

45th SESSION

CG(2023)45-09
18 October 2023

Summary of reports

Presented at the 45th Congress Session

Table of contents

I. REPORTS SUBMITTED TO THE PLENARY SITTINGS OF THE CONGRESS	2
Verification of new members' credentials	2
Local and regional media: watchdogs of democracy, guardians of community cohesion	2
Delivering on the Reykjavik summit: revised Congress priorities, working procedures and structures	2
Monitoring of the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in Ireland	3
Monitoring of the application of the European Charter of Local Self-government in the Slovak Republic	4
The plight of anti-war political activists and prisoners of conscience in Russia	4
European Urban Charter III (2023): Urban living in the era of transformations	4
II. REPORTS SUBMITTED TO THE CHAMBER OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES	6
Elections to the Council of Elders, City of Yerevan, Armenia	6
Monitoring of the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in Estonia	6
Local elections in Albania (14 May 2023)	7

I. REPORTS SUBMITTED TO THE PLENARY SITTINGS OF THE CONGRESS

Verification of new members' credentials

Xavier CADORET, France (L, SOC/G/PD) and Aleksandra MALETIĆ, Serbia (R, EPP/CCE)

Bureau of the Congress

CG(2023)45-04

Resolution

The rapporteurs will review the credentials of the new members and any new procedures for the appointment of national delegations in the light of the current criteria of the Congress Charter and Rules and Procedures.

Local and regional media: watchdogs of democracy, guardians of community cohesion

Cecilia DALMAN EEK, Sweden (R, SOC/G/PD) and Mélanie LEPOULTIER, France (L, ILDG)

Current Affairs Committee

CG(2023)45-11

Resolution

Recommendation

Local and regional authorities have a sound interest in combating media desertification and in ensuring the existence of strong, independent local and regional media in their communities. Not only do subnational media serve as crucial avenues of information – ensuring that citizens understand and are aware of the policies put in place by their regional or municipal councillors – they also strengthen the legitimacy of local and regional authorities by holding them accountable to their citizens. However, over the past decades, local and regional media have been in decline in many Council of Europe member States.

The present report explores this growing trend towards media deserts in European towns and regions, their impact on democracy, and the role of local and regional authorities in combating such phenomena. It outlines the key challenges the subnational media sector faces and highlights its key political and socio-cultural roles in upholding democratic communities.

In a resolution addressed to local and regional authorities and a recommendation to governments of member States, the Congress calls for action to be taken to support strong and independent subnational media.

Delivering on the Reykjavik summit: revised Congress priorities, working procedures and structures

Bernd Voehringer, Germany (L, EPP/CCE) and Harald Sonderegger, Austria (R, EPP/CCE)

Bureau of the Congress

CG(2023)45-12

Resolution

At each renewal session the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities adopts its overall priorities for the upcoming mandate. They provide a framework in which the Congress carries out the statutory activities entrusted to it by the Committee of Ministers – monitoring local and regional democracy and observing local and regional elections, preparing thematic recommendations, carrying out thematic and co-operation activities and providing a platform of exchange for local and regional elected

representatives – and contributes to new societal developments within the Council of Europe member States.

The Covid-19 pandemic added to a long list of crises that highlighted the importance of co-operation at all levels of governance and showed the need for societies to be better prepared to overcome crisis situations or new challenges.

Since February 2022, the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has led to the Russian Federation's exclusion from the Council of Europe and has prompted the Council to reflect on its future.

The Reykjavik Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe was held to renew the European States' commitment to the democratic values and principles of the Council of Europe. On this occasion the leaders also demonstrated a historic commitment to local and regional democracy.

To better deliver against the commitments made and implement the Summit's decisions, the Congress decided to review its priorities from 2023 until the end of the current mandate in 2026. Monitoring local and regional democracy, and the implementation of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights by local and regional authorities, as well as strengthening democracy, the rule of law and the protection of human rights, will be at the heart of the Congress's statutory activities. Governance and citizenship, the quality of democratic representation, youth participation, reducing inequalities on the ground, environmental challenges, as well as digitalisation and artificial intelligence will be the focus of thematic work and field activities, in order to respond more effectively to the interests and needs of citizens.

