

VII National Congress of the National Association of Local Authorities of Georgia, Tbilisi, Georgia

Speech by of Bernd Vöhringer, President of the Chamber of Local Authorities

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09 March 2022

Dear Mayor Kaladze,
Dear Deputy Minister of Regional Development and Infrastructure, Mzia Giorgobiani
Dear Deputy Head of the Parliamentary Committee on regional policy and self-governance, Irakli Zarqua
Dear Mayors,
Ladies and gentlemen,

The General Assembly of the National Association of Local Authorities of Georgia – NALAG - is taking place as we witness the horrors of war in Ukraine. These are unprecedented and dark times for our continent, and for democracy.

At the Council of Europe, we commend the heartfelt solidarity of member states, cities and villages, and we call for the immediate stop of hostilities and the return to the path of diplomacy.

Our thoughts and solidarity are with the Ukrainian people and with authorities at all levels.

The war reminds us of the need to build strong public authorities, closer to citizens. It reminds us of the need to work together to defend, promote and uphold the values of freedom and democracy.

I am honoured to address the 7th National Congress of NALAG, in my capacity as President of the Chamber of Local Authorities of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, and as peer Mayor.

First and foremost, dear mayors, dear local councillors, allow me to extend my warmest congratulations on your success in the elections of last October. You have important tasks and challenges ahead. Democracy at the grassroots level demands continuous improvement; it demands constant attention and care.

As it is enshrined in the European Charter of Local Self-Government, “public responsibilities shall generally be exercised, in preference, by those authorities which are closest to the citizen”. So, it is on you, on us, local elected representatives, to perform our duties and to exercise our authority in the most independent, citizen-centered, open, accountable and ethical manner. Only by acting in such a way, we are able to better address the needs of citizens.

The Congress is the pan-European forum of elected local and regional politicians from member states of the Council of Europe. It is your European institution, your voice and it works to promote, defend and develop local and regional democracy across our continent.

The Congress regularly assesses the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in each member State. Our monitoring activities are characterised by a constructive policy dialogue with all stakeholders at all levels concerned. We aim to support national authorities, the associations of local authorities and the municipalities they represent, in better complying with the European standards set out in the Charter as well as in the Additional Protocol on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority. This year marks the 10th anniversary of the entry into force of the Additional Protocol, and we would like to congratulate Georgia for having ratified it and included its principles in the Decentralisation Strategy.

At the Council of Europe Congress, we believe that strong associations contribute to building the stability of the political system, as a whole. National associations are fully fledged partners of a multi-level governance system. 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. It requires the Decentralisation Strategy to be thoroughly implemented and regular dialogue and consultations as a prerequisite to achieve this goal.

The right of local authorities to be consulted by other levels of government is a key principle enshrined in the Charter. National associations are indispensable stakeholders in consultation mechanisms as they represent the voice of local authorities and defend the collective interests of their member communities and elected representatives. At the Congress, we recommend introducing a comprehensive and stable system of consultation.

Therefore, local self-government reforms, the decentralisation strategy and any other 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.

National associations also serve as a platform of exchange bringing together elected representatives from all political backgrounds with a pluralistic and open approach and ensuring co-operation and constructive dialogue amongst their members, and between national and grass roots levels of governance.

They identify issues and local challenges where joint efforts from the central and local levels are needed. Such processes ensure the success of reforms and a better quality of policy making, giving national decisions greater legitimacy and shared ownership which ultimately leads to increased citizens' trust in public authorities.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In this moment of renewal of the association, let me express the continuous and steady Congress support and endorsement of NALAG. Your association is a fundamental actor of the Georgian democratic system, with whom we have been working to strengthen the voice and give a prominent role to local authorities as fully fledged partners.

We are now seeing a positive trend in Georgia, in which the local authorities are getting more regularly consulted on a variety of matters, both by the government and the Parliament. This includes discussion on policies that protect human rights of vulnerable groups such as children or people with disabilities and promote equal opportunities for women and men to eliminate all forms of discrimination. We hope that within the project we are implementing jointly with NALAG, we will achieve positive results for enhanced implementation of human rights at local level as well as strengthened commitments of Georgia in upholding human rights.

The relations between the Congress and NALAG are a success story and I look forward to continuing the excellent co-operation with NALAG's newly elected leaders, and to jointly celebrating its 20th anniversary in 2024.

I also look forward to welcoming the Georgian delegation at the Congress session from 22 – 24 March 2022 and to our continuous partnership.

I wish you a very productive meeting and thank you for your attention.