

Motion

Urgent motion on deepening democratic crisis and the systematic suppression of youth- led mobilisation in Türkiye

signed by: Belarusian National Youth
Council (RADA), Youth Organizations
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(GoFor)

Introduction

In recent months, Türkiye has witnessed an alarming acceleration in authoritarian practices that severely undermine democratic principles, human rights, and the rule of law. These developments have culminated in a systemic assault on youth-led civic and political engagement, most notably through the politically motivated arrest of İstanbul Metropolitan Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, the widespread imposition of government-appointed trustees in local governments and universities, and the violent suppression of peaceful demonstrations. As of May 2025, the İstanbul Mayor and Presidential Candidate Ekrem Imamoglu are still in prison and remain detained together with students and young people. There are many universities and local governments which remain under the siege of the government-appointed trustees. Peaceful youth protests are still being met with police brutality. Student Esila Ayik detained on April 9 2025 for carrying a banner during the peaceful demonstration, stays in detention by the decision of the court despite 135 pages of e-health records, medical reports, and the İstanbul Medical Chambers' opinion that she cannot stay in prison.

Young people in Türkiye—already confronting precarious socioeconomic conditions, political marginalisation, and institutionalised inequality—have emerged government-appointed as the vanguard of democratic resistance. Yet, their mobilisation has been met with unprecedented state violence, arbitrary detentions, and digital censorship.

Around the world, youth movements have consistently played a pivotal role in resisting authoritarian tendencies and defending democratic principles. In Serbia, young people mobilised in response to widespread corruption and governance failures, successfully galvanising public demand for accountability. In Belarus, youth were at the forefront of mass mobilisations following the 2020 presidential elections, widely criticized for lacking transparency and credibility, demanding electoral integrity and democratic reform. In Georgia, students and young people actively opposed legislation perceived to curtail media freedom and limit foreign-funded non-governmental organisations, which they view

as a threat to democratic pluralism. In Greece, youth protests have emerged in response to police violence and perceived impunity, raising broader concerns about state accountability and the erosion of civil liberties. These movements have shown that youth solidarity transcends borders and is a powerful force for change. Türkiye's youth are now facing a similar battle, and just like elsewhere, their resilience and determination will shape the state of democracy not only in the country but also in the world. Every struggle against authoritarianism at home echoes as a stand for democracy and freedom across the world.¹

As members of the European Youth Forum and as defenders of democratic values, it is our responsibility to respond urgently to this escalating crisis, stand in solidarity with Türkiye's youth, and demand accountability for the systematic repression of their fundamental rights. Authoritarianism knows no borders—neither should our resistance.

Background

a. Arrest of Ekrem İmamoğlu, the mayor of İstanbul Metropolitan Municipality

The detention and arrest of İstanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu and his aides have triggered nationwide protests, underscoring the escalating democratic crisis in Türkiye. İmamoğlu, a key opposition figure and a leading contender for the 2028 presidential elections, was taken into custody on politically motivated charges of corruption and alleged links to so-called 'terrorist organisations'—widely regarded as an attempt to sideline him from presidential elections. Prior to his detention, his university diploma was cancelled, furthering concerns over a systematic effort to discredit him and obstruct his candidacy. On March 23, a court ordered his arrest on financial crime charges while dropping accusations of links to so-called terrorist organisations.

b. Trustee appointments to local governments and universities

¹ European Commission. (2024). Türkiye 2024 report. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/turkiye-report-2024_en

As part of the same investigation, a government-appointed trustee was installed in Şişli, replacing the democratically elected mayor, Resul Emrah Şahan. In Beylikdüzü, Mayor Murat Çalık was removed from office, pending the appointment of a trustee. These measures align with a broader trend following the last local elections. In the context of İstanbul, government-appointed trustees have replaced elected mayors in several districts, including Esenyurt, Beşiktaş, and Beykoz, removing Ahmet Özer, Rıza Akpolat, and Alaattin Köşeler from office. This pattern extends beyond İstanbul, notably impacting Kurdish-majority provinces. On 4 November 2024, the Turkish government dismissed the elected mayors of Mardin, Batman, and Halfeti—Ahmet Türk, Gülistan Sönük, and Mehmet Karayılan, respectively—all members of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Equality and Democracy (DEM) Party. These officials were replaced with state-appointed trustees, a move justified by the government on the basis of alleged terrorism-related charges. Such actions undermine democratic processes and disproportionately target Kurdish political representation.

