

## Chamber of Local Authorities

**34<sup>th</sup> SESSION**  
**Strasbourg, 28 March 2018**

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***CHECK AGAINST  
DELIVERY***

### COMMUNICATION OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE CHAMBER OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES ANDERS KNAPE

Wednesday, 28 March 2018

Dear colleagues,

It is my honour to welcome you to the 34<sup>th</sup> Session of our Chamber.

We have some important work to get through this morning, so I will be brief. But let me begin by the debates for which our invited speakers are here. And we have several such topical issues on our agenda of today:

First, we will be examining two reports on election observations, one in “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” and the other in Georgia.

Then we will have a debate on “Mayors under Pressure”, and I will give you some further information on this theme in a minute.

This afternoon there is a big debate on local democracy in smaller states – with reports on the monitoring that has been carried out in Andorra, Liechtenstein, Monaco and San Marino – with the participation of several ministers. These reports would normally be dealt with by our Chamber. But we cannot do everything and, as today we are meeting in Room 1, it is natural to give visiting VIPs the floor in the Hemicycle. The point I am making is that the work we are doing today is just a small part of the work of this Chamber.

So today we have narrowed down our agenda to two subjects – one of them is “Mayors under Pressure”.

It is not by chance that we have chosen this topic. We are getting more and more reports and complaints by mayors and city councillors who complain of receiving threats and intimidation. Some of them live in fear and are seeking protection. Others have even felt obliged to leave the country.

There is the stick and there is the carrot. We don’t get many complaints from people informing us that they have been offered bribes – but we know it happens – and often in the same situations. We are addressing this in the work we are preparing in our Action Plan against corruption, which will be on the agenda of our next session. In the framework of this action plan, we have already adopted a resolution on the Misuse of Administrative Resources during Electoral Processes, and we are preparing a practical guide to prevent such malpractice.

One form of misuse that we come across time and time again is when candidates in elections receive financial and other incentives or threats to resign or to change party, usually to join the ruling party.

We know that in many of our countries, local politics are closely tied to national politics. The main political parties are vying for power and no ruling party wants to see large towns and cities fall into the hands of the opposition.

For some of us this is all part of the game of politics, but in some of our countries, the idea of pluralist democracy itself is looking increasingly vulnerable.

So, going back to our subject 'Mayors under Pressure': when we decided on this debate, we agreed to focus today on politically motivated pressure.

We are aware that local politicians are subject to many forms of pressure. Many of us receive death threats from crazy people and we have seen some horrible cases where these threats have been followed through. Some of our best politicians have been murdered because of the hatred that they had the courage to stand up to, defending causes that extremists had warned them not to defend.

It is a fine line, in my opinion, between this intimidation that we all sometimes have to face from a few crazy people and the intimidation that some of our colleagues have to face from the party that is in power. But today we have chosen to focus on the latter. So when we talk of 'pressure', we are referring to undue political pressure that can usually be traced to the party in power, the ruling party.

It is not enough to complain and raise awareness about such pressures – it is better if we do something about it. This is why we have invited Patrick Klugman to join us today, because at the very same time that we decided to organise this debate, the City of Paris announced its plan to set up an International Observatory to support and to protect such mayors. We are delighted that he has agreed to tell us more about this proposal, which I hope that we will be able to contribute to.

We have also invited some local politicians to speak to us at first-hand about their experience in this respect. I can tell you that to take the floor on such an issue takes a lot of courage and I am looking forward to hearing their stories.

This takes us back to elections. 'What is the reason for this political pressure?' 'What did I do wrong?' 'What did I do to deserve this?' – These are the questions the victims are asking themselves – and asking us. The answer is very simple – you stood up and you stood for election – and you were elected. That is your crime. You had the courage to stand up for what you believe. Today, I believe, we are going to hear some people who have shown courage and who are being persecuted for their courage.

So when we talk about elections – the real issue we have to face is: was this election free and fair? Did people have a fair chance to stand, to campaign, to present their case? Obviously, if people are afraid to stand for election, if they have fled the country or been arrested for their political beliefs, then the answers to these questions will be 'no'.

So, the election observation work that members of our Congress are doing is vital. I am proud of the election observation work carried out by the Council of Europe and the Congress, drawing on international electoral standards. It concerns, in particular, transversal issues, including the accuracy of voter lists, the voting rights at local level of specific groups of voters, such as internally displaced persons, or migrants and the already mentioned Misuse of Administrative Resources during Electoral Processes.

I think that it is a shame we cannot do more election observations and this is also a consequence of the current financial crisis that this Organisation is going through.

We cannot accept all the invitations that we receive to observe elections – because our budget – which is continuing to decrease in real terms – will not allow it.

I believe that in such a crisis situation we have to be strong and continue to defend the principles that we believe in. And this is not only a problem of the Congress - our Organisation as a whole is being challenged.

Yesterday in the hemicycle we heard the Congress President explain to us the gravity of this situation, the huge cuts that have been made to our budget and the cuts in staff, all of which are causing us to tighten our belts and to reduce our activities. These cuts are unprecedented in my long experience of this Organisation. We are all feeling the pressure.

Do we continue to stand up for our principles of democracy, human rights and rule of law, or do we bow to this pressure?

As our President announced, the Congress Bureau has set up a Steering Group to look at the options and make some proposals for reforming the Congress to ensure that these cuts do not weaken our capacity to defend local and regional democracy in Europe. I am participating in this group and I will do all I can to ensure that the work of this Chamber is not compromised.

We are under pressure as never before. Let us stand firm. Let me encourage you to play a full part in our debates today, which I hope will help to answer some of these questions.

I wish you all a stimulating and fruitful session. Thank you.