

First meeting of the Forum of Exchange, Tbilisi, Georgia

Speech by of Harald Bergmann, Human rights Spokesperson of the Congress of the Council of Europe

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25 March 2022

Dear Mayors,
Dear local councillors,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased to welcome you today for the first meeting of the Forum of Exchange on Human Rights at local level in Georgia - 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.

Let me start with sharing my solidarity with the Ukrainian people and with their local authorities, our peers. They are today showing – at the cost of their own safety – a profound courage, dedication, and connection with their territories, in resisting against the invasion.

The war reminds us how fragile human rights really are, and how precious they are.

The war reminds us, through the shining example of resilience of our Ukrainian peers, that we as local authorities have the responsibility and privilege to be the authorities closest to the citizens. We are the first responders in time of crisis, and the first line of defence of human rights.

The war reminds us that more than ever we need to work together – beyond political factions – to build strong public authorities, to defend, promote and uphold the values of freedom, equality, and democracy.

I commend the mobilisation of many of our European peers in solidarity with the Ukrainian population, facilitating the reception and welcoming of refugees. Initiatives such as free housing, public transportation, and facilitated access to schools and kindergartens are examples of that.

Humanitarian efforts such as these are commendable and extraordinary. Yet, our responsibilities as local authorities are the opposite of extraordinary – they are ordinary in the sense that they relate with the everyday life of our citizens.

It is not only in extraordinary times of crisis, when human rights are grossly violated, that we should strive to protect them. It is really in our ordinary life that we shall work for their protection, implementation, and promotion.

Your presence here today, and your active participation in this project, shows that you already have this understanding, and I congratulate you for your engagement.

You are aware that as competences of local authorities grow, through much welcomed decentralisation processes, so do their responsibilities in terms of human rights promotion and protection.

We routinely deal with human rights: the right not to be discriminated against, the rights to have equal access to public services, to education, to housing and health care, for example. All such rights imply the direct involvement of local authorities and the development of adequate policies which are tailored to the territory and its population.

You will agree that we are not “agents” of central government but have our own responsibilities to actively protect and promote human rights throughout our policy development and delivery of services. We also have the unique advantage of being close to our citizens, and to their real needs.

Municipalities and cities have de facto a significant share of responsibility for implementing human rights standards set out in international treaties – and the unique possibility to do it in a tailored, effective, and rewarding way.

To best implement these rights, it is fundamental that as local authorities we are equipped with the awareness of international human rights standards. This awareness also allows us to advocate within multilevel dialogue structures more effectively, and to voice our needs and priorities from a strengthened position.

Raising awareness has thus always been one of the fundamental pillars of our human rights work at the Congress. Besides our recommendations on the role of local and regional authorities in upholding human rights, we decided to have a concrete and practical approach, working on a set of Human Rights Handbooks for local and regional authorities.

The first Handbook focuses on non-discrimination. It sets the basis for exchanging initiatives among local authorities and guide them in the implementation of a human rights approach to local policy making.

The second Handbook focuses on social rights as an expression of human rights. Especially times of crisis, it is crucial to ensure that everyone has equal access to their social rights. This 2nd volume presents a wide range of good, simple and low-cost best practice implemented by municipalities across Europe.

The third Handbook focuses on environment. It will soon be presented together with a report on the environment and human rights. I take this opportunity to congratulate Mr Levan Zhorzholiani, member of the Georgian Delegation for his appointment as co-rapporteur of the report. It attests the continued engagement with environment and human rights which Georgia has promoted during its Presidency of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe.

These Handbooks are useful resources which hopefully will inspire you in the efforts towards strengthening human rights protection of your communities.

It is through peer exchange and open dialogue that we can best strengthen our capacities as local authorities and effectively promote human rights. It is with this notion that I welcome this innovative Forum of Exchange.

The Forum serves as an opportunity to address the daily challenges you meet in your respective local authorities. It will work as a community of practice and will support the dialogue with central authorities and the advocacy efforts of your national association NALAG, our main project partner.

We are currently witnessing some positive developments in the consultation of local authorities. I trust that this trend will continue as you will be showing strong leadership in advancing human rights.

The Congress is committed to support you in this endeavour. I look forward to our continuous co-operation and to visiting your local communities soon.

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