

War in Ukraine: the Congress rallies around the Ukrainians and Russian dissidents

The debate on Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine at the 45th session of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities culminated in the adoption of a Resolution on the plight of anti-war political activists and prisoners of conscience in Russia and in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine. After being briefed on the steps involved in setting up a Register of Damage caused to Ukraine and its population by Russian aggression, delegates expressed their determination to provide assistance and expertise to ensure its success.

Reaffirming the Council of Europe's unwavering support for Ukraine, which has been under unjust and brutal attack from the Russian Federation since 22 February 2022, was one of the priorities of the 4th Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe in Reykjavík in May 2023. At this Summit, the Council of Europe once again played a pioneering role, launching the Register of Damage caused to Ukraine by Russian aggression. The Register represents a major step forward in the fight against Russian impunity, and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities is called upon to contribute to it.

During the plenary debate on 24 October 2023, the Register was presented to Congress members by Ambassador Tanja GONGGRIJP, Vice-Chair of the Conference of Participants of the Register, to which 43 countries and the European Union have signed up. The main aim of the Register is to “collect all information and claims for compensation relating to damage caused by Russia on Ukrainian territory,” said Ms GONGGRIJP. “It will not only bring together the claims, but will also verify their eligibility by gathering a series of proofs. And although the Register in no way constitutes a legal compensation mechanism, it will prepare the ground so that such a mechanism can be created quickly”.

During the debate, delegates stressed the crucial role of local and regional authorities in Ukraine in presenting this mechanism to the public and helping citizens to use the Register's digital platform, which will be launched in spring 2024. Welcomed at the start of the session by Alexis Kuleba, a member of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's cabinet, who stressed the importance of democratic decentralisation and the front-line work of local and regional authorities, members of the Congress expressed their willingness to assist their Ukrainian colleagues with logistical and financial support and expertise. Their support will help to ensure that the Register documents as many viable claims as

possible, including in the field of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, directly related to Ukraine's national identity.

In the second part of the debate, rapporteur Leendert VERBEEK, Netherlands (SOC/G/PD), presented Congress delegates with the draft Resolution on the plight of anti-war political activists and prisoners of conscience in Russia, the title of which was amended by adding “the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine”.

The fact is that Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has gone hand in hand with a crackdown on opposition and civil society voices challenging the Russian government's policies. Those who have spoken out against the war are being prosecuted under new legislation passed in March 2022 that makes it a criminal offence to “discredit” and “knowingly disseminate false information” about the Russian armed forces. The Congress condemns the escalation of this repression and calls for all legislation incompatible with the right to freedom of expression to be repealed.

During the debate, the voices declared their opposition to the adoption of the Resolution, arguing that it diverts attention from Ukrainian victims to victims of the Russian regime.

The Congress nevertheless voted to adopt the Resolution with a series of amendments focusing on Ukrainian victims living in “the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine”.

“We understand the emotion and distress of our Ukrainian colleagues,” replied rapporteur Leendert Verbeek, “but I believe that we have sufficiently demonstrated our unconditional support for Ukraine over the past 18 months. The Resolution in no way alters that commitment. It was suggested to the Congress by the Summit of Heads of State in Reykjavík, who insisted on the need to support civil society and the opposition in Russia in order to resolve the situation in favour of Ukraine as quickly as possible”.