

45th SESSION

Resolution
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AMENDMENTS

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

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Summary

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.

¹ L: Chamber of Local Authorities / R: Chamber of Regions
EPP/CCE: European People's Party Group in the Congress
SOC: Socialist Group
ILDG: Independent Liberal and Democratic Group
ECR: European Conservatives and Reformists Group
NR: Members not belonging to a political group of the Congress

DRAFT RESOLUTION

1. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities represents the 130 000 local and regional communities and their elected officials in the Council of Europe's member States, ensuring their voices and concerns are reflected in the Organisation's activities aimed at promoting and defending democracy, the rule of law and human rights at all levels.
2. At the beginning of each new mandate the Congress draws up an overall framework for its future work and activities, providing a direction and defining priority areas to fulfil its core missions. This reflection is based on consultation of its members and of the national and European associations of local and regional authorities.
3. The Congress determines the main issues to be addressed and opportunities to be explored and defines the strategic orientations of its work to address the evolving problems and challenges facing local and regional authorities.
4. It also takes on board the priorities of the Secretary General and the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe – including the priorities of its rotating presidency – as well as that of its member States – and refers to the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as part of the wider Council of Europe contribution to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.
5. When adopting its priorities for 2021-2026 in March 2021, the Congress confirmed, as its core mission, the monitoring of local and regional democracy, the observation of local and regional elections, substantial thematic contributions to address current, future but also persisting challenges and the implementation of co-operation programmes in specific member States.
6. The Congress welcomes the commitment shown in favour of local and regional democracy and the role of local and regional elected representatives in defending democracy, human rights and the rule of law within their communities by the Heads of State and Government at the 4th Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe held in Reykjavik on 16 and 17 May 2023.
7. In order to align its priorities with the decisions of the 4th Summit, the Congress considers it necessary to adopt revised priorities for the period from October 2023 until the end of the current mandate in 2026.
8. To better respond to the challenges identified by the Summit, the Congress will strengthen its monitoring of local and regional democracy and respect of the rule of law, as an important element of an *“early warning”* system to signal possible *“democratic erosion”* in member States.
9. It will implement a new strategy for the protection of human rights at local and regional level and strengthening its contribution to the execution of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights relating to the activities of local and regional authorities.
10. It will contribute to reinforcing climate and environmental action by local and regional authorities and to strengthening the recognition of a safe environment as a fundamental right.
11. Regarding its thematic priorities, the Congress will focus on:
 - a. Fostering democracy
 - b. Promoting and protecting human rights
 - c. Preparing and effectively responding to crises
 - d. Reducing inequalities in society
 - e. Taking action on environmental issues
 - f. Supporting the digital revolution
12. The Congress adopts the revised priorities for 2023-2026, as appended, which will be implemented through the Congress's statutory meetings, the working programmes of its chambers and committees as well as its co-operation activities under the supervision of its Bureau.
13. In this respect and in order to better meet these objectives, the Congress adopts new terms of reference for its three committees, as appended, and renames them accordingly:
 - a. The Committee on the Monitoring of the Implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government – known as the *“Monitoring Committee”* – becomes the Committee on the Monitoring of the implementation of

the European Charter of Local Self-Government and on the respect of Human Rights and the Rule of Law at local and regional levels (known as the “Monitoring Committee”). In particular:

- i. The committee will be the legal arm of the Congress in charge of promoting human rights and the rule of law at local and regional level and protecting local and regional democracy through the monitoring of the Charter and election observations;
- ii. The committee will monitor the situation of local and regional democracy in all member States, ensure the effective implementation of the principles of the European Charter of Local Self-Government (ETS No. 122) and its Additional Protocol on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority (CETS No. 207) and prepare reports and recommendations following the observation of local and regional elections;
- iii. It may provide support to local and regional authorities in their efforts to implement the Court judgments and comply with the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5), including through capacity building and awareness-raising activities;
- iv. A methodology on how to best include monitoring of human rights in the framework of the regular monitoring procedure will be developed in co-operation with experts and academics;
- v. Furthermore, the committee will contribute to upholding the rule of law at the subnational level.

b. The Committee on Governance becomes the Committee on Governance, Civic Engagement and Environment (known as the “Governance Committee”). In particular:

- i. The committee will consider issues relating to governance and the functioning of local and regional authorities, such as citizen participation, especially among young people, at local and regional level as well as issues relating to the protection of the environment to counter the harmful effects of the triple planetary crisis of pollution, climate change and loss of biodiversity, considering that human rights and environment are interlinked and that a clean, healthy and sustainable environment is essential to the full enjoyment of human rights;
- ii. It will also consider issues relating to culture and cultural heritage and deal with the educational, cultural and ethical challenges raised notably by diversity, seeking to identify suitable policy responses at local and regional levels.

c. The Current Affairs Committee becomes the Committee on Social Inclusion and Human Dignity (known as the “Social Inclusion Committee”). In particular:

- i. The committee will consider the role of local and regional authorities in promoting social cohesion and inclusion, in combatting discrimination and violence against women and vulnerable groups, supporting youth and youth policies and in addressing societal polarisation and radicalisation with a view to safeguarding fundamental rights at subnational level and ensuring equality;
- ii. It will also identify emerging challenges at subnational level with a potential impact on human rights or local and regional democracy, including but not limited to media freedom, access to information, social care, migration, human trafficking, digitalisation and the development of new technologies such as artificial intelligence;
- iii. The committee’s work will also focus, as mandated by the Bureau, on topical issues, developments and emergencies, as well as crises affecting local and regional authorities in Council of Europe member States, with a view to recommending concrete responses.

Amendment 1

Presented by the co-rapporteurs Bernd Vöhringer, Germany (L, EPP/CCE) and Harald Sonderegger, Austria (R, EPP/CCE)

In paragraph 13.c.iii, delete the words “, as mandated by the Bureau,”.
The paragraph would read:

- iii. The committee’s work will also focus on topical issues, developments and emergencies, as well as crises affecting local and regional authorities in Council of Europe member States, with a view to recommending concrete responses.

14. Under the guidance of their respective chairs, who coordinate the work of the committees and provide political input, the work of each committee will focus on promoting and defending local and regional democracy, within the framework of their specific terms of reference. This work will take into account a human rights perspective that will be developed through the work of a standing rapporteur on human rights. It will be based on the values of the Council of Europe and the rights guaranteed in particular by the European Convention on Human Rights, the European Social Charter (revised) (ETS No. 163), and any other relevant Council of Europe standards. They will also support the implementation of the United Nations 2030 Agenda and its relevant Sustainable Development Goals. In accordance with their respective terms of reference and as mandated by the Bureau, the three committees will be entitled to work on any current affairs matter.

