

**31st Session of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities – 19-21 October 2016, Strasbourg, France**

19 October 2016

**Follow-up to the Congress strategy to combat radicalisation at grass-roots level**

## **Presentation by Bert Bouwmeester (Netherlands, ILDG), corapporteur**

Dear colleagues,

The aspiration to build a democratic and inclusive society capable of ensuring cultural and religious pluralism is nothing new and has long been the focus of Council of Europe's concerns. However, events in 2015 and 2016 have compelled the Congress to re-open the debate in this area.

Islamist terrorism is dealing Europe a heavy blow through people born in Europe and through individuals leaving their countries to support the war conducted by Daesh. The refugee crisis has put a huge pressure on national, regional and local authorities in all countries in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

Finally, although they are two distinct issues, the growing Islamist radicalisation of people born in Europe and the refugee crisis have both led to the rise of xenophobic social and political movements.

It is in this context that in February 2015, the Congress Bureau adopted the "Strategy to combat radicalisation at grassroots level", and proposed a series of activities based on three pillars of action:

- awareness raising,
- synergies with Council of Europe bodies and
- synergies with other institutions.

One month later, the Congress adopted the Resolution 381 on "Combatting radicalisation at grassroots level: the role of local and regional authorities" to implement this strategy.

You will recall that both the Current Affairs and the Governance Committees have been mandated with the preparation of guidelines for local and regional authorities to prevent radicalisation at grassroots level and of a toolkit on intercultural and interreligious dialogue.

The present report, that Josef NEUMANN, for the Current Affairs Committee, and myself for the Governance Committee, have prepared, has two purposes:

- First to review the relevant Congress texts on citizen participation, living together in diversity, social inclusion and intercultural and interfaith dialogue,
- and secondly, to follow up on the Congress Strategy one year and a half after it has been adopted.

The rereading of the Congress' reference texts focuses on the fact that living in Europe requires learning about the foundations of democracy as we conceive and apply it. As a matter of fact, the theoretical issue today concerning the universality of human rights has become a matter of direct practical and political relevance in Europe.

As you well know, Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights provides a right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

However, it is important to add that there is no such thing as absolute freedom and that these freedoms are both protected and circumscribed by law. In a democracy, this law is the expression of

the will of the people and must respect fundamental rights, which are subject to the supervision of the courts. This philosophical, moral and political position is the foundation of democracy.

Citizenship in Europe requires knowledge and understanding of this philosophical, moral and political position. This involves everyone born in Europe, whatever their origins, and everyone wishing to settle here.

Starting from this statement, we have studied a dozen texts adopted by the Congress between 2005 and 2014. We have found that they all advocate a general policy of enhancing the status of specific identities and cultures, whether it is in the linguistic field; in the field of education and communication strategies; or as far as intercultural and inter-faith relations are concerned.

Although this kind of policy is good in itself, the question is whether the methods advocated are always the most suitable. If the aim is to promote pluralist and inclusive European societies, the objective is therefore *practical* in nature. It means that enhancing the status of cultures of origin is not an end in itself but a means of fostering their ability to adapt to the particular type of society in question.

As regards the recommendations and resolutions adopted by the Congress in the past years on intercultural and interfaith dialogue, they are soundly based. There is, however, also a need to introduce the concept of "interconvictional" dialogue. The hallmark of democratic societies is that they allow and protect religious convictions and their manifestations within the limits of the law. A further feature of democratic societies is that they protect the freedom of conscience of those who have no religious convictions or convictions that are decidedly atheistic.

I now leave the floor to my colleague, to tell you about our activities, the newly developed Toolkit and our new resolution in detail.