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Debate:

Progress report of the Bureau and the Standing Committee

Observation of the early presidential and parliamentary elections in Turkey (24 June 2018)

The following texts were submitted for inclusion in the Official Report by members who were present in the Chamber but were prevented by lack of time from delivering them.

Ms BAKOYANNIS (*Greece*) – The recent elections were crucial for Turkey, as they institutionalised the change from a parliamentary to a presidential system. As an old friend of Turkey, I would like to say that the conditions for campaigning were not equal, with the incumbent president and ruling party enjoying an advantage, including excessive coverage by media outlets. These early elections took place under the state of emergency. This is not, *per se*, an insurmountable obstacle to holding a vote. However, the way in which the state of emergency was implemented greatly limited the space for democratic debate and the expression of pluralism, let alone political dissent.

The campaign was vibrant and took place in a highly polarised environment. Candidates campaigned by various means, and social media was an important tool to reach younger voters in order to overcome campaign restrictions. Moreover, as the rapporteur stresses, certain members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe delegation encountered difficulties or restrictions when exercising their duties as observers. It should be clear to our Turkish friends that our task is to provide an impartial external assessment of the electoral process, without taking sides.

These elections showed that Turkish citizens are willing to mobilise for their democracy. They really want to campaign, protect the integrity of the election process and vote. This is the most important conclusion. Therefore, our Assembly should support all measures ensuring that people can form their opinion based on objective and impartial information and express their free will, without fear, intimidation or hindrance.

Furthermore, I noticed that Turkish women remain under-represented in political life. Although the Constitution guarantees gender equality, there are no legal obligations for the parties to nominate women candidates. Therefore, only one out of five candidates on party lists was female.

To sum up, as the citizens energetically demonstrated their commitment to democracy, the authorities need to step up and meet their demands. This is why Turkey needs a stronger democracy for the sake of its people and the whole of the Eastern Mediterranean region.

Our Assembly will continue to stand ready to work with Turkey in the field of elections. The only way to protect civic and civil rights is to stay aligned with the principles of the Council of Europe and remain in close co-operation with the Venice Commission.

Ms GAFAROVA (*Azerbaijan*) – I will speak about the presidential and parliamentary elections in Turkey. In the report, Ms Sotnyk mentioned that the early elections of 24 June were the confirmation that Turkish citizens are willing to mobilise for their democracy and are willing to take to supervising the integrity of the election process and vote in great numbers. Indeed, the citizens of Turkey participated in elections in great numbers. Of course, that shows that all citizens of the country enjoy the right to vote and that all work has been prepared in accordance with international election standards and relevant legislation.

Candidates' election campaigns were carried out under the country's electoral law. The voting process was also carried out transparently by persons appointed and legally proclaimed. Most domestic and international observers have clearly indicated that the necessary conditions were created for transparent and objective elections.

One of the important points was the recognition of the election results following their announcement by all of the candidates who participated in the process and the fact that they congratulated the winning candidate. All those and other facts confirm once more that the elections were fully democratic, fair and consistent with international norms and principles.

There is no doubt that, in addition to the democratic conduct of the presidential elections, their consequences are important to the development of the Turkish State in the coming years, as well as to the expected effects on the region and the larger geography. In this sense, the recent elections in Turkey can be regarded as the beginning of a new stage in the development of the country. Turkey has experienced great economic development in recent years. Of course, the growth of Turkey's economy, economic relations and trade expansion give positive impetus to Turkey's relations with European Union countries.

Turkey is of strategic importance not only in its region, but across the whole of Europe. Turkey is currently playing an important role in promoting international security and supporting peace. Naturally, Turkey's active presence in the region will give new impetus to peace and economic development. In particular, Turkey's role in the fight against separatism and terrorism in the region is irrefutable. In evaluating the June elections, we should take into account all these nuances.

Mr GAVAN (*Ireland*) – Turkey's presidential and parliamentary elections on 24 June were anything but democratic. They were held under a state of emergency and unparalleled repression. It was therefore no surprise that Erdoğan has become the first executive president in Turkey and is pushing the country further along the path to a dictatorship.