Amendment 2

Presented by the co-rapporteurs Bernd Vöhringer, Germany (L, EPP/CCE) and Harald Sonderegger, Austria (R, EPP/CCE)

In paragraph 14, last sentence, delete the words “and as mandated by the Bureau”.
The paragraph would read:

14. Under the guidance of their respective chairs, who coordinate the work of the committees and provide political input, the work of each committee will focus on promoting and defending local and regional democracy, within the framework of their specific terms of reference. This work will take into account a human rights perspective that will be developed through the work of a standing rapporteur on human rights. It will be based on the values of the Council of Europe and the rights guaranteed in particular by the European Convention on Human Rights, the European Social Charter (revised) (ETS No. 163), and any other relevant Council of Europe standards. They will also support the implementation of the United Nations 2030 Agenda and its relevant Sustainable Development Goals. In accordance with their respective terms of reference, the three committees will be entitled to work on any current affairs matter.

15. The Congress adopts the Congress Human Rights Strategy, as appended. In line with this strategy, human rights will be mainstreamed and proactively addressed by all Congress bodies. The Congress Bureau will appoint a standing rapporteur on human rights, and two deputy standing rapporteurs on human rights. The standing rapporteur and the two deputies must stem from the three committees in order to facilitate the mainstreaming of human rights throughout the Congress’s work. They will work in a coordinated manner based on the new human rights strategy. In particular:

- a. The current position of “spokesperson” on human rights shall be replaced by the new position of standing rapporteur (with two deputies). With the political impetus given by the Reykjavik Summit on the localisation of human rights, the creation of a new human rights portfolio is needed;
- b. Unlike a spokesperson dealing with one topic, the standing rapporteur shall have a cross-cutting role when it comes to human rights. The standing rapporteur shall also report back directly to the Bureau;

c. He or she will facilitate the work on human rights in the committees, lead study visits, represent the Congress at external events related to human rights, make declarations when needed and work with other Council of Europe entities on their portfolio;

d. The standing rapporteur will become the natural figurehead on human rights and make the work of the Congress on this pillar of the Council of Europe more visible.

16. With these revised priorities, the Congress will continue to transmit the work and values of the Council of Europe as close as possible to its citizens. It will actively implement the decisions of the Summit within the framework of its competences in a complementary manner with the other bodies of the Council of Europe and in close co-operation with its institutional partners at local, regional, and European level.

17. A workplan outlining how these revised priorities are to be implemented will be produced at the beginning of 2024 after the budget negotiations and Council of Europe re-organisation have been finalised and announced.

18. The new committee structures and the posts of standing rapporteur on human rights and two deputies will be established after the adoption by the Congress of the necessary amendments to its rules and procedures at its 46th session in March 2024.

APPENDIX 1 - Revised priorities 2023-2026

I. Congress objectives: Ensuring the proper functioning of local and regional democracy and addressing major societal challenges.

The Council of Europe, an international platform for exchange and devising standards based on common values

1. Since its creation in 1949, the Council of Europe has been the major architect of post-war democratic developments in the larger Europe. It contributed to the creation of a continent-wide system based on solid institutions of democratic governance, mechanisms for the protection of human rights and a common space where the rule of law applies. It has also played a key role in building pluralistic and cohesive societies based on international co-operation and multilateralism.
2. Over the years, the Council of Europe has advanced respect for fundamental rights, democracy, and the rule of law in Europe. When celebrating the 70th anniversary of the Council of Europe in October 2019, French President Emmanuel Macron shared his firm conviction that it is at the Council of Europe that the divisions of the European continent can be healed because it is the place where European consciousness is formed and debated.
3. In May 2019, at the 129th Ministerial session of the Committee of Ministers in Helsinki, the Foreign Ministers reaffirmed the importance of the Organisation as a unique platform for dialogue and co-operation and defined the future priority areas for the Organisation.
4. In the Athens declaration resulting from the 130th ministerial session of the Committee of Ministers in November 2020, the Foreign Affairs Ministers expressed the renewed commitment to European unity and multilateral co-operation and greater solidarity among nations.
5. On 24 February 2022, the Russian Federation's military aggression against Ukraine, in flagrant violation of international law, in particular the Statute of the Council of Europe, marked the return of war to the European continent.
6. In response to this war of aggression as well as to the retreat of democracy, the polarisation of societies and growing authoritarian tendencies within some member States, the Heads of State and Government meeting at the Reykjavik Summit on 16 and 17 May 2023 renewed their commitment to the democratic values and principles of the Council of Europe.
7. They also expressed their strong commitment to local and regional democracy and to the role of local elected representatives in defending democracy, human rights and the rule of law in their communities.

Local and regional authorities to help deliver the Council of Europe's vision

8. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities grew out of the conviction that the intergovernmental and inter-parliamentary co-operation required a local and regional dimension to cover all levels of democratic governance. The establishment of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities" within the Council of Europe in 1994 gave local and regional authorities a forum to have their say in the process of European integration.
9. In the preamble to the European Charter of Local Self-Government, adopted by the Council of Europe in 1985, national governments recognised the role played by local democracy in building pluralist and cohesive societies by establishing local democracy as one of the main foundations of any democratic system.
10. This recognition of the importance of local democracy and the decision to strengthen the local and regional dimension of the European democratic model were not only visionary but are, today, essential at a time when European societies are facing major new challenges.
11. In times of crisis in particular, as witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic, local and regional elected representatives are at the frontline to deliver basic and emergency services, find suitable solutions to specific challenges, relay and implement national policies and coordinate their action with other levels of government and other partners across all sectors of society. This requires multilateral co-operation and multi-level governance.

12. A strong and efficient system of multi-level governance in which every level is equipped with proper competences, means, resources and a climate of trust and interaction enables a country, region or city to better respond to an emergency situation.

13. Through their action and proximity on the ground, local and regional authorities are the best placed to promote territorial cohesion, sustainable local development and solutions tailored to the specific needs of the communities, based on a strong territorial approach of national and European policies as well as interaction and interdependence between the population, the democratic institutions and the national associations.

14. It is therefore essential for central governments to rely on local and regional authorities to mitigate problems, to reduce tensions within populations and to revive the citizens' confidence in institutions, thus ensuring the democratic stability of European societies.

15. In Ukraine in particular, since the start of the war, mayors and local councillors have been at the front line to ensure that communities continue to function and provide the necessary services to the population. Ukraine's local elected representatives have often been described as the country's "second army", because they are an essential pillar of resistance against the occupation and of the resilience of the country's communities. It is in this capacity that they have frequently been targeted by the occupying forces, who have carried out assassinations, arbitrary arrests, intimidation, and abduction of local elected representatives.

