

31st SESSION

Report
CG31(2016)13final

Congress priorities 2017-2020

Bureau of the Congress

Rapporteurs¹: Anders KNAPE, Sweden (L, EPP/CCE)
Gudrun MOSLER-TÖRNSTRÖM, Austria (R, SOC)

Resolution 406 (2016)..... 2

Summary

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities represents the local and regional authorities of the Council of Europe member States. It contributes to the inclusion of the local and regional dimension in the activities of the Council of Europe on democracy, rule of law, and human rights.

The action of the Congress is intended to promote local and regional democracy, identify tools necessary for its proper functioning and to help communities respond to the challenges and difficulties they face. It also helps to strengthen the local and regional voice vis-à-vis the central and federal governments and other European organisations.

Its statutory activities are based on the European Charter of Local Self-Government and the Reference Framework for Regional Democracy.

Its goal is to ensure effective responses to the needs of local authorities and their citizens, while continuing to improve the relevance and effectiveness of its action in the field in the framework of the Council of Europe priorities.

The adoption of the priorities for 2017-2020 gives the Congress the opportunity to recall its statutory missions, assess its action in light of the 2013-2016 priorities and identify strategic directions for the coming years, which include:

- **Enhancing the quality of local and regional democracy** – especially monitoring and strengthening the European Charter of Local Self-Government, observing local and regional elections, raising awareness on human rights at local and regional level and promoting ethics and transparency.
- **Building safe and inclusive societies that respect diversity** – especially combating radicalisation and violent extremism, integrating refugees and migrants, promoting intercultural dialogue and citizen's participation, in particular among young people.

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 and Liberal Democrat Group
ECR: European Conservatives and Reformists Group
NR: Members not belonging to a political group of the Congress

RESOLUTION 406 (2016)²

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, as an assembly of the local and regional authorities of the Council of Europe member States;

1. represents the local and regional communities and their elected officials and helps to ensure their participation in the Council of Europe action aimed at promoting and defending democracy, the rule of law and human rights;
2. defines its new priorities and the direction of its activities at each renewal session of the Congress;
3. consults the national associations of local and regional authorities to define the strategic orientations of its work;
4. has considered the project on priorities for 2017-2020 that aims at:
 - a. enhancing the quality of local and regional democracy and governance, human rights and the rule of law in Council of Europe member States;
 - b. helping local and regional authorities and national governments to face the challenges resulting from the many crisis affecting Europe;
 - c. promoting, sharing and exchanging knowledge and experiences as well as co-operation between elected members of communities of all member States;
 - d. developing citizen participation in the political process and in the creation of a European continent that respects common values;
 - e. developing co-operation with its institutional partners;
5. adopts its 2017-2020 priorities and instructs its Bureau to overview their implement action by the Congress chambers and committees.

² Debated and adopted by the Congress on 21 October 2016, 3rd sitting (see Document [CG31\(2016\)13final](#), appendix), rapporteurs: Anders KNAPE, Sweden (L, EPP/CCE) and Gudrun MOSLER-TÖRNSTRÖM, Austria (R, SOC).

APPENDIX I

Table of contents

A.	Introduction.....	3
B.	The priorities.....	6
I.	Enhancing the quality of local and regional democracy.....	6
II.	Building safe and inclusive societies that respect diversity	10

A. Introduction

1. The preparation of the priorities for 2017-2020 constituted a key moment for the Congress to reflect on its role, its work and the strategic lines of approach for the years ahead.

2. The Congress is committed to pursuing its action in the spirit of the reform it began in 2010 and to working with the aim of increasing its political and operational responsibilities and enhancing the impact of its recommendations and the associated co-operation activities.

3. In setting its priorities, the Congress sought to ensure that it provided a response to the needs of the authorities it represents and continued to improve the relevance and effectiveness of its action on the ground.

4. Furthermore it enhanced its institutional role as the third political body of the Council of Europe and the only political Assembly to defend the interests of the local and regional authorities across the greater Europe. It will continue to provide these authorities a platform where they may present their know-how and experience in addressing the challenges they are facing and share good practices and solutions to common problems at all levels of governance.

5. As a representative body of local and regional authorities, the Congress can provide answers to the difficulties they face and identify the tools necessary for the proper functioning of local and regional democracy. It also helps strengthen the voice of the local and regional level vis-à-vis central and federal governments, within the Council of Europe and other European organisations.

