

**Thematic meeting of the Executive Board of NALAG, Tbilisi, Georgia**

## Opening remarks by Harald Bergmann, Human rights Spokesperson of the Congress of the Council of Europe

*Check against delivery*

4 October 2022

Dear Mayors,  
Dear Executive Board members of NALAG,  
Dear representatives of the Secretariat,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased to participate here today in this thematic meeting of the National Association of Local Authorities of Georgia (NALAG) - in both my capacity as Human rights Spokesperson of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, and as peer mayor of the city of Middelburg in the Netherlands.

The Congress has a long story of cooperation and support towards NALAG since the very first steps of this national association, having contributed to its foundation. It is therefore with great pleasure and a strong sense of familiarity that we are carrying out this common project on “Strengthening participatory democracy and human rights at local level in Georgia” with the Association.

At the Congress of the Council of Europe, we believe that strong associations contribute to building the stability of the political system as a whole, as well as promoting democracy and respect of rule of law and human rights. They play a crucial role in implementing the provisions of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, and in building robust local authorities within a decentralised system of multilevel governance.

Strong multi-level governance requires strong local and regional authorities, equipped with proper competences and financial resources. The right of local authorities to be consulted by other levels of government is a key principle enshrined in the Charter.

National associations represent the voice of local authorities and defend the collective interests of their member communities and elected representatives. Therefore, all and any laws of local concern, *including human rights strategies and policies*, must be carried out in constant dialogue between central and territorial authorities represented by their national association.

It is indeed fundamental for national governments to recognise two key principles:

- 1) that the national level is not the only deliverer of human rights, and
- 2) that local and regional authorities must have the independence, autonomy, and resources to make decisions in response to the needs of their communities, within the law – including of course human rights law - but free from undue control from the centre. In fact, this independence is guaranteed by the European Charter of Local Self-Government.

Associations such as NALAG have a central role in advocating for the implementation of such fundamental principles. They also have the unique possibility to act a platform for exchange, for capacity development, and for dialogue among elected representatives from all political backgrounds with a pluralistic and open approach. Peer dialogue and exchange of good practices, as well as common development of strategies to deal with challenges, are key strategies for the strengthening of human rights implementation.

I had the pleasure yesterday to participate in an example of this, namely the meeting of the Forum of Exchange on human rights at local level which was set up jointly with NALAG to foster a results based-approach of our common project. I was impressed by the proactiveness and dedication to the cause of human rights of this group. Mayors showed leadership, commitment, and shared numerous interesting practices.

Together we discussed the findings of the capacities and needs baseline assessment which was carried out in a participatory manner (and about which you will hear more later today). The Forum as a platform of exchange allowed for Mayors to openly discuss their municipalities' current capacities, needs, and visions for human rights implementation, to share inspiring good practices, and thereby, strengthen intermunicipal dialogue.

NALAG has the potential to lead the process of dialogue on human rights at local level not only between local authorities, but also with other actors of human rights governance, such as the national institutions, the Public Defender's Office and civil society. The Congress recognises this potential, and stands ready to support further efforts in this direction.

This meeting represents a unique opportunity for NALAG to foster and advocate for an effective policy of consultation between local and central levels on human rights, and the Congress is honoured to be part of this process.

By expressing once more our support to NALAG in promoting constructive dialogue with a view to strengthening the Georgian political system, I wish us a very productive meeting and thank you for your attention.