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EXTRA-TERRITORIAL VOTING IN TURKEY: lessons learnt

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For the first time in history, on 10 August 2014, the president of Turkey has been elected by the citizens rather than by the Members of the Parliament. This means the election results were determined by a pool of more than 55 million voters, about 5 per cent of them were citizens living abroad. This corresponds to near 2.8 million voters. This is a significant number. Firstly because voters could potentially have a substantial influence on the results of the elections. But secondly, because this large number illustrates why extraterritorial voting is a right to be taken into account. Even if the voting turnout was very low, it was a good exercise to reflect on the challenges of external voting and to discuss the ways to enhance participation in the next elections.

Before assessing to what extent this right has been used, let's have a quick look at the history of extra-territorial voting rights in Turkey. Although officially all citizens have the right to vote, until recently special arrangements have been very limited for emigrant voting. For a long time, the only possibility for Turkish residents in foreign countries to participate in national elections was to vote at national exit points 30 days prior to the election.

Gradually though some changes were made about emigrants' voting rights. Most importantly, in 2008 law (No. 5749) has been accommodated to facilitate emigrant voting from abroad in general elections, presidential elections, and referenda in Turkey. Besides, according to the *Fundamental Principles of Elections and Voters Law (1961)*, Turkish citizens have the right to vote by regular mail, at the borders, at the consulates abroad and electronically. With the change approved in 2012, Turkish citizens could vote not only at the borders at entry or exit, but during their stay in Turkey 38 days prior to the Election Day. They were also given the opportunity to use any type of ID that includes their citizenship number.

But until this summer, even if rights were there, in practice voting facilitations remained very limited. It has been difficult to set up ballot boxes in public spaces in destination countries especially with a large Turkish population, and maintain security of mail ballots.

2014 Presidential Elections were the first attempt to change the current situation and make it significantly easier as many emigrants as possible to vote. The high expectation turnout rate was about 17-18 per cent.

Emigrants could vote in more than fifty countries, either at consulates or in rented areas (schools, stadiums, and fairgrounds) where voting stations were established temporarily. For instance, Supreme Electoral Council rented the Berlin Olympic Stadium to turn it into a voting station for the four days during which emigrants could vote. In total, there were 4,128 voting stations in 54 countries.

The main question now is: what was the turnout rate given the new facilitations? Well, the results doesn't look so positive. Compared to the total number of voters of about 2,8 million people, only 230 thousand emigrants actually voted. This means that the turnout rate stayed at 8.32 per cent. The turnout rate in the US was slightly higher than other countries with 11.8 per cent (10,376 votes), and in Germany the rate remained below average with 8.15 per cent (111,933). Besides question the overall low rate of turnout, it would actually be interesting to investigate whether this relative difference can be explained by the socioeconomic background of migrants in the two destination countries as it is considered to be a strong explanatory factor. Considering that the Turkish emigrants in the US tend to be more highly educated, they may be more likely to vote than Turkish emigrants in Germany who are more likely to come from lower socioeconomic background. A more thorough mapping of external voting in this regard could be very interesting.

Another point for discussion is the overall turnout rate. One may say that it is not surprising that citizens living abroad are less likely to vote and that the turnout rate is significantly lower than that of the citizens in the country (74.1%). In a previous study, Carlos Navarro Fierro, Isabel Morales and Maria Gratschew have attempted to look at external voting and mapped the turnout rates in various countries. They have concluded that it can be considered as a general trend that migrants' external voting is almost always lower than in-country voting. A unique exception to high external voter turnout is Bosnia and Herzegovina where 80 per cent of citizens living abroad are registered to vote. In Spain for instance, in 2004 general elections, in-country voter turnout was 75 per cent compared to 30 per cent external voting. Even in Brazil, only about half of voters living abroad have actually voted even if voting is compulsory for citizens who are (temporarily or permanent) abroad.

While these examples justify the Turkish situation to a certain extent, it is important to realize that external voting turnout rate in Turkey is significantly lower than many other countries and the gap is huge in relation to in-country voter turnout (74.1% versus 8.3 %). it would be helpful to identify what the problems have been to cause such a low turnout rate, and discuss what can be learned from other country practices.

Most of the news published before and after the elections discussed that even if facilitations were put in place, various practical factors made the procedure to vote quite troublesome for many migrants. Notably, it seems that most of the emigrants were not well informed about the process of voting. First of all, they had to register their addresses at the embassies or consulates in their cities of residence. Without registration, they were not allowed to make an appointment to vote at a specific date and time. And even among those who knew that they were supposed to register, many complaints were made about the mistakes with registries and the difficulties of the website of Supreme Electoral Council. Because of such problems, many migrants seem to have missed the final date to register and make an appointment. Besides, it was difficult for many emigrants to make an appointment as the only way to make one was online. And when it was finally achieved, some emigrants were given appointments at voting stations that were far from their city of residence.

One way to solve these problems could be to organize activities to share knowledge with countries which are successful at integrating their migrants in the elections even when they are abroad. Additionally to this, it might also help to engage more the civil society to inform better the electorates about the procedures. It seems that the efforts of politicians from various parties to reach the electorate abroad remained limited. And last but not least, as Michael Collyer summarizes when discussing the understandable challenges of implementing extraterritorial voting, it is important to approach external voting as an integral part of development of democracy in Turkey in general: "New systems need to take into account various competing objectives simultaneously, such as guaranteeing universal suffrage, maintaining the rule of law, increasing political participation, improving the democratic system and consolidating the development of democracy".

While Turkey seems to have a long way to go, there is no reason to believe that external voting can not be improved if efforts are made in the near future in a well-organized systematic way to reach out the versatile group of Turkish emigrants living abroad.