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Item 6 of the agenda

## **EUROPEAN COMMITTEE ON DEMOCRACY AND GOVERNANCE (CDDG)**

### **DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE AND COVID-19**

#### **Compendium of key-note speeches delivered on the occasion of the thematic meeting of 18 June 2020**

Secretariat Memorandum  
prepared by the  
Directorate General of Democracy  
Democratic Governance Division

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## 1. Programme of the meeting

### THEMATIC MEETING

#### on A DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE RESPONSE TO COVID-19

18 June 2020 by videoconference

From 10.30 am to 1 pm and from 2.30 to 4 pm (Central Europe Time)

*Delivering democratic governance while responding to the unprecedented sanitary emergency caused by the Covid-19 pandemic requires leadership, adaptability and innovation. This thematic meeting of the European Committee on Democracy and Governance, taking place under the auspices of the Greek chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers, offers an opportunity to member States and other participants to exchange experience, information and practical solutions which can strengthen their response to the Covid-19 emergency in line with Council of Europe values and standards.*

*After the opening session, during which high level authorities from Greece and the Secretary General of the Council of Europe will address the audience, the meeting will explore the issues of multilevel governance and response to the emergency; the frontline role of local authorities; and cross-border cooperation. Members of the CDDG, observers and participants will be able to share the experience from their countries. Each session will end with a short debate. In the final session, participants will have a general debate on democratic governance and the response to Covid-19, before final conclusions are drawn.*

*The information collected during this meeting will contribute to a CDDG publication on Democratic governance and response to Covid-19 and will be used to update a dedicated [webpage](#).*

#### 10.30 am Opening session

Welcome by **Mr Markku Mölläri, Chair ad interim of the CDDG**

Opening addresses:

**Mr Nikos Chardalias, Deputy Minister of Civil Protection and Crisis Management, Greece**

**Ms Marija Pejčinović Burić, Secretary General of the Council of Europe**

Videomessage by **Mr Ivan Malenica, Minister of Public Administration, Croatia**

#### Session 1: Multilevel governance and response to the emergency

*Despite differences in the policies introduced in various countries and sometimes within the same country, the response to Covid-19 involves action by all levels of government and other public bodies and agencies, especially those responsible for civil protection, health, education and social issues. The effectiveness of the response often depends on the coordination between them.*

**Key-note address: Ms Georgia Valatsou, Permanent Secretary General, Ministry of the Interior, Greece**

Interventions by CDDG members, observers, participants

Debate

**Session 2: The frontline role of local authorities**

*In all Council of Europe member States, local authorities are in the frontline in the response to the Covid-19 emergency, as those who are the closest to citizens and to their needs. This session highlights challenges faced by local authorities and showcases innovative solutions at local level.*

Key-note addresses:

**Mr Leendert Verbeek (Netherlands, SOC/G/PD), Chair of the Monitoring Committee, Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe**  
**Mr Robert Gruman (Romania, EPP/CCE), Chair of the Governance Committee, Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe**

Questions and answers

Interventions by CDDG members, observers, participants

Debate

**Session 3: Cross-border cooperation**

*Inter-governmental fiscal policy responses and cooperation: ongoing work by the OECD.*  
 Presentation by **Mr Sean Dougherty, OECD Network on Fiscal Relations**

Questions and answers

*Cross-border cooperation has been affected by the restrictions of freedom of movements due to the Covid-19 pandemic. At times, however, it has been an asset and has helped ease pressure on the health system of some border areas.*

Interventions by CDDG members, observers, participants

Debate

**General debate and conclusions**

With concluding remarks by **Ms Snežana Samardžić-Marković, Director General, Directorate General of Democracy, Council of Europe**

4 pm                      End of the meeting

## 2. Speeches

### **Ms Marija Pejčinović Burić, Secretary General of the Council of Europe**

Ministers,  
Chair of the European Committee on Democracy and Governance,

The COVID-19 pandemic poses enormous challenges to the way in which our societies function, including decision-making at every level of government in our member states. So, I am grateful to the Chair of this Committee for organising today's thematic meeting, and to the Greek Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers for including it among its activities. Just as it has prioritised the overall importance of ensuring that Council of Europe member states respond to the current crisis in a way that reinforces our values: this principle will underpin the political declaration that is planned for the Athens Ministerial Session in November, and it is an important balance for authorities to strike.

