

12th CORLEAP Annual meeting

**Speech by Harald SONDEREGGER (Austria, EPP/CCE),
President of the Chamber of Regions of the Congress**

Session on “Cities and regions' voice on Eastern Partnership in new geopolitical reality”

Batumi, Georgia (7 September 2023, 10:00-10:45)

Dear President,

Dear colleagues,

I am very privileged to have the opportunity to contribute to this debate in my capacity as the President of the Chamber of Regions of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe.

As it has been rightly noted, this meeting is taking place in a new geopolitical reality not only for the Eastern Partnership but for Europe as a whole.

The war in Ukraine has strongly affected the region, and its effects are felt throughout Europe, and beyond. The war's horrific humanitarian, political, social and economic consequences have added to Europe's other crises, such as the lingering effects from the Covid pandemic and the growing threat of climate change.

This new geopolitical reality has prompted member States of the Council of Europe, at their 4th Summit in Reykjavik in May this year, to renew their commitment to this Organisation's democratic values and principles, against the background of worrying democratic backsliding and authoritarian trends in some countries.

European leaders have also recognised the important role of local and regional authorities in upholding democracy, human rights and the rule of law in their communities, and thus reversing democratic backsliding.

The new geopolitical reality has indeed brought to the forefront the key role of local and regional authorities as the first responders to the crises, their role in responding to the needs of citizens and, most importantly, upholding democratic principles in crisis situations.

In this regard, I would like to highlight the indispensable role played by Ukrainian local elected representatives during this war of aggression. Our colleagues, mayors and councillors have managed to ensure uninterrupted provision of basic services to their residents while upholding the standards of democracy, human rights and the rule of law in their communities.

In Reykjavik, the Heads of State and Government also committed to support the essential role of multi-level governance in Europe, and recognised grassroots authorities as being part of the system of checks and balances, to prevent any excessive concentration of power.

They further recognised the role of local and regional authorities in delivering human rights and protecting the environment.

This strong mandate applies fully to local and regional authorities of the Eastern Partnership countries which are all member States of the Council of Europe. This mandate also means greater competences and resources for local and regional authorities to deliver on their responsibilities, which requires further decentralisation and reform of public administration – as well as action to promote open, ethical government and fight corruption at local and regional level.

We are therefore very pleased to see the strong emphasis on these topics in both the report by Aleksandra Dulciewicz and CORLEAP's Revised Action Plan for 2023-2024 – together with the emphasis on the role of local and regional authorities in upholding democratic values, and the need for European action to strengthen their capacities to do so.

Of course, the Council of Europe and its Congress have been engaged with Eastern partnership countries ever since they became members of our Organisation. The Congress, for its part, has been working to strengthen local and regional self-government systems in those countries as well as their territorial authorities and associations - either through the regular monitoring of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, or through our co-operation programmes on the ground.

For more than two decades of its presence in those countries, the Congress has been advocating for decentralisation of competences for local and regional level, coupled with appropriate resources and the necessary autonomy in decision making and budget allocation to fulfil their tasks.

As a result of this work, we have today local and regional authorities that are much stronger than they were when their countries joined the Council of Europe. We have local and regional authorities that enjoy high levels of trust of their citizens – which is prerequisite for upholding democracy and democratic values.

We saw it when cities and regions found themselves at the frontline of the Covid pandemic. We see it in the admirable resistance of municipalities and regions in Ukraine against the brutal invasion.

We in the Congress are pursuing our action. We have been implementing co-operation projects in the Eastern Partnership region for almost 10 years. This is an ongoing effort to facilitate national-local dialogue, strengthen democratic values and support local and regional elected representatives in leading the change.

We are working on making local and regional authorities fully-fledged partners in the reconstruction and recovery in Ukraine; building their capacities for integrating migrants and refugees in the Republic of Moldova; and engaging them in national action for human rights protection in Georgia as well as supporting NALAG in becoming an even stronger partner for national authorities.

We are expanding our action to enhance the role of local and regional authorities in the protection of the environment too. In this regard, I am particularly delighted to note that it is thanks to the [Georgian Presidency](#) in 2020 and its initiative to review the Council of Europe legal arsenal on environmental protection and human rights, the Committee of Ministers adopted a recommendation in this field in September last year.

As a follow-up, the Congress recommended adopting a ‘green’ approach to reading the European Charter which entails empowering local and regional authorities to take a more active role in fighting climate change and dealing with its consequences.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We understand that decentralisation also brings an increased responsibility over public spending and the management of public funds. In the absence of proper safeguard mechanisms and procedures, and in a lack of adherence to high ethical standards, decentralisation also brings corruption risks.

As we are meeting today in Batumi, our peers from the Eastern Partnership region are participating in the Open Government Partnership Global Summit in Tallinn, Estonia. Municipalities from Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine, participating in the OGP Local Programme, have joined it with the support by the Congress co-operation projects.

The members of a Congress-led delegation will have the opportunity to share knowledge and innovation, benefit from significant networking opportunities and establish connections with like-minded policymakers from around the world.

With our support, more and more local and regional authorities will join Open Government Partnership and their peers in advocating and practicing the principles of transparency, accountability and citizen participation at local level.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The new geopolitical reality, and the mandate from the Reykjavik Summit, gave a new momentum to the local and regional authorities throughout Europe, including in Eastern Partnership countries. As international partners, we must seize this momentum, and we in the Congress support the findings of Ms Dulkiewicz's report in this regard.

Let me remind you that on the occasion of the Council of Europe Summit, the Congress and the European Committee of the Regions, amongst other European institutions and associations, signed the first of its kind Call for Action to national governments to support grassroots democracy within a system of strong multi-level governance.

This Call shows strong synergies between our institutions and how deeply committed we are in our work.

We called upon our member States to proactively involve local and regional authorities in the design of public policies, to recognise them as key partners in addressing challenges they face.

We also need to pursue and call for the greater potential for direct funding of local and regional authorities, as well as of their national associations, to increase their resilience, support them in the development of their respective territories and strengthen them as fully fledged partners of national institutions. This obviously applies to the recovery and transformation of Ukraine.

Commitment for our sustained international support for stronger local and regional authorities in Eastern Partnership countries is one commitment they need today. For our part, I can assure you that the Congress, in partnership with the European Committee of the Regions, will continue supporting local and regional authorities in the Eastern Partnership countries, and beyond, to build more resilient and inclusive local governance.