

On 27 March, during the 48th session of the Congress, the debate under urgent procedure on “Dismissals of mayors in Türkiye” led to the adoption of a declaration calling on Türkiye to abolish the practice of dismissing mayors and to release the current detainees, including Mayor İmamoğlu of Istanbul and the mayor of Van, a Congress member.

The heated debate under urgent procedure on “Dismissals of mayors in Türkiye” pitted some Turkish representatives from the governing party against their opposition colleagues in the chamber, who were supported by all the other Congress members taking part in the debate in condemning the country’s gradual departure from the principles of the rule of law, democracy and human rights.

The Congress Bureau co-rapporteur behind the draft declaration, David Eray (Switzerland, R, EPP/CCE), pointed out that a year earlier the Congress had drawn up a report and draft roadmap to address problems of local democracy in Türkiye but that the Turkish authorities had still not followed up or responded to the Congress’s proposed roadmap. This was one of the reasons why it had not been possible to include the position of the Turkish authorities in the declaration put to the vote, he said, in response to Turkish Congress members who took the floor to condemn “an overly subjective position adopted in the declaration” that did not take account of the views of the current government.

David Eray said that it was unfortunate that the principles on which Kemal Atatürk had founded the Turkish Republic were being jeopardised by the current government, which had seriously undermined local democracy and human rights by dismissing the Mayor of Istanbul. Mr İmamoğlu, who had been elected by millions of voters, had been stripped of his university degree and placed in pre-trial detention for leading a criminal organisation. The Congress President had described these moves as an assault on democracy as the timing chosen – just before the vote to select Mr İmamoğlu as candidate for the next presidential elections – called into question the credibility of the charges brought against him.

“Türkiye must change course quickly!” said the co-rapporteur, Bryony Rudkin, (United Kingdom, L, SOC/G/PD), who also referred to the arrest of the Congress member, Abdullah Zeydan, Mayor of Van, who had been put on trial in Diyarbakir on the charge of co-operating with terrorist organisations.

A Turkish delegate urged the Council of Europe and its member states to take a hard line on violations of democratic and human rights in Türkiye and not give in to security blackmail. Delegates from all over Europe voiced support for this point of view and expressed grave concern about the clear signs of deterioration in the working conditions of local and regional elected representatives and the weakening of fundamental freedoms and the rule of law in Türkiye. Swedish member Jelena Drenjanin (EPP/CCE) stressed that the way in which the current Turkish government was treating the political opposition threatened Türkiye’s future in Europe and its status as a candidate for EU membership.

Referring in particular to the arrest of the Mayor of Van, Abdullah Zeydan, a Turkish member indignantly asked whether the rape of hundreds of women and the abduction of children in

the Diyarbakir region were not enough for members to understand the real threat posed by terrorist organisations in Türkiye and those who collaborated with them. In reply, a number of participants said that exploiting the terrorist threat argument was a crude attempt to use security issues to fight the opposition. Bernd Vöhringer (Germany, EPP/CCE) and other speakers said that since over a hundred mayors had been dismissed since 1994, it was impossible not to see that as the confirmation of a trend towards crushing political opposition in Türkiye.

Turkish youth delegate Enes Hocaogullari received a standing ovation after recounting his personal experience of demonstrations in the streets of Istanbul and the brutal treatment suffered by demonstrators at the hands of the police. "Invest in Turkish young people to invest in democracy in Europe," he told the Congress members.

The declaration adopted by an overwhelming majority of the delegates states that 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 İmamoğlu and the mayor of Van, a Congress member, and to address the urgent concerns regarding violations of democratic rules and human rights in Türkiye.