

1380bis meeting of the Committee of Ministers' Deputies – Strasbourg, France, Wednesday, 8 July 2020

Speech by Andreas KIEFER, Secretary General of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities

Check against delivery - Seul le prononcé fait foi

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Dear Ambassadors,

The activity report you have in front of you covers a longer period than usual, as my last communication to this Committee dates back to 23 October 2019.

In my statement I will not repeat details of the information you will find in the document. My statement will address:

- Lessons learned from COVID and proposals to the CM
- Impact of COVID on Congress work and outlook to autumn
- Budgetary aspects
- The "CARTA MONITOR" data base
and
- The Congress renewal process and the role of the Permanent Representations in Strasbourg

The relevance of local and regional authorities in member states in responding to the COVID-19 crisis and lessons learned in order to respect the basic principles of democracy, human rights and the rule of law in extra-ordinary situations in cities and municipalities,

Since February this year, in this severe sanitary, social and economic crisis in all member States, local and regional authorities found themselves at the frontline. They provided emergency services in their communities, took measures to contain the spread of the disease, ensured coordination with other levels of government and other partners, and cooperated across borders, to ensure care for those affected and to secure protection and human rights for all. And they continue to do so. And they will also be key actors in bolstering the economic recovery and social revival in member States. The Congress leaders were very pleased that this key role has been recognized by heads of governments, the Chair of the CM, the Secretary General and that the Council of Europe is aware of the role and contributions, which local and regional authorities – via the Congress – can make for the Organisation. If human rights, democracy and the rule of law are not achieved in municipalities, cities and regions, they will not be achieved at national level either!

Quick action – to support local actors

In order to provide a swift response to the need for exchange of experience and good practice, the Congress established an online platform showcasing the action by local and regional authorities during the pandemic. The portal with the web-address and a treasure of examples is reproduced as Appendix 3 to the activity report.

Institutional support at CoE- and member state level

When Cities and regions were included from Day 1 in the national inter-ministerial task forces and emergency response structures, when pragmatic, inclusive and capacity-oriented approaches were applied, they delivered in the best possible ways for the benefit of the people. And there are many positive examples in our member states to draw lessons from! On the basis of discussions in the Committees in September and the Session in October, the Congress will formulate concrete recommendations to member States' governments, parliaments and local and regional authorities and also contribute to the Athens Declaration – building on the Congress message to the Helsinki Ministerial, which remains relevant for the Organisation and needs to be complemented by references to the new situation.

Let me mention some encouraging examples for the acknowledgement of mayors, coming from previous, the current and future chairmanship countries:

In France

On 25 June 2020, the French Senate adopted a resolution for "a new era of decentralisation" in which, referring to the European Charter of Local Self-Government, it affirms the fundamental place of the municipality as a basic cell of the territorial organisation, close to the needs of populations, and the first level of democratic life.

Georgia and Greece: National associations were closely involved in emergency planning and action.

In Germany

Speaking in the Bundesrat on 3 July 2020, Chancellor Angela Merkel has laid out the priorities of Germany's Presidency of the Council of the European Union. She said: "Together, we – the federal government, the federal states, our towns, cities and local authorities – can push ahead with Europe's recovery." This inclusive approach and spirit of multi-level governance will be – as we in the Congress trust - also the spirit of the German presidency in the CoE!

The Congress will include the multi-level governance approach in its priorities for the next mandate (2021 – 2025). These priorities will also contain proposals to strengthen the role of the Council of Europe's tools and instruments with respect to the environment and thus enhance the role of the organisation in supporting member states in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. This is fully in line with Joint Declaration on human rights and the environment by the Georgian, Greek and German Presidencies of the Committee of Ministers and what several delegations expressed in this room.

COVID-19: adapting the functioning of the Congress

After cancelling the March Session, immediate steps to ensure business continuity of the Congress bodies and of the secretariat were taken and working methods were adapted. During the entire containment period, the Congress and its secretariat remained operational and worked remotely via teleworking and video conferences.

Monitoring visits to the Netherlands, Bulgaria, Albania, Azerbaijan and Ireland have been postponed, as it is the case for the post-monitoring visit to the Republic of Moldova. The Congress mission to observe the local elections in Serbia in June also had to be cancelled.

Monitoring visits to Spain and Germany, originally on the work programme of 2020, may have to be carried out in 2021. We will prepare these visits in close co-operation with the Permanent Representations here in Strasbourg.

With regard to election observation missions to Bosnia and Herzegovina and to Ukraine in autumn, the Congress will consider the deployment of delegations in close contact with the respective authorities, taking into account the sanitary situation.

A series of webinars was organised for the youth delegates and the co-operation activities in Ukraine, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as in Tunisia and Morocco were continued electronically. You can find the details in the written activity report.

All these remote activities can, of course, not replace the in-person meetings which characterise a political body, meant to discuss, to negotiate, to exchange and to establish relations and trust. Our members are eager to return to in-person meetings, as soon as the circumstances allow. The Congress will not become an e-Congress as it will not be fully functional in plenary! For committee meetings the experiences from video-meetings will be very useful and be included in further reflections about our working methods.

For the time being the autumn session is scheduled in Strasbourg from 26 – 29 October 2020, with a plan B for a virtual meeting. The decision will be taken after the summer break and safety and security will be the guiding principles.