1. The role of the Congress in the Council of Europe

6. The Congress implements the local and regional dimension of the Council of Europe's action in the field of democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

7. In its present form, it was established in 1994. Its terms of reference and functioning are based on the Congress Charter and Statutory Resolution, adopted by the Committee of Ministers in 1994 and recently amended in July 2015 (see Appendix 1).

8. The role of the Congress is to promote local and regional democracy, strengthen authorities' self-government and improve local and regional governance. It monitors the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government and the Reference Framework on Regional Democracy by the Council of Europe member States and the holding of free and fair elections at local and regional level.

9. The Congress provides its members and its institutional partners in the Council of Europe and beyond with a platform to exchange ideas, experiences and good practices. It encourages these exchanges and partnerships and seeks to strengthen dialogue between all players in the field of local self-government and regional democracy.

10. In addition to its role as a forum for exchange, the Congress is a consultative body for the Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe as well as a monitoring body and it carries out co-operation and thematic activities.

11. In 2014, Secretary General Thorbjørn Jagland set out his priorities for the Council of Europe during his second term of office. These "seven imperatives" were aimed at increasing the relevance and effectiveness of the Organisation.

12. Top priority was given to strengthening the European Court of Human Rights and the principle of shared responsibility. The second imperative was the strengthening and expansion of co-operation with member States. The third priority was the upholding of democratic principles. The fourth priority

was to provide assistance to neighbouring countries by introducing the next generation Neighbourhood Partnership. The fifth imperative was to strengthen the Social Charter and the sixth was to make the Organisation stronger and more cohesive. Lastly, the seventh imperative was to enhance the Council of Europe's operational capacity.

13. On the basis of these "seven imperatives" and the Council of Europe's programmes and budget, the Congress will continue to support the values and standards of the Council of Europe, defending respect for human rights, the rule of law and democracy while contributing to the building of more inclusive societies for the citizens of Europe. It will focus in particular on implementing the Council of Europe's policies, conventions and campaigns, seeking, amongst other things, to incorporate a gender dimension, children's rights and the rights of civil society into all its activities and texts.

14. The Congress will continue to work closely with other entities of the Council of Europe in areas of common interest and with its external institutional partners, such as the EU Committee of the Regions and the national and European associations representing local and regional authorities.

2. Implementation of 2013-2016 priorities

15. The previous Congress priorities adopted at the October 2012 session for the period 2013-2016 focused on three key areas:

- Raising the quality of local and regional democracy and human rights in Europe,
- Rising to the new challenges resulting from the economic and financial crisis,
- Developing co-operation and partnerships.

16. In order to implement these priorities, the Congress has strengthened its monitoring activities, refocused its work in line with the authorities' needs and enhanced its political dialogue with governments and institutional partners while at the same time putting in place tools aimed at ensuring visible and sustainable results in the field. It has also sought to identify and anticipate trends and developments and continued to adapt to political and societal changes in member States and at European level.

17. As part of the monitoring of the European Charter of Local Self-Government and the observation of local elections, the Congress has increased the number and the quality of its missions and adopted new rules in this respect in order to maintain a high standard in its work. It has paid special attention to following up its recommendations and their implementation by the member States and stepped up its co-operation with other organisations. It has in particular strengthened dialogue with governments by adopting post-monitoring procedures to give practical follow-up to its recommendations, and implemented co-operation and partnership activities in several member States, in particular to respond to recurring issues identified during its monitoring activities and its observation of elections.

18. The Congress has raised awareness among local and regional authorities of the importance of upholding human rights by including this dimension in the role and activities of its Monitoring Committee and by developing performance indicators. It has promoted the networking of cities and regions for the reception of migrants and refugees and has drawn up a number of strategies and tools, in particular in the field of fighting violent extremism and radicalisation.

19. It has contributed to the projects and campaigns undertaken by the Council of Europe such as the 1 in 5 Campaign which it has promoted at local level with its Pact of Cities and Regions against sexual violence towards children. It has also supported the No Hate Speech Campaign and the Campaign against domestic violence.

20. It has encouraged its members to seek to protect the most vulnerable population groups, including the Roma, and in this connection, it set up the Alliance of Cities and Regions for Roma inclusion. It has promoted greater citizen participation in local and regional life, especially through its European Local Democracy Week. It has encouraged local and regional authorities to guarantee the rights of LGBT people.