II. Congress statutory missions and means for action: monitoring, election observation, co-operation programmes, practical tools, and networking.

a. Monitoring the European Charter of Local Self-Government

16. The Congress' main statutory duty is its monitoring of the *European Charter of Local Self-Government*, which binds all 46 Council of Europe member States to respect the rights and responsibilities of local authorities and to work towards the implementation of the principle of subsidiarity or shared democracy.

17. Through its monitoring mechanism, the Congress assesses the application of the Charter in domestic law and works to improve compliance with the Charter's provisions, thus advancing local and regional democratic self-government and decentralisation.

18. The Charter contains a hard core of fundamental principles as well as optional provisions and it seeks to reconcile the diversity of local authority structures in the member States with these principles. The Congress strives, in the framework of its political dialogue with member States, to encourage governments and parliaments to ratify and implement all the provisions of the Charter.

19. During its monitoring work the Congress is observing certain moves or trends towards recentralisation and reducing financial autonomy of local and regional authorities especially in times of crisis. The monitoring of the Charter constitutes in that respect an early-warning mechanism on the state of democracy in the 46 member States.

20. It serves to ensure that the swift or exceptional measures or restrictions on individual freedoms taken in response to a crisis do not undermine the foundations of a functioning local and regional democracy and are timebound, respect human rights and are rooted in democratic decisions reached in a transparent and responsible process.

b. Observing local and regional elections

21. The right of citizens to exercise their democratic choice through universal, equal, free, secret, and direct suffrage is an internationally recognised fundamental right as well as the basis for political participation at territorial level. Such a right is enshrined in the *Additional Protocol to the European Charter of Local Self-Government on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority*, already ratified by 21 member States (as of September 2023).

22. During its observation missions, the Congress assesses whether planning and conduct of local and regional elections adhere to legal provisions and best practice in this matter. The observation activities will continue to be one of the Congress' priorities of action, thus ensuring that the standards for holding democratic local and regional elections are respected.

23. The questioning of democracy coupled with declining public trust in traditional politics will also be reflected in the Congress' work in the field of elections through, for example, the fight against corruption and clientelism and the selection and funding of candidates as well as the re-orientation on new issues such as the use of referendums in the local context and the conditions of independent candidates running in local and regional elections.

24. In addition to the country-specific election observation reports, the Congress will follow up issues and challenges identified in the strategy it has developed over the past years to better address election-related problems that reoccur across the Council of Europe countries such as the quality of voters' lists, misuse of administrative resources during electoral campaigns or voting rights of migrants and internally displaced persons on the local level, against the backdrop of the population movements in Europe.

c. Implementing co-operation activities in the field

25. Thanks to the expertise and experience of its members, the Congress can offer local and regional authorities and their associations assistance and the means to acquire new skills and know-how.

26. The co-operation programmes complement the statutory activities of the Congress. They link the recommendations and resolutions adopted at the plenary sessions with the situation on the ground and are based on the monitoring of the European Charter of Local Self-Government and a subsequent political dialogue with the national authorities. With the strong political mandate given by the Reykjavik Summit to the Congress on Human Rights, co-operation activities will be developed on that front.

27. These activities will be pursued within the framework of the Council of Europe action plans and the Congress' own post-monitoring road maps signed with individual member States, as well as within the framework of specific partnerships, such as the Neighbourhood Partnerships with Southern Mediterranean countries.

d. Further developing practical tools, networks, and synergies

28. The Congress has developed numerous tools, publications, and practical guides for use by its members and all local and regional authorities, to assist and support them in their daily work. This work of compiling and developing practical tools will be continued. Existing collections such as the series of Human Rights handbooks will be developed and further promoted.

29. The Congress also aims to bring together local and regional elected representatives from all 46 Council of Europe member States to enable them to work together or carry out joint projects. These networks will be energised and further developed.

30. Furthermore, the Congress will continue developing its partnerships, institutional co-operation, and co-operation with civil society, among others, through regular exchanges of views, the signature of co-operation agreements and the organisation of common activities.

31. It will in particular develop further synergies with its institutional partners inside the Council of Europe.

32. Outside the Council of Europe, the Congress has close relations with national and European associations of local and regional authorities, which will be further developed in this new mandate.

33. In the margins of the Reykjavik Summit the Congress organised a side event on "Embedding democratic values at grassroots level" where a Call for Action to national governments was signed by representatives of seven European institutions and associations. This Call will be followed up by increased co-operation between the Congress and its European partners to highlight the pivotal role played by local and regional authorities in responding to current challenges, in upholding human rights and the rule of law in Europe, as well as in preventing democratic backsliding and safeguarding democratic values on the continent.

34. As re-stated by the Reykjavik Summit, the European Union is the main institutional partner of the Council of Europe. Relations with the European Union are therefore also key for the Congress which maintains close co-operation and working relations in particular with the European Committee of the Regions. These relations are developed both at the political level and the level of the respective secretariats and based on a Co-operation Agreement. The European Committee of the Regions is also one of the signatories of the Call for Action signed in Reykjavik. The Congress will also develop relationships with all directorates of the European Commission and any entities of the European Union relevant to its far-reaching work.

35. The Congress will join forces with all these partners to implement its priorities and to ensure impact of its political and operational work.

III. The Congress thematic revised priorities 2023-2026: responses to new challenges

36. In its thematic work programmes, the Congress will focus in particular on six areas: **fostering democracy, promoting and protecting human rights, effectively preparing and responding to crisis, reducing inequalities in society, taking action on environmental issues, and supporting digital revolution.**

A. Democratic societies: Fostering representative democracy and citizen participation

The quality of democratic governance for the benefit of the citizen must be improved.

37. Representative democracy operates if it is based on respect and trust between the people and its representatives and if it includes effective checks and balances.

38. Representative democracy needs to be complemented with elements of direct democracy to ensure more transparency and participation of single citizens, civil society and the business community.

39. Mayors and local councillors play a vital role in promoting the principles of representative democracy and shared values within their communities. Aside from the role prescribed in the legislation, it is upon them to implement innovative approaches developing the complementarity between representative and participatory democracy in full respect of the principles of ethical governance, accountability, transparency, and greater solidarity in public policies. New ways of democracy including online participation, petitions, public deliberation, local think tanks or platforms, civil society initiatives or other tools, complement formal decision making.

40. The Congress will continue to support the local elected representative in carrying out their daily tasks and helping to reduce the difficulties associated with the exercise of their mandates. It will thus continue to follow the issue of local elected representatives facing pressure, coming under undue legal, financial, psychological, and physical pressure from central governments, majority parties or members of their communities.

41. The involvement of young people in decision-making and governance at the local and regional level, will be horizontal features of the work of the Congress in the coming years.

