

NALAS General Assembly - Istanbul, Türkiye; 15 March 2023

Keynote address by Mathieu Mori, Secretary General Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, Council of Europe

Introduction of the session on "Resilience of Local Governments: Response to Crisis. Solidarity support, prevention and policies related to natural disasters/earthquakes."

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(currently 1572 words – 10 - 11 minutes)

Dear President,

Dear Mayors,

dear colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me start by joining President Vöhringer and other speakers in expressing my deepest sympathy to the Turkish people and to all of you who have been directly affected by the massive earthquakes in your country and in Syria. Many of us in other European countries were in shock about the devastating effects of this natural disaster and the losses of more than 50,000 lives. In the face of this catastrophe, we are promoting initiatives to mobilise help. The response, resilience and demonstrated solidarity we are witnessing have been truly inspiring.

Resilience is the key word of the present session, and I would like to pay tribute to your steadfast resilience, as individuals and as local leaders.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to address you and meet you in person at the very beginning of my mandate as Secretary General of the Congress. The topic of our discussion could not be more relevant in today's context, and I am glad that it is taken up by NALAS a long-standing partner of the Congress in upholding and strengthening local democracy, even in difficult times.

I believe that it has never been as urgent as today to address the implications of major crises for local and regional authorities - not only following the most recent earthquakes, but also, as mentioned earlier, following the COVID-19 health crisis; the widespread floods, droughts and fires linked to climate change; and the war in Ukraine leading to energy, food and socio-economic crises for all of us.

Whatever the nature of crisis situations, they present unparalleled challenges for local and regional authorities, which are in the front line when it comes to:

- providing immediate and life-saving assistance to their people,
- organising humanitarian, logistic and financial help, in terms of housing, healthcare and psychosocial support,
- rebuilding destroyed habitats in a more sustainable manner,
- and developing preventive measures, where possible, and making cities and regions more resilient for future crises.

As it was mentioned in the opening remarks, the Congress a political but also a cooperation-oriented assembly has engaged in activities at different levels, which I would also like to emphasise :

- The Congress is just about to initiate a report on “Local and regional responses to major crises”, which will address issues of coordination between all levels of governance, the need for material and social reconstruction, the importance of transparency and clarity in communication or the importance of upholding democratic institutions;

- At the upcoming March Session, the Congress will hold a debate on the “Resilience of cities and regions in the face of multiple crises”;
- The Concept for a “Manual for Local Authorities – Resilient Cities Respond to Crises” has been developed in co-operation with NALAS and discussed with the Association of Ukrainian Cities, as part of our ongoing co-operation project in Ukraine.

President Vöhringer has already mentioned the Cities4Cities platform, started at HIS initiative. We are now trying to find out if it is possible to develop initiatives of the same kind to create links between cities affected by natural disasters. The Cities4Cities could serve as a model to further promote inter-municipal exchanges in different areas and mutual support among local authorities throughout Europe and beyond.

Much is happening at local and regional levels already. We have already mentioned the solidarity that people have demonstrated following the recent earthquakes. We have seen similar expressions of solidarity following the floodings in Germany and Belgium in 2021, the widespread heat waves and fires in France, Spain or Greece over the past years, or during the COVID-19 pandemic where many volunteers have contributed to keeping social and health services running. Not to mention the outstanding support provided to the 18 million Ukrainian refugees who had to leave their country since February 2022.

In the Southeast, we have also witnessed a number of natural disasters, such as the earthquakes in recent years in Albania and Croatia, which called for increased cautiousness and re-thinking of ways to ensure adequate and swift response in the face of multiple challenges. This has been recognised by NALAS in its work throughout the years, as well as through their strategic orientation, which focuses, among other, on ensuring more sustainable, smart, inclusive and resilient cities and municipalities.

The challenge for authorities at all levels will now be to turn words into action. I look forward to learning your reflections and insights.

I would also like to stress that co-ordination with, and timely consultation of local authorities as inscribed in the European Charter of local self-government, the international treaty protecting local democracy in Europe, is crucial at all times and is further highlighted in times of crisis. The need to involve local authorities and their associations in crisis management and policy dialogue on strategic planning and rebuilding, as well as fund distribution, has been widely recognised both by national associations and national authorities. In this regard, we are interested in hearing your views about the sustainable mechanisms that can ensure a meaningful contribution of local authorities to post-crisis recovery and reconstruction.

I would also like to recall that after the Covid-19 crisis, the Congress presented recommendations to the 46 Member States, recommendations to be considered in establishing a coordinated framework for responding to future crisis situations. Let me share some of them with you:

- Any emergency measures must be temporary in nature, proportional to the requirements of the situation, and introduced under democratic control, and they must be lifted as soon as the situation allows it;
- Instead of re-centralising competences and funds, better coordination between different levels of governance and improved system of regular consultations with local and regional authorities must be established within emergency mechanisms, making subnational authorities an integral part of national crisis management;
- All tiers of government should/must be involved in decision-making on postponing or holding of elections in times of crisis.

In this endeavour, citizens' must not be forgotten; they must always remain at the heart of our action, and we should therefore look at new ways and forms of democratic engagement of citizens in our deliberations and decision-making.

The Congress has started and will continue to push this agenda at the European level and NALAS, with its anchorage in the countries of South-East Europe, will continue to be an critical partner for the Congress to inform our work, to help us implement Congress recommendations in this region of Europe and to work together in co-operation projects.

We look forward to pursuing our co-operation and joint efforts towards building more resilient cities and regions.

And I look forward to pushing the Congress / NALAS relationship further!

Thank you for your attention.