

36th SESSION

The Congress' contribution to the reflection on the future of the Council of Europe (Helsinki Ministerial Session, 16-17 May 2019)

Recommendation 429 (2019) ¹

1. In 2017, the Congress celebrated 60 years of commitment to local and regional democracy within the Council of Europe. Today, representing more than 150,000 local and regional authorities in the Organisation's 47 member States, it is the embodiment of territorial democracy within the Council of Europe.

2. Since the first meeting in 1957 of the European Conference of Local and Regional Authorities, forerunner to the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities which was established in 1994 following the Council of Europe Summit of Heads of State in Vienna, territorial issues have become a key concern for central governments.

3. Over this period of time, the Congress has continued to grow in political maturity and operational capacity, determined to be a full partner of the Committee of Ministers and of central governments in promoting democracy, human rights and the rule of law at local and regional level, while with the main goal of strengthening trust in democratic institutions through proximity governance.

4. The Foreign Ministers of the 47 member States of the Council of Europe will meet in Helsinki on 16 and 17 May 2019 at a time when faith in the democratic process is faltering across Europe and the democratic values for which this Organisation stands face unprecedented challenges; the Congress fervently hopes that the conclusions and decisions of the Ministers will provide new impetus to the Council of Europe.

5. In this respect, the Congress is convinced that:

a. the Council of Europe, as the pan-European guarantor of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, is a central actor for innovative thinking in these domains and can contribute to the democratic dimension of Europe which is experiencing a worrying crisis;

b. the local and regional level can help significantly to reconnect with citizens and restore confidence in democratic processes and institutions and that the Congress can contribute its experience and that of the municipalities and regions it represents, in order to develop comprehensive strategies aimed at revitalising and regenerating European democracy.

¹ Debated and adopted by the Congress on 2 April 2019, 1st sitting (see Document [CG36\(2019\)08](#)), Co-rapporteurs: Xavier CADORET, France (L, SOC) and Gunn Marit HELGESEN, Norway (R, EPP/CCE)

6. The Congress, consequently, has prepared a contribution to the member States' reflection on the future of the Council of Europe, and:

a. invites the Committee of Ministers to take account of this contribution, presented as an appendix to this recommendation, during its preparation for the forthcoming Helsinki Ministerial Session and in particular during the drafting of its final declaration and conclusions;

b. declares its commitment and readiness to implement the conclusions of the Ministerial Session in its areas of competence.

APPENDIX

The Congress' contribution to the reflection on the future of the Council of Europe (Helsinki Ministerial Session, 16-17 May 2019)

Strengthening local and regional democracy in the 21st century

1. Since its foundation seventy years ago in the wake of the Second World War, the Council of Europe's main purpose has been to protect the people of its 47 member States, where human rights, democracy and the rule of law are recognised as the core values of harmonious co-existence.
2. In 70 years it has succeeded in creating a common space of legal norms based on these core values, establishing, notably, a unique system of human rights protection centred on the European Convention and Court of Human Rights. It has promoted a model of democratic governance at both national and local level that represents as much of a landmark feature of the European model as the human rights protection mechanism.
3. With regard to local democracy, it has played a key role in building pluralist and cohesive societies, which can be rightly seen as one of the Council of Europe's main achievements.
4. National governments themselves recognised this when, in the preamble to the European Charter of Local Self-Government, they defined local democracy as one of the main foundations of any democratic regime. This importance of communities and their elected representatives has become an acknowledged feature of the Council of Europe and provides today a valuable opportunity for the Organisation to make a positive contribution to the democratic debate taking place in our member countries.
5. The future of the Council of Europe is inseparable from the future of European democracy and the European model of society which this Organisation has built and upheld and which paved the way for the creation of the European Union (EU). Yet today, this model is in danger of unravelling. The protection it offers to Europeans is being challenged by far-reaching changes that affect, to varying degrees, all nations. The initial role of the Council of Europe, which is