

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities



The Bureau of the Congress

CG/BUR/2015(27)31
23 March 2015

Improving the impact of Congress recommendations

Guidelines for co-operation activities in Council of Europe member States

Document approved by the Bureau of the Congress on 23 March 2015



Preamble

The Congress is the Council of Europe's assembly of local and regional representatives, a political and consultative body of territorial delegates who hold an elected mandate in their own country. 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. To do so it has been mandated by the Committee of Ministers to "prepare on a regular basis country-by-country reports on the situation of local and regional democracy in all member states" as well as "reports and recommendations following the observation of local and/or regional elections"¹.

The Congress of local and regional authorities (the Congress) acts in priority fields of activity which have a substantial local and/or regional dimension. It is also a reference point for territorial democracy. Its members form a pool of practitioners in local and regional policy matters which constitutes an asset for the development and deepening of local and regional democracy and governance in the Council of Europe member States.

Context

In order to give a practical response to the challenges encountered at grassroots level, the Congress has adopted a new orientation since 2011 and developed new forms of co-operation and action directly linked with its statutory responsibilities².

The Congress is able to offer its expertise to help both national and territorial authorities in the implementation of its recommendations, one main objective being the strengthening of the competences and capacities of local and regional elected representatives and of the role of their associations with regard to the Council of Europe's priority fields of action.

Monitoring of the European Charter on Local Self-Government and observation of elections

The European Charter on Local Self-Government (CETS No. 122) -hereafter the Charter- is the cornerstone of local democracy in Europe and ratified by all Council of Europe member States. Compliance with its provisions is verified through the monitoring mechanism of the Congress³. In addition, the Congress carries out observations of local and regional elections so as to ensure the integrity of electoral processes at local and regional level and to promote, at the same time, public confidence and electoral participation⁴.

The coherence and effectiveness of the monitoring process is enhanced through a post-monitoring dialogue and that of the observation of elections through a post-election dialogue with the national authorities concerned, with the aim of assisting and facilitating the better implementation of Congress recommendations. After an exchange of views and political meetings with the national authorities and relevant stakeholders of the country concerned, a roadmap is agreed upon and developed to set the pace of reforms. On the basis of the monitoring report and in the case of a post-monitoring dialogue, when a need is identified in collaboration with the central authorities and/or within the framework of a Council of Europe Action Plan, co-operation programmes are designed and activities are implemented to address in a practical way the specific or transversal problems identified during monitoring and election observation activities⁵.

Thematic recommendations

The Congress Secretariat carries out co-operation activities in thematic fields such as: gender equality and participation of women in the political life, consultation of local authorities by national governments, promotion of public ethics and prevention of corruption, youth and civic engagement, regionalisation processes and territorial reforms, transfrontier cooperation, etc. These activities are based on the thematic reports and recommendations prepared by its Statutory Committees (Monitoring Committee, Current Affairs Committee and Governance Committee) and driven by the demand of the member states themselves.

¹ Statutory Resolution CM/Res(2011)2, adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 19 January 2011

² Framework Document for Cooperation activities of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, approved by the Bureau of the Congress on 16 September 2011 and Priorities of the Congress 2013-2016

³ Resolution 307 (2010)REV 2, adopted by the Congress on 30 October 2013

⁴ Resolution 306(2010)REV, adopted by the Congress on 30 October 2013

⁵ Resolution 353(2013)REV, adopted by the Congress on 30 October 2013

The co-operation activities are carried out in accordance with the main international treaties and texts on local and regional democracy, and in particular:

- the European Charter of Local Self-Government (CETS No. 122) and its Additional Protocol on the right of citizens to participate in the conduct of public affairs (CETS No. 207);
- the Council of Europe Reference Framework for Regional Democracy (MCL16(2009)11);
- the European Code of Conduct for the Political Integrity of Local and Regional Elected Representatives⁶;
- the Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life⁷;
- the Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters of the European Commission on Democracy through Law -better known as the Venice Commission (CDL-AD(2002)023rev).

Reference texts comprise also other basic Council of Europe conventions which are of particular relevance for local and regional authorities, such as the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (CETS No. 148), as well as relevant recommendations from the Committee of Ministers.

1. Aims of the Congress' intervention

Under the authority of the Secretary General, the Congress Secretariat implements programmes and activities related to the local democracy component of the Council of Europe Action Plans for specific member States as well as regional activities in the Eastern Partnership countries and in South East Europe with the aim of:

- supporting the implementation of the principles of the European Charter of Local Self-Government;
- developing the competencies of local elected representatives (women and men) and their knowledge of good practices so as to enable them to assume full leadership and responsibility in their communities;
- enhancing the institutional capacity of local authorities and empowering them for the delivery of better services to their citizens;
- fostering regular dialogue (early and transparent) with the national authorities and promoting consultation among local and regional authorities, in particular through their associations and institutional mechanisms (properly anchored in policies and legislative framework), in order to improve the relevance and quality of the legislation, taking into account regional specificities, as provided by the Charter;
- increasing dialogue with citizens and involving them in local public life and decision making, by enabling local elected representatives (mayors and councillors) to use and implement new participatory measures.