21. As part of its strategy against radicalisation at local level, it has issued guidelines on the prevention of radicalisation leading to terrorism for local and regional authorities and begun devising tools to promote interfaith dialogue at local level.

22. Its work has been undertaken and led by the Congress members, with the support of its Secretariat and in co-operation with other institutional partners both within the Council of Europe – in

particular the Committee of Ministers, the Parliamentary Assembly, the Commissioner for Human Rights, the Venice Commission and the operational Directorates General – and outside, in other international organisations, such as the European Union and its Committee of the Regions, and with national and European associations of local and regional authorities and partners such as the European Forum for Urban Security.

23. During the October 2015 session, the President of the Congress and the Presidents of the Chambers presented a mid-term evaluation of the work carried out under these priorities. The adoption of the new priorities for the next Congress term during the October 2016 session will be an opportunity for the Congress President and the Presidents of the Chambers to present a global assessment of the work carried out and implementation of the 2013-2016 priorities.

3. Outlook for 2017-2020

24. The economic and financial crisis of recent years has had a broad national and European impact which has also had a huge influence on the functioning and quality of local and regional democracy. Local and regional authorities have been faced with the consequences of the crisis, in terms of loss of autonomy, lack of resources and indebtedness. A recentralisation trend has, moreover, been observed in several member States.

25. Furthermore, authorities have also been facing new challenges such as the difficulties associated with the management of high numbers of refugees and migrants, the long-term integration of these new population groups, and the rise of various forms of extremism, rejection, nationalism and terrorism in European societies.

26. The new priorities for 2017-2020 take these developments into account and reflect the particular local and regional consequences of national, European and international developments. They also look at how new technologies will impact and change political life at local level over the coming years and how access to these new technologies – the internet in particular – can be promoted in rural areas and for the elderly.

27. They build on the work already achieved during the period 2013-2016 and represent in this regard continuity in the action of Congress. They form the general framework in which the Congress will be able to undertake its statutory and specific activities and develop its tools in order to help authorities face up to the challenges and deal with the specific difficulties they meet in the exercise of their responsibilities towards their citizens.

28. The Congress will enhance its close co-operation with its institutional partners inside the Council of Europe and outside, in particular with the Committee of the Regions and the European associations of local and regional authorities.

29. It will pursue its dialogue with the national associations of local and regional governments, to involve them in Congress activities and to advocate their role with the member States' governments.

30. The Congress will continue its efforts to give its work more visibility, in particular by promoting and circulating its reference documents and texts and developing new working tools for its members and stakeholders.

31. When identifying and drafting the priorities, between October 2015 and October 2016, the rapporteurs consulted widely with members of the Congress and the national and European associations of local and regional authorities. They have incorporated the specific contributions of the members of the Plenary Bureau, the Bureau of the Chamber of Local Self Government and the Bureau of the Chamber of Regions and of the three Congress committees – Monitoring, Governance and Current Affairs.

32. The priorities of the Congress will be implemented by its two chambers and three committees and be reflected in their work programmes.

33. The Bureau of the Congress will be responsible for ensuring implementation of the priorities in the activities of the Congress. It will make a mid-term assessment of the priorities and their relevance in the light of political developments in Europe and in the member States and will, where necessary, update them.

B. The priorities

I. Enhancing the quality of local and regional democracy

34. Democracy is one of the basic European values and local and regional democracy is nearest to the citizens.

35. The primary role of the Congress is to promote and defend local and regional democracy in keeping with the values and priorities of the Council of Europe. In this respect, the Congress promotes multilevel governance throughout Europe.

36. In Article 3 and 4 of the Congress Statutory Resolution, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe entrusts the Congress with monitoring activities in connection with the European Charter of Local Self-Government and with the observation of local and regional elections. The full wording is reproduced in Appendix I.

37. At its 1112th meeting in April 2011, the Committee of Ministers encouraged the governments of member States to take account, when implementing governance policies and territorial reforms, of the Reference Framework for Regional Democracy, adopted in Utrecht in November 2009 by the Ministers responsible for local and regional autonomy.

