

XVI NALAS General Assembly Meeting – Chisinau 13 April 2021

Speaking points - Leendert Verbeek, President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities

Check against delivery - Seul le prononcé fait foi

Ms President,

Excellencies,

Dear Mayors [and NALAS delegates of the General Assembly]

Dear Colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a special pleasure to participate in the XVI General Assembly of NALAS and address you today in my capacity as President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities.

Although we are not able to meet in person, I am glad to see familiar faces, members of the delegations to the Congress who participate in the Congress work, in our Sessions, our Committees and in the co-operation activities carried out in the field – such as in the Republic of Moldova, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Ukraine and Kosovo*.

Since its creation, NALAS has been an important and strategic partner of the Congress. We see the Network as a success story and as a key stakeholder in discussions on decentralisation and local autonomy in South-East Europe. NALAS has engaged resolutely in voicing the important role local authorities play, in empowering their national associations, and in advocating a key role and stronger position of local government in the process of EU integration.

We very much value the long-standing close co-operation with NALAS and its member associations and the synergies built between our two organisations.

Today, in times of the Covid-19 crisis, NALAS has kept close to its members and has created the space for local governments in the region to exchange experience and know-how.

The pandemic has confronted municipalities with entirely new challenges as it had a strong impact on the areas of public health, delivery of social services and economic activities, and deepened the existing inequalities.

Unfortunately, the sanitary crisis will continue affecting our communities in such ways where democracy, constitutional values, and civil and human rights are at stake.

The coronavirus pandemic has tested both the policies implemented in our respective countries and our democratic systems themselves. It has aggravated the so-called recurring issues in the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government. These include the lack of consultation, inadequate distribution of competences and financial resources, and excessive supervision repeatedly pinpointed by the Congress

over the past years. Although we noted many good practices at all levels of governance, we have also observed a tendency to recentralise, which became especially evident during the crisis.

The report adopted by the Congress in March identifies the most acute issues that subnational authorities have been confronted with during this pandemic. The Congress recommendation calls on Council of Europe member States to adopt measures supporting local authorities in their efforts to tackle the pandemic, while preserving local autonomy. It also invites the governments to strengthen the dialogue with subnational levels. It stresses the importance of respect of the Charter and its Additional Protocol on participation in local public affairs, in times of major crises, in order to safeguard local democracy and ensure local self-government's resilience and sustainability.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Although the crisis has taken its toll on local and regional authorities, I am confident that they will be at the forefront of the recovery. The year 2021 could be a turning point in this regard, and can bring new opportunities.

It is our responsibility as local and regional elected representatives to stand next to our citizens, to protect their human rights and guarantee their security, to preserve democracy and create an environment conducive to sustainable economic development in our cities and regions.

We need to bring all actors together to fight the pandemic, prepare the aftermath and help our societies overcome this unprecedented crisis.

The Congress will contribute concretely by putting emphasis on five main areas of work as part of its priorities adopted for the next 5 years:

- Resilient societies through effective responses to the health crisis;
- Democratic societies, focusing on representative democracy and citizen participation;
- Cohesive societies, by reducing inequalities;
- Sustainable societies, focusing on environmental issues and climate action and,
- Digital societies, focusing on digitalisation and artificial intelligence.

We note that the workplan of NALAS that you will discuss during your Assembly is fully aligned with the Congress' work on these thematic issues. I trust that it will be beneficial for the preparation of knowledge products you are offering to your members.

For our part, the Congress will continue to support the mission of your Network – a network both for and by associations of local authorities – geared towards promoting and safeguarding local democracy, and improving the performance of cities and regions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before concluding, I would like to stress that the Congress has been pursuing its monitoring activities during the crisis, even remotely. It is essential that we continue our work in order to ensure that the Charter is well implemented.

The Congress also continues its post-monitoring dialogue and co-operation activities. I am glad that we will soon sign a post-monitoring roadmap with the authorities in the Republic of Moldova, for the implementation of the Congress monitoring recommendations. I am also grateful to CALM, the Congress of Local Authorities from Moldova, for the joint work that is being carried out within the Congress co-operation project as part of the Council of Europe Action Plan for the Republic of Moldova. We look forward to the positive development and hope that this remote mode of functioning will remain temporary, and that we will soon be able to resume in-person meetings as nothing can substitute them.

Thank you.