42. The further development of the “rejuvenating politics” initiative which the Congress started in 2014 will be part of this process in which the Congress invites youth delegates from member States to participate in its sessions and the work of its committees, gradually involving them more and more in its decision-making processes.

B. Societies respecting human rights: the role of local and regional authorities in promoting and protecting human rights

43. The Reykjavik Summit final declaration, in its Appendix IV on the convention system and the protection of human rights, gives explicitly, for the first time, a clear political mandate to the Congress to help the Council of Europe deliver on the promotion and protection of Human Rights.

The Congress aims at doing so by:

- training local and regional elected representatives and civil servants on their role in protecting Human Rights: Too many condemnations of member States by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) happen with regard to decisions taken at local and regional level; local and regional leaders must therefore be better trained in their duties in this regard;
- supporting and cooperating with the Council of Europe department for the execution of the judgements of the Court to reach out to the local and regional levels: in order to abide by its judgements, structural changes often need to happen also at the local and regional level. Facilitating the interaction between the Council of Europe and these levels to help the process of execution of judgments of the Court will be a new task for the Congress;

- helping National Human Rights Institutions (NHRI) reach out to the local and regional levels: Many national human rights defenders find it difficult to enter into a dialogue with the local level which hampers their ability to act closest to the citizens. The Congress can help play a mediation role. This will help countries to meet the Paris principles which set out the minimum standards that NHRIs must meet in order to be considered credible.

C. Resilient societies: preparing and effectively responding to crises

The effectiveness of responses to overcome future crisis or emergencies depends on the right balance and interaction between centralised and decentralised capacities within the systems of multi-level governance.

44. The policy responses to crises need to be adapted to the local realities, to the needs and opportunities of the communities. Local and regional authorities are the level of governance closest to the citizens and have a good understanding of the challenges facing their communities and how the specific dynamics of a crisis are impacting upon them.

45. Recent crises have revealed, among others, the need for measures and policies to safeguard civic, political, social and economic rights. The first players in the field of implementing the necessary solidarity are the elected representatives in local and regional authorities and the civil servants under their authority.

46. The Congress will continue to collect inspiring examples of grassroots action from municipalities, regions and the institutional partners and organise exchanges of views on the management of crisis in Europe's cities and regions and the functioning of local and regional democracy in times of crisis. Based on this work, the Congress will produce reports, recommendations, and practical tools to help facing and managing emergency situations and crises and their devastating consequences, and support societies and communities in becoming stronger and more resilient.

D. Cohesive societies: reducing inequalities in societies

Development gaps within territories and communities must be bridged and social and economic fractures overcome.

47. While the living conditions in Europe have substantially improved since the establishment of the Council of Europe, increasing income, health, gender, education, skills, and opportunities inequalities are still fracturing societies, hurting economies, and undermining democracies.

48. The role of local authorities is more important than ever in this context. By implementing innovative policies, they can help building more resilient and inclusive cities and regions, have a positive impact on reducing social and economic inequalities and discrimination as well as reinforcing participation and trust on the ground. A specific focus on educational and cultural policies as a tool for building inclusive societies will be sought.

49. The Congress will continue its work in this respect, in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals – in particular goals 11 (make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable), 16 (promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies) and 17 (revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development).

50. It will implement at the local and regional level all Council of Europe action and campaigns in these areas and promote the development of networks of cities and regions having the same objectives.

E. Sustainable societies: taking action on environmental issues

Living conditions in cities and regions must be radically improved by implementing innovative local policies that respect the environment and address climate change issues.

51. Climate change, pollution, extinction of species, loss of biodiversity and the overall degradation of the earth's ecosystems present a pressing, inter-related and profound challenge to the way of life in societies. Over the past years, it has been widely recognised that the right to live in a sustainable, healthy, and safe environment is one of the crucial aspects of fundamental rights.

52. Environmental protection is part of good governance, whether it is implemented at international, national or subnational level, and, in this regard, all possible actors must be considered as key actors and participate in the decision-making processes.

53. Local and regional elected representatives need to adapt to the environmental and social impacts of climate change. They are in a unique position to tackle climate emergency, promote sustainable development and implement policies and actions which they can shape policy to fit local situation and needs.

54. The Congress will further develop activities linked to the specific responsibilities of local and regional authorities, regarding local responses to environmental and climate challenges.

55. In the framework of the work undertaken within the Council of Europe, according to the Sustainable Development Goals and taking into account the EU Green Deal Strategy, the Congress will contribute among others to the standard setting on the right to a safe and healthy environment as a fundamental human right and to the implementation of such work at the local and regional level.

F. Digital societies: supporting digitalisation

The digital revolution is changing the face of democracy and must be put at the service of democracy.

56. The digitalisation drives huge changes in all sectors of activity and in the future, its developments such as Artificial Intelligence, in particular, are likely to have a considerable impact on the life of the citizens and the functioning of societies.

57. Digitalisation and the use of AI in public management can make administration more efficient and inclusive, and it can promote better information and direct participation.

58. However, to prevent the many risks of abuses, increased digitalisation also requires investments in education and high-level expertise. It requires above all a sound and proportionate regulatory framework, to ensure respect of human rights and democracy.

59. The Congress will support the development of digitalisation in the local and regional communities with ethical, legal, reliable, and controlled technologies that considers democratic security and the protection of personal data. Its work will aim at seizing fully the opportunities offered by new technologies while protecting the freedom, integrity and, in general, the fundamental rights of the citizens.

60. The Congress will participate in the work carried out in this field within the Council of Europe and contribute to its implementation at local and regional level.

APPENDIX 2 - New terms of reference for Congress committees

Committee on Monitoring of Democracy, and on Respect of Human Rights and the Rule of Law at Local and Regional Levels [MON]

