

1431st meeting of the Ministers' Deputies - Strasbourg, France

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Mr President,

Madame Secretary General,

Ambassadors,

The war in Ukraine has been raging for more than a month now and has positioned itself at the top of our concerns and political agendas.

The Congress, like the rest of this Organisation, is mobilised to help Ukraine, its authorities and its people. At our March session, we unanimously adopted a declaration building on the one adopted few weeks before by our Bureau.

In its Declaration, the Congress calls on Russia to cease the war immediately and unconditionally, stop the bombing of civilian infrastructures and residential areas, ensure humanitarian corridors for safe evacuation of civilians, stop human rights and humanitarian law violations, and withdraw its troops.

In this context, the Congress also recognises the key role of local and regional authorities in addressing the disastrous humanitarian consequences faced by citizens, and condemns the intimidation, abduction and killing of local and regional elected representatives in Ukraine.

Two weeks ago, we had been informed about the disappearance of three mayors.

In the meanwhile, the number of abductions of mayors and other local elected officials has dramatically increased, and I should like to refer you to my statement last week concerning this very matter.

These last days while Russian troops are retreating from the villages and cities around Kyiv, in Boucha or Irpyn, they are leaving behind evidence of what appears to be deliberate killings of civilians.

Mayors have been reportedly killed in Hostomel, Motyzhyn and Kyiv oblast, mayors killed for having refused to cooperate with the Russian troops and ensure full support to the war.

I condemn in the strongest terms possible the brutal murders of civilians and their elected representatives. I will issue a statement today to denounce these barbarian practices which are blatant breaches of the rules of democracy, international law and fundamental human rights.

In Mariupol, Kherson, Zaporizhya, Mykolaiv and Luhansk oblasts, “so-called mayors” were appointed in replacement of the elected mayors. I condemn the abduction and intimidation of mayors and councillors and I demand the release and the reinstatement of the mayors democratically elected by the Ukrainian citizens. We should never forget that mayors, local elected representatives and civil servants play a key role in addressing the daily challenges of citizens in their cities, towns, and villages. They are by their side, on the frontline and do their best to bring them safety and lessen their hardship, but also provide essential services. And this is exactly why they are being targeted by the aggressor.

As we see it in Ukraine today and, given the challenges we see in our societies, prevention is very much needed; prevention against autocratic aspirations, prevention against threats to minorities and different opinions, prevention in favour of pluralistic democratic societies, which grow from the grassroots, and which build up sustainable societies and democratic institutions at national level.

During our last session in March, we could hear about the situation in Ukraine from the Minister for Communities and Territories Development Oleksiy CHERNYSHOV, the Mayor of Kyiv, Vitali KLICHKO and the Mayor of Mykolaiv Oleksandr SENKEVYCH.

We also heard powerful testimonies from the members of the Ukrainian delegation to the Congress who attended in person after a long and difficult journey to Strasbourg, and online from mayors serving on the ground in their cities.

They cried for help and the Congress members stand fully united in their resolute support and solidarity with their Ukrainian counterparts.

We are facilitating the exchange of experience between local elected representatives on how to manage a city in times of crisis and provide its inhabitants with the basic services they urgently need.

We are also mobilising our networks to provide support to Ukraine in these difficult times.

We have organised several meetings of European associations of local and regional authorities with the Association of Ukrainian Cities to exchange information and promote co-operation and concrete aid.

We are pursuing in the same vein with the European Committee of the Regions, and I spoke in a meeting on Ukraine last week, in which the European Commissioner for Home Affairs, Ylva JOHANSSON, also participated.

We have also sponsored a city-to-city online help platform, at the initiative of the mayor of Sindelfingen in Germany and president of the Chamber of Local Authorities of the Congress to help local and regional authorities throughout Europe match the material and logistical needs of Ukrainian local authorities.

The platform is called “cities 4 cities” and was officially launched last week together with the distinguished Ambassador of Ukraine to the Council of Europe.

I encourage you to promote its use at domestic level.

All information is available at the Congress website.

Dear Ambassadors,

The war in Ukraine has brutally reminded us that nothing should be taken for granted.

It has also reminded us of the crucial importance of the values on which this Organisation is built: human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

The Congress will continue to promote and defend the values of the Council of Europe at each level of governance, making our communities and society stronger.

We have a tangible contribution to make in this respect as our last session showed again.

Our members engaged in concrete action, working directly with each other, with central governments, with citizens and civil society. They also addressed crucial challenges for our democratic societies such as fake news, disinformation, threats and violence on elected representatives.

Elected representatives, and this is particularly true at the local and regional level, are increasingly exposed to hate speech and online disinformation, but also verbal or physical threats.

This phenomenon has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Improving the quality of democracy is at the heart of our work, as we monitor the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government.

We resumed monitoring visits in the field as soon as the health situation made it possible and are deploying significant efforts to reduce the backlog in the regular monitoring cycle.

During the Congress sessions, when discussing the monitoring reports, representatives of the central governments take an active role in the debates.

With our cooperation activities we also contribute to promote and strengthen democracy and human rights in the field.

In Ukraine, we have been implementing cooperation activities since 2011 to strengthen local democracy and self-government.

Our ongoing project launched last year is on hold for obvious reasons, but I am convinced that the many reforms undertaken in Ukraine, especially on decentralisation and local empowerment, have contributed to the admirable resistance we can see today and have helped to cement the bonds between citizens and public authorities, who stand together today in the defence of their country.

I am glad that the Council of Europe and the Congress have contributed their part to making local and regional communities stronger in the face of the military aggression.

Mr President,

As per your Resolutions, our last session was held without the presence of the Russian delegation for the first time since the accession of this country to the Council of Europe.

The Council of Europe took the only possible and right decision which was to exclude the Russian Federation.

But the Council of Europe family must not be weakened by this decision for as I have said, the women, men and children living in European countries need the Council of Europe more than ever.

The Organisation's budget must be preserved in order to be relevant and achieve our objectives. We call on the remaining 46 States to ensure the budgetary sustainability of the Council of Europe by compensating the part no longer covered by the Russian Federation.

I welcome the statements in that direction by some member States including my own and together with the President of the Parliamentary Assembly we are mobilising our members in support of the budgetary sustainability of this Organisation.

Today, we should be motivated to invest more in the values that our Council of Europe stands for. Yet, over the last ten years we have seen a decrease in the available budget.

I do believe we need to recognize the value of the work done by our Council of Europe and the work done by our Congress especially and how much it is needed today.

I do plea that all of you should start this debate in your own country with the objective to improve considerably our action in this regard.

I would like to express my strong support to the proposal of the Secretary General and the President of PACE of holding a Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe.

Mr President, Secretary General, Ambassadors,

As I come to the conclusion of my statement, I should like to say that the war against Ukraine has underlined the importance of strong democratic communities and leaders at local, regional and national level within a democratic system based on the values of the Council of Europe.

The Congress will continue to play its part in the promotion and protection of those values from the unique position it has in the institutional architecture of the Organisation.

Thank you