European mayors travel to Istanbul in defence of local democracy

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A delegation of European mayors has travelled to Istanbul this week as part of a mission organised by Eurocities to express solidarity with Turkish local leaders, in particular Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu of Istanbul, and reaffirm a shared commitment to democratic governance, local autonomy, and the rule of law.

Led by Jaume Collboni, Vice President of Eurocities and Mayor of Barcelona, the delegation included local leaders from Athens, Brescia, Budapest, Sofia, Timisoara, Utrecht and Zagreb. Over two days, the mayors met with Acting Mayor of Istanbul Nuri Aslan, several mayors from Turkey and Ekrem İmamoğlu's wife Dilek Kaya İmamoğlu, to understand current developments regarding local democracy in Turkey.

In the City Hall and in front of Silivri Prison, where Istanbul's elected mayor, Ekrem İmamoğlu, remains imprisoned, they reiterated their request for the immediate release of Mayor Imamoglu and of the over twenty local leaders that have been imprisoned in Turkey.

The visit follows sustained concern over the deterioration of democratic norms in Turkey, marked by the detention of İmamoğlu in March 2025 and the subsequent arrests of numerous other mayors and local officials affiliated with the opposition. These developments have sparked widespread protest within Turkey and increasing alarm among international observers.

Speaking from his prison cell, Mayor İmamoğlu said

> We live in an era where children are killed in wars, innocent civilians are massacred, the press is silenced, opposition voices are stifled, and the judiciary is weaponised. In the face of this reality, we remind the world that democracy is not only a system of governance but the common conscience of humanity.

Speaking from before the walls of Silivri Prison Jaume Collboni, Vice President of Eurocities, Mayor of Barcelona and Head of Delegation, said:

> Behind these prison walls is Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu: a democratically elected leader unjustly imprisoned.
>
> We will continue to stand together, in solidarity with our colleague, Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu. His courage in defending democratic principles inspires us all,

On this occasion, the Mayor of Barcelona formally handed over a Special Democracy Award – previously announced at the Eurocities Annual Conference in Braga – to Dilek Kaya İmamoğlu in recognition of Mayor İmamoğlu's unwavering commitment to democratic values.

At a press briefing following the award ceremony, members of the delegation reaffirmed that their presence in Istanbul was not only a gesture of solidarity, but a call to uphold the democratic rights of elected representatives across Europe and beyond. The mission highlights the essential role that cities play in defending democracy from the ground up.

Nuri Aslan, Acting Mayor of Istanbul, said: "The support of many mayors from European cities, Members of the European Parliament, and political parties in European countries has been a great source of morale for us.

> However, the weak reactions of governments in Europe — the cradle of democracy and freedoms — driven by political calculations, are worrying.

Vassil Terziev, President of the B40 network and Mayor of Sofia, said:

> Supporting the Mayor of Istanbul means supporting the right of millions of people to have their voices heard. It is also a step towards Turkey's European future – a future built on democracy, justice, and the rule of law.

Sharon Dijksma, Mayor of Utrecht, said:

> When democracy is under threat, local leaders must stand together. We came to Istanbul not only to support Mayor

> Imamoğlu, but to support the principles he represents — justice, accountability, and respect for citizens' voices. And not only a mayor has been imprisoned but also a father and a husband. This is heartbreaking for his family.

The Eurocities network has consistently spoken out in defence of democratic values in Turkey, particularly since the politically motivated targeting of Mayor İmamoğlu began in 2022. The delegation's visit underscores Eurocities' continued commitment to supporting local leaders facing political pressure and to defending the integrity of local democracy.

The network is well placed to strengthen the cooperation between cities from Turkey and the rest of Europe. Eurocities is ready to work in concert with the EU institutions to safeguard democracy and the rule of law.

1. The Eurocities delegation included:

• Jaume Collboni, Mayor of Barcelona

• Haris Doukas, Mayor of Athens

• Gergely Karácsony, Mayor of Budapest

• Vassil Terziev, Mayor of Sofia

• Dominic Fritz, Mayor of Timisoara

• Sharon Dijksma, Mayor of Utrecht

• Tomislav Tomašević, Mayor of Zagreb

• Francesco Tomasini, Deputy Mayor of Brescia

2. Photos of the mission can be accessed on the Eurocities Flickr page; copyright is listed below each photo: Eurocities delegation to Istanbul, 27-28 August 2025 | Flickr

3. In March, more than eighty mayors — from Paris, Berlin, Amsterdam, Milan, Stockholm, Rome, and many more — signed a joint declaration denouncing the imprisonment of Mayor İmamoğlu: Mayors voice support for Ekrem İmamoğlu – Eurocities

4. On 23 March, days after Mayor İmamoğlu was arrested, 15.5 million Turkish citizens went to the primary election ballot boxes set up in all 81 provinces of Turkey and elected Ekrem İmamoğlu as the Presidential Candidate.

5. For further reading, please find here some previous actions undertaken by Eurocities:

• European cities highlight ongoing repression of elected officials in Turkey

• Democratic values at stake in Istanbul

• Cities gather in Istanbul for democracy

• Cities take the lead to strengthen democracy and innovation

6. Eurocities wants to make cities places where everyone can enjoy a good quality of life, can move around safely, access quality and inclusive public services and benefit from a healthy environment. We do this by networking over 200 larger European cities, which together represent some 150 million people across 39 countries, and by gathering evidence of how policy making impacts people to inspire other cities and EU decision makers.

Connect with us at www.eurocities.eu or by following our Bluesky, YouTube.

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