Trustee appointments to local governments have consistently and systematically targeted youth work as a first step in dismantling democratic local governance. In municipalities where trustees have been installed—particularly in Kurdish provinces and opposition-led districts—youth centres, participatory councils, and cultural spaces dedicated to young people have faced immediate defunding or closure. This deliberate defunding serves to suppress youth organising by removing institutional support structures, limiting access to public space, and weakening avenues for civic engagement. In many cases, trustees have replaced inclusive, rights-based programming with depoliticised or religiously oriented youth services, thereby further marginalising already vulnerable groups of young people and curtailing freedom of expression and assembly.

Similarly, universities have witnessed the politically motivated imposition of rectors, curtailing institutional autonomy and academic freedom. These appointments have resulted in the banning of student unions and the silencing of youth voices on campuses. The restriction of student protests, disciplinary actions against dissenting academics, and surveillance of youth organisations have created

a climate of fear and censorship within academic institutions.

These anti-democratic practices are not mere attacks on individual politicians or institutions but systematic assaults on democracy itself, sending a clear message that dissent towards the status quo will not be tolerated.

Youth mobilisation against the democratic crisis and authoritarian measures

Youth in Türkiye had already been confronting profound poverty under austerity policies, systematic discrimination against women and LGBTI+ communities and minorities, as well as the erosion of their right to vote through the imposition of government-appointed trustees. For a generation already burdened by economic hardship, disenfranchisement and systemic inequality, the arrest of İmamoğlu has come to symbolise the culmination of prolonged institutional disregard for democratic norms and fundamental rights.

In response, young people and university students have emerged as a central force in the nationwide mobilisation, advocating for democracy, justice, the rule of law, fundamental freedoms and socio-economic rights. From nearly every province across Türkiye, youth have taken to the streets in defence of such universal values, even in the face of disproportionate police force, arbitrary arrests, and ongoing repression. Within academic institutions, students have initiated coordinated boycotts, signalling a deliberate and collective refusal to accept the normalisation of democratic backsliding and calling for the restoration of civic and institutional accountability.

a. Police brutality, detentions and arrests targeting young people

Such responses from youth have met with the brutal crackdown on demonstrations, escalating to alarming levels, with reports of physical assault by law enforcement, excessive and disproportionate deployment of tear gas, use of pressured water mixed with tear gas, and plastic bullets deliberately aimed at critical zones of the body. Between March 19 and 23, during the violent crackdowns, a total of 1,133

individuals, the majority of whom are young people, have been taken into custody. These detentions have been accompanied by targeted police raids, disproportionately directed at youth who played an active role in the leadership of the protests. Among those detained were members of youth organisations, including several members of the National Youth Council of Türkiye (GoFor). During these detentions, there have been cases of invasive strip searches and sexual violence, particularly targeting young women. These acts constitute clear violations of fundamental human rights and international democratic norms, demonstrating the extent of state repression against peaceful dissent.

Notably, Esila Ayık, a 22-year-old university student, was arrested during the protests and remains in custody despite serious health concerns, including chronic heart and kidney conditions. Her detention has drawn attention from political leaders and human rights advocates, highlighting the broader implications of the government's response to youth-led demonstrations.

Another notable example is the ongoing prosecution of Cem Aydın, the President of the Republican People's Party (CHP) Youth Wing. Aydın faces charges of "insulting a public official due to their duty" and "targeting individuals involved in counter-terrorism efforts" following a social media post that he merely retweeted. The indictment seeks a prison sentence ranging from 2 years and 2 months to 5 years and 4 months, along with a political ban that would prohibit Aydın from holding public office or engaging in political activities. This case exemplifies the broader strategy of the Turkish government to silence organised youth opposition through legal intimidation. The pursuit of a political ban against a leading youth figure underscores the regime's intent to dismantle youth participation in democratic processes. Such actions not only violate individual rights but also erode the foundations of democratic engagement and pluralism in Türkiye.

b. Social media restrictions and bans

In a further attempt to curtail the freedom of association and expression among youth, access restrictions have been imposed in Türkiye on X (formerly Twitter), affecting accounts belonging to youth and women's organisations as well as independent media outlets.