Given the threat to human life and the measures required to address it, limitations have been imposed on people's rights and freedoms. In light of this, in early April I published a document on Respecting democracy, rule of law and human rights in the framework of the COVID-19 sanitary crisis. This toolkit, sent to the governments of all 47 of our member states, is designed to help them reconcile their necessary action with our common legal standards. It makes clear that authorities' actions must be both proportionate to the threat posed by the virus and limited in time. This includes measures that impact on democratic institutions, checks and balances. Among the many coronavirus-related initiatives that our Organisation is taking, I am pleased that the toolkit has been well-received.

But our role is not simply to remind member states of their obligations. We also provide a forum for dialogue, exchanging best practice, and developing policy. This meeting is a perfect example. You will hear different perspectives about the impact of COVID-19 measures on democracy and governance. From these we have already seen patterns emerge:

- political campaigns have been limited, and elections and referendums postponed,
- the role of the executive has often been strengthened as the separation of powers has rebalanced with parliamentary capacity and oversight weakening,
- centralisation has sometimes recast the competences of the different layers of government.
- and the space for civil society's participation in political decision-making has been seen to shrink as processes have sped up.

All this has implications for freedom of expression and assembly, democratic control of government action, the principle of subsidiarity and citizens' access to decision-making.

In the medium and long term we will have to find ways of ensuring a return to normality. But at the moment, while we are still confronted with the coronavirus, the elements presented by the Committee clearly indicate which ethical principles should govern actions:

- effective responses are based on dialogue and the common will of political and institutional forces,
- as confirmed by the experience presented by the Deputy Minister concerning Greece, this presupposes effective coordination between the different levels of government as well as with actors outside government,
- and it is imperative to actively involve civil society to the fullest extent possible, including through voluntary action; it is important to ensure respect for the Council

of Europe's 12 principles of good democratic governance in order to guarantee that citizens and civil society continue to benefit from the services that are essential to their well-being and to strengthen their confidence in the way they are governed.

You now have many examples of cases where this approach has been adopted, often with interesting results. In some cases, reforms and restructuring have been considerably slowed down. In others, administrative procedures have been simplified and public services have been put online, making it easier for citizens to access them. In still others, new partnerships have been established between the public and private sectors in a way that seemed impossible only a few months ago. The COVID-19 pandemic has dealt a terrible blow to our societies, but it has also served as a catalyst for change.

Your mission now will be to share this understanding and to envision a future in which these changes are controlled for the benefit of all. More effective forms of government, open to the people they serve and fully respecting democratic norms, procedures and values. In the current context, solidarity between citizens and states is paramount.

Sharing ideas on ways to make life easier is an important and tangible contribution.

I wish you every success.

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## **Mr Nikolaos Hardalias, Deputy Minister of Civil Protection and Crisis Management, Greece**

Dear Secretary General, Your Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to thank the Council of Europe for kindly inviting me to address this meeting and wish the Greek Chairmanship a very successful term.

I am very glad to be with all of you today, even under these extraordinary circumstances and I am confident that most fruitful conclusions are to be drawn by your contributions.

Let me start by saying something rather obvious, that the COVID-19 pandemic has proved to be one of the greatest and most unexpected challenges our world has faced in many years.

It forced us to take unprecedented decisions, as well as difficult measures vastly affecting our societies and in practice, all aspects of our way of life.

I am particularly pleased say that in Greece, we managed to successfully contain the pandemic, having taken measures very early on. We specifically paid attention to targeted measures and their firm and timely application. This strategy greatly contributed to achieving positive results.

Moreover, by Prime Minister's decision, the general coordination of all relevant authorities responding to the pandemic has been assigned to the General Secretariat for Civil Protection. It has been a great honour and a great responsibility for the Civil Protection family.

Our primary goal was -and still is- to contain as effectively as possible the spread of coronavirus in order to ensure the highest possible level of protection of public health. This was our guide to whatever measures taken.

It is undeniable that many of the measures entailed partial restriction of human rights. The most striking example was of course the partial restriction imposed on the freedom of movement.

However, all measures taken fully complied with the provisions of our Constitutional chart and the national legislation.

Furthermore, we strictly adhered to the principles of necessity and proportionality, with regard to the aforementioned goal, namely the protection of public health. And all measures were implemented for the absolutely necessary period of time and have been gradually lifted by now.

