

draft version as of 2 June 2022

*Congress of the Central European Initiative (CEI):*  
*Local and Regional Authorities in the post-crisis Europe – Prospects for a sustainable and resilient future*  
*7-8 June 2022*  
*Grand Hotel Millennium, Sofia/Bulgaria*

**Speaking points for Dr. Bernd Vöhringer, President of the Chamber of Local Authorities, Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, Council of Europe**

- I would like to thank the organisers for the warm welcome and the opportunity to address the “1st Congress of the Central European Initiative”, meeting here in Sofia, and dealing with challenges which are crucial for our common future. We are talking about sustainability and resilience to be achieved through the fight against climate change and the protection of biodiversity at local, regional and at state level. In extreme consequence, this is about ecological transition for the sake of the survival of our civilization, of mankind.
- We meet here at the time when the overarching aim of environmental protection has been overshadowed by unprecedented challenges: The war in Ukraine has relegated the fight against climate change to second place. A war, literally on our doorstep, that has already killed thousands and uprooted millions of people, causing severe humanitarian, social and economic consequences. At the same time, many communities are still struggling with the consequences of the COVID-19. A pandemic, that isn't over yet and, most probably, won't end any time soon.
- Blocked out by these multiple threats, climate change and its consequences, notably the loss of biodiversity, continue to threaten our planet, our very existence. The far-reaching impact of ecological emergencies is more and more felt beyond borders, prompting national authorities to reach out to their counterparts at the grassroots' level for swift and coordinated action.

- In parallel, we are witnessing an increased fragmentation and polarisation of our societies, fuelled by fear, spread of misinformation, fake news and hate speech and an ongoing crisis of confidence in the institutions and in politics as such.
- All these crises strain the democratic foundations of our societies and remind us that in these difficult times, it is more important than ever to focus on building resilient communities. The ability to prevent, resist and adapt to the consequences of crisis, and to bounce back quickly, should be at the very core of democratic governance today. We must carry on with our work of building democracy and delivering good governance, for the benefit of our citizens and their trust in regional and local authorities.
- As I said at the beginning, environmental protection is a central issue at all levels of governance. However, it is the local and regional authorities which are key actors in implementing measures and applying laws. The Council of Europe has been pioneering progress on environmental issues, for example through its Bern Convention on the conservation of European wildlife and natural habitats, a binding international legal instrument, which came into force already in 1982. What many people do not know is that the European Court of Human Rights, over the years, has already ruled in some 300 environment-related cases. In a land-mark case the Court found that municipal authorities have failed to protect the health of residents further to the re-routing of a motorway. This shows that local and regional authorities will be, more and more, central players in the process of ecological transition in order to ensure climate neutrality through clean energies and accompanying measures.
- To empower them, local authorities, among other things, need the necessary competences and must be included in the legislative process in a structured, regular consultation with central government and all levels of governance, in interaction with the relevant local, regional and national associations. In order to institutionalise this, the Congress is currently working on a Resolution to consider the elaboration of an Additional Protocol to the Charter of Local Self-Government, the basic legal framework for the protection of local self-government, which, for the time-being, does not explicitly mention the right to a sustainable environment. What we aim at is a “green reading” of the Charter, so to say an interpretation of its provisions from the angle of environmental

protection, as well as the strengthening of the position of local and regional authorities – vis-à-vis State authorities – in decision-making on environmental matters.

- Therefore, the new Congress Resolution includes a wide range of measures for subnational government to seek solutions to the climate crisis and build resilience and sustainability at community level. Enhancing inter-municipal, inter-regional cooperation as well as the interplay between rural and urban areas is essential to boost ecological transition through the exchange between relevant stakeholders. A strong commitment to multi-level governance is the underlying principle to achieve tangible results.
- Indispensable, however, is early information and transparency vis-à-vis the citizens. New ways of involvement of citizens in environmental decision-making, in particular at the local and regional level, can be a game changer. Innovative deliberative democracy tools such as citizens' assemblies can help making people embrace new ideas and projects to tackle climate change and biodiversity, taking ownership of a real change in their communities which, ultimately, leads also to increased trust of citizens in public authorities.
- Overall, I think that it is fundamental to create a real culture of environmental decision-making, bringing all strategic elements – including planning, budgeting and project implementation - in line with a shift to zero carbon and climate resilience. Local and regional action can be exemplary in this respect.
- At the end of my presentation, I would like to share with you also some experiences regarding sustainability, resilience and ecological transition in my own city, Sindelfingen.
- Currently planning of an energy hub in the region. Usage of the biological garbage (turning biogas into biometan). In the future, this gas should be use for the district heating (Fernwärme).
- In line with the new Climate protection act of the federal state of Baden-Württemberg (The Baden-Württemberg Climate Protection Act (KSG BW) establishes a statutory framework for the state's climate protection policy. The Climate Protection Act entered into force on July 31st, 2013. The Climate Protection Act underwent a

thorough revision and expansion in 2020 and was revised in 2021 once again.) the city of Sindelfingen has to generate min 2 % of its energy from wind energy and Photovoltaics.

- In order to increase the energy production through photovoltaics, the city of Sindelfingen made use of noise barrier (Flugfeld Lärmschutzwall)
- Currently, we are planning to use a “highway tunnel cover” (Tunneldeckel) for more Photovoltaics.
- We have to have ambitious plans. According to the Climate protection act, by 2023, every city with more than 50.000 inhabitants has to establish a concept to be CO2 neutral in heating of buildings by 2040/45.
- Let me thank you again for this kind invitation and allow me to stress that the Congress will continue to support the National Association of the Municipalities of the Republic of Bulgaria in the future, not only, but particularly with regard to what is probably the biggest threat to life on earth...