

50th SESSION OF THE CONGRESS: THE SAFETY OF LOCAL ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES CENTRAL TO THE NEW DEMOCRATIC PACT FOR EUROPE

In Strasbourg on 1 April, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe held a key debate on an issue that has now become critical for European democracy: the safety of local and regional elected representatives. Given the rise in all forms of violence, the Congress adopted a recommendation and a resolution calling on member states to strengthen their legal frameworks, provide better protection for elected representatives and improve data collection, while promoting diversity, respect and tolerance in political life.

In connection with the New Democratic Pact for Europe launched following the Reykjavik Summit in 2023, members discussed a report highlighting a worrying deterioration in the conditions under which local and regional mandates are carried out. With threats, online harassment and physical attacks, local elected representatives are facing increasing pressure that is undermining their commitment.

Eider Inunciaga Serna, Councillor at Bilbao City Council, warned of daily violence that was undermining democratic trust and prompting many elected representatives to resign from office. She highlighted the recent adoption in Bilbao of a protocol aimed at protecting the most vulnerable elected representatives, in particular women, LGBT+ people and minorities. Stressing the exacerbating role of disinformation, she also described the establishment of a European Observatory for the Defence of Democracy at Local Level, developed in partnership with the City of Bilbao, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions and Bocconi University. This tool aimed to produce comparable data at European level, drawing on administrative and police sources as well as firsthand accounts, in order to develop practical solutions and strengthen the protection of elected representatives, under an approach based on the principle of shared responsibility.

Co-rapporteur Bryony Rudkin (United Kingdom, SOC/G/PD) issued a blunt warning: “Violence against local elected representatives is no longer a marginal issue; it poses a direct threat to our democracies.” She illustrated this disturbing trend with a recent incident in Strasbourg, where a candidate in the local elections was assaulted and threatened in front of her children while putting up posters. This was a scene that highlighted an increasingly hostile climate towards those involved in local politics. Pointing out that being close to the public left elected representatives more vulnerable, she called for a collective response based on prevention, documentation and protection. In particular, the resolution adopted proposes the establishment of a monitoring mechanism to analyse the trends in and forms of such violence.

Her co-rapporteur, Katrien Partyka (Belgium, EPP/ECC), pointed out that, despite already alarming figures, the actual extent of violence was still largely underestimated. The attacks had a direct impact on the work, personal lives and health of elected representatives. Women

and people from minority backgrounds were particularly targeted, undermining the diversity and representativeness of institutions. There was a need for reliable data to adapt public policies and boost protective measures, in particular along the lines of the French law of 2024 aimed at better protecting mayors. It was also important to support victims, both psychologically and legally, and to establish a culture of zero tolerance towards toxic behaviour, including within the political arena and more broadly.

The discussions were enriched by numerous accounts from European elected representatives. In Spain, some local council meetings are now held under close police protection. In the United Kingdom, several elected officials have reported incidents involving their families. In Austria, a Congress member said she had been subjected to anonymous attacks that affected her ability to work. Nikola Jovanovic, the mayor of Budva in Montenegro, spoke out about a physical assault he had suffered, warning of the impunity enjoyed by organised crime groups, which were infiltrating the structures of power and exerting pressure on political representatives.

Several best practices were also presented, including the establishment of specialised administrative and police units in the United Kingdom and North Rhine-Westphalia, the passage of legislation against deepfakes in Austria and initiatives in the Netherlands to engage in dialogue with perpetrators of harassment in order to restore trust. These approaches were backed up by strengthening of data collection tools, legal responses and partnerships with civil society.

At the end of the debate, the Congress reaffirmed its commitment to protecting local elected representatives, promoting diversity and inclusion and ensuring that their safety was a shared responsibility between member states, local authorities and European institutions. Protocols, monitoring mechanisms, codes of conduct and co-operation initiatives were all tools designed to ensure that local democracy could continue to function freely. The message was crystal clear: protecting local elected representatives meant protecting democracy itself.