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And what is of the utmost importance, by no means was there any major impact on the enjoyment of fundamental human rights. There was no disruption of access to health and other vital services. On the contrary, all state actors ensured that everyone's needs would be fully respected and met, with particular attention paid to vulnerable groups, such as the elderly, the chronically ill, the migrants and refugees residing in Greece etc.

And I have to stress out that the vast majority of Greek citizens endorsed and abided by the measures, greatly contributing to the success of our strategy.

But, we also have to keep in mind that we are not over yet with COVID-19.

We hope that it will not be necessary to take such measures ever again, however we should remain alert. Protecting human lives remains our top priority and our unquestionable duty.

Thank you very much for your time.

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## **Mr Ivan Malenica, Minister of Public Administration, Croatia**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Please allow me first to greet all the esteemed participants at this meeting, personally and in my capacity as Minister of Public Administration of the Republic of Croatia.

The situation in which the whole world has found itself due to the global coronavirus pandemic declared by the World Health Organisation has brought us some new challenges that we as the European community have never encountered before.

In only three months, the crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic has affected the entire globe and become a threat to human health and global economy, affecting everyday lives of millions of people.

And even though every country went through crises and challenges of some sort in the past, this is a completely different challenge for all of us. The COVID-19 pandemic is a global challenge which has united all nations in an endeavour to find a common solution – first of all, to prevent the spread of the virus, but also to mitigate its consequences. In this fight, we have all been forced to change our usual routines and regular life patterns for the greater good of the communities we live in.

Thirty years ago, Croatia went through an exceptionally difficult period of the Homeland War, fighting for independence and people's lives.

Although very different from the devastations of war, the COVID-19 pandemic posed another big challenge of fighting for people's lives and health. The battle against the coronavirus demanded solidarity, composure and determination on the part of every individual as well as the society as a whole. During that difficult time, Croatia experienced an additional shock that other countries were spared from – namely, its capital Zagreb and the surrounding areas were hit by the strongest earthquake in the last 140 years.

Croatia recognised the COVID-19 threat very early on and took it very seriously. Civil protection headquarters were established on all levels (national, county and local) to ensure coherence and coordination of all levels of government in the specific situation.

In the fight against the coronavirus, Croatia, like other countries, was forced to take serious measures. It shut down all cafes, most stores, kindergartens, schools and higher education institutions, libraries, gyms, clubs etc., it cancelled public events, imposed restrictions on transport and business, and citizens were prohibited from leaving their place of permanent residence. Every restriction made by Croatian authorities was made to protect people's lives and health, especially for vulnerable groups of our society.

These measures have proved to be successful. Croatia is one of the most successful countries in the fight against the coronavirus.

I would like to take this opportunity to mention some of the measures that have proved extremely successful and were especially significant for our citizens.

As I mentioned, as the epidemiological situation was getting worse, citizens were prohibited from leaving their place of permanent residence. Bearing in mind, however, that there are exceptional situations in which citizens have to leave their residence, the system of e-Passes was designed. The main goal of the system was to create a single point of access to issued passes, which reduced the possibility of misuse and facilitated the system of controlling the passes issued. I would like to stress that out of over two million e-Passes, most were issued for economic purposes, to maintain some economic activity despite the restrictive measures and to alleviate the economic consequences of the pandemic.



Another important project was the creation of a digital assistant. It's a WhatsApp chatbot, a digital assistant named Andrija, who provides assistance in the fight against the coronavirus, and is able to provide citizens with current information and recommendations in a fast and efficient manner. Digital assistant Andrija greatly relieved the burden on epidemiological services by providing over 8 thousand answers to our citizens, whose reaction to the new service was extremely positive.

Right after the health of our citizens, the health of our economy is our second key priority. We already know that the pandemic will severely affect our economy.

For that reason, Croatia has introduced packages of measures designed to strengthen the economy. The measures are focused on entrepreneurs, workers and the protection of the private sector. For instance, the measures include the exemption of businesses from the payment of taxes and contributions until June, payment of a net salary of HRK 4,000 to workers in private companies, in order to save jobs and preserve employment rates, etc.

Furthermore, Croatia adopted a number of legislative acts related to a more flexible use of EU funds, simpler procurement and production of medical supplies, and free movement of goods across borders.

The current circumstances are still extraordinary and we need to get used to them. Life and the functioning of the state must continue. However, globalisation as we know it and the functioning of countries that we are used to are changing.