2. Methodology

The co-operation activities consist mainly 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. They are designed to be easily adaptable to specific target groups, relevant themes and local contexts. Creativity, motivation and openness of the target groups are an important feature of these activities. Specific attention is paid to political pluralism and inclusion of women.

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

The Congress Secretariat is fully involved in the preparation of Council of Europe Actions Plans, taking into account the monitoring reports and elections observations reports. Once approved by the Committee of Ministers, the programmes and projects are coordinated and financially supervised by the Office of the Directorate General of Programmes (ODG Prog), which reports to the Committee of Ministers and the Secretary General of the Council of Europe. The Congress Secretariat acts in close co-operation and synergy with the Centre of Expertise for Local Government Reform⁸ (Centre of Expertise) for the implementation of the local democracy component of the Action Plans.

⁶ Recommendation 60(99), adopted by the Congress on 17 June 1999

⁷ Recommendation 128(2003), adopted by the Congress on 21 May 2003

⁸ The Centre of Expertise is a Unit of the Directorate General of Democracy of the Council of Europe Secretariat. It supports ministries in the implementation of local self-government reforms through legal assistance and capacity-building of administrations. Its Advisory Board includes representatives from the Congress, the European Committee on Democracy and Governance and the Directorate

2.1. Role of Congress members

Congress members are invited to take part in events to exchange views with the participants and provide peer advice to mayors and councillors on their daily experience of local democracy in their own countries.

The benefit for the participants in these co-operation activities is the opportunity to learn from similar experiences both from their own country and from their European neighbours. Congress members benefit from these exchanges too, as they strengthen and expand their network of peers throughout Europe.

The Congress members who participate in the activities should have the following profile:

- experience in key political roles in their respective local and regional authority;
- openness to mutual exchange of experiences and good practice;
- political and cultural sensitivity;
- relevant experience in the specific themes or fields of activities discussed during the event (e.g. decentralisation, municipal amalgamation, financial autonomy, etc);
- availability to travel and relevant language skills.

2.2. Contribution of local and international experts

Academics from the Group of Independent Experts on the European Charter of Local Self-Government can provide relevant expertise on the Charter, on topical issues that have implications for local and regional authorities and on the situation of each member State, particularly on specific matters that pose a problem with regard to compliance with the Charter provisions. To design the content of the co-operation activities, international and local experts as well as trainers in the field of local and regional democracy are involved in designing the content of the co-operation activities.

In addition, since the number of co-operation activities and countries concerned is increasing, experts are recruited on an *ad-hoc* basis through a permanent call, to support activities on political governance at local and regional level, including the role, responsibilities and leadership of local elected representatives, communication, ethics and prevention of corruption in local public decision-making, involvement of citizens, etc.

The co-operation activities can also be implemented through partnerships and with the expertise of international networks of local and regional authorities such as the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) or the Assembly of European Regions (AER), as well as the European Association for Local Democracy (ALDA), the Network of associations of Local Authorities in South-East Europe (NALAS), and the European Network of Training Organisations for Local and Regional Authorities (ENTO).

2.3. Sources of funding and the Steering Committee

The co-operation programmes are generally funded by external voluntary contributions, coming from donor countries (including member States) as well as from the European Union or other international organisations. In addition, a contribution from the Congress ordinary budget may be provided for each project. Both the operational activities and the staff in the project teams are financed by extra-budgetary resources.

The operational project budgets are managed by ODG Prog, in accordance with the delegation by the Secretary General of the Council of Europe to the field offices. The Congress Secretariat is responsible for ensuring the compliance with the rules and procedures, as well as for the content-related implementation of the activities and their supervision. It also manages the contributions from the Congress' ordinary budget.

A project team is recruited for the implementation of each project. A minor part of the team is located in the headquarters of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg (mostly responsible for the preparation and coordination of the activities) and a major part in the field offices (mostly responsible for the organisation and practical implementation of the activities).

A Steering Committee is composed of relevant stakeholders (i.e. representatives of the Congress and/or its Secretariat and of the Council of Europe Secretariat, local authorities and their associations, representatives from the national authorities, donors, etc.). It is, in most cases, established at the beginning of each co-

General of Democracy, which assess and approve the work programme of the Centre of Expertise before transmission for information to the Committee of Ministers.

operation project and meets once a year. The Steering Committee provides strategic guidance, assesses the progress made during the implementation of activities and approves yearly plans of activities. It also ensures proper co-ordination between the different parts of the project implemented respectively by the Congress Secretariat and the Centre of Expertise.

