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Statement by Ekrem İMAMOĞLU, Mayor of Istanbul, Turkey

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Report on the observation of local elections in Turkey (31 March 2019) including the Istanbul repeat mayoral election (23 June 2019) Strasbourg, France, 30 October 2019

Honorable President,

Esteemed Members of the Congress,

As the Mayor of Istanbul, the city which was the capital of Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman Empires,

The only city which hosted 120 emperors, kings and sultans,

The cradle of three great civilizations,

The city where two continents meet and which has protected the holy relics of three holy religions,

The city which is one of the most important centers of the world with its unique and exquisite view,

I would like to extend the sincere regards of 16 million Istanbulites with you and our sister nations.

I feel at home here in this hall and among you.

One of the reasons of this is my country is among the founding members of the Council of Europe.

Also, European Congress of Local Governments, which is the starting point of today's European Council body of European Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, was established on January 12th, 1957 as a result of the initiatives taken following the report and recommendations prepared by Turkish parliamentarian Ziyad Ebuzziya in 1953.

That is why I feel completely at home.

Esteemed Members of the Congress,

Another reason for me to feel at home is our belief in democracy and democratic processes, which are our common values.

This year, 16 million Istanbulites showed a democratic will that will change many dynamics in the politics of Turkey.

The congress members carried out monitoring missions at both elections on March 31st and the re-run of elections on June 23rd upon the invitation of Turkish government.

As mentioned in the report of the mission, this was the first local election that had ever been observed by the Congress in Turkey.

We were very pleased to see Ankara acting maturely and inviting the Congress to observe both elections.

In this regard, I would like to extend my sincere thanks to the government of the Republic of Turkey.

I would also like to thank the observers who came to our country both for the elections of March 31st and the re-run of the elections on June 23rd, and to Mr. Andrew Dawson, the rapporteur who wrote down the report, for all their valuable efforts.

The details given in the report are all correct. It is impossible to disagree with the recommendations given in article 16 of the report mentioning the decisions of Council of Europe Venice Commission, the European Charter of Local Self Government, and the recommendations of Council of Europe's Group of States against Corruption.

The recommendations given in the report regarding the regulations, in particular the following, are all very meaningful and valuable for democracy.

- Limitless use of public resources in favor of the government
- The unfair attitude of media towards the candidates running in the elections
- The polarizing discourse dividing the people
- The regulations allowing the actions and implementations of the President and cabinet members which are against the election related bans
- Non-transparency of campaign financing
- Removal of successful mayors from their offices

Local elections were held on March 31st in my country in a social climate and unjust conditions where the freedom of press and expression was restricted, the opposition voices could not find a place in the mainstream media and the culture of living together was weakened.

Despite all the negative conditions, we were the winners of the night of March 31 with our campaign based on democracy, freedom, respect for the city and people, and the 16 million Istanbulites' choice of democracy.

Anadolu Agency, the state's news agency, wanted to manipulate the election results. We did not allow this with our people.

As we had established a structure that could receive wet signed minutes from all ballot boxes, and allow us to have all the data, we did not leave the struggle.

On March 31st, we stood for votes, ballot boxes and democracy with 16 million Istanbulites. We waited for days at the polls.

The ruling party could not win the elections by manipulation, so they wanted to win by canceling the elections with the decision of the Supreme Election Board, which was authorized to govern the elections.

But despite all the power of the government, our citizens showed their strong will in favor of democracy once again on the night of June 23 with a much louder voice.

The people of Istanbul showed their commitment to the republic and democracy in these elections, and established that the power of the nation cannot be ignored.

The results of June 23rd repaired the damage given to democracy.

Some of the reasons for the cancellation decision of the Supreme Election Board were also the subject of criminal courts, but no one was punished even after months have passed.

Because there was no crime.

16 million Istanbulites have achieved a proud result in both elections.

So I would like to take this opportunity to thank all Istanbulites once again on behalf of democracy.

Local elections raised hopes again in society.

Honorable Members of the Congress,

The results of the Istanbul elections are very clear, instructive and inspiring for the whole world.

Where people who take office through elections do not leave their office again through elections, we would have neither democracy nor the rule of law.

The will of the citizens shown in the ballot boxes is not a will that can be deemed valid or invalid in accordance with the desires of some authorities.

To prevent the citizens from exercising their right to vote and to be elected is nothing but strengthening the segments in the search for non-democracy.

It is unacceptable to separate some voters, some political parties, some elected persons from others, and try to apply different criteria and different rules.

The dismissal of some mayors and the appointment of trustees in their place, and the detention of some of them in particular violates the principle of the rule of law.

These dismissals do not comply with the principles of democracy, current legal regulations and international conventions to which we are party.

Political parties and their elected officials, deputies and mayors are either in or out of law.

The judiciary is the authority that makes the final decision and this is clearly stated in the Constitution.

Whoever is treated unjust and unlawful, we have to stand against it and say no altogether.

Because this is a fight for justice, a fight for democracy.

This is a fight to protect our national will.

We will continue to defend the values of the Republic and democracy in all conditions, on all grounds, without any fanaticism, without any discrimination, without fear, without giving up.

Honorable Members of the Congress,

The commitment to the European values and family is not a foreign policy issue for Turkey, it is a target of Turkey as a state and society.

We know that the European family attaches great importance to the development of local governments, which are the closest administrative units to the public.

The perspective of the Council of Europe on Turkish cities and especially on Istanbul, where two continents meet, is of great importance.

We, too, attach great importance to cities and local democracies.

At this point, cities and local governments are the starting point for all our thoughts.

In the same context, we consider the standards stipulated by the Council of Europe very valuable.

In such an environment, being able to make the necessary arrangements in the city to provide a humane environment to facilitate the lives of people is among the most important targets and standards for us.

In principle, we adopt the objectives of European Charter of Local Self Government which was opened for signature on October 15, 1985 and signed by Turkey on November 21, 1988.

As Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, we prioritize these objectives in the job descriptions of our district municipalities.

Therefore, on March 31 and later on June 23, an important opportunity was created for the hope of democracy in Turkey to flourish again.

In liberal democracies, local governments are considered as the schools of democracy.

With this mission in mind, we will fight for Turkey to get out of the political impasse it is in.

In Istanbul, we will create the common values again as a society.

Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality will be a municipality that embraces 16 million people, regardless of their identity and belief, whether they are rich or poor, and adopts and acts on all the values of social democracy.

I can summarize our vision as the following:

There have always been some periods across the world where countries temporarily move away from democracy and freedom. As Turkey, we will overcome this period in a very short time.

Istanbul, the largest city in Europe, will surely succeed in becoming one of the most democratic, pluralist, fairest, greenest and most creative cities in Europe.

As individuals who believe in the principle of peace at home, peace in the world, we know very well that democracy is a powerful force.

We will make sure populism is unsuccessful through the opportunities provided by local democracy, and we will ensure peace and welfare again.

This hall and this Congress are the most important platforms of local democracy in our continent.

It is essential that this platform develops initiatives on the refugee problem created through the proxy wars in Syria.

Because Turkey equals Europe and Europe equals Turkey.

The problems Turkey is experiencing in this regard are not the problems of Turkey alone. They are also fundamental problems of Europe.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.

I invite all of you to Istanbul, my beloved and cherished city, where a strong local democracy is being rebuilt.