A. General terms of reference

1. The Committee on Monitoring of Democracy, and on Respect of Human Rights and the Rule of Law at local and regional levels, (referred to as the “Monitoring Committee”), may examine any matter within its mandate, in line with the relevant provisions of the Congress’ Rules and Procedures.
2. In accordance with the relevant provisions of the Committee of Ministers Statutory Resolution related to the Congress and Congress Rules and Procedure, the committee shall monitor the situation of local and regional democracy in all member States, ensure the effective implementation of the principles of the European Charter of Local Self-Government (EB No.122) and its Additional Protocol on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority (CETS No. 207) and prepare reports and recommendations following the observation of local and regional elections.
3. In line with the Reykjavík Declaration (Appendix IV), the committee shall also contribute to facilitating the process of the execution of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights that concern local and regional authorities and to adopting measures to comply with the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No.5) at local and regional levels.
4. Pursuant to the revised Congress Human Rights Strategy (2023-2025), which highlights the interdependence of the principles of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, the committee will contribute to upholding the rule of law at local and regional level, by carrying out the activities including but not limited to the fight against corruption at local and regional level and promoting better understanding of the application of the principle of the rule of law at subnational level as a preventive approach to human rights violations.
5. The committee shall prepare reports, including resolutions and/or recommendations, for debate in the Congress or its Chambers:
 - when stipulated in the Congress Rules and Procedures and in the present terms of reference;
 - when stipulated in texts adopted by the Congress;
 - when instructed by the Congress Bureau or its chambers.
6. The committee shall work in close co-operation with the chambers and follow the actions taken on reports adopted by the Congress.
7. The committee may propose activities to the Congress Bureau for advancing local and regional democracy and the respect of human rights and the rule of law at the subnational level in accordance with the revised political priorities set by the Congress and in line with the Council of Europe Reykjavík Declaration “United around our values” as well as principles 1,2,3,4 and 6 of the Reykjavík Principles for Democracy (Appendix III) and Appendix IV on “Recommitting to the Convention system as the cornerstone of the Council of Europe’s protection of human rights”.
8. The committee shall support the implementation of the United Nations 2030 Agenda and its relevant Sustainable Development Goals.
9. The committee may organise conferences, hearings and other activities on matters within its specific terms of reference, in accordance with its work programme.
10. The committee shall follow the activities of and maintain working relations with the relevant Council of Europe structures and bodies, in particular with the European Court of Human Rights, the Department for the Execution of Judgments of the European Court of Human Rights, the relevant subsidiary bodies of the Committee of Ministers, the Commissioner for Human Rights and the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) and the relevant committees of the Parliamentary Assembly.

11. The committee shall also develop working relations with its external partners, such as relevant European and international organisations, national associations of local and regional authorities, ombudspersons, national human rights institutions and civil society organisations with a view to ensuring the efficiency and impact of Congress activities.

B. Specific terms of reference

12. The committee is responsible, in particular, for:

- 12.1 carrying out regular monitoring visits in each member State approximately every five years and drawing up country reports on evaluating legislative and other measures taken by member States to give effect to the provisions of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, its Additional Protocol on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority, and possibly another Additional Protocol thereto, as well as drawing up relevant reports/resolutions/recommendations;
- 12.2 carrying out fact-finding missions to examine a particular aspect of the Charter or specific questions of concern related to local and regional democracy and the rule of law in member States upon decision of the Congress Bureau or the committee and drawing up relevant reports/resolutions/recommendations;
- 12.3 carrying out observation of local/regional elections and discussing electoral assessments and drawing up relevant reports/resolutions/recommendations;
- 12.4 organising post-monitoring/post-observation activities at the joint request of the Congress and the national authorities on the basis of the main monitoring recommendations and carrying out mid-term reviews of the implementation of the Congress recommendations; post-monitoring missions give rise to roadmaps which contain concrete steps for the implementation of the recommendations adopted by the Congress;
- 12.5 monitoring the implementation by local and regional authorities of member states of the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights that concern them;
- 12.6 providing support to local and regional authorities in their efforts to implement the Court's judgments and comply with the European Convention on Human Rights; support may be provided through capacity building and awareness-raising activities at local and regional levels.

13. The committee shall follow the activities of and prepare the Congress contribution to the specialised conferences of ministers and their follow-up.

Committee on Governance, Civic Engagement and Environment [GOV]

A. General terms of reference

14. The Committee on Governance, Civic Engagement and Environment may examine any matter within its mandate, in line with the relevant provisions of the Congress' Rules and Procedures.

15. The committee shall consider issues related to participation in local public affairs, environment, education, culture, and e-democracy and recommend concrete action at national, regional and local levels. A human rights perspective will underpin the work of the committee.

16. The committee shall prepare reports, including resolutions and/or recommendations, for debate in the Congress or its chambers:

- when stipulated in the Congress' Rules and Procedures and in the present terms of reference;
- when stipulated in texts adopted by the Congress;
- when instructed by the Congress Bureau or its chambers.

17. The committee shall work in close co-operation with the chambers and follow the actions taken on reports adopted by the Congress.

18. The committee may propose activities to the Bureau for securing good governance at local and regional levels, in accordance with the priorities set by the Congress, as revised in the light of the Council of Europe Reykjavík Declaration "United around our values" as well as with principles 1, 8 and 9 of the Reykjavík Principles for Democracy (Appendix III) and the Appendix V of the Reykjavík Declaration on the Council of Europe and the environment.

19. The committee will carry out its work from the point of view of the Council of Europe's core values and based on the rights guaranteed in particular by the European Convention on Human Rights, the European Social Charter, the Bern Convention, and any other relevant Council of Europe standards.

20. The committee shall support the implementation of the United Nations 2030 Agenda and its relevant Sustainable Development Goals.

21. The committee may organise conferences, hearings and other activities on matters within its specific terms of reference and which are linked to its work programme.

22. The committee shall follow the activities of and maintain working relations with the relevant Council of Europe bodies, in particular the subsidiary bodies of the Committee of Ministers, the Commissioner for Human Rights, the Conference of International NGOs and the relevant Parliamentary Assembly committees.

23. The committee shall also develop working relations with its external partners, such as relevant European and international organisations, national associations of local and regional authorities, ombudspersons, national human rights institutions and civil society organisations with a view to ensuring the efficiency and impact of Congress activities.

B. Specific terms of reference

24. The committee shall in particular consider:

- 24.1 issues relating to the protection of the environment to counter the harmful effects of the triple planetary crisis of pollution, climate change and loss of biodiversity, considering that human rights and environment are interlinked and that a clean, healthy and sustainable environment is essential to the full enjoyment of human rights by present and future generations;
- 24.2 issues relating to governance and the functioning of local and regional authorities, such as citizen participation at local and regional level;
- 24.3 issues relating to culture and cultural heritage and deal with the educational, cultural and ethical challenges raised notably by diversity, seeking to identify suitable policy responses at local and regional levels;

24.4 contributing to the development of the Council of Europe legal instruments, tools, and actions in particular in the field of the rights and duties of citizens in the societies, as well as the right to a healthy environment at grassroots level.

25. The committee shall follow the activities of and prepare the Congress contribution to the specialised conferences of ministers and their follow-up.

Committee on Social Inclusion and Human Dignity [SOC]

A. General terms of reference

26. The Committee on Social Inclusion and Human Dignity may examine any matter within its specific terms of reference, in line with the relevant provisions of the Congress' Rules and Procedures.

27. The committee shall consider issues related to social cohesion, inclusion and human dignity in Council of Europe member States from a subnational perspective and recommend concrete action at national, regional and local levels. A human rights perspective will underpin the work of the committee.

