

South-East European Local Governments in post COVID-19 Socio-Economic Recovery – Online Mayors' Conference organised by NALAS (16 September 2020, 13:00 – 15:40)

Speech by Gunn Marit HELGESEN, President of the Chamber of Regions of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe

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Online Mayors' Conference organised by NALAS, 16 September 2020

Dear Mayors, dear colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for this opportunity to exchange with you today and share the views and work of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe.

I would like first and foremost to congratulate mayors and local elected representatives for their unwavering support to one another, to the principles and ideals of local self-government during this unprecedented time we are experiencing. Your constant interaction, discussion and consultation with community members during this pandemic has allowed for grass-root initiatives to be designed, implemented and shared with peers here today, thus benefiting a whole network of actors working and pursuing local self-governance.

I would also like to take the time to highlight the work of NALAS President Mr. Emanuil Manolov and his determination in maintaining the topic of post-crisis recovery at the heart of debates and discussions through the Network's activities. In line with the priority defined at the beginning of his term, President Manolov's drive has provided NALAS members with the appropriate tools in preparing for the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis. We must now look forward to economic and community recovery.

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic is far more than a health crisis. It has affected societies and economies all over the world in a profound and unprecedented manner. Local authorities are at the frontline of the management of the crisis, facing extraordinary levels of uncertainty and having to make difficult emergency budget rationing decisions. As the NALAS survey on the COVID-19 social and economic recovery at the local level in South-East Europe suggests - and it is also our analysis, - in the longer term, authorities will face large revenue declines that may lead to drastic budget cuts and to the reduction of public services.

Moreover, we have witnessed some unprecedented worrying trends in relation to multilevel governance as stated by the Congress Bureau in its Declaration adopted in June this year. Some governments have imposed, within or outside the context of states of emergency, measures that compromise the political autonomy of subnational authorities with far-reaching consequences for fundamental rights and freedoms and the democratic functioning.

We have also observed that the effectiveness or failure of responses to the pandemic do not necessarily depend on the level of decentralisation, as multilevel governance systems do not pose obstacles to decision making. On the contrary, they increase the quality of decisions and show greater flexibility in adapting to emergency situations. Actually, multilevel governance can be used by local and regional authorities to increase their effectiveness and tailor solutions to specific needs.

Therefore I would like to emphasise the role of European cities and regions as key partners of national governments at all stages, and particularly for the restoration of the economy, social life and normal democratic functioning at the local and regional level. They must be involved in setting-up mechanisms and procedures for future emergency situations in their role as actors of multi-level governance.

In this regard, I would like to quote Council of Europe Secretary General Marija Pejčinović Burić who said: "Human rights, democracy and the rule of law are meaningless if they are not embodied in the lives of individuals everywhere in Europe. The role of local and regional authorities is therefore essential to give concrete expression to aspirations on the ground."

This is why in the Congress, we strongly believe that it is vital to ensure respect for the principles of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, in particular consultation and financial autonomy, and to restore democratic functioning at local level, in full compliance with the Charter. The principle of consultation is the foundations of the goals set out by the Charter. Only through consultation and exchanges of best practices can effective and efficient policies be planned, coordinated and implemented together with local authorities.

Solidarity and experience sharing are essential in dealing with the COVID-19 crisis as they are the cornerstone of any coordinated and planned recovery strategy. I would like to take this opportunity to recall the key role national associations have to play and reiterate our congratulations to NALAS for its efforts in supporting their member associations and staying connected to them and to local authorities throughout this crisis.

Unfortunately, during the crisis we have witnessed very strong recentralisation trends towards the national executive, reduction in local decision making and budgetary autonomy, imposition of measures – even push for territorial reforms – without proper consultations with local authorities, postponement of local and regional elections, and difficulties of elected councils to fulfil their duties.

The crisis has had a serious impact on the functioning of democratic institutions and on local self-government in particular, prompting the Council of Europe Secretary General to issue guidance to national governments. In this guidance, the Secretary General has made it clear that any measures that change the division of competences between national, regional and local levels must be temporary and the situation must return to normal once the crisis is over.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As a political assembly comprising local and regional elected representatives, the Congress has had the ability to draw from members and partners' experiences in order to find responses that can be implemented on the ground in all European communities.

In the context of COVID-19, a Congress Hub was created to relay partners' actions – including that of NALAS – as well as initiatives that cities and regions undertook in responding to this major crisis. It is the Congress' belief that this hub can be a source of inspiration for mayors and local elected officials in this new phase of economic and community recovery.

We are also considering that during the next monitoring visits, hopefully resuming in 2021, the Congress rapporteurs will address the multi-level management of the pandemic. They will identify the main challenges that local authorities have had to face during the crisis and in the post-Covid period, and their concrete response.

These days, some of you, members of the Congress, are or were attending online meetings of the three Congress Committees on Governance, Current Affairs and Monitoring [respectively on 15, 16 and 17 September 2020]:

- The Governance Committee held a key debate over “the COVID-19 pandemic and challenges for multi-level governance”.
- The Current Affairs Committee will discuss this afternoon the “lessons learned during the Covid-19 outbreak and how minorities in cities and regions can be protected in times of fundamental crisis”;
- Tomorrow, a debate over “the protection of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in extreme crisis situations” is also due to take place during the Monitoring Committee’s meeting. Also a report on “Local and regional elections in major crisis situations” is to be debated and adopted.

You may wish to follow these discussions that are public. The link to view them and related documents can be found on the Congress website.

To conclude, I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the efforts provided by NALAS and its members. It is in strengthening local self-government and representing and defending the interests of local and regional authorities that we find that our political positions and common interests of our respective organisations are well aligned. We share a common objective and a common need to respond to the challenges facing our communities.