

RESOLUTION ON THE REPRESSION OF KURDISH LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN TÜRKIYE

The Assembly of Delegates of PEN International, meeting at its 88th annual Congress in Uppsala, Sweden, 27 September to 1 October 2022, is deeply concerned at the sustained repression of Kurdish culture, language, and identity in Türkiye, the impact of which is becoming more harrowing.

Although no official data exist, Kurdish people are estimated to make up over 20% of the population of Türkiye, where they have been facing severe discrimination on account of their culture, language, and identity.ⁱ Since the founding of the Republic of Türkiye in 1923, which enshrined a mono-cultural national identity, the country's large Kurdish minority has often been banned from expressing its culture and promoting its language. At various points in its history, Türkiye has enacted laws prohibiting the use of Kurdish language in public, forcing Kurdish people to abandon their language and speak Turkish instead.ⁱⁱ As a result, there has been significant conflict in Türkiye over Kurdish language rights. After the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, President Erdoğan loosened some of these restrictions, notably allowing the Kurdish language to be offered as an elective subject in schools.ⁱⁱⁱ Yet the repression of the Kurdish population has come back in full force since the breakdown of the peace process between the Turkish authorities and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in July 2015. Since then, the authorities have repeatedly cracked down on Kurdish literary and cultural symbols, language, and media outlets.^{iv}

Renewed violence after the end of the ceasefire has seen thousands killed and wounded in the Kurdish populated areas of Southeastern Türkiye. Scores of historical sites and buildings have been destroyed. No credible investigations into the massive destruction and serious rights violations committed have been conducted to date, thereby aggravating the situation.^v

Most pro Kurds and Kurdish language media outlets have been closed down.^{vi} Many Kurdish journalists are languishing behind bars on trumped-up terrorism charges, including news editor, reporter, and poet **Nedim Türfent** who notably experienced severe interpretation issues in

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court when trying to give evidence in his native Kurdish language.^{vii}

Writer and former co-chair of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), **Selahattin Demirtaş** remains behind bars, despite the European Court of Human Rights twice ruling for his immediate release.^{viii} The Turkish authorities continue to forcibly replace elected HDP local officials in the Kurdish populated towns and cities of Southeastern Türkiye, thus depriving voters of their elected representatives in parliament and local government.^{ix}

Language plays a vital role in relation to identity, communication, social integration, education, and development, yet education and teaching in Kurdish are still prohibited. Scores of Kurdish writers are being persecuted for their writings promoting Kurdish language and culture, including writer and Kurdish PEN member **Gülgeç Akdeniz** (pen name **Gulgeç Deryaspi**), who was sentenced to six years and three months in prison on bogus charges of 'membership of a terrorist organisation' in December 2020, and writer, poet, and Kurdish PEN member **Meral Doğan** (pen name **Meral Şimşek**) who was found guilty of 'making terrorist propaganda' and sentenced to one year and three months in prison in October 2021.^x

Kurdish people have the right to use their own language in public and in education and to receive information in their mother tongue. Their linguistic riches should be celebrated, not destroyed.

The Assembly of Delegates of PEN International calls on the authorities of Türkiye to:

- Immediately and unconditionally release Nedim Türfent and Selahattin Demirtaş, and all others who are imprisoned solely for having exercised their right to freedom of expression;
- End the prosecution and detention of writers and journalists on the basis of the content of their writing, including in support of Kurdish language and culture;
- Respect the right of Kurdish people to use and promote their own language and culture and to study in their mother tongue; specifically:

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- Allow the Kurdish language to be the language of education along with the Turkish language, to enjoy state grants and official promotion as it is a fundamental right for all individuals to learn and speak at the heart of their community – giving them life, language, culture, and identity;
- Promote translations of texts to and from Kurdish, especially great works from different cultures, as they represent an important element in the necessary process of greater understanding and respect amongst human beings;
- Respect Kurdish language and linguistic rights, including by withdrawing their reservation to Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and ratifying the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities;
- End the destruction of Kurdish culture and heritage and rebuild sites of cultural heritage;
- End the persecution of those who call for peace in the conflict between the Turkish authorities and the Kurdish population both within and outside of Türkiye.

ⁱ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Turkey: Situation of Kurds in western cities such as Ankara, Istanbul, Izmir, Konya and Mersin; resettlement to these cities (2009 - May 2012), 14 June 2012, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4feadc02.html>

ⁱⁱ Human Rights Watch, Restrictions on the use of the Kurdish language, 1999, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/turkey/turkey993-08.htm>

ⁱⁱⁱ BBC news, Kurdish can be taught in Turkey's schools, Erdogan says, 12 June 2012, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-18410596>

^{iv} PEN International, Turkey: Destruction of Kurdish Culture In The Southeast Two Years On From Collapse of Ceasefire, 2 August 2017, available at: <https://pen-international.org/news/turkey-destruction-of-kurdish-culture-in-the-southeast-two-years-on-from-collapse-of-ceasefire>

^v Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, UN report details massive destruction and serious rights violations since July 2015 in southeast Turkey, 10 March 2017, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2017/03/un-report-details-massive-destruction-and-serious-rights-violations-july-2015?LangID=E&NewsID=21342>

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^{vi} Bianet, Media in Kurdish threatened with extinction in Turkey, 13 December 2021, available at: <https://m.bianet.org/english/media/254676-media-in-kurdish-threatened-with-extinction-in-turkey>

^{vii} PEN International, Turkey: Global appeal marks 2000 days in prison for Nedim Türfent, 3 November 2021, available at: <https://pen-international.org/news/turkey-global-appeal-marks-2000-days-in-prison-for-nedim-turfent>

^{viii} PEN International, Day of the Imprisoned Writer, 15 November 2021, available at: <https://pen-international.org/campaigns/day-of-the-imprisoned-writer-2021>

^{ix} European Parliament resolution of 19 September 2019 on situation in Turkey, notably the removal of elected mayors (2019/2821(RSP)), available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0017_EN.pdf

^x PEN International, International Women's Day 2022: Take Action for Gulgeş Deryaspî and Meral Şimşek, 8 March 2022, available at: <https://pen-international.org/campaigns/international-womens-day-2022>

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