28. The committee shall prepare reports, including resolutions and/or recommendations, for debate in the Congress or its Chambers:

- when stipulated in the Congress's Rules and Procedures and in the present terms of reference;
- when stipulated in texts adopted by the Congress;
- when instructed by the Congress Bureau or the Bureaux of the chambers.

29. The committee shall work in close co-operation with the Chambers and follow the actions taken on reports adopted by the Congress.

30. The committee may propose activities to the Bureau for advancing local and regional democracy as related to human dignity and social cohesion and inclusion at the subnational level, in accordance with the priorities set by the Congress, as revised in the light of the Council of Europe Reykjavík Declaration "United around our values" as well as with principles 1,7,9 and 10 of the Reykjavík Principles for Democracy (Appendix III).

31. The committee will carry out its work from the point of view of the Council of Europe's core values and based on the rights guaranteed in particular by European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No.5) and the European Social Charter (ETS No.163), as well as other relevant Council of Europe standards.

32. The committee shall support the implementation of the United Nations 2030 Agenda and its relevant Sustainable Development Goals.

33. The committee may organise conferences, hearings, study visits and other activities on matters within its specific terms of reference and which are linked to its work programme.

34. The committee shall follow the activities of and maintain working relations with the relevant Council of Europe bodies, in particular the subsidiary bodies of the Committee of Ministers, the Commissioner for Human Rights, the Conference of International NGOs and the relevant Parliamentary Assembly committees.

35. The committee shall also develop working relations with its external partners, such as relevant European and international organisations, national associations of local and regional authorities, ombudspersons, national human rights institutions and civil society organisations with a view to ensuring the efficiency and impact of Congress activities.

B. Specific terms of reference

36. The committee shall in particular consider:

- 36.1. the role of local and regional authorities in promoting social cohesion and inclusion, in combatting discrimination and violence against women and vulnerable groups, supporting youth and youth policies and in addressing societal polarisation with a view to safeguarding fundamental rights at subnational level and ensuring equality;
- 36.2. emerging challenges at subnational level with a potential impact on human rights or local and regional democracy, including but not limited to media freedom, access to information, social care, migration, human trafficking and to the development of new technologies such as artificial intelligence;
- 36.3. contributing to the development of the Council of Europe legal instruments, tools and actions in particular in the field of inclusion, anti-discrimination and the protection of fundamental rights.

37. The committee shall follow the activities of and prepare the Congress contribution to the specialised conferences of ministers and their follow-up.

APPENDIX 3 - Congress Human Rights Strategy

CONGRESS HUMAN RIGHTS STRATEGY

Document approved by the Monitoring Committee at its meeting on 4 July 2023.

THE CONGRESS HUMAN RIGHTS STRATEGY (2023-2025)

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. From its establishment, the Congress has actively engaged in promoting and protecting of human rights at grassroots level. This includes securing democracy and good governance at local and regional level, by monitoring the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government (ETS No.122) and regular missions to observe local and regional elections.

2. The Congress has adopted a wide range of reports, resolutions and recommendations aimed at preventing and combatting human rights violations at local and regional level. The Congress Spokesperson on human rights has represented the Congress in international fora to bring local perspectives into human rights policy discussions. Through its co-operation activities, the Congress has been providing technical assistance to local and regional authorities on human rights in the Council of Europe member States and beyond.

3. In 2015, the Congress adopted the Graz Declaration on the implementation of human rights, which laid down the conceptual basis for the Congress Human Rights Action Plan for 2016-2017.

4. Since 2018, as a deliverable of this Action Plan, the Congress has produced a series of "Human rights handbooks for local and regional authorities" to provide a practical tool for local and regional elected representatives in the implementation of human rights.

5. In its political priorities for 2021-2026,² the Congress has placed a particular focus on awareness-raising for the respect of human rights at local level, fighting corruption, discrimination, radicalisation, exclusion, violence against women and children, and ensuring gender equality.

6. In 2022, the Congress adopted a report entitled "A fundamental right to the environment: a matter for local and regional authorities", in which it highlighted the role of local authorities in fulfilling the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment. The report encouraged a green reading of the European Charter of Local Self-Government and called for drawing up an additional Protocol to the Charter that would underline

² Priorities of the Congress 2021-2026: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/congress/priorities-of-the-congress>.

the role of local authorities in the protection of human rights, in particular through participation in decision making on environmental protection issues.

7. As a result, the recognition of the role of local and regional authorities in delivering human rights has gradually grown across Europe. Today, it is widely acknowledged that grassroots authorities are key actors in fulfilling human rights within their realm of competence. Furthermore, they have proven their strong commitment to deliver on human rights in the face of the ongoing consequences of the pandemic, massive arrival of refugees, the fallout of climate change, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the cost-of-living and energy crises and other current and emerging challenges.

8. Nevertheless, not all citizens across European cities and towns equally enjoy human rights. Growing social inequalities, social and economic exclusion, a widening urban-rural divide, discrimination, hate speech, hate crime persist. These issues are further compounded by corruption, disinformation and radicalisation, indicating that human rights are still not fully enjoyed by all.

9. The European Court of Human Rights has regularly ruled on violations of the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No.5) where the respective illegal acts and/or omissions to act were committed by or on behalf of subnational authorities.

10. Therefore, there is a persistent vital need to continue improving human rights at all levels of government with the effective and sustainable contribution of grassroots authorities. This vision was recognised by the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe in the Declaration adopted at the Reykjavik Summit of 16 and 17 May 2023. In the declaration, the signatories renewed their commitment to the Council of Europe's values and principles and recognised the essential role of the Congress in delivering the organisation's vision.³

11. The Reykjavik Declaration highlights the essential role of multilevel governance in human rights protection. It further recalls⁴ that "national and local authorities...bear responsibility for implementing the Convention and complying with the judgments of the Court" and invites national authorities to strengthen co-operation with local and regional authorities in order to facilitate the process of executing the Court's judgments which concern them. In addition, the Declaration calls on the Congress leadership to strengthen the political dialogue with the respective national interlocutors on the implementation of judgments.

12. To put in practice the decisions taken at the Reykjavik Summit, and to counter challenges to human rights, the Congress needs a comprehensive and integrated Strategy that outlines a clear strategic vision of its future human rights activities and long-term objectives. Given the interdependence of the principles of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, and the importance of the subnational authorities' contribution to upholding the rule of law at their level, the rule of law dimension of the Congress activities will be subject of a separate document.

13. This Strategy further builds on the Congress's important acquis on human rights and streamlines its human rights efforts to further ensure democratic and values-aligned governance at grassroots level.