Monitoring of the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in Ireland

Vladimir PREBILIČ, Slovenia (L, SOC/G/PD) and Gunn Marit HELGESEN, Norway (R, EPP/CCE)

Monitoring Committee

[CG\(2023\)45-17](#)

Recommendation

The report presents the findings and recommendations from the third monitoring visit in April-May 2023. Although Ireland is a solid democracy, and reforms of local government have taken place in the last decade, it remains one of the most centralised countries in Europe. Nevertheless, the Irish authorities proclaim that they are committed to strengthening local self-government and since the previous monitoring report in 2013, significant improvements have taken place, for example with transfers of the responsibility for local economic and community development to local government and the abolishing of the dual mandate. The system is now also more streamlined with just one tier of local government and with indirectly elected regional assemblies. Further reforms are on their way, such as the first directly elected mayor in Limerick.

However, there is still a lot to be done before local self-government in Ireland is on par with other European countries. In this respect, the rapporteurs expressed concern, among other things, over the limited share of public affairs under local authorities' own responsibility and local authorities' limited own resources, an imbalance between the elected members and the chief executives in local authorities, a lack of a formalised and regular consultation with central government as well as extensive and detailed administrative supervision. In addition, members of regional assemblies are indirectly elected and are not accountable to the citizens for the decisions they take in the assembly.

It is therefore recommended that Irish authorities transfer additional functions to local authorities, continue with reforms of the executive, elect members of the regional assemblies directly; introduce a system of formal and regular consultations between central and local government; enhance local democratic control over the internal administrative structure of local government; reduce administrative supervision; increase the amount of own resources that can be used at the discretion of local government and increase the share of non-earmarked grants.

Monitoring of the application of the European Charter of Local Self-government in the Slovak Republic

Matthias GYSIN, Switzerland (L, ILDG) and Levan ZHORZHOLIANI, Georgia (R, NR)

Monitoring Committee

[CG\(2023\)45-18](#)
Recommendation

This is the fourth report assessing the implementation of the Charter in the Slovak Republic since the country ratified the Charter in 2000.

The rapporteurs note with satisfaction the synchronisation of the election and term of office of local and regional self-governments. The rapporteurs also highlight the positive effects of the creation of the Supreme Administrative Court, as well as the ongoing reform of the civil/public service.

However, the report highlights a few issues that deserve special attention, in particular, municipal fragmentation, inadequacy of local government finance and the ineffectiveness of the equalisation system. Another point highlighted by the rapporteurs concerns consultation processes that are not held in due time and in an appropriate way. Finally, the rapporteurs regret the absence of fiscal powers at regional level as well as limited and inadequate training of local staff.

Consequently, the rapporteurs suggest encouraging voluntary mergers, promoting intermunicipal co-operation and ensuring adequate funding to local and regional authorities. Likewise, the rapporteurs stress the importance of revising the equalisation system, improving the implementation of existing consultation mechanisms and implementing training plans for local public employees. Furthermore, the rapporteurs invite national authorities to enable regional fiscal autonomy and to enhance the buoyancy of subnational financial resources.

The report also encourages the Slovak Republic to sign and ratify the Additional Protocol to the Charter (CETS No. 207).

The plight of anti-war political activists and prisoners of conscience in Russia

Leendert VERBEEK, Netherlands, (R, SOC/G/PD)

Bureau of the Congress

[CG\(2023\)45-19](#)
Resolution

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has been accompanied by an intensified crackdown on dissenters in Russia. The repression of opposition voices and of civil society voices has significantly escalated, and those who have spoken out against the war have been prosecuted using new legislation.

The Congress deplores this escalating repression of opposition activists, stands in solidarity with those who are unjustly imprisoned for expressing their opinions and fighting for Russia's democratic future, and calls, inter alia, for the repeal of all legislation incompatible with the right to freedom of expression.

European Urban Charter III (2023): Urban living in the era of transformations

Anne Colgan, Ireland (L, ILDG)

Governance Committee

[CG\(2023\)45-20](#)

Resolution

The European Urban Charter III provides a revised body of common principles and concepts that enable towns and cities to meet the current challenges of urban societies. It builds on the original [European Urban Charter and the European Declaration of Urban Rights \(1992\)](#) and on the [European Urban Charter II – Manifesto for a new urbanity \(2008\)](#).

It takes into account the transformations that have occurred in recent decades and the major challenges confronting urban societies, such as the Russian Federation's war of aggression against Ukraine, terrorism, the exacerbation of inequalities, the accelerated pace of climate change, natural disasters and public health crises.

The revised Charter is an invitation to all those who are involved in urban development to review their practices and to further strengthen the implementation and ensure the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms. The revised principles aim to provide for a stronger and more sustainable local governance and to improve forms of living together in our cities and towns.

