

NALAS General Assembly, 15 March 2023, Istanbul, Türkiye

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Dear President,
Dear colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to address you today on behalf of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe as President of its Chamber of Local Authorities.

I am very pleased to do so, because since its establishment, NALAS has been a true advocate and our devoted partner in the efforts to strengthen local self-government in the South-East of Europe

Today's General Assembly is being held in a context marked by multiple ongoing crises. It is being held in Istanbul in Türkiye, a country that was hit over a month ago by terrible earthquakes, which claimed tens of thousands of lives, leaving the country with immense human loss and severe infrastructural damage. In this regard, I would like to reiterate the Congress deepest condolences and sympathy with Türkiye and to express our solidarity with the authorities and people of this country in this tragic period. The earthquake was a stark reminder of the need to strengthen resilience of our local communities, and in this regard, this General Assembly is an excellent opportunity to share experiences and identify ways to address the many challenges we face. I would like to thank the hosts for making it possible, despite the difficult circumstances.

In the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, the Congress called for local and regional authorities to support the emergency aid campaigns and we remain committed to support the local and regional authorities in Türkiye.

We are witnessing moving examples of solidarity and support across cities and municipalities both in the country and internationally, and we trust that these joint efforts will lead to the swiftest possible recovery of affected villages, towns and regions.

In these difficult times, local authorities emerge as primary actors, the ones immediately responding to the needs, providing assistance, and remaining closest to their citizens. Mayors, local councillors and civil servants are those at the frontline, who are staying on their constituencies' side and doing their best to provide them with essential support and services, as well as sense of safety and comfort.

In this framework, we highly appreciate the *Guidelines for responding in emergency situations* developed by NALAS, which emphasise the immediate role of local authorities and put forward their associations as key co-ordinating and mobilising actors.

The importance of local authorities is highlighted in Ukraine as well, where for more than a year now, Russia's war continues to claim innocent human lives and cause destruction in cities and communities across the country.

The Congress commends the Ukrainian resistance, as we continue to provide unwavering support to the local and regional authorities in their struggle. The *Cities4Cities - United for Ukraine* Platform, launched in March last year is a concrete example of our quick response to help Ukrainian local and regional authorities with the capacity, know-how and supply of cities and regions in other Council of Europe member States.

I would like to thank NALAS for engaging in this and similar initiatives, such as the Bridges of Trust. We are convinced that such co-operation contributes meaningfully and creates a great sense of unity and support. The experiences and lessons from the South-East of Europe are needed more than ever in Ukraine, both in post-war recovery efforts, but also in country's path towards the European Union.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our societies are facing numerous challenges indeed – war, natural hazards and the many consequences they imply, which I just mentioned. We are also witnessing the continued threat of climate change, and its already visible effects for our planet. The trends in the energy sector call for additional prudence. Socially, we witness ongoing polarisation of our societies and erosion of democratic values. The full scope of the migrant crisis, aggravated by the war in Ukraine, is only yet to be seen. And all of this as the world recovers from the Covid-19 pandemic.

It is therefore important more than ever to focus on building resilient and sustainable communities, that have the capacity to respond in the most adequate manner to the needs of people. The ability to prevent, resist and adapt to the consequences of crisis, and to uphold human rights at the local level should be at the very core of democratic governance today.

The Congress is addressing this in very comprehensive terms. Resilience and sustainability are major features of the upcoming Congress session, which will take place next week. I hope that your delegations will be participating and will be proactive in sharing the experience of your region. I look forward to our debates.

In addition, we are launching the drafting of a report and recommendation on local and regional responses to major crises. Within our co-operation activities, and working with NALAS, we have recently discussed with the Association of Ukrainian Cities, the concept of a *Manual for local authorities on building resilience through risk management*.

For more than a decade now, the Congress has been advocating for the role of local authorities in managing different aspects related to the quality of the environment, the impact of climate change on citizen's lives, and the energy transition. We have also developed the third *handbook on human rights for local and regional authorities*, which focuses on environment and sustainable development and provides examples and ideas. Indeed, efforts should be geared towards enhancing the protection of human rights and the environment at the local level. These should be translated into practical steps and effectively localised. During its previous session in October, the Congress debated a report on the green reading of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, and recommended drafting an Additional protocol to the Charter on the competences and responsibilities of local authorities in the environmental protection.

We must pursue and persevere with our efforts in building democracy and delivering good governance, for the benefit of our citizens and their trust in regional and local authorities. However, to achieve this, local authorities cannot act alone, but in co-operation and with shared responsibility with other levels of government, as part of the strong multi-governance system, which the Congress insists on. We believe that the key to achieve this is an inclusive and transparent dialogue of national governments with local authorities and their national associations.

It is our strong conviction that the efforts to preserve our democratic heritage, undertaken by local and regional authorities and their associations, are bearing fruit and will help us to better manage the present crises.

To conclude, I would like to re-iterate our support and congratulate NALAS for the excellent work throughout the years. We look forward to pursuing our co-operation and joint efforts for peaceful, more sustainable and resilient societies.

I thank you all and wish you a successful discussion ahead of us.