Dear friends,

I believe that we have all demonstrated great responsibility both as individuals and as institutions, countries and societies, and that we have risen to the challenge before us. I believe we will come out of this ordeal even stronger and more united and solidary.

We will continue to coordinate activities regarding coronavirus prevention and mitigation of economic consequences, as well as vaccine research.

Our joint response to all the challenges the future brings should be unity, responsibility and preparedness, along with continuous development and preservation of the Council of Europe's values and the European spirit.

Thank you.

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## **Ms Georgia Valatsou, Permanent Secretary General, Ministry of Interior, Greece**

First and foremost, I would like to convey the greetings of Mr. Panagiotis Theodorikakos, Minister of Interior of the Hellenic Republic who could not be with us today due to prior engagements relating to the newly established Special Development Programme of Local Governments of A and B degree entitled 'Antonis Tritsis', which could not be postponed.

It is a great pleasure to be with you, so that we can discuss, in the context of the work of the European Committee on Democracy and Governance of the Council of Europe, focusing on multilevel governance and the response to the emergency situation caused because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The current health crisis has been both a challenge and an opportunity for multilevel governance. The way the pandemic was addressed, within the framework of democratic governance in Greece, proved to be good practice, which was implemented under actual emergency conditions, in accordance with the principles of subsidiarity, proximity and proportionality.

The central government and in particular the Ministry of Interior (MoI) had a successful and thorough collaboration with all local government entities and jointly responsible agencies, at all the stages of the procedure, from the design to the implementation of the policies adopted to fight the pandemic, maintaining distinct roles for each level of government and involving their participation, proportionally and based on the responsibilities they have been assigned. Collaboration and coordination among all levels of government have been very successful; thus, the institutional interventions that were adapted led to the development of both the state and the local government authorities while the financial interventions were fully used by all the levels of government for services delivered to citizens and for the smooth operation of the institutions. The ultimate goal was and still is to have a less severe impact of the pandemic on the everyday life of citizens and achieve the best possible response to the special circumstances arisen because of the pandemic.

At this delicate and challenging time of the health crisis, the MoI, as the competent executive structure responsible for the institutional and regulatory framework governing the organization and operation of local government of the first and second degree, has already undertaken exceptional institutional interventions/initiatives which support local government authorities in exercising their roles and implementing their tasks and allow the self-government institutions to contribute to the national strategy for addressing both the health crisis due to the coronavirus COVID -19 and the economic crisis which resulted from the measures to prevent the spread. The adopted interventions, such as the legislative interventions on local government budgets, in no way affect the democratic operation and financial independence of local authorities. Nor do they affect the local authorities response to the challenges faced in daily lives of their citizens.

The fruitful cooperation among the levels of government in order to address the crisis, led to an identification of the needs, and a relevant provision of financial resources to local authorities from the part of the MoI, so that local authorities may perform their increased social role. Within the limit of the appropriations entered in the budget this year in favour of Local Authorities (Central Independent Resources), Local Authorities of the first and second degree the grants of almost 104.660.500,00 euros (90.410.500,00 € to municipalities and 14.250.000,00 € to Regions) were allocated to address the pandemic.

In addition, the new development programme, entitled "Antonis Tritsis", which is being presented today, while designed by the MoI, took into consideration the special circumstances due to the pandemic as well as the need for implementing civil protection actions and actions aimed at the protection of public health at the level of local government. The programme also provides for the possibility of an extraordinary grant of 100 million euro to be awarded to the MoI, through the first Axis of the programme, in case of unfavourable developments due to the pandemic.

In addition to the above stated financial support measures, it is worth mentioning that other facilities were also provided by the MoI to local authorities through a series of legislative interventions , in an effort to achieve the goal of responsiveness, effectiveness and efficiency and make use of available tools to develop good financial governance. Such reliefs and facilitations aim at assigning local government authorities the role of the key actor in the growth and productivity, by undertaking social and development actions at the local level, supporting local financial activity and prosperity, protecting employment and ensuring social cohesion.

Furthermore, the pandemic was a challenge which led to the adoption, for the first time, in the public sector and in the local government authorities, of new forms of work, such as tele-working/ remote work and the rotation of staff, being forms of work compatible with the current circumstances and the social needs of the staff, which ensure the protection of the health of the staff and their families. Also the pandemic led to the creation of conditions for facilitating particular groups of staff in the public sector, conditions which did not affect at all the operation of the state and local authorities, which continued their efficient functioning, strengthening in parallel the use of digital means and tools.