38. In carrying out its work, the Congress contributes to reinforcing and guaranteeing local and regional democracy, in the context of the economic crisis and its consequences for local authorities. In the coming years, the Congress will pay special attention to new trends and will combat any reduction in the powers and autonomy of municipalities.

39. In particular, it will continue to work towards compliance with the concomitance principle between the competences of local authorities and the financial resources which are allocated by central governments, as provided by Article 9 of the European Charter of Local Self-government. It will also continue to look for overall incentives aimed at continuing the processes of decentralisation and strengthening of local and regional democracy.

1. Promoting local democracy

40. As Europe's populations become increasingly urbanised, the management of towns and cities is becoming more and more critical for citizens' quality of life. At the same time, Europe's populations are changing fast, becoming increasingly mobile and diverse, which itself brings new tensions, issues of living together and security problems. These trends also affect the relations between rural and town communities which the Congress will continue to follow.

41. Fundamental to the principle of subsidiarity is the conviction that it is local authorities which are best placed to meet the needs of citizens and to put forward solutions to their problems. A few years ago (in 2008) the Congress adopted its "European Urban Charter II - Manifesto for a new urbanity", setting out these challenges and giving guidelines for how they should be tackled.

42. In 2015 the Chamber of Local Authorities adopted a report on "New forms of local governance".

43. The Congress, and in particular its Chamber of Local Authorities, will continue to debate, share experience and put forward solutions to the problems facing Europe's towns and cities, including in areas of urban development, environment and the preservation of cultural and architectural heritage. It will promote quality and accessibility of public services delivered by local communities.

44. It will continue to identify changing trends of local public services, local governance and central-local relations.

45. It will pursue its work to improve local democracy through enhanced citizen participation at local level and support for local authorities in their work to build safer and more inclusive societies.

2. Promoting regional democracy

46. The Congress is convinced that regional democracy is a factor for political and territorial stability in Europe. It keeps a close watch on trends in regionalisation in its member States and stands ready to provide its support and expertise wherever needed. In recent years, it adopted three important reports on "Regions with special status" (October 2013), "Trends in regionalisation in Council of

Europe member States” (October 2015) and “Autonomy and borders in an evolving Europe” (March 2016).

47. As a follow-up to this work, the Congress will continue to act as a strong advocate of regional democracy throughout Europe. It will further promote, including through its monitoring, post-monitoring and co-operation activities, the Reference Framework for Regional Democracy, which will have its 10th Anniversary in 2019, as an instrument promoting political stability and territorial integrity.

48. It will pursue and strengthen its co-operation with European regional associations, in particular through its Chamber of Regions, and develop the regional dimension of its co-operation with the Committee of the Regions of the European Union.

3. Monitoring local and regional democracy

49. Monitoring of local and regional democracy and the observation of local and regional elections are among the core activities of the Congress. Over the last few years, the Congress has developed a coherent practice, streamlined its procedures and consequently introduced new rules and procedures.

50. The quality of local and regional democracy requires compliance with international law, which generates obligations for those states that have ratified related treaties such as the European Charter of Local Self-Government and its Additional Protocol on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority.

51. In addition to these texts which impose a number of legal obligations on member States and local and regional authorities, the Reference Framework for Regional Democracy is also a collection of guidelines that states can learn from when they are in the process of reform or reflecting on regional democracy.

52. Lastly, the recommendations made by the Congress to the authorities of the states concerned are also a reference basis and a key vehicle for strengthening the quality of local and regional democracy.

53. On a regular basis, the Congress draws up country-by-country reports on the situation of local and regional democracy in all member States and ensures, in particular, that the principles of the European Charter of Local Self-Government are implemented in domestic law. It submits its recommendations to the Committee of Ministers which forwards them to the governments concerned.

54. The Congress will continue to promote the implementation of these texts by states and monitor the policies and reforms pursued in the field.

55. The Congress will continue to organise monitoring visits to all member States on a regular basis and adopt recommendations on improvements to be made in law and in practice.

56. Considering the consequences of the economic crisis for the local and regional communities, it will in particular pay attention that necessary and adequate financial support is given for municipal activities and services, in accordance with the principles of the Charter.

57. The Congress will elaborate, at least once during each mandate, a compilation of the main findings of the monitoring of the situation of local and regional democracy in the member States which would identify recurring issues in the light of the Charter and on which the Congress should focus its action in order to better assist member States. The result of this process of scrutiny will serve the dialogue with the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe and the member States.

