

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities



The Bureau of the Congress

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Cooperation activities of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities

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Preamble

The Congress is the Council of Europe's assembly of local and regional representatives, a political body of territorial representatives who hold an elected mandate in their own country.

The Congress is a reference point for territorial democracy. Its core mission is to ensure the full application of democratic principles at local and regional levels both by national governments and by territorial authorities, notably through monitoring the implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government and observing local and regional elections. It acts transversally in all fields of activities of the Council of Europe where there is a local and/or regional dimension.

Introduction

In order to improve its response to the challenges of local and regional democracy, the Congress decided upon a new orientation for its activities and priorities for 2011 and 2012. It committed itself to moving beyond its traditional role of standard setter and to address in a practical way the problems that are identified during monitoring activities. This means that it is ready to offer its expertise to help both national and territorial authorities implement the changes proposed in its recommendations, in particular on the issues of competences and mandate of local and regional elected representatives as well as on the role and functioning of their associations.

The Congress proposes cooperation programmes with the overall objective to support the consolidation and development of territorial democracy, to build confidence and trust in local elected officials and to foster greater transparency at local and regional level.

The Congress has a unique status and composition which sets it apart from other international bodies and expert committees working in the field of local self-government. Its members form a pool of practical and political experience that can be drawn on and used to its full advantage for the development and deepening of local and regional democracy and governance in the Council of Europe member states.

1. Local and regional elected representatives at the heart of a political pluralistic democratic system.

Local and regional democracy is one of the main innovations of democracy in the 20th century. The evolution of thought and understanding of what constitutes democracy and local and regional democracy in particular, the evolution of the strength and degree of involvement of local and regional authorities in national and European policy-making, their growing role and their recognition by governments of member states constitute a major reality of today's democratic system in Europe.

Implemented in most European countries, local and regional democracy remains a difficult and on-going challenge in some Council of Europe member states, where it still needs deepening and consolidation in order to ensure appropriate local self-government, effective decentralisation and good governance.

Local and regional elected representatives play a key role in a pluralistic political democratic system. The European Charter of Local Self-government affirms the role of local authorities as the first level for practicing democracy. It is the first internationally binding treaty that sets forth a clear definition of competences for each level of governance and the principle of subsidiarity and that guarantees the rights of local authorities and their elected representatives.

In addition to the principles of local self-government and subsidiarity, the Charter lays down principles for the democratic functioning of local authorities and guarantees the conditions of office of local elected representatives and their ability to freely exercise their functions.

The Charter is the foundation when it comes to building a system of multilevel governance on the European continent. The Congress can bring to the system of multilevel governance its toolbox of legal instruments, its monitoring experience and pan-European outreach and direct access to local and regional authorities and national governments across the European continent.

The additional Protocol to the Charter on the participation of citizens in the conduct of public affairs puts emphasis on one of the major democratic principles that make a key contribution to good governance and to effective decision making. The duty of local elected representatives to involve citizens is of increasing

importance. It is at local level that the dialogue between authorities and citizens can be established in the most efficient way.

The Council of Europe Reference Framework for Regional Democracy also constitutes a practical point of reference when considering institutional reforms and governance at the regional level. The Council of Europe Committee of Ministers has recently encouraged governments of Member States to take it into account in their policies and reforms.

Decentralisation has changed the overall situation in Europe, especially in the new democracies of the Eastern part of the continent. Local elected officials have become important stakeholders in democracy. They are entrusted with a number of public tasks and responsibilities which they have to undertake through a proper dialogue with their peers, with other local and regional authorities, with central authorities, with the business community and with the citizens that they represent.

Local and regional authorities are uniquely placed to develop strategies, to shape thinking and to take an active lead locally, as they have been elected to represent the interests of the people.

The powers and levels of responsibility of local elected officials can be expected to increase. At the same time, the issues that they have to take decisions on are often complex and the resources at their disposal can be inadequate or even scarce.

For all these reasons, they must act as the facilitators of democracy within their territories and this implies a certain level of political maturity and leadership in order to be successful in influencing the conditions for local self-government and in responding adequately to the needs of their citizens.