3. Themes of the activities

The Congress Secretariat has specifically designed tailor-made activities according to the different targets concerned and under relevant themes. The main objectives of the co-operation projects of the Congress can be classified as follows:

3.1. Fostering dialogue between regional/local authorities and central authorities; building the capacities of the national associations of local/regional authorities

The Congress believes that strong local/regional government associations have an essential role to play in the development and implementation of local self-governance. Activities are therefore designed to facilitate the participation of local and regional authorities in framing national policies within a sustainable institutional framework and to institutionalise a sustainable and formal mechanism of dialogue.

These activities aim to ensure that the local governmental entities and their associations are regularly consulted and contribute to the process of drafting legislation on matters of their concern and relevant reforms, as well as with regard to their implementation, as provided by the Charter.

The Congress supports the creation of opportunities for local authorities to exchange among themselves and to find common positions, so as to increase their power of advocacy vis-à-vis the central institutions. It also provides support to associations in order to develop their institutional capacities and their structures so as to improve the level of services provided to their members.

The process has been conceived as an inclusive one, with representatives of ministries, members of Parliament, local governments associations, municipalities, international organisations, members of the Congress, and local and international experts taking part in it.

3.2. Building the capacities of local and regional elected officials as promoters of change

The Congress has devised a flexible programme for elected representatives, aimed at building their leadership capacities and their knowledge of the best practices and standards of local self-government.

Selected groups of mayors are given the possibility of exchanging experiences with Congress members from other Council of Europe member States, and to learn from international and local experts how to define and develop effective policies and lead successful projects that inspire citizens and stakeholders towards concrete and positive results. The role played by the Congress members is extremely valuable to these activities, as they provide similar practical experience and can discuss with the participants on an equal basis. In addition, local and international experts can provide in-depth knowledge of European standards on local and regional democracy and of relevant legislation and practices from European countries.

The flexibility of the programme, structured around a number of thematic workshops, means it can be adapted to the needs of the target group. Any of the following topics can be included:

- the role and responsibilities of local or regional elected representatives;
- ethics in politics and decision making;
- engaging citizen in decisionmaking at local level;
- designing and leading successful projects;
- effective communication;
- transfrontier and inter-regional co-operation;
- quality campaigns for local and regional elections;
- implementation of human rights at local level;
- decentralisation and regionalisation processes.

Furthermore, empowered elected representatives are instrumental in bringing larger groups of mayors and councillors on board in national and international activities, thereby enabling the impact of the programme to be scaled up.

3.3. *Making young local leaders aware of the principles of local democracy*

The Congress implements a series of regional seminars aimed at disseminating a culture of democracy beyond the present-day political sphere by raising awareness of local and regional democracy principles and developing the participants' capacity to engage in local elections in an active and informed manner. These seminars bring together leaders of NGOs, representatives of the youth wings of political parties and of the media, as well as local elected representatives (mayors and councillors) or candidates and informal leaders (bloggers, journalists) likely to stand for future local elections or to perform a role in the electoral process.

The seminars are designed according to a format which mixes formal presentations delivered by trainers or Congress members followed by open discussion and interactive group sessions. The participants are invited to share their perception of the role of local authorities and citizens and to come up with ideas on how to bring about democratic change in their communities.

3.4. *Local pilot initiatives*

The Congress Secretariat provides assistance to selected pilot communities to design and implement sustainable and replicable initiatives encouraging the active participation of citizens in decision making at local government level. The final objective is to incite local governments to become efficient, flexible, accountable and responsive to the needs of their communities.

Key interest groups in the communities receive support from international and local experts as well as individual coaching and are guided through the different preparation and implementation phases of their own citizen participation initiatives.

Practical experiences and participative models in pilot communities are then disseminated and shared with other communities through wider events that may also involve Congress members.

Conclusion

Based on the political work of the Congress and its statutory activities, the Congress Secretariat develops and implements co-operation projects at local and regional level. These activities are organised in the framework of bilateral or regional programmes, funded by voluntary contributions, and as part of the thematic priorities of the Congress.

This practical aspect of the Congress' work ensures a link between the political bodies of the Congress and the operational General Directorates of the Council of Europe Secretariat, in particular the Directorate General of Democracy and its Centre of Expertise for Local Government Reform. The Congress activities are fully integrated in the overall action of the Council of Europe, on the basis of the Action Plans adopted by the Committee of Ministers and co-ordinated by the Office of the Directorate General of Programmes.

The Secretary General of the Congress informs the Bureau and the committees regularly about the progress of co-operation programmes, in addition to the information provided by the chair of the Monitoring Committee about the post-monitoring and post-election observation activities. An update on these programmes is also included in the activity report presented to the Committee of Ministers twice a year by the Secretary General of the Congress.

Co-operation activities are set up in order to build a bridge between Strasbourg (its work and standards) and the field, and to serve the goal of strengthening local and regional democracy throughout Europe.