Aspects of the working conditions and concrete requests and proposals to improve Budget: use savings for investments

In close co-operation with the Parliamentary Assembly and the Major Administrative Entities concerned, the Congress contributed to the development of IT tools for remote meetings. In fact, the first KUDO meeting with interpretation was organized for the Congress on 6 April 2020 and we all have made substantial progress in using and developing these video-conferencing facilities since then.

A part of the savings of the cancelled session is being used for investment in videoconferencing infrastructure for certain meetings. These investments will serve the whole organisation.

The Congress is trying to implement as much of the work programme as possible, but we will not be able to fully catch up. Some of the cancelled activities – meetings, conferences, monitoring missions etc. – can be postponed or carried over to 2021, some can be replaced by video conferences. The bi-annual budget of the organization can provide the necessary flexibility in this extraordinary situation.

Human resources

On 9 June 2020 the Bureau held an exchange of views with Secretary General Marija Pejčinović Burić and appreciated her commitment to facilitating interpretation into the working languages (DE, RU and IT). Members, however, referred to the very difficult budgetary and staffing situation of the Congress, which they had already expressed in September 2019. The budget 2020/2021, as adopted end 2019, still does not reflect a fair distribution of the impact of the change of status of Turkey, which first impacted the 2018/2019 budget of the Council of Europe.

As you may remember, this Bureau declaration of September 2019 was understood by the Committee of Ministers as a call for help, but only the working languages were addressed with a temporary solution. The main question, the extremely un-proportional share of the Congress in carrying the burden, is still unresolved. To recall: in the course of the cuts in 2018, the CoE budget shrunk by 6 percent and the one of the Congress by 12.1 percent: this is twice as much. The Congress Bureau considers, that a “fair burden sharing” is still due to be achieved. The request is based on serious concerns about the loss of critical mass of the Congress secretariat. You will remember that the Congress President mentioned this in his exchange of view on 26 February 2020.

Secondments – an indispensable support

The Congress is very grateful that three member states support the secretariat in this difficult time by seconding persons and we hope this will continue also in 2021. I would like to thank Iceland, Turkey and Ukraine for their invaluable support. At the same time, I would like to invite other member states to consider seconding staff to the Congress secretariat. We are in urgent need to strengthen the secretariats of the committees to catch up with the work programme as far as possible.

The growing backlog in monitoring visits is of major concern in this context. Even before the COVID-19 crisis we had a significant backlog – due to the staff and budget cuts in recent years: On 1 January 2019 we had 13 countries not monitored within the scheduled five year period, on 1 January 2020 the number

rose to 22 countries, that is 47.8 percent of all member states! While reducing and cutting many activities, it was not possible to compensate the cuts without putting in danger the core business of the Congress.

Dear Ambassadors, the Congress needs your attention and help, so that it can continue to perform and deliver on its mandate.

Selected aspects of the work programme of the Congress committees

A new online tool, called CARTA-MONITOR, was launched at the 37th session of the Congress in October 2019. This inter-active database presents the findings of the Monitoring reports on the application of the provisions of the [European Charter of Local Self-Government graphically](#). It allows to consult the analysis, article-by-article and paragraph-by-paragraph, made during the monitoring missions, as well as to make comparative analyses of several provisions and countries.

The portal and the link are reproduced in Appendix 3 of the activity report.

Reports under preparation by the committees

Local and regional elections in extreme crisis situations

Recurring issues from monitoring and observing elections

Sexism and gender-based violence in politics at local and regional level

Hate speech and physical violence against local / regional politicians

Youth work

Cultural heritage as a tool for local and regional development (also: promoting the EPA Cultural Routes)

Situation of LGBTi+ persons in the age of increasing homophobia

Status of capital cities

Developing rural – urban interplay (supported by an EU funded research project)

Digital economy and local budgets (home sharing platforms)

Horizontal co-operation with other CoE partners continues

- Roma and travelers
- Radicalisation
- Children's rights
- Artificial intelligence
- World Forum for Democracy
- Electoral matters with Venice Commission

The upcoming renewal of delegations

On behalf of the Congress I would like to thank the Committee of Ministers for having agreed to extend the Congress mandate for six months, in order to give national, regional and local authorities more time for the renewal procedure under the revised Charter. The changes for the renewal of delegations concern mainly: the distribution of seats between Chambers and that countries without regions do not need to nominate members of the Chamber of Regions (without voting rights).

The Secretary General of the Council of Europe will send a letter to all Ministers at the end of the summer and the Permanent Representations will receive electronic versions of the forms to be filled in by 31 December 2020. As in the past, we can expect that the Permanent Representations will be contacted by capitals on the criteria – gender balance, reflection of results of local and regional elections, geographical

distribution - and the domestic procedure of consultation. The colleagues in the Congress secretariat will be happy to provide information and guidance. The Congress Bureau will examine the proposed delegations in their first meeting in 2021, so that the future members can be invited to the renewal Session from 23 – 25 March 2021 in time.

Equally important, the timely nomination is also a precondition for those members, who want to stand for elections to the Bureau, the Committees or as spokespersons. The political groups coordinate these candidatures well in advance, in order to achieve a fair distribution among national delegations and to achieve a gender balance. So, candidatures are more likely to be successful, if presented at an early stage. We are looking forward to receiving proposals for gender balanced delegations with active local and regional elected politicians, who are willing to get actively involved in the work of the Congress and of the Council of Europe.