14. Above all, the implementation of the Strategy will allow the Congress, as the only pan-European assembly of local and regional leaders, to contribute to developing peaceful, just and inclusive communities with equal opportunities for all, where people live in mutual respect, dignity and security, where there is no place for violence and conflicts. All of this can be achieved when human rights are fully respected.

³ See the Reykjavik Declaration, "United around our values", p. 3 and p. 9.

⁴ See Appendix IV to [the Reykjavik Declaration "United around our values"](#), "Recommitting to the Convention system as the cornerstone of the Council of Europe's protection of human rights".

15. Equally, the Strategy has been designed to contribute to the achievement of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, given the link of human rights protection at local level with, inter alia, Goal 11 on making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable, Goal 3 on good health and well-being, Goal 4 on quality education, Goal 5 on gender equality, Goal 6 on clean water and sanitation for all, Goal 8 on economic growth and decent work for all, Goal 13 on climate action, Goal 16 on peace, justice and building strong institutions at all levels.

II. MAIN GOAL OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS STRATEGY

16. The overarching goal of the Strategy is to contribute to securing and strengthening democracy and good governance at subnational level through the effective realization and equal enjoyment of human rights by all citizens in all communities, in line with the provisions of the European Convention on Human Rights, the European Social Charter and other international human rights instruments.

17. This will be achieved by empowering and building capacity of local and regional authorities in the implementation of the existing international human rights standards, in their fields of competences, and in close co-operation with national governments, through supporting local democracy and democratic governance at grassroots' level in line with the principles of the European Charter of Local Self-Government.

18. The Congress will further strengthen the human rights dimension in all its activities with the focus on the following strategic objectives:

2.1 Protect human rights at grassroots' level through strengthening local democracy

19. Local democracy and good democratic governance at grassroots level cannot be secured and strengthened without due protection of human rights by subnational authorities. Although international human rights law lays the obligation for human rights protection on the States and attributes international responsibility for human rights violation to central governments, in practice many human rights are protected and fulfilled at grassroots level.

20. Grassroots authorities fulfil a variety of economic, social and cultural rights, notably when they deliver public services relating to health, housing, water and sanitation. They also implement civil and political rights, given a wide variety of competences including but not limited to the right to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression, providing access to justice, implementing non-discrimination policies and gender equality mainstreaming. Many decisions at local level, directly or indirectly, can either enforce or infringe the enjoyment of human rights, in particular when it comes to people and groups in vulnerable and marginalised situations.

21. Furthermore, with accelerated decentralisation in some countries, human rights competences of local self-government are increasing while national legislation in some states explicitly requires grassroots authorities to respect human rights. Illegal acts and failures to act committed by local authorities continue to entail the liability of Council of Europe member States for human rights violations, as ruled in various judgments of the European Court of Human Rights related to subnational government.

22. To prevent human rights violations, it is thus important to make sure that local authorities, within their competences, are fully aware of how to duly fulfil their role in delivering human rights protection as part of good democratic governance at local level.

23. The Congress should enhance its activities on human rights protection by improving democratic governance at local and regional level. This requires, inter alia, strengthening the capacities of local governments to protect and fulfil human rights, raising awareness about human rights issues and the legal framework at the local level. Efforts should also be made to ensure that sufficient resources are available for these important tasks, especially in municipalities which have been heavily affected by multiple recent crises.

24. In addition, as a preventive measure to reduce human rights violations at grassroots level, subnational authorities should be regularly made aware of the relevant judgments of the European Court of Human Rights and effective remedies.

25. More specifically, the Congress will contribute to effective implementation of human rights at grassroots by informing local authorities about their human rights obligations, encouraging them to integrate a human rights-based approach into daily activities, policies and programmes and providing relevant technical assistance in adopting measures to promote and protect human rights.

26. It is equally important to make sure that local authorities apply the same human rights standards in the digital environment given the increasing impact of AI and technological change on service delivery at local and regional level.

27. The Congress actions in this area will seek to:

- a. make sure through its monitoring mechanisms that, in line with the principles set out in the European Charter of Local Self-Government, subnational authorities are provided with a proper legal framework, competences and adequate financial resources for effective local governance, including in the field of human rights;
- b. strengthen human rights expertise and education at local level and raise awareness among locally elected representatives, their administrations and associations of their duties and responsibilities in addressing human rights issues;
- c. support and sustain sufficient institutional capacity at subnational level to ensure that human rights can be adequately protected at the subnational level;
- d. support and promote a multi-level governance approach to delivering human rights at all levels;
- e. encourage grassroots authorities to integrate a human rights-based approach into their policies and initiatives to prevent and address human rights violations. Promote the adoption of local human rights action plans, developing a local human rights agenda and the concept of “human rights city” to localize human rights;
- f. prepare regular analysis of the most frequently violated provisions of the European Convention on Human Rights at local level and provide recommendations to subnational authorities on how to prevent and redress human rights violations in close co-operation with the Council of Europe Department for the Execution of Judgments of the Court;
- g. work in close co-operation with the CoE Department for the Execution of Judgments of the Court to facilitate interaction and liaise with subnational authorities concerned by the judgments in order to contribute to their execution;
- h. give more visibility to the role of local authorities in human rights protection;
- i. contribute to the drawing up of the international register of losses and damages caused by Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine;
- j. promote human rights protection at the local level in unresolved conflict zones or territories under control of de facto authorities;
- k. promote and ensure training of local and regional elected representatives and subnational government personnel on international human rights standards;
- l. promote sharing of best practices by subnational authorities about effective implementation of human rights, including by preparing practical tools and guidelines (handbooks) and collecting and disseminating such good practices;
- m. encourage inter-municipal and inter-regional co-operation on human rights.

2.2 Promote subnational authorities’ participation in decision-making on human rights at national level

28. Central governments have a duty to duly inform subnational authorities of their human rights obligations stemming either from national human rights legislation and/or international human rights law. However, even though this duty to inform is important, it is not sufficient to ensure effective implementation of human rights at local level. Further practical steps are required to ensure that human rights obligations are implemented by subnational authorities in practice.

29. It should be remembered that grassroots authorities are also “rights-holders” vis-a-vis national governments as they have the right to be effectively consulted on all matters concerning them in line with the requirements of the European Charter of Local Self-Government. To ensure that local authorities are able to exercise these rights in full, they should not only receive relevant and timely information about matters concerning them, including human rights protection. They should be treated as strategic and operational partners at every stage of decision-making at national level, starting from designing national human rights strategies, actions plans and policies to translating them into practical application, ensuring proper follow-up and reporting on implementation.

30. In addition, developing the spirit of partnership and local ownership of national human rights policies is vital for successful and sustainable implementation of human rights at all levels. It helps to build a culture of human rights from the bottom-up and improve the quality of life for all people based on human rights standards and norms.