4. Applicability of the Charter in the member States

58. In 2013, the Congress enumerated the recurring issues identified in its monitoring recommendations submitted to states. This work makes it possible to pinpoint the main challenges that are common to all national authorities in terms of local democracy issues and enables the Congress to target its actions and its assistance more accurately and meet the needs of states more effectively. It informed the Committee of Ministers of these recurrent issues and decided to present an update every three years.

59. The Charter is one of Council of Europe Conventions that offer a particular system of ratification "à la carte". In ratifying the Charter, States undertake to comply with a hard core of basic principles whose ratification is compulsory. At the same time, Article 12 enables States to refrain from ratifying specific provisions of the Charter. This flexibility makes it possible to accommodate the diversity and specific features of local government structures in member States. But Article 12 also lays down that each State which ratifies this text considers itself to be bound by it. Consequently, the Charter is applicable and thus can be directly invoked before courts.

60. The Congress will continue to advocate the implementation of all provisions of the Charter, encouraging, particularly through political dialogue as part of its monitoring and/or post-monitoring activities, the ratification of provisions not yet ratified by certain states, so that 100% of the Charter will as far as possible cover 100% of the territory of Europe.

61. In addition, the Congress will pay a particular attention to the applicability of the Charter in order to curb any reluctance or denial in applying it.

62. It will on a regular basis take stock of the situation, including identifying which member States have not fully ratified and/or transposed the Charter into domestic legislation and will submit its updates to the Committee of Ministers.

63. It will also continue to keep a close watch on trends in regionalisation and to promote the development and strengthening of regions, on the basis, in particular, of the Reference Framework for Regional Democracy. It will also continue its reflection on the potential of regional structures and institutions for reducing regional tensions.

5. Dialogue with member States

64. The Congress maintains a regular political dialogue with member States through the Committee of Ministers as well as through bilateral meetings with governments of member States in the framework of post-monitoring activities. This dialogue seeks to promote local self-government principles and to work directly with governments to better implement the European Charter on Local Self-government which they ratified. This co-operation with national authorities is a precondition for strengthening the implementation of Congress recommendations on local and regional democracy. It is based on a constructive discussion on the main challenges that national, local and regional authorities have to deal with and is a key to the discovery of relevant solutions.

65. The Congress will pursue its regular dialogue with the Committee of Ministers, its Rapporteur Groups and its steering committees.

66. It will continue to share its expertise with those states which so request and to offer its support for reforms on the basis of a roadmap drawn up jointly with the authorities of the states concerned, containing a timetable for implementation of the measures on which they have agreed.

67. As part of this effort it will continue to promote a structured and regular political dialogue with those member States that have either not fully ratified the Charter (and/or its additional Protocol) or not transposed it into national legislation to identify ways they can be supported in ensuring the implementation of Congress recommendations for full compliance with the Charter.

6. Observing local and regional elections

68. In addition to its monitoring activities of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, the Congress observes local and regional elections upon invitation by the national or regional authorities responsible for the organisation of elections. Through these missions which lead to reports and recommendations, the Congress helps to improve electoral processes based on international standards, and more generally, foster greater democratic stability in Europe.

69. In recent years, the Congress has enhanced its co-operation with strategic partners working in the field of election observation, in particular the OSCE-ODIHR, the EU Committee of the Regions and the Venice Commission whose Council for Democratic Elections is currently being chaired by the Congress. This has enabled the Congress to have a greater impact and a higher profile within the Council of Europe and beyond.

70. The Congress will continue to organise missions to observe local and regional elections, where appropriate in co-operation with other European institutions. It will develop country-specific

recommendations based on specific observations in the field together with reports on recurring across-the-board electoral issues including the quality of voters' lists, misuse of administrative resources during campaigns and voting rights at local and regional level.

71. In addition, it will pursue the dialogue with stakeholders in the respective countries for a more consistent implementation of its recommendations in the interest of further democratic development.

7. Awareness-raising of human rights at local and regional level

72. The Congress has undertaken to make local and regional elected representatives more aware of their human rights responsibilities in carrying out their responsibilities vis-à-vis the daily lives of local residents. This includes the social dimension of Human Rights enshrined in the European Social Charter.

73. It has collected data and examples of good practice on implementation of policies by local and regional authorities. In May 2015, it organised an international Forum, with the participation of the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, during which the Graz Declaration was adopted.

