

1510th Meeting of the Ministers' Deputies

Wednesday, 23 October 2024

Address by Mathieu Mori, Secretary General of the Congress

Mr Chair,
Mr Secretary General,
Mr Deputy Secretary General
Ambassadors,

I am pleased to report back on some of the highlights of the 47th session of the Congress.

Support to Ukraine

First of all, the Congress expressed its continuing support to Ukraine by holding a debate on the destruction of its cultural heritage. Following the contribution of the Minister of culture of Ukraine and the chair of the Dnipropetrovsk regional council, the Congress adopted a declaration which stressed that the targeting of cultural sites constitutes a systemic policy aiming at erasing Ukraine's historical and cultural identity, reflecting a genocidal intent.

With more than a thousand cultural sites damaged or destroyed since the beginning of the war, such as the historic centers of Odesa and Lviv, it was important for the Congress to help draw attention to this issue and we are satisfied that this declaration has indeed been taken up by the media.

The declaration is also a way to promote the Faro and Nicosia conventions as well as the register of damage which will deal with claims linked to historic, cultural and religious heritage.

I take this opportunity to stress some of our current work on Ukraine:

I had the opportunity, at the recent Conference of Participants of the Register of Damage to stress the commitment of the Congress to make the register known and understood to cities and mayors of Ukraine. Following an initial awareness raising conference on this topic in June in Kyiv, I will go back to Ukraine in the early months of next year to present the new categories of claims. My thanks go to the colleagues in the Hague and Kyiv for our excellent cooperation in these outreach activities.

Furthermore, following the last high-level dialogue on good democratic governance last July, the Ukrainian authorities have asked for a further dedicated meeting on decentralization to take place before the end of the year, request to which we have of course responded positively.

Finally, the session was, once again, the opportunity to share best practices on how to best create partnerships with Ukrainian regions and cities.

The session was of course also very much devoted to our core work on democracy.

Democracy

Local democracy monitoring

The Congress adopted the monitoring reports of Finland, Iceland, Latvia, and Malta and we are currently discussing with Türkiye and Ireland the content of a roadmap to facilitate the implementation of their latest monitoring reports recommendations.

Our center of expertise is also working hard with Armenia, Hungary, Finland and Serbia in addressing some of the findings of the monitoring reports.

Local elections observations

In terms of local election observations, the session adopted the Election observation report of Türkiye. I would like to thank the authorities of Türkiye for this invitation as well the authorities of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro for their recent invitations to observe local elections in their country.

Threats to democracy

These monitoring and election observation missions are part of the early warning mechanisms of the Council of Europe to measure the state of local democracy and therefore democracy as a whole.

A report was presented at the session, on the key findings of the monitoring and election observation missions over the last five years. I am sorry to say that it does not make for an optimistic reading : hate speech, disinformation, foreign influence in electoral processes, physical and verbal aggressions targeting local leaders are on the rise.

In order to monitor these trends, please let me remind everyone that the Congress is the only European institution which has the mandate and capacity to observe local and regional elections in Europe. The OSCE Odihr only rarely observes local elections, and the European Parliament only joins existing missions but does not lead local election observations.

To deliver on the first of the ten Reykjavik Principles for Democracy, I would therefore like to encourage you all to invite us more systematically to observe local and regional elections in your country.

Promoting participation

On a more positive note, I would like to stress the encouraging developments we see in many countries in their attempt to promote citizens participation. The Congress is playing its part by implementing projects on participatory democracy in Georgia and in all countries of the Balkans.

I am also particularly glad that several major projects will soon start to promote democracy and human rights at local level, notably in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Georgia. In Georgia, the Congress continues its close dialogue with the authorities, civil society and oppositions. This dialogue will continue after the elections in the form of a high-level visit as announced during the urgent debate on Georgia held during the session.

Droits Humains

Suite à Reykjavik, le Congrès travaille désormais activement sur les questions de droits humains. Nous avons créé en septembre une unité dédiée à cette thématique et la session a abordé le rôle des élus locaux dans le respect, la protection, la réalisation et la promotion des droits humains. Le Commissaire aux droits de l'homme et le juge français à la Cour ont pu échanger longuement avec les élus du Congrès, échanges qui nourriront un rapport général sur la protection des droits humains au niveau local qui est en cour de rédaction.

Le juge Guyomard a notamment souligné l'importance d'« écouter davantage les élus locaux qui font vivre la démocratie et l'état de droit au quotidien et qui sont les premiers acteurs de la protection des droits humains ». La Cour se réjouit de ce nouvel axe de travail du Congrès puisque, comme les juges nationaux et comme les Etats, les collectivités locales doivent intégrer le reflexe conventionnel.

C'est dans ce cadre, que le Congrès a mené en Bulgarie sa première mission de dialogue politique pour faciliter l'exécution des arrêts de la Cour, comme l'y a invité le Sommet de Reykjavik.

Droits sociaux et environnement

En matière de droits sociaux et d'environnement, j'aimerais attirer votre attention sur deux recommandations qui vous parviendront bientôt et qui ont donné lieu à des débats animés lors de la session : l'une sur le vieillissement de nos communautés et l'accès des personnes âgées à une aide sociale de qualité et l'autre sur l'économie circulaire au niveau local.

La démocratie locale dans le monde

La session a également été l'occasion d'ouvrir les horizons du Congrès en dehors de notre continent et d'entendre des élus non européens notamment du Maroc et de Mauritanie. Ces invités ont souligné l'importance des principes démocratiques protégés par la charte européenne de l'autonomie locale. Ils ont encouragé le Conseil de l'Europe à promouvoir les principes de la Charte en dehors du Continent européen.

Le Congrès a entendu cet appel et réfléchit actuellement à comment y répondre de manière efficace et réaliste.

Perspectives jeunesse

Pour finir, j'aimerais mentionner le 10ème anniversaire du programme jeunesse du Congrès qui a été célébré lors de la session. Symboliquement et pour la première fois, la présidence d'une partie de la session a été confiée à un délégué jeune. Témoignage de la confiance de notre institution envers la jeunesse et de son engagement renouvelé à intégrer les perspectives jeunesse dans le travail du Conseil de l'Europe.

C'est en faisant écho au cri d'Ingrid Bergman qui, en tant que femme, disait « je ne demande rien, mais je veux tout avoir » que nos délégués jeunes, sans rien nous enlever, revendiquent leur place dans notre société.

Merci enfin à vous tous qui avez facilité la venue de ministres, de maires, de personnalités de vos pays respectifs et tous nos remerciements pour les dialogues forts nourris et constructifs avec le SG, le Président de l'Assemblée Parlementaire et la Présidence du Comité des Ministres.