Workshop on Reducing inequalities, advancing Human Rights at Local Level in Georgia

Speaking points by Andreas Kiefer, Secretary General of Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe

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Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Congress, I would like to greet all participants to this workshop that we are organising jointly with the National Association of Local Authorities of Georgia to mark the International Human Rights Day. My warmest welcome to the President of NALAG and Mayor of Tbilisi, Kahka Kaladze, and to the newly elected mayors that have joined us, in person and online, to discuss ways to reduce inequalities and advancing human rights at local level in Georgia.

The topic of this event takes on an even greater significance today, in the current very complex situation of the pandemic that has been affecting us all for two years. It is as relevant as it is timely. While the pandemic has worsened existing inequalities, particularly affecting persons and groups in situations of vulnerability, it has had a negative impact on a wide range of human rights.

The role of local authorities as front-line stakeholders in the implementation of human rights is no longer questioned. The health crisis itself and the numerous challenges it has raised have brought to the forefront the need for better protection of human rights of our citizens.

At the same time, the pandemic has highlighted the need for more solidarity and more dialogue, as a vital requirement for building resilience of our communities and trust in public institutions.

Dialogue between different groups of society, between citizens and publics authorities, between different levels of governance. Dialogue is in fact the cornerstone of democratic societies. Democracy is essential if people are to live in freedom, dignity and security. Together with the rule of law and human rights, democracy represents the third pilar of the core values of our work at the Council of Europe, and all three serve as the basis for democratic, pluralistic and sustainable development.

While the primary responsibility for the promotion and protection of human rights lies with state organs that ratify international human rights treaties, it is local authorities, to a large extent, which translate international obligations into practice. The provisions of the European Charter of Local Self-Government establish the principle of subsidiarity and the right of democratic local authorities to "regulate and manage a substantial share of public affairs under their own responsibility and in the interests of the local population." (Art 3). At the same time many aspects of these "public affairs" are horizontal and imply joint and shared responsibilities with national authorities. Human rights are one of these cross-cutting issues relevant for many thematic portfolios and responsibilities.

National and local authorities have an opportunity and the obligation to work together to shape the society we want, to renew democracy and create an enabling environment, in which human rights and the rule of law can flourish.

At the Congress, we believe that democracy is not restricted to free and fair elections, which are indeed an essential feature of pluralistic and representative democracy. Democracy has to embrace a culture of transparency and participation in local political processes, develop a culture of power sharing and have checks and balances between the different levels of governance and with citizens, as well as develop a culture of human rights for building better communities and resilient territories, as a catalyst for sustainable development.

The pandemic has pushed us towards efficiency. However, I believe that we must go back to a principle of effectiveness over (perceived) short term efficiency - and effectiveness entails full participation from local authorities as well as inclusive and open processes at all levels. This concerns the phases of assessment, policy shaping and implementation in order to create ownership and commitment.

Acknowledging the need of increased collaboration with local authorities, the Council of Europe and the Congress have adopted a number of recommendations and resolutions on the role of local authorities in protecting and mainstreaming human rights, and in promoting a citizen-oriented, open, inclusive and gender-sensitive local governance.

Convinced of the need to reinforce capacities and support peer exchanges, the Congress has published a set of Handbooks to support and inspire local elected representatives in the concrete implementation of Human rights through the collection of innovative territorial good practices. The collection entails three volumes, the third one soon to be published. The first volume focuses on the right to non-discrimination, the second volume deals with social rights, in particular in times of Covid, and the third volume will address sustainable development and environmental issues, pointing to a clear interdependence with human rights.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the Congress, we are convinced that the local and regional levels are crucial for human rights protection, resilient communities, and sustainable development. Indeed, around two thirds of the SDG targets can only be reached if we act at the local or regional level. Through this project, we contribute specifically to SDGs 5 (Gender equality);

10 (Reduced inequalities) ;16 (Peace, Justice, and strong institutions). The intervention is also linked with the SDGs 11 (Sustainable cities and communities) and 17 (Partnership for the goals).

In today's world, we can no longer think about actions taken by local governments without due consideration to their human rights implications. Nor about human rights actions taken on a national level, without consulting local authorities. We need to start active discussions around the role of local authorities in pandemic recovery and to identify ways in which local government, civil society, business enterprises and others can work together to ensure vibrant and sustainable societies that can fulfil the aspirations of the population.

It is in this context, and with great satisfaction, that I welcome the municipalities which have decided to embark on a joint venture as part of this project on "Strengthening participatory democracy and human rights at local level in Georgia" which the Congress is implementing with the National Association of Local Authorities of Georgia.

Shortly, I will be signing, with NALAG and with 13 local authorities, the Memoranda of Understanding that underline our joint commitment to improve the quality of local democracy, strengthen institutional frameworks and embed human rights in local decision-making and political processes.

I look forward to our fruitful discussion and co-operation to make this project successful.

Thank you very much for your attention.