74. The Graz Declaration sets out the parameters of a series of activities that the Congress will implement within an Action Plan in the coming years. These will include an international symposium in 2017 and the drawing up of a practical handbook to provide elected officials with the tools enabling them to take appropriate decisions which are in full compliance with human rights in areas which have an impact on fundamental freedoms (for example in the fight against radicalisation and terrorism).

75. The Congress will continue and intensify its awareness-raising work, in co-operation with other partners.

8. Promoting ethics and transparency at local and regional level

76. Good political governance is based on the population's trust and elected representatives at all levels must therefore act as role models for society as a whole. In a resolution adopted in 2015, the Congress states that "People who occupy public office must have a high level of integrity and should ignore, in their decisions, their personal interests or other considerations related to their personal position".

77. The Congress will work on means to prevent corruption, which requires the strengthening of values based on ethics and transparency, including transparency in declarations of interest and public procurement. It will in particular promote rigorous governance frameworks and the development of common standards, as part of an overall and cross-sectorial strategy which will also involve other international organisations and specialised entities. The Congress will also support the development and the widening of the use of e-democracy tools on a local and regional level, as this can help to increase transparency and better involve citizens.

78. Reports will be drawn up and the 1999 European Code of conduct for the political integrity of local and regional elected representatives will be revised and extended to cover executive staff and officials in local and regional government.

9. Implementing co-operation programmes

79. Fully involved in the preparation of Council of Europe Action Plans, the Congress Secretariat develops and implements co-operation projects at local and regional level. These activities are taking into account the Congress monitoring reports and elections observations reports as well as its thematic priorities, and are driven by the demand of the member States themselves. The guidelines adopted in March 2015 on "Improving the impact of the recommendations of the Congress – Guidelines for co-operation activities in member States of the Council of Europe" serve as a basis for implementation.

80. The co-operation projects will consist mainly of series of peer-to-peer exchanges and interactive sessions with the participation of Congress members and experts. Easily adaptable to specific target groups, relevant themes and local contexts, these projects aim at accompanying local and regional authorities as well as other relevant stakeholders to take action in the field to further implement the principles of the Charter and the Congress recommendations. Roundtables, seminars and

workshops are conceived as an experience of mutual learning and sharing of know-how and knowledge.

81. By accompanying the implementation of the principles of local and regional democracy, developing the competencies of local elected representatives (women and men) and enhancing their institutional capacity, promoting consultation among local and regional authorities, and increasing citizen participation, these co-operation programmes will support the Congress in ensuring the full application of democratic principles at local and regional levels in Europe.

82. Well established synergies with the activities of the Council of Europe's Directorate General of Democracy and its Centre of Expertise for the Reform of Local Administration will be reinforced.

II. Building safe and inclusive societies that respect diversity

83. The aim of good local governance is to create an environment and living conditions that will help citizens to open up. The Congress is convinced that local and regional authorities are more and more responsive to the expectations of their citizens in this respect and must find ways of nurturing more diversified societies increase the intergenerational balance of interests and ensure safe and prosperous living conditions.

84. The purpose of representative democracy is to ensure that all groups have an equal opportunity to voice their opinions and influence decision-making. Interaction between local residents and decision-makers and improved communication both serve to strengthen inclusion, joint responsibility of and co-operation between citizens, decision-makers and local-governments as well as non-governmental organisations. It creates pre-conditions for the strengthening of local vitality and viability.

85. The Congress will assist municipalities in exercising their powers, ensuring quality and accessibility of public and municipal services, increasing civic engagement of citizens, and searching for solutions to face a range of challenges, particularly in terms of security, integration, dialogue and respect for fundamental human and social rights.

86. The implementation of the Council of Europe Action Plan on "Building Inclusive Societies" at local and regional level will be at the centre of its action.

1. Combating radicalisation and violent extremism

87. Radicalisation and violent extremism have resulted, since the end of 2014, in an upsurge of deadly terrorist acts in many cities around the world. These attacks highlight the urgent need for cities to undertake more initiatives to combat extremism and radicalisation,

88. As part of the Council of Europe's comprehensive Action Plan for 2015-2017 on the fight against violent extremism and radicalisation leading to terrorism, the Congress drew up a strategy to combat this phenomenon in cities and regions. As part of this strategy, it produced "Guidelines for local and regional authorities on preventing radicalisation and manifestations of hate at grass-roots level" and launched a platform for exchanges to facilitate co-operation between cities with regard to the prevention of radicalisation: the "Alliance of European cities against violent extremism".

