

Local Democracy Agency (LDA) Dnipropetrovsk  
Inaugural event  
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Speech by Natalya Romanova  
Vice-President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities  
of the Council of Europe

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to address participants of today's meeting in my capacity as vice-president of the Council of Europe Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, at a moment when the European Association for Local democracy is opening a Local Democracy Agency in Dnipropetrovsk. I would like to thank the organisers for keeping up the good tradition of exchanges between the Congress and ALDA, in the spirit of our continuing co-operation.

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe and the Association, of course, share a bond which is almost parental, as the Congress played a major role in setting up Local Democracy Agencies – LDAs – which have grown into a genuine network. The Congress always gave its full support to ALDA, and I should add that today's activities of the Association, seeking to promote active citizenship, civic participation and democratic pluralism, at local level, are fully in line with the priorities of the Congress.

Over the past years, the activities of ALDA at the grassroots have proved both useful and necessary, and remain today as vital as they were 15 years ago.

Let me take this opportunity to congratulate ALDA on the occasion of its 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary that was celebrated a few days ago at the annual General Assembly of ALDA which took place in Podgorica, Montenegro.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The cooperation between ALDA and the Congress has been evolving, too, as the network was gaining maturity and developing its structures and activities. There are several examples where ALDA and the Congress have built synergies for mutual benefit and mutual reinforcement of their grassroots activities, in particular in countries where the Congress is developing field activities and where Local Democracy Agencies are active. This is already the case in countries such as Armenia, Georgia and now in Ukraine.

As you may be aware, the Congress is a political and consultative body of local and regional 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.

In practical terms, this entails that the Congress supports positive change in the 47 Council of Europe member states through the monitoring of the European Charter of Local Self-government, the observation of local and regional elections, post-monitoring dialogue and practical co-operation programmes in the field.

Our co-operation activities represent a further step; they are demand-driven and based on bilateral agreements within the action plans which have been agreed between the Council of Europe and a number of its member states, among them Ukraine.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The opening of the Local Democracy Agency in Dnipropetrovsk is of utmost importance, especially in the context of the local self-government reform and decentralisation process in Ukraine.

Of course, an important step in this reform is the revision of the Constitution. A new basic law on local self-government cannot be adopted before the Constitution is revised. Most political forces in Ukraine agree that the new Constitution should be adopted in autumn. We hope this will be the case and that the Venice Commission opinions will be duly taken into account. Forthcoming local elections are another crucial milestone in strengthening local democracy and increasing the role of local elected representatives in leading changes.

However, the implementation of the reforms should not wait until the autumn. The Concept of decentralisation adopted in April 2014 is a good starting point but it may need to evolve, in particular in respect of the role of oblasts and rayons, which may not be sufficient and adequately described. The new Budget Code which was adopted represents a good step forward but this important piece of legislation also needs to continue evolving within the decentralisation reform.

I would like to stress that it is of paramount importance for the action of the Ukrainian authorities to be in line with the European Charter on Local Self-Government. Moreover, in the Congress we believe that decentralisation cannot be successful if local authorities do not have the capacity to implement their new competencies. This is why the Congress is targeting its action in Ukraine in several complementary directions.

In particular, I would like to mention the post-monitoring dialogue with Ukrainian authorities, held between May 2014 and March 2015, which led to the formulation of a roadmap on the implementation of the Congress recommendations on the situation of local and regional democracy in Ukraine. This roadmap is being officially presented to the Ukrainian Government this week. The Congress is also focusing its efforts on delivering training programmes for young local leaders and for local elected representatives. The aim is to spread a culture of democracy by raising the awareness of young community leaders on local and regional democracy principles and developing their capacity to engage in local elections in an active and qualified manner.

We hope to be able to count on the Local Democracy Agency and ALDA as partners in implementing these activities in Ukraine.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to conclude by welcoming ALDA's involvement in the Eastern Partnership process and its current expansion to Ukraine, with a new agency in Dnipropetrovsk. We strongly hope that the LDA will become a pillar for enhancing local democracy in Ukraine at the grassroots, operating for all Ukrainian local elected representatives and for further dialogue with citizens in Ukraine.

Indeed, the existing local democracy agencies have become important vehicles for participatory democracy at local level, and their experience can be used and applied elsewhere.

We thank all the partners present here today for their commitment to support the capacities of the new Local Democracy Agency in Ukraine.

I would like to underline our conviction, in the Congress, that the LDA has an important role to play, and that we will support the development of its activities in the future.

The Congress also remains firmly supportive to ALDA and its work, and committed to pursuing our co-operation in areas of common interest.

I wish the LDA lots of success and fruitful partnerships.

Thank you.