In some Council of Europe member states, ratification of the Charter has led to a considerable evolution, to the point where local self-government legislation is globally consistent with the Charter. However, implementation does not always reach expected standards, as the Congress monitoring activities have shown. The reasons for this can vary but the lack of capacity of local authorities is frequently mentioned.

This has led the Congress to propose specific cooperation programmes with the member states concerned. These programmes are expected to lead to concrete results following the recommendations of its monitoring and election observation missions. The main focus consists in addressing the political dimension of the responsibilities of local and regional elected representatives in order to increase their leadership and their responsibilities as part of the complex task of improving local self-government and responding to the challenges in the field.

2. *Strengthening leadership by local and regional elected representatives*

Responding to the challenges facing local and regional democracy in Europe implies strengthening the local elected representatives in their roles, responsibilities and capacity.

The proposed programme focuses on the quality of local self-governance and the consolidation of the reforms in this field in the Council of Europe member states. It aims at improving the leadership capacities of local elected officials and empowering them to engage in constructive dialogue with the central authorities and with the citizens. It also seeks to strengthen the associations of local and regional authorities.

It consists of a series of peer-to-peer exchanges and interactive sessions with the participation of Congress members from other member states of the Council of Europe and experts. It includes all tiers of government in the country concerned as well as NGO's.

The work can be organised into the following main themes, according to the specific situation of the countries involved:

- the role and responsibilities of local elected representatives;
- ethics in politics and decision making;
- citizen participation;
- transfrontier co-operation;
- positive campaigning (with a view to local and regional elections);
- promotion and exchange of experiences in the implementation of human rights at local level;
- regionalisation process (where applicable).

The programme complements existing programmes which focus on providing legal assistance in the area of local government reform and on the implementation of the European standards of decentralisation and good governance at local and regional level. It will take into consideration the proposal by the authorities in the country to further promote legal and operational capacities for local self-government.

3. Target public, partners, expected results and reference texts

The Congress seeks to develop a programme aimed at local elected representatives of the Council of Europe member states, bearing in mind their political roles and responsibilities.

The programme will be developed in line with the main international treaties and texts on local and regional democracy, in particular the:

- European Charter of Local Self-Government and its Additional Protocol on the right of citizens to participate in the conduct of public affairs;
- Council of Europe Reference Framework for Regional Democracy;
- European Code of conduct for the political integrity of local and regional elected representatives;
- Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life.

The path towards an enhanced democracy obliges local elected officials to set their own standards and to improve the performance of their local or regional authority to respond to the mandate and responsibilities conferred by the electors.

The partners for the implementation of activities are therefore local and regional elected representatives, the delegation to the Council of Europe Congress of the country concerned, the national associations of municipalities and regions and experts in the field of local and regional democracy. Local media and NGOs, as well as international networks of local and regional authorities such as CEMR, AER and UCLG, may also be involved at certain stages of the activities undertaken.

The main expected results of such programme and activities are:

- enhanced institutional capacity of local authorities;
- better implementation of the principles of the European Charter of Local Self-government;
- regular dialogue with central authorities;
- stronger involvement of associations of local and regional authorities and consolidated multi-level relationships;
- increased dialogue with citizens and involvement in local public life and decision making;
- more effective and democratic local self-government.

Conclusion

The Congress' objective is to respond to the various challenges that local and regional authorities face in today's Europe, as well as to promote cooperation among local and regional authorities of Europe.

Much legislative reform on local and regional democracy has already been carried out by member states on the basis of the findings set out in Congress monitoring reports and through activities undertaken in parallel to its monitoring visits.

The Congress will seek to co-finance such activities through voluntary contributions from Council of Europe member states and/or support from the European Union and other international partners.

In the implementation of this programme, the Congress will bear in mind the need to avoid overlap and duplication of work with other Council of Europe bodies. It will seek to establish complementarity and synergies with the intergovernmental sector and with the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) with regard to constitutional matters, issues related to elections and referendums.

Furthermore, the Congress is ready to take part in the Council of Europe neighbourhood policy and to contribute actively to the inclusion of the local and regional democracy dimension in this new policy.

The Congress will also consider possibilities for cooperation with the Committee of the Regions when working with countries of the Eastern Partnership of the European Union or in the Mediterranean region.