I have only a short time available, so I would like to focus particularly on the anti-democratic treatment of the third largest party in Turkey, the pro-Kurdish HDP. Its presidential candidate was unable to campaign because he has remained in prison on pre-trial detention since November 2016. He is in prison because he dared to stand up to the autocratic Erdoğan regime and demand democratic and human rights for all citizens in Turkey, including the oppressed Kurdish minority. He ran his campaign from prison and came third. I want to pay credit to him and all those who bravely helped his campaign.

In any country where parliamentary democracy functions properly, members of parliament and leaders of political parties are not put in prison for their policies. Yet that is the reality in Turkey. These elections clearly did not take place in a free and fair climate.

Despite the imprisonment of its activists and MPs, daily police oppression, and media censorship, the HDP passed the election threshold to win almost 12% of the 600 seats in parliament. It has done so on a campaign for human rights and democracy. I send my congratulations and solidarity. The continued detention of HDP MPs, and especially the co-chairs of the HDP, is wrong and unjustifiable. The Turkish authorities must immediately release these political prisoners, as well as the thousands of others it arrested using state of emergency laws, and respect human rights.

Mr HASANOV (*Azerbaijan*) – According to the election observation report, the early presidential and parliamentary elections in Turkey were held “with a genuine choice, however the conditions for campaigning were not equal”. The report says that “the incumbent president and ruling party enjoyed an undue advantage”. For me, saying that the Turkish voters had a genuine choice, but the conditions were not equal, sounds like double standards. I strongly disagree with the statement about the conditions in the elections not being equal, and there are some solid reasons for this.

There is no doubt that the Turkish elections fully reflected the will of the Turkish people. The Turkish voters supported the ruling party and the incumbent president. There are some key elements which give us grounds to talk about fair and transparent elections in Turkey: freedom of assembly, freedom of expression, and democratic electoral legislation.

As we saw during the election campaign, Turkish citizens demonstrated their commitment to democracy by participating in large rallies. Huge opposition rallies proved that the Turkish Government fully ensured freedom of assembly. The Turkish voters expressed their free will without fear and intimidation. Election day procedures were followed, and all the procedures required by law were fulfilled during the counting and tabulation of ballots.

The local opposition had free access to TV and could hold meetings with voters. There is a huge space for democratic debate and the expression of pluralism in Turkey. As a result, the early elections took place under the laws that ensure fundamental rights. Turkey's electoral legislation provides a broad range of guarantees of fundamental freedoms. Therefore, Turkish citizens had a genuine choice between presidential candidates and parties expressing different views and belonging to different political groups. We can definitely say that the integrity of the election process was guaranteed.

Now we should assist Turkey in building a stronger democracy for the benefit of its citizens. We need to support Turkish democracy in order to spread further such modern values as human rights and free elections. Turkey is a nation with the ability to influence neighbouring countries and regions. At the same time, today Turkey is fighting against terror. Turkey is also facing the huge challenge that the flow of refugees from Syria and the Middle East represents. We now need to support Turkey in such fragile circumstances. We should develop our co-operation with Turkey, as a very important country in the region.

Ms KAVVADIA (*Greece*) - The Turkish parliamentary and presidential elections took place in June, and the political developments throughout Europe have been so rapid and overwhelming, that we are already contemplating tomorrow's political agenda. However, it is important to have an in-depth look at the way the elections were conducted, not only because they represented the transition to a new political system, but mainly because they confirmed the public consent to it.

The electoral process itself was indicative of the general will of the Turkish people, thus meeting the basic election observation standards of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. However,

it was also evident that indirect initiatives had been taken to influence the result. The legislation that allowed party coalitions was initiated shortly before the elections and was designed to favour those who entered the elections in co-operation with other parties; the two-party coalitions that were formed covered the Islamic and Kemalist political spectrum, opposing the HDP, the pro-leftist and Kurdish party, which had to strive alone.

