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Dismissals of mayors in Türkiye

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Draft declaration (for vote) 2

¹ L: Chamber of Local Authorities / R: Chamber of Regions.
EPP/CCE: European People's Party Group in the Congress.
SOC/G/PD: Group of Socialists, Greens and Progressive Democrats.
ILDG: Independent Liberal and Democratic Group.
ECR: European Conservatives and Reformists Group.
NR: Members not belonging to a political group of the Congress.

DRAFT DECLARATION²

1. The Congress recalls that the national authorities of Türkiye, one of the founding members of the Council of Europe, recommitted to Council of Europe values in the Reykjavik Declaration (2023). The Declaration was endorsed by all member States and includes Appendix III “the Reykjavik Principles for Democracy”, which applies to all levels of government and states: “We will meet our obligations under international law. We will prevent and resist democratic backsliding on our continent [...] by enhancing our shared commitments as member States of the Council of Europe”.

2. The Congress expresses deep concern over clear signs of degradation of the working conditions of local and regional elected representatives and the weakening of fundamental freedoms and the rule of law in Türkiye, marked by an acceleration of the dismissals, arrests and prosecutions of opposition mayors on grounds of terrorism and corruption. The Congress has repeatedly condemned the practice of dismissals of elected mayors and the appointment of trustees since 2016, calling for its abolition, as it runs counter to the European Charter of Local Self-Government (ETS No. 122), ratified by all member States of the Council of Europe, including by Türkiye in 1992.

3. On 19 March 2025, Ekrem İmamoğlu, Mayor of the Metropolitan Municipality of Istanbul and President of the Union of Municipalities of Türkiye (UMT), was arrested alongside 106 people, including the district mayors of Şişli and Beylikdüzü and other local officials, media and business leaders. Earlier in 2025, the deputy district mayors of two other districts of Istanbul, Kartal and Ataşehir, had also been arrested with other officials.

4. Reacting to Mayor İmamoğlu’s custody, the Congress strongly condemned his arrest on 19 March and took the view that his case bore all the hallmarks of political pressure on a figure considered as one of the main candidates in forthcoming presidential elections. In three separate elections observed by the Congress, the citizens of Istanbul have democratically elected Mr İmamoğlu. According to the European Court of Human Rights, while freedom of expression is important for everybody, it is especially so for democratically elected representatives, notably if from the opposition. They represent their electorate, draw attention to their preoccupations and defend their interests.

5. The Congress considers that the relentless campaign of judicial harrassment targeting Mr İmamoğlu since his first election in 2019, and increasingly since 2022, has been used to restrict his right to stand for elections. This culminated after 18 March 2025 with the sudden annulment of his university degree, a pre-condition to run for presidential elections, and the conditions of his arrest on 19 March, just four days before the presidential primary election of his party (CHP), the main opposition party, which are matters of grave concern. On 23 March, Mr İmamoğlu was placed in pre-trial detention on charges of leading a criminal organisation, which the Congress President qualified as an assault on democracy as the timing of these actions put into question the credibility of the charges brought against the mayor.

6. In addition, as of 24 March 2025, thirteen mayors, including one Congress member, have been dismissed and replaced by trustees and over four million citizens now live in municipalities governed by appointed administrators. The arrest of Mr İmamoğlu runs the risk of the more than 16 million citizens of the largest municipality in Europe being administered by a non-elected administrator.

7. Furthermore, the Congress highlights that freedom of expression and assembly have suffered from extensive restrictions over the last few months in the country. In particular, the Congress condemns the recourse to blanket bans of public demonstrations, as used in municipalities where mayors were removed or arrested, including Istanbul, as well as the increased repression of dissenting voices in the media and political spheres and restrictions on access to social media.

8. As a result, the Congress considers that the above recent events are further damaging local democracy and that the country is currently deviating from democratic norms and standards. Such arrests and dismissals of elected representatives from opposition parties and their replacement by trustees, as well as the silencing of dissenting voices, have become commonplace. It is beyond reasonable doubt that these events have the ultimate purpose of stifling pluralism and limiting freedom of political debate, which is at the very core of the concept of a democratic society. Democratic

² Adopted by the Bureau at its 64th meeting on 24 March 2025.

standards, upheld by the European Court of Human Rights, dictate that such cases must be handled with extreme care.

9. Against this backdrop and bearing in mind past Congress recommendations, the Congress reiterates that the right of voters to express their opinions and choose their representatives is fundamental and genuinely democratic elections mean respecting the will of the people and providing equal opportunities to all candidates regardless of their political affiliation.

10. The Congress also considers that the right to free elections, as enshrined in Article 3 of Protocol No.1 to the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 9), should be extended to all types of elections and referendums in order to guarantee fundamental protections for candidates and voters alike, as these elections also represent an essential component of democracy in Europe.

11. The Congress reaffirms that local and regional authorities are key in upholding and defending democracy, human rights and rule of law, not only within their communities, but as part of the system of checks and balances which represents the backbone of a genuine pluralistic democracy. It underlines that the right of local authorities to freely exercise self-government without fear of persecution or retaliation must be guaranteed regardless of the political views of their leaders and representatives.

12. Local authorities must not be put in a position when they are required by law to violate human rights and fundamental freedoms. The Congress reaffirms that effective protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, must be guaranteed.

13. In the light of the above, the Congress calls on the Turkish authorities to:

a. implement Congress Recommendation 519 (2024) “Local elections in Türkiye” and the 2020 Venice Commission Opinion on the replacement of elected candidates and mayors (CDL-AD(2020)011), and abolish the practice of dismissing mayors and appointing trustees;

b. put an end to overly broad limitations on the freedoms of assembly and expression, which curb political pluralism, infringe human rights and undermine the foundations of democracy and are detrimental to local self-government in Türkiye;

c. stop prosecuting and detaining elected representatives from opposition parties based on a broad interpretation and application of the offences of terrorism or defamation, in particular in electoral contexts;

d. in line with the caselaw of the European Court of Human Rights, release the current detainees, including Mayor İmamoğlu, guarantee the rights of the defence and refrain from making extensive use of pre-trial detention when clear evidence of reasonable suspicion is missing.

14. The Congress underlines its commitment to pursuing constructive political dialogue with the authorities of Türkiye, notably in the framework of the post-monitoring roadmap and the organisation of a visit of the leadership of the Congress and the co-rapporteurs on the situation of local democracy in Türkiye.

15. Given the magnitude of current concerns, the Congress will organise a fact-finding visit to Türkiye as soon as possible, seeking face-to-face meetings with mayors who have been detained, including Mayor Imamoglu, and to address the urgent concerns outlined in this Declaration.