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## TURKISH EXPATS AND THEIR POLITICAL PARTICIPATION ABROAD: A RIGHT WITH LIMITS?

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**T**he diplomatic conflict between Turkey and various European Union governments over the refusal of the latter to allow the political mobilisation of Turkish expatriates in their territories, citing security issues, means we must consider the limits on voting abroad. Though overseas voting has become an important democratic practice for the vast majority of countries, whether destination countries support it or not should be resolved diligently and based on objective criteria, once the rules of the game have been established. Similarly, the transfer of sovereignty that means political parties or governments can campaign in the territory of another country should be guided by a basic rationale: democracy.

Immigrants abroad keep up a constant relationship with their countries of origin in highly diverse ways: from continual communication with relatives via the internet to sending remittances and political participation through formal acts such as voting and less formal ones such as actively participating in social movements. Connections of these kinds are supported by the reception countries in which the immigrants live. When it comes to political participation abroad, it has become common practice for the different levels of government (national, regional and local) in destination countries to provide spaces and guarantee safety during electoral campaigns or on the days elections are held in countries of origin. A significant example is the mobilisation that occurs in Spain during Latin American elections (among which those of Ecuador and Peru stand out).

The right to vote from abroad, demanded for many years, has been a key advance for Western democracies and has been spreading from country to country over the past ten years. For citizens living in a third country, keeping their right to vote and thereby to decide what happens in their country of origin has become a basic condition for preserving one of the pillars of democracy: the right of all citizens to choose their leaders. Most democratic countries have therefore sought to guarantee it for their citizens abroad while facilitating its development in their own countries when it comes to third-country elections.

With the above in mind, questions arise about the diplomatic conflict unleashed between Turkey and various European Union countries (above all Germany, Austria and the Netherlands, but also Sweden and Denmark) around the constitution-

al referendum to be held on April 16th and the Turkish government's campaign to mobilise its electorate abroad in favour of a "yes" vote. What should the basic premises be for permitting and ensuring protection for other countries' electoral campaigns? Is it legitimate for democratic countries to refuse them support by invoking security issues alone? As we have said, the democratic framework should be the basis of justifying this decision. Hence third countries should support the electoral campaigns of other countries in their territories as long as minimum democratic standards are guaranteed. Such requirements may be based on the most minimal definition of democracy, as proposed by Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheibub and Limongi (2000),<sup>1</sup> which maintains that more than one option must exist (i.e. more than one party in the case of general elections). Or they may be based upon more extensive definitions, such as that of Robert A. Dahl's polyarchy (1989),<sup>2</sup> one of the premises of which is that voters must have equal information about the different alternatives presented to them. This means that the mechanisms for accessing information channels must be guaranteed for all political options.

This last framework begs the question: does the referendum proposed by the Turkish government meet these conditions? If the answer is no, the EU countries must unite in refusing to support the mobilisation of the vote abroad and seek to open, whenever possible, the channels that permit compliance with the democratic premises mentioned above, such as, for example, creating ways to mobilise the opposition. If the answer is yes then refusing to provide support would hinder more than 3 million Turks from fully exercising their right to vote in elections.

The chance to vote abroad is a fundamental political right and blocking the channels of its maximum exercise seems inappropriate in a democratic setting. That said, the need to establish limits that require at least a prerequisite level of political contestation seems clear. The very rules that establish the definition of a democracy are those that should also define whether interference and transferring sovereignty from one country to another is legitimate, especially at times of elections. The European Union should consider taking a decision, agreed in the EU framework, to regulate what may be supported and what may not based on a definition of democracy. That decision taken, it should be applied to all other cases without exception.

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1. Przeworski, A., Alvarez, M., Cheibub, J.A., and Limongi, F. *Democracy and development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.  
2. Dahl, R. A. *Democracy and its critics*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.