89. It is this strategy that the Congress will continue to develop in order to find lasting responses, based in particular on prevention and education. Prevention measures and education can increase youth inclusion and strengthen their own capabilities to resist violence provoking propaganda. The Congress will help by promoting the exchange of good practices in this field.

90. In a general manner, the Congress will continue fighting all forms of violent extremism and manifestations of hate at local level.

2. Integration of refugees and migrants

91. In most cases national governments and parliaments have the main responsibility for immigration policy, including the policy on refugees. The humanitarian responsibility is shared by local and regional authorities. Municipalities and regions also have an important role in promoting the integration, the participation and non-discrimination of immigrants and in advancing good relations between them and local residents. Local authorities should thus be actively involved in the drafting and implementation of the state's immigration policy.

92. In 2015, the Congress held several debates on the refugee and migrant crisis during its plenary sessions and adopted a Declaration in which it stated that, faced with a humanitarian emergency on this scale all local and regional authorities must play a major role in refugee reception arrangements, regardless of their geographical position in Europe. It also underlined the Congress's deep commitment to social cohesion and harmonious co-existence in a pluricultural society and highlighted the rich contribution made by migrants to European societies.

93. The Congress will help with the networking of cities in order that their activities and initiatives for the reception of refugees and the long-term integration of migrants can be co-ordinated more effectively. It will promote in particular the exchange of good practices and peer-to-peer training within European networks which have been working on these subjects for a long time.

94. It will also work to strengthen solidarity and burden-sharing in the reception and integration of migrants between authorities in all European states.

95. It will in particular promote good practices concerning children and young people, whose integration in the new culture and the daily life must be particularly favoured.

3. Promoting intercultural dialogue

96. Cities, regions and states should work together to promote respect and tolerance in European societies. It is important to bridge the gaps and ignorance that divide cultures, and to promote the role of education in the acquisition of the skills needed for democratic culture. Local authorities should create public spaces that bring together citizens and allow the expression of freedom of religion or non-religious beliefs in a spirit of dialogue and exchange.

97. The Congress will further promote dialogue between the different population groups. It will support mutual adaptation and acceptance by local residents of other groups such as migrants.

98. It will be closely involved in the Council of Europe Action Plan on "Building inclusive societies" and, in this context, the No Hate Speech campaign. In particular, it will develop a local and regional dimension of the campaign.

99. Furthermore, it will help local and regional authorities to facilitate interfaith dialogue, in particular by devising educational tools that they can use to organise intercultural and interfaith activities.

4. Active participation of citizens

100. The quality of democracy depends above all on citizens' trust in their institutions and their participation in the democratic process. Citizen participation is the bridge and vehicle for achieving the twin goals of quality of local democracy and building more inclusive societies.

101. The involvement of citizens and increased dialogue with their elected representatives must be integrated at all levels of governance. In this respect, the Congress relies on the Additional Protocol to the European Charter of Local Self-Government on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority which was opened for signature in 2009.

102. Furthermore, in October each year since 2007, the Congress has called on all member and several non-member States to hold European Local Democracy Week (ELDW), encouraging the participating authorities to organise events for and with citizens around annual themes decided upon in line with the Congress's priorities.

103. The Congress will continue, particularly in its monitoring activities, to encourage national authorities to sign and ratify the Additional Protocol, especially as a number of countries that have not yet ratified it do already apply its provisions in practice.

104. The Congress will continue to support the development of activities and initiatives to promote the active participation of citizens, such as European Local Democracy Week.

105. It will also continue to be involved in the preparation and follow up of the World Forum for Democracy which has been held by the Council of Europe since 2012, and to actively participate in the event.

5. Youth empowerment

106. The Congress makes great efforts to enhance the participation of young people in the decision-making process and the public life of their communities. It promotes in particular the Revised Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life adopted in 2003.

107. Since 2014, it has involved youth delegates in its work, especially during plenary sessions. The Congress has created an ad hoc reflection group on how to encourage young people to participate in decision-making processes at European level and has adopted reports on specific issues that affect the daily lives and the future of young people.