The coordination of the administration levels, which is strengthened through the use of digital tools and the chain support service, that is from the Ministry (central/national level) to the local government authorities (sub-national level) and from the local government authorities to citizens and businesses highlights the successful implementation of the multi-level governance model for the establishment of a coherent strategy to address the pandemic and mitigate the effects of the crisis in the economy and the community. In line with the majority of the Council of Europe good democratic governance principles, the decision making for the implementation of actions at the local level was strengthened based on the principle of subsidiarity, in accordance with the guidelines provided by the state authorities (enhancing the role of Municipalities, through the Acts of Legislative Content). Also, the digital transformation of the state and local authorities was speeded up and successfully implemented, while at the central level the possibilities of immediate responsiveness, adaptability, innovation and leadership of the MoI, as the executive actor in relation to local government authorities were highlighted, in an effort to address the health crisis.

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## **Mr Leendert Verbeek, Chair of the Monitoring Committee, Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe**

Dear members of this Committee,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for this opportunity to exchange views with you today.

I would like to share with you my experience of tackling the pandemic in my capacity as the King's Commissioner, similar to governor, of the province of Flevoland in the Netherlands, but also our experiences on the level of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe.

I will start with some general remarks on the global impact of the pandemic on sub-national government from the perspective of the European Charter of Local Self-Government.

It is evident that authorities of all levels have been dramatically affected by the unprecedented situation caused by the coronavirus.

They all had to find immediate, day-to-day responses to the emergency under the extreme pressure of uncertainty.

Nobody really knew in which direction the pandemic would evolve and how fast.

Local authorities have been hit particularly severely by the sanitary crisis.

They had to deliver basic services, provide transport in their cities and make sure that the population respected the lockdown measures.

And we saw that people reacted differently, and not always obeyed to the restriction of their freedoms.

Local authorities also had to raise awareness of the population on the COVID-19.

And this had to be done, without even being sure, that the information available was accurate.

And yes, we also made mistakes, just as higher level authorities did.

As we often say in the Netherlands; during crisis you often have to take decisions with often too little information, but deciding is more important than keeping asking questions.

In my opinion, despite all this, local authorities have worthily taken this challenge.

However, in response to the crisis, we have seen that central authorities in some member-states of the council of Europe have departed from their commitments under the Charter.

They started either to recentralise local competences or reduce the local governments' margin of appreciation in conducting local business.

The consequences of the lockdown measures have also been dire for financial autonomy at local level.

Local tax revenues fell.

Many municipalities have had to implement tasks and responsibilities without receiving necessary means from their central governments.

The recovery plans often envisage the tightening of local budgets to overcome economic downturn caused by the coronavirus.

In some countries, consultation has worsened, and the central governments have made decisions affecting local level without proper coordination.

The organisation of local elections has become another burning issue at this time of crisis.

The Monitoring Committee will hold an exchange of views on this topic on the basis of a reflection paper which has been already endorsed by the Bureau.

This reflection paper deals specifically with local and regional elections in times of COVID-19 pandemic and should give rise to a report on this particular electoral subject to be adopted in October this year.

Last week, the Congress Bureau adopted a Declaration on the impact of central government COVID-measures on local and regional authorities.

It raised concerns about the negative tendencies I have just outlined to you.

But let me remind you that the Charter must be applied in all situations, including the crises.

This will be the main theme of a debate the Monitoring Committee will hold at its next meeting, on 21 September 2020.

The Congress members will share their experiences of tackling the coronavirus and coping up with its far-reaching consequences.

In addition, during the next monitoring visits, we hope to resume in 2021, the Congress rapporteurs will focus on the multi-level management of the pandemic.

They will identify the main challenges that local authorities have had to face during the crisis and in the post-Covid period, and the replies of local and regional authorities will be reflected in our reports and recommendations as far as the application of the Charter will be concerned.

Now I would like to tell more about the experience of facing the sanitary crisis in the Flevoland, and in the Netherlands.

The topical debate in the Netherlands now is focussing on a new Emergency Covid-19 law that the National Government is preparing.

COVID measures at the moment, like the prohibition of gathering, are based on Local Emergency Directives.

From a legal point of view, they are not considered democratic and constitutional.

Local Emergency Directives are intended for local, temporary crises, like riots and sudden disasters.

The social distancing measures that are needed in Covid19-times demand a more permanent legislation.

