parties. In particular, the delegation was informed of repeated bias of the public broadcaster in covering opposition parties.

In addition, it is clear to the delegation that urgent steps must be taken to ensure and enforce in a consistent manner equal and fair campaigning conditions for all contestants, including the opposition.

As pointed out in the previous recommendation:

The campaign was also a clear indicator that much more needs to be done in the near future to regulate the campaign and party finance as well as the potential misuse of public resources.

After the election of 2019, we were very concerned to see elected mayors replaced by trustees. Today we urge the national authority to ensure that this will not happen again and that this practice of trustees will be abandoned altogether.

We will be looking at the next steps of the electoral process closely, including the election dispute mechanism as the Congress and other bodies of the Council of Europe have voiced that the will of voters must be respected following an election. In particular, candidates accepted as eligible shall have an opportunity to take office if elected and to freely exercise their mandates, in accordance with the European Charter of Local Self-Government, which is binding on all Council of Europe member States.

Finally, we would like to conclude on a positive note, as these local and regional elections have demonstrated the possibility of alternation between political

parties through the expression of an active electorate, which is a clear indicator of the realisation of a fundamental democratic principle. We look forward to seeing the will of the electorate fully implemented, as trust in the electoral process is the cornerstone of democracy.

Next July, the Congress Monitoring Committee will discuss a preliminary report and recommendations to the authorities of Türkiye, before adoption at the October Congress session in Strasbourg.

I thank you for your attention and we are happy to take questions, if there are any.