108. Active participation in the sessions and the working group's reflection will continue. Based on this work, the Congress will continue to lead targeted activities to enhance young people's trust and interest in political institutions and to promote their active participation

109. The reflection engaged should help creating the vision of 'A Young European in the 2020s' and map out the opportunities which must be created.

110. The Congress will also encourage greater engagement and dialogue between local and regional authorities and the education systems across Europe in order to enhance civic commitment encourage greater youth participation and combat radicalisation of young people.

6. Rights and protection of minority, underprivileged and vulnerable populations

111. The role of local, regional and national authorities is to protect their citizens, with due regard for their diversity, especially when they are a minority or in vulnerable situations. They must adopt and implement policies to secure respect for their fundamental rights and ensure their integration in society. They must in particular ensure that people in vulnerable situations get information on their fundamental and human rights effectively and understandably.

112. The Congress will participate in the implementation of the Council of Europe Action Plan on Child Rights 2016-2017 and encourage exchange of best practices in the field of children's rights protection among its members.

113. It will continue to develop action to be taken at local level for Roma inclusion, in particular under the "Alliance of Cities and Regions for Roma Inclusion" set up in 2013 by the Congress.

114. It will continue to promote equality between women and men and encourage measures taken to prevent violence against women.

115. It will continue to defend the rights of LGBT people and fight their discrimination.

116. It will contribute to the Council of Europe strategy 2016-2022 to promote the rights and full representation and participation of people with disabilities in society.

117. It will continue to promote regional and minority languages, in particular the Council of Europe's European Charter of Regional and Minority Languages.

118. It will promote better access to proximity services and to new technologies such as the internet for elderly people so that they are not isolated or disconnected from society.

7. Empowering rural areas

119. For decades, the trend in many European countries has been the development of cities and urban centres to the detriment of rural areas. The disappearance of public services and transports, small businesses and jobs causes people in remote areas to migrate to the capitals or cities with the hope of finding jobs, a better quality of life and services such as hospitals, medical professionals, schools, transport, means of communication etc. This exodus leads to a dramatic depopulation and exclusion of rural areas as well as to the abandonment of whole sectors of the population who cannot undertake such migration, especially because of their age, their inability to pay the cost of living and housing in cities or simply because they do not want to leave their land.

120. With predominantly rural regions representing over a third of the European territory, it is urgent for national as well as for regional and local authorities to develop comprehensive policies ensuring that the European standards of living that are praised as a model across the world are applied equally to both urban and rural areas.

121. The Congress with the support of national associations of local and regional authorities will help to promote the potential of rural areas and to highlight their strengths and qualities.

122. The Governance Committee will prepare a report on “A better future for Europe’s rural regions” that will be presented in October 2017 and that will focus on the issues mentioned above by looking at territorial cohesion, social sustainability, employment, capacity building and infrastructure development.

123. The Congress will also support initiatives to repopulate and revitalise these areas.

APPENDIX II

Extract from Statutory Resolution CM/Res(2015)9 relating to the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 8 July 2015

Art. 1

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe [...] is a consultative organ composed of representatives of local and regional authorities.

Art. 2

1. The Congress, in addition to its consultative functions, furthermore undertakes activities the aims of which shall be:

a. to ensure the participation of local and regional authorities in the implementation of the ideal of European unity [...], as well as their representation and active involvement in the Council of Europe's work;

b. to submit proposals to the Committee of Ministers in order to promote local and regional democracy;

c. to promote co-operation between local and regional authorities;

d. to maintain, within the sphere of its responsibilities, contact with international organisations as part of the general external relations policy of the Council of Europe;

e. to work in close co-operation, on the one hand with the national, democratic associations of local and regional authorities, and, on the other hand, with the European organisations representing local and regional authorities of the member States of the Council of Europe, and notably with the Committee of the Regions of the European Union.

2. The Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly shall consult the Congress on issues which are likely to affect the responsibilities and essential interests of the local and/or regional authorities which the Congress represents.

3. The Congress shall prepare on a regular basis country-by-country reports on the situation of local and regional democracy in all member States and in States which have applied to join the Council of Europe, and shall ensure, in particular, that the principles of the European Charter of Local Self-Government are implemented.

4. The Congress shall also prepare reports and recommendations following the observation of local and/or regional elections.