II. REPORTS SUBMITTED TO THE CHAMBER OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Elections to the Council of Elders, City of Yerevan, Armenia

Carla DEJONGHE, Belgium (R,ILDG)

Monitoring Committee

[CPL\(2023\)45-02](#)

Recommendation

Further to an invitation by the Central Election Commission of the Republic of Armenia, the Congress deployed an election observation mission to assess the elections to the Council of Elders of the City of Yerevan held on 17 September 2023. On the election day, seven teams visited some 112 polling stations to observe the election procedure, from opening to closing and counting.

The Congress delegation assessed the election day as being technically well prepared, in line overall with international standards, and carried out in a professional and orderly manner. The delegation welcomed the 2020 and 2021 amendments to the Electoral Code which addressed some previous recommendations and contributed to a more transparent election process. Despite these improvements, the campaign was polarised, overshadowed by national security issues and marked by allegations of bias in favour of the candidate of the ruling party which did not contribute to a level playing field. The delegation regretted the lack of public interest in local elections, particularly among young voters, as seen in the lowest turnout ever recorded in Yerevan.

The Congress delegation noted areas for improvements which still need to be addressed in particular the lack of accessibility of polling stations, the quality of voters lists and the fact that these lists include a large number of voters who are residing *de facto* abroad, the persisting allegations of misuse of administrative resources as well as the underrepresentation of women as heads of candidate lists. In addition, as noted in 2017, the Congress delegation would welcome measures towards establishing one unified election day at the local level.

Monitoring of the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in Estonia

Harald BERGMANN, Netherlands (L, ILDG) and Sören SCHUMACHER, Germany (R, SOC/G/PD)

Monitoring Committee

[CPL\(2023\)45-03](#)

Recommendation

This is the 4th report assessing the implementation of the Charter in Estonia.

The rapporteurs conclude that the country's system of local self-government works well and that the obligations of the Charter are generally fulfilled.

They note with satisfaction the positive impact of the 2017 territorial administrative reform. The delegation also notes the increasing use of new technologies for administrative and democratic purposes, creating more engagement opportunities for the citizens. The delegation evaluates favourably the increasing recognition of the Association of Estonian Cities and Municipalities since its creation in 2018. In addition, the rapporteurs highlight the creation of a dedicated Ministry with responsibility issues concerning local self-government.

However, the report points out a few issues that deserve special attention. Notably, the persisting ambiguity regarding the division of competences; transfers of competences that are not always accompanied by the necessary financial resources; the insufficiency of the equalisation fund, the inadequacy of the equalisation formula and shortcomings in the consultation procedures on legislation affecting directly local government actors. There is additionally a dependence of local government on

state grants for implementation of their obligations and only limited possibilities for local governments to leverage own resources.

Therefore, it is recommended that Estonia revise the legislation on the division of tasks and competences between local and national levels, to allocate to local government financial resources commensurate with their responsibilities and increase the possibilities for local government to generate own resources by allowing them to introduce additional local taxes. In addition, the delegation recommends revising consultation mechanisms to ensure effective, timely and meaningful consultation with subnational authorities. Furthermore, it is recommended that Estonia increase resources allocated to the equalisation fund and revise the criteria of distribution.

Local elections in Albania (14 May 2023)

Stewart DICKSON, United Kingdom, (R, ILDG)

Monitoring Committee

[CPL\(2023\)45-04](#)

Recommendation

Following the invitation by the authorities of Albania, the Congress deployed an election observation mission to assess the local elections held on 14 May 2023 in the 61 municipalities of Albania. On the Election day, 10 teams, involving 20 Congress observers, visited some 110 polling stations to observe the election procedure, from opening to closing.

Overall, the Congress delegation found the 2023 local elections were held in a calm environment and in a transparent manner, despite the long-standing distrust between major parties which all fully participated in the elections. It constituted a welcome change from the 2019 elections, which were boycotted by the opposition. The delegation welcomed the amendments made to the Electoral Code in 2020 which addressed some previous Congress recommendations and contributed to a more professional and transparent election administration. The election campaign was polarised and highly personalised, revolving mainly around political leaders at national level, overshadowing matters of local interest. The Election day was generally peaceful and well-administered, except as regards some technical and practical issues.

The Congress delegation noted several areas where there is room for improvement and efforts could be strengthened notably to address the politicisation of lower-level election administration, the insufficient accessibility of voting centres, some technical and procedural inconsistencies, as well as irregularities noted prior to the Election day and the misuse of public resources.