31. Furthermore, when local authorities meaningfully participate in national decision making, they can effectively alert national authorities about human rights concerns and, in this way, act as an early warning mechanism on emerging human rights needs and potential threats. As the level of government closest to the citizens, local and regional authorities possess invaluable knowledge and insight of local conditions. In addition, they benefit from both physical and cultural proximity, which allows local and regional authorities to respond more effectively to the specific needs and concerns of local population.

32. The Congress’s actions in this area will seek to:

- a. encourage national authorities to bring recommendations, resolutions, standards and best practices of implementing internationally recognized human rights to the local level;
- b. promote drawing up guiding principles for local government on human rights, taking into account various competencies at local level in human rights protection;
- c. protect and advocate direct involvement of representatives of local authorities and their associations in developing human rights legislation, national strategic frameworks and policies in line with the requirement of the European Charter of Local Self-Government on consultation;
- d. encourage national authorities to engage in a dialogue and strengthen co-operation with local and regional authorities for the purpose of monitoring domestic implementation of international human rights commitments, including through facilitating the execution of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights which concern subnational authorities, and for relevant reporting both at national and international level;
- e. promote bringing local perspectives into the further development of international legal standards related to human rights and contribute to the Reykjavik process within the Council of Europe through participation in the Reykjavik Committee on environment and human rights (to be established).

2.3 Promote participatory democracy on human rights at local and regional level

33. Placing citizens and their rights at the heart of local policies and their implementation is essential to good democratic governance and achieving full realisation of human rights at the local level. Local authorities are the most directly accessible level of government and usually the most trusted one. They can identify people’s needs and respond to societal demands promptly and effectively.

34. Open and effective communication between local governments and residents on all matters, and even more so on human rights, is a glue which holds societies together. It can help to tackle many societal issues, such as anti-rights and anti-migration movements, disinformation and fake news, hate speech, sexism, discrimination and the growing social divide.

35. Local authorities can help to build a culture of human rights in their cities and communities, by raising public awareness of human rights and finding solutions based on the principles of equality, respect, gender sensitivity, inclusiveness, while empowering groups who have often been left excluded or marginalised. When local elected representatives lead by example in fulfilling citizens’ rights and become vocal advocates for human rights, they contribute to countering the negative trend of growing public distrust towards democratic institutions.

36. Therefore, grassroots authorities should be encouraged to promote human rights by disseminating reliable information on human rights and ensuring effective and meaningful participation in local public affairs for all inhabitants. This should be done in co-operation with a wide range of stakeholders, including but not limited to civil society, religious organisations, the private sector and human rights defenders. Additional efforts should be applied to reach out to women and youth as well as the poorest and most marginalized groups.

37. Additionally, member states should be encouraged to accede to the Additional Protocol to the European Charter of Local Self-Government on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority (CETS No. 207).

38. The Congress actions in promoting participatory democracy will seek to:

- a. encourage local authorities to involve and enhance citizens participation in decision making on human rights at local level by carrying out awareness raising campaigns, public consultations, citizens councils and other forms of participatory and deliberative democracy;
- b. promote active involvement of civil society and other actors concerned in planning human rights actions and their implementation at the local level;
- c. make sure that local authorities ensure equal access to information on human rights; promote dissemination of relevant information among citizens about their rights;
- d. promote the accession of Council of Europe member states, who have not yet done so, to the Additional Protocol to the Charter on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority;
- e. ensure that digital technologies are used at the local level in a responsible manner, which is respectful of human rights;
- f. promote a sustainable, participatory and socially inclusive spatial planning and urban governance, based on human rights and environmental protection standards for the benefits of all inhabitants;
- g. encourage the establishment of independent complaint mechanisms at local and regional level such as local ombudspersons, based on the Principles on the Protection and Promotion of the Ombudsman Institution ("The Venice Principles"), to assist local authorities in complying with their human rights obligations;
- h. establish a network/platform of independent complaint mechanisms at local level.

III. PARTNERSHIP AND SYNERGIES

39. The objectives set in this Strategy will be implemented in close co-operation with external partners of the Congress, both international institutions and national associations of local and regional authorities in the Council of Europe member States.

40. The Congress will seek to develop networking and facilitate co-operation and exchanges of experiences and best practices to support international efforts aimed at the promotion of human rights at local level with the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, the European Committee of the Regions, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), OSCE/ODIHR, OECD as well as other international organisations and NGOs dealing with human rights.

41. As a voice of 130 000 local and regional authorities in Europe, the Congress will make sure that the local dimension and common position of subnational governments are duly taken into account by various international fora and platforms when human rights issues are addressed. In this respect, the networks of ombuds-institutions at the local and national level can also be valuable partners of the Congress.

42. The visibility of the Congress human rights activities will be increased through ensuring effective communication at international level.

43. Furthermore, the Congress will pay specific attention to empowering local and regional authorities' engagement in the bottom-up multilateralism on a wide range of activities related to human rights, including but not limited to localising SDGs. The Congress will extend support to locally led initiatives aimed at strengthening city diplomacy and international co-operation between cities on human rights to yield more impactful human rights protection.

44. In addition to enhancing co-operation with external partners, the implementation of this Strategy will require strengthened and more focused co-operation within the Organisation, specifically with the Council of Europe entities engaged in human rights, notably the ECtHR, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, the Venice Commission and the Council of Europe Department for the execution of judgments of the ECtHR.

IV. METHODOLOGY (MONITORING, EVALUATION AND RESOURCES)

45. Subject to the subsequent decisions of the President and the Bureau of the Congress, concrete measures and activities aimed at implementing this Strategy will be detailed in a subsequent Human Rights Action Plan.

46. The Congress spokesperson on human rights, whose functions may eventually evolve, may be tasked with assessing the outcomes of the Strategy and the action plan in a relevant stock-taking report. This report may be prepared based on the methodology for collection and analysis of data and relevant indicators established in the 2011 Congress report “Developing indicators to raise awareness of human rights at local and regional level”.

47. An outcome event may be convened to conclude the implementation of the Human Rights Action Plan, identify lessons learned during the implementation phase and prepare proposals for follow-up measures.

48. The Group of Independent Experts may be involved, when necessary, in collecting and analysing human rights data at the domestic level. In addition, the country reports on monitoring the implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government will continue to address human rights issues at grassroots level and feed into the Congress activities on human rights.

49. In light of the potential implications of the implementation of the Human Rights Strategy for the Congress’ scope of activities, the Secretary General of the Congress may decide to explore the possibility to reinforce the resources of the secretariat dedicated to human rights promotion and protection at grassroots level. A further mobilisation of budgetary resources may be needed.