

Regional conference on “Ethics and transparency at local level: strategies and tools”

Andreas KIEFER, Secretary General of the Congress

Tbilisi, 6 December 2017

Dear Minister ALAVIDZE,

Dear Mayor KALADZE,

Dear Ambassador HERMAN,

Dear mayors,

Dear representatives of national associations,

Dear colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, I would like to welcome all the participants and partners to this regional conference on “Ethics and transparency at local level: strategies and tools”. It is a great pleasure to be here in Tbilisi for this stock-taking event. I would particularly like to greet all the mayors and representatives from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus, and to extend my congratulations to the newly elected mayors of Georgia, including the Mayor of Tbilisi, Mr KALADZE.

The presence of members of the Congress, representatives from national associations of local and regional authorities, and in particular our long-standing partner NALAG, as well as civil society representatives from across the EU Eastern Partnership countries, is particularly significant and will help to enrich our debates during this conference.

Throughout the region, the Congress is engaged in regular dialogue with national authorities on the implementation of the European Charter on Local Self-Government – an international agreement on standards for local democracy, which all member states have signed and ratified and thus committed to these values. Georgia is a good example as also the law on local self-government explicitly refers to the Charter.

Explain Congress Monitoring

- regular mirror by constructively critical friends
- feedback on the implementation of the commitments (not imposed – voluntary choice)
- proposals for improvements
- political support in post monitoring dialogue and road maps
- operational support in bilateral CoE-Action Plans and in this regional PGG programme

The governments of Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have signed individual roadmaps with the Congress, thus defining the path for enhanced local democracy on the way to jointly develop and improve the implementation of the commitments made. This commitment is particularly visible for Georgia and I would like to warmly welcome the presence of Mr ALAVIDZE, Minister of Regional Development and Infrastructure of Georgia.

I would also like to greet the Council of Europe's longstanding partner, the European Union, with whom we share common values and objectives, and who has provided the means for our programme. Jointly we advocate for good governance throughout the wider Europe, and work jointly towards building safe and inclusive societies that respect the rule of law, human rights and democracy.

The Council of Europe's presence in Georgia, and in other countries of the region, reinforces the partnership with the European Union towards good governance. I would like to extend my warm greetings to my colleague Cristian URSE, the Head of the Council of Europe Office in Tbilisi; thank you indeed for your continuous support to, and promotion of, the Congress activities in Georgia.

Dear colleagues,

Two and a half years ago, in July 2015, we gathered together here in Tbilisi to launch the thematic programme "Strengthening institutional frameworks for local governance". Since then, we have been working effectively, with a shared vision, to establish a fruitful foundation to enhance local democracy in this region, in a sustainable manner.

Responding to the needs that you voiced, and based on the respective Congress monitoring recommendations, the activities developed and implemented by the secretariat of the Congress focused on the roles and responsibilities of local elected representatives as key stakeholders of a democratic system in your countries – as it is the case all over Europe: committed and capable local politicians represent the knots of a net of democracy and proximity to the citizens. And if one or two knots of the net break there are still enough other knots to hold the net and withstand challenges and difficult times. This is the very philosophy of our joint work!

The team around Marité Moras and our local staff and experts have focused on enhancing your positions as drivers for change through ethical decision-making, greater transparency and involvement of citizens in local affairs.

Indeed, we in the Congress believe that, besides adequate legislative frameworks for local self-government, it is essential to have fully-fledged stakeholders at local level and effective local public administrations, contributing to the establishment of stable democratic systems. Sustainable democracy and our citizens need and deserve mayors and local councillors who are ready to lead change, and to nurture a renewed approach in serving citizens' needs and improving the quality of life in local communities.

Sustainable democracy also needs national associations of local and regional authorities to promote a partnership culture of consultation between local and central authorities, and to foster an open dialogue for inclusive public administration and effective local government reform. In order to meet these expectations and to deliver for the citizens you represent strong national associations and local authorities vested with the necessary competences and provided with the means to exert them are indispensable. Only when the capacities of local leaders are strengthened nationwide and in a concerted manner, will they be able to enhance local self-government, support decentralisation reforms and develop their communities.

In this programme the Congress and its secretariat worked with all stakeholders, undertook activities at country-specific level, as well as in a multilateral format, of which this regional conference is an example. This programme was conceived as a catalyst in the democratic process. This has been particularly relevant within the twelve initiatives on transparency and citizen participation, a unique "learning-by-doing" approach supported through peer-to-peer work, both between mayors in the region and the members of the Congress from other European countries.

To ensure sustainability in our actions, we have established the Community of practice on local democracy, a platform for exchange and networking between representatives of national associations and experts and practitioners in the fields of local governance and ethics. This overarching element of our programme ensured that tailored support was provided in responding to the needs of citizens, as well as to local authorities in their fostering of a new approach to local public governance in the region. I was very pleased to join you in one of the meetings the Congress secretariat organised in Strasbourg in October.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Today's conference aims to reflect on the results and the good practices that this programme led to – in your respective countries. We will discuss the implementation of the local initiatives, which were an opportunity for twelve municipalities in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine to experience new practices and innovative approaches to enhance ethics and transparency at local level.