The Doğan Media Group was bought by a political friend of the AKP shortly before the elections. Thus, in its entirety, the media favoured the government party coalition and so did the official State and its facilities. Finally, we must not forget that the HDP entered the electoral struggle with many of its leading members in jail. As a sad reminder, Selahattin Demirtaş has been imprisoned since 2016, along with a further 15 MPs, hundreds of supporters and 68 mayors that were supported by the HDP. Furthermore, the government banished HDP elected members in 94 of the 102 municipalities that had elected HDP-supported candidates, and appointed State officials instead.

It is obvious that the transition to a new political system that has allocated extensive powers to the president of the State, weakened the authority of the National Assembly and done away with the position of Prime Minister could not have stemmed from elections organised in a different manner. Turkey has entered a historical period of a one-man political system, where basic European Union principles regarding social and human rights will be roughly schematic and imprecise.

Thus, the Assembly needs to follow that new development in Turkish political history and closely monitor the implementation of the new mandates that were ratified through these elections.

Mr KILIÇ (*Turkey*) – I would like to stress that the Turkish presidential and general elections were conducted in a free and fair manner, whereby the Turkish authorities took all due measures to ensure that the rights of all Turkish citizens were upheld.

I would also like to address some issues mentioned by the rapporteur. The allegations that the presidential system provided the president with unlimited power and reduced the parliament's authority do not reflect the truth. The 'Presidential Government System' is a democratic regime where the powers of the legislative are enhanced. The president constitutes the executive branch and the parliament is the sole legislative authority.

The state of emergency, as applied in Turkey, is a common legal instrument regulated in our constitution and also in international legal norms, including the European Convention on Human Rights. The purpose of declaring a state of emergency in the aftermath of the coup attempt was to take necessary measures against terrorist threats. There are necessary safeguards to make sure that fundamental rights and freedoms are respected and protected during a state of emergency in our legal system. I would also like to remind you that elections have been held under a state of emergency in other European countries.

Freedom of expression and the right to receive and impart information are guaranteed in our laws. In this context, the opinions of all candidates and parties were reflected in all media instruments and social media.

As for the arguments about the convicted or detained politicians and journalists, I need to point out that these legal actions were taken by the independent judiciary of Turkey on charges of committing terrorist crimes. Such measures are vital for the sake of preserving a democratic society and the rule of law.

In Turkish election law, there is no restriction on who observes elections, therefore the law does not specify observer accreditation. All citizens in Turkey, as well as the representatives of political parties, have the right to observe polling stations during the voting and counting process. International observers were welcomed and all necessary measures were taken to ease their work, except in the case of some people with known links to terrorist organisations who could not have been impartial observers.

Mr SIRAKAYA (*Turkey*) – I would like to remind you that Turkey has a long tradition of conducting elections. The first general election in our country was held in 1876 and since then the peaceful transfer of political power through the choice of people in fair elections has occurred countless times. Questioning the legitimacy of elections has never been at the top of the political agenda of our democracy.

The enthusiasm and excitement felt by all candidates, political parties and citizens with respect to the elections could be seen during the campaign process. The politics and the elections were the main topics of conversation among our citizens. The level of participation was high, as always. These are concrete manifestations of the Turkish citizens' firm belief in the legitimacy and fairness of elections.

I welcome the generally positive assessments of the voting process by the international observer missions. However, I have to admit that the report fails to take into account the serious security threats that our country and citizens face when examining the presence of security officers in polling stations. It should be emphasised that terrorist organisations intensified their efforts to sabotage the election process and jeopardise the security of the elections. I would like to remind you that Turkish security officers arrested 14 Daesh terrorists planning an attack on election day two days before the 24 June elections. It is the administration's fundamental duty to ensure that the democratic will of our citizens is properly reflected in the polls. The report would have been more accurate if it had strongly stressed that the security officers were present in the polls to protect the lives and the right to vote of our citizens.

To conclude, I would like to reiterate that the 24 June elections in Turkey were held in a transparent, free, pluralist and fair manner in accordance with international standards.