Though the intention behind the new Emergency law is good, the criticism on the other hand is that the new law will shift power for a long period to the national government at the expense of the Parliament, but also the provincial parliaments and the local governments.

So Parliament but also local and regional authorities demand a larger involvement in the new law and a more limited time frame.

Right now it is under debate how far the government directives can go in relation to the local responsibilities.

For instance when approving requests for keeping demonstrations like the anti-discrimination demonstration, balancing the Human Right to gather against human health considerations.

By saying you can have a demonstration, but you have to use social distance, or the number of participants is limited to certain number.

To conclude, I would like to highlight the fact, but you will have understood already from my statement, that the Monitoring Committee will continue to use all available tools to promote good democratic governance at all times, be they normal, critical or "new normal".

Thank you for your attention.

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## **Mr Róbert Grúman, Chair of the Governance Committee, Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe**

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to participate in this meeting today, in my capacity as Chair of the Governance Committee of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and as the Vice-President of the Covasna County Council in Romania.

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic is far more than a health crisis, it has been affecting societies and economies all over the world in a profound and unprecedented manner. As we all know, it has already vast financial and structural consequences for local and regional authorities in Europe as well as the national governments.

The examples for such impact at the territorial level are numerous: In the short term, some local governments are facing liquidity problems as many tax deadlines have been postponed. In the longer term, authorities will face large revenue declines that may lead to drastic budget cuts and to the reduction of public services.

The pandemic has shown shortcomings of sanitary systems of certain European countries and regions. It seems that some government systems were more resilient and better prepared to such a major crisis than others, and that co-operation between the different tiers of government functioned better in some regions than in others.

Therefore, the Governance Committee of the Congress will organise a thematic debate on multi-governance and cooperation aspects during the next meeting scheduled for 21 September. We hope to be able to hold it in Strasbourg – but this will depend, not least, on the further development of Covid-19.

We will also consider an exchange of views on the very practical side of local and regional governance – digital meetings of councils, legal implications of remote decision-making and citizen participation in municipalities and regions in times of major crisis, to mention only some interesting topics. This could result in a compilation of practical guidelines for our Congress members. In any case, we will continue this debate during the Congress Plenary Session, normally due to be held in October.

We will look into these questions and must make use of the valuable experiences gained over the last months to improve health care and other public services for the benefit of the general public. This is a challenge and a chance at the same time!

Dear colleagues,

I believe that consultation between all levels of governments is the key to success in coping with the crisis and with possible future challenges. Let me emphasise in this context the basic principles of the European Charter of Local Self-Governance: self-government, consultation and financial autonomy. It is essential that national authorities fully embrace these principles of our Charter and remove restrictions which have been implemented, in some countries, in the initial phase of the crisis. Extraordinary measures must always be temporary only and under democratic control.

We must prevent, under all circumstances, this crisis – irrespective of its dramatic economic impact – from destroying our democratic values and our free and pluralistic societies.

I would like now to conclude by a few words about the challenges we are currently facing in my own country Romania and, more specifically, in Covasna County, where I have my elected mandate.

On the 13<sup>th</sup> of March Romania introduced a state of emergency to prevent and control the spread of COVID-19. After two months, a state of alert was instated at the national level, starting from the 15<sup>th</sup> of May.

Currently, Romania has 22.415 cases (1.437 death)

Like worldwide, the restrictive measures and regulations put a lot of pressure on people, in everyday life, but to sustain the smooth operation of the public institutions and the emergency healthcare system, the pressure was put on the local government.

The Covasna County Council as the budgetary sustainer of the county emergency hospital allocated extra financial resources for the provision of services, materials, and special equipment to battle the virus.

In strong partnership and co-operation with the NGO's health care and youth associations, since the beginning of the lockdown, throughout the cities and rural areas, we were helping to provide the daily needs of elderly people.

Being one of the smallest counties in Romania, after 3 months, we can say that we were quite fortunate, having disciplined citizens who understood and respected the lockdowns and the strict regulations.

Last but not least I find it very important to speak out about the economic effects of the pandemic. We are facing factory lockdowns, mass layoffs, and the struggle of the HORECA and tourism sector.

Now, as restrictions are being eased across the country, industry players are trying to find a way to regain the trust of tourists and breathe new life into empty leisure accommodations.

To help them, the county's tourism association has recently announced the "Visit Covasna Safe Place" program, which grants hoteliers a "COVID Safe Place" certification. So far, more than 60 properties in Covasna County have complied with the measures recommended by the association and received such a certificate, throughout the county.