You will hear from the mayors how their leadership was instrumental and what measures they undertook within their administrations, their councils and constituencies. We will also discuss the sustainability of their approaches, in looking to disseminate beyond their municipalities.

During this conference, you will be introduced to two main practical tools that stem from the experience and challenges that these mayors met in driving change to provide better and relevant public services. Measuring the quality of local democracy and, particularly, evaluating the success of local policies in addressing the identified needs of citizens, is a demanding task. It is all the more important, however, when deciding on the adequate orientation of local policies, services and approaches. Meeting the expectations of citizens requires proper management and, more importantly, continuous monitoring.

We trust that the 'Tool guide on management of change' will offer some useful "food for thought and guidance" in your daily work.

Moreover, you will be presented with, and invited to, discuss the 'Handbooks on transparency and citizen participation', a set of country-specific documents which tackle such issues as corruption and accountability from a practical perspective. By outlining the legislative frameworks in your respective countries, with examples of case laws and good practices, these serve to provide you with yet another practical tool to support you in your efforts to make communities more open, ethical and citizen-oriented.

As I mentioned earlier, bringing on board creative and innovative tools, and applying them in practice, can be a demanding task, but indeed a satisfying one. In the moment when you see yourself on the right track, that you are introducing concrete demand-driven policies, you will know that long-term impact has been achieved, which can only lead to overall improved trust of citizens in their elected representatives and local authorities. And that will be rewarded by a local identity and pride – and – on the long run – by higher turnout in local elections. The precondition for this is, however, that local politicians and administrations under their authority dispose of meaningful responsibilities and the necessary financial means to perform accordingly. This is the measurable indicator for a successful policy.

As the decentralisation of powers advances through on-going reforms in the region, success will only come if it is accompanied with a change in mind-set and by empowered stakeholders, including local authorities, their national associations and citizens.

The Congress is striving to reach these objectives through our co-operation activities. These efforts are complementary to our statutory work - the monitoring of the implementation of the European Charter of local self-government, the observation of local and regional elections and our thematic work, in particular through the Roadmap of activities for preventing corruption and promoting public ethics. One of the objectives of this Roadmap is

to deepen our understanding of the various risks and forms of corruption that exist at local level.

It is with this perspective that the Congress has recently adopted recommendations on the abuse of administrative resources in the election campaigns, on preventing corruption in public procurement, and on transparency and open government. In 2018, the Congress will pursue this work with a focus on conflict of interest, protection of whistle-blowers and nepotism in the recruitment of staff.

Thereby we will provide European local and regional authorities with a set of standards, specifically through the provision of the European Code of conduct for the political integrity of local and regional representatives. The scope of the Code will be extended to fully embrace the tremendous changes that have occurred in the organisation of local and regional public administration in the past twenty years. As a European forum for dialogue and co-operation, we believe that the Congress can contribute concretely to a better understanding of the key ingredients that make local self-governments successful.

In our work, we believe that national associations have a vital role to play in advocating for the interests of local self-government, and also in bringing together and disseminating best practices. They are key partners in the Congress' work and the Charter carves out a unique role for them. In this regard, I would like to highlight the Memorandum of Understanding that was signed between the associations from Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine in Kyiv in June this year – under the patronage of the Congress. We trust that within this framework the leaders and executive directors will seek further opportunities for partnership programmes and joint initiatives in the region, in turn influencing the future of local self-government in their respective countries.

We also trust that the national associations will contribute to the implementation of the Eastern Partnership Summit Joint Declaration adopted on 24 November 2017 in Brussels and in particular to “strengthening institutions and good governance” which is a key priority of the 20 Deliverables for 2020. Jointly with the Conference of the Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership (CORLEAP) the Congress advocated to give more prominence to the local dimension of this co-operation. Indeed we believe that it is fundamental for local and regional authorities to gain a stronger stance in the face of their growing responsibilities. This is our common ambition.

The work of the Congress on promoting ethics, transparency and participatory democracy at local level is instrumental and complementary to these efforts.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to express the Congress’ renewed commitment to work together with our partners in the EU Eastern Partnership region, within a horizon of more democratic, cohesive and inclusive societies, so as to better target the interests of local communities and to build stronger resilience at local level.

I thank you all for your contributions to the great results of this programme, and I invite you to share your views and the experiences you have had over the past few years. I wish you a fruitful discussions and exchanges with your peers.

Local democracy, serving the citizens at grassroots levels is not only about institutions and procedures. Democracy is about people: People who are committed, who have a vision, who are curious and willing to learn. Local democracy needs people like you! The Congress is proud to be part of this process of weaving the net of knots of strong and resilient local democracy and its elected actors.