Among those targeted were 53 youth organisations, whose accounts were silenced under Article 8/A of Law No. 5651, purportedly on the grounds of protecting national security and public order. As a result, access to information was unlawfully restricted for over 500,000 individuals, many of whom rely on these platforms for civic engagement, advocacy, and information sharing. These measures have been accompanied by bandwidth throttling, significantly impeding communication and coordination among youth organisations. Such actions represent a serious infringement of the rights to freedom of expression, access to information, and peaceful assembly, and stand in clear violation of Türkiye's obligations under international human rights law and democratic standards. These developments amount to an unlawful interference with young people's right to be informed and constitute a direct restriction of their freedoms of organisation and expression.

c. Punishing students by threatening their access to state-provided housing

In connection with the youth-led protests that began in March 2025, university students faced violations of their right to housing, particularly through punitive actions taken by state-run dormitories. At Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University, 11 students residing in KYK (Credit and Dormitories Institution) dormitories were subjected to disciplinary investigations; five of them were ultimately expelled from the dorms. The students reported being pressured by dormitory administrators to voluntarily withdraw their registrations, following their peaceful participation in demonstrations—an act protected under constitutional rights.

A similar incident occurred in Hatay, where Görkem Akşit, a student at Mustafa Kemal University, was expelled from a KYK dormitory after sharing a post in a private WhatsApp group related to the protests.

These actions illustrate the state's use of housing as a coercive tool to suppress dissent, particularly among youth. Punishing students by threatening or revoking their access to state-provided shelter in response to peaceful political participation constitutes a clear violation of both national legal protections and international human rights standards.

d. May Day demonstrations and subsequent detentions

In the days leading up to May Day, authorities conducted pre-emptive house raids across major cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir, detaining more than 150 members of youth organisations, trade unions, and leftist political groups. On 1 May 2025, Turkish authorities intensified their crackdown on peaceful demonstrations by detaining over 400 individuals in Istanbul. The police response was marked by excessive force, including the use of tear gas and physical assaults, particularly in the central districts of Beşiktaş and Şişli.

Key demands and calls to action

a. National level

We, the European Youth Forum, call the government of Türkiye to:

Immediately release detained young activists

We call for the immediate and unconditional release of all young people, students, and youth leaders who have been arbitrarily detained during the recent protests, including those held in connection with the May Day demonstrations.

Put an end to trustee appointments

We demand an immediate halt to the imposition of government-appointed trustees in municipalities and universities, which undermine democratic representation, youth participation, and institutional autonomy.

Restore democratic governance at local and university levels

We urge the reinstatement of all elected local officials and university leaders removed through undemocratic means, as well as the re-establishment of student unions and youth councils dissolved under trustee rule.

Respond and take action to key EU-level recommendations

We urge the Turkish authorities to take action in accordance with the recommendations highlighted in the latest reports of the European Commission¹ and the European Parliament² on Türkiye in order to implement democratic governance, and fundamental rights and freedoms.

Protect the freedom of expression and access to information

We demand the full restoration of access to digital platforms and social media accounts of youth and civil society organisations. All restrictions imposed under Article 8/A of Law No. 5651 must be repealed in accordance with international human rights standards.

b. International level

We, the European Youth Forum, call for:

Fact-finding visits by European institutions

We call on relevant European institutions—particularly the Council of Europe (PACE and Venice Commission)—to urgently conduct youth rights-focused fact-finding missions to Türkiye. These missions must include direct engagement with young people who have participated in demonstrations and faced detention or mistreatment.

International monitoring of legal proceedings

We request that the European institutions assign international observers to attend court hearings and monitor the legal processes involving young activists in Türkiye. European Youth Forum member organisations are encouraged to support this process and stand in solidarity with youth-led legal advocacy efforts in Türkiye.

International advocacy by member organisations

European Youth Forum member organisations are encouraged to prioritise the situation in Türkiye when addressing international advocacy agendas,

² European Parliament. (2025). Report on the 2023 and 2024 Commission reports on Türkiye. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-10-2025-0067_EN.html

and to actively raise awareness about the systematic suppression of youth rights in Türkiye.

Recognition and support for youth as democratic actors

We call on European institutions and international partners to publicly recognise youth in Türkiye as key defenders of democracy, and to support their work through effective advocacy, protection mechanisms, and long-term political engagement.



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