Thank you for your attention.

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## **Ms Snežana Samardžić-Marković, Director General, DG Democracy, Council of Europe**

Dear Chairperson, distinguished participants,

I would like to thank all of you for the fruitful meeting. I would also like to thank the Greek chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers for supporting this meeting and including it under its activities.

### **Covid-19 and democracies**

COVID-19 is the first pandemic of this millennium. Some experts say that it will not be the last one. Moreover, it is not behind us, as some countries are still struggling with high infection rates and a second wave or regional surges cannot be excluded. Even if Covid-19 is not yet behind us, it is not too early to draw some lessons from this crisis.

The first lesson is that democracies which uphold human rights, the rule of law and the principles of good democratic governance are best placed to manage a challenge of such a magnitude and complexity. Only a system of government based on the protection of fundamental rights, legality, transparency, openness, inclusion, dialogue, respect of national minority's rights, public ethics and accountability can deliver durable and trustworthy solutions, which are supported by citizens and all stakeholders. Tackling this crisis is not only about bringing down the infection rate. It is about ensuring the protection of public health while continuing to protect people's rights and deliver good governance. Today's meeting has given us a wealth of information and examples of responses to Covid-19.

I see four areas where we can draw lessons from this crisis and from the way public authorities at all levels have handled it. These areas correspond to the stages of crisis management: Preparedness, response, return to normality, aftermath

#### **1<sup>st</sup> stage: preparedness**

Being prepared to tackle a pandemic means relying on the scientific community on the one hand, and public bodies responsible for health and public safety on the other hand, to identify the first signs of an outbreak. It means having a pre-existing plan in place. It means establishing communication channels between different authorities involved and having an alert system to warn other States of the incoming threat.

#### **2<sup>nd</sup> stage: Response**

To be able to respond to the pandemic, Council of Europe member States have adopted exceptional emergency measures, either under existing legislative frameworks or newly established ones. The response to the public health threat has involved primarily preventing the spread of the virus and ensuring the supply of medical care and equipment. In addition, it has required ensuring the continuation of essential services and addressing the immediate socio-economic consequences provoked by the virus and the measures that were taken to tackle it.

Authorities at all levels of government have been involved in the response. The need to ensure coordination, concertation and a constant flow of information between them has been crucial to the effective handling of the crisis. I hope that member States will draw inspiration from the examples they heard today to strengthen their capacity in this area even further. We have also heard powerful examples of how local authorities have been in the frontline in mobilising the solidarity effort, addressing situations of vulnerability and



reducing the impact of the crisis on the economic fabric of their communities. This is a vital responsibility which needs to be supported by adequate financial resources.

The response to Covid-19 is a reminder that openness and transparency are essential components of democratic governance: the public has the right to be informed and be provided with up-to-date and reliable information on the pandemic and the measures to tackle it.

After having listened to the interventions by member States today, it is also clear that Covid-19 has been a catalyst for change. Member States had to find different, innovative ways to reach out to the public and to continue to provide essential services, to ensure in so far possible that people could continue to have a normal life. Increased teleworking possibilities for all employees, including in the public administration; videoconference meetings for elected and government bodies; digital tools for providing administrative services to the public are new practices that have been mentioned by all the participants.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> stage: return to normality**

I sincerely believe that, these practices could have a durable legacy now that a number of member States approach the stage of the return to normality. E-democracy and e-governance could become the new normal. Or at least, reticence against them could be more easily overcome, especially in the face of increased expectations by the public.

### **4<sup>th</sup> stage: aftermath**

Dear Chairperson, distinguished participants,

The Covid-19 pandemic is a stress test for our democracies. Unfortunately, this test is not over. Even once the virus is defeated, there will remain heavy social and economic consequences to deal with. I believe that in the difficult times that lie ahead of us, some lessons learnt in these last few months, and which we have reviewed together today, will continue to be extremely relevant. I sincerely hope that today's discussions will be reflected in the political declaration that is planned for the Athens Ministerial Session in November, which was mentioned this morning by the Secretary General.

With its manifold cooperation activities and the work of its monitoring mechanisms and steering committees, the Directorate General of Democracy remains at the disposal of member States to help them respond to this unprecedented challenge while remaining true to the fundamental values of democracy and governance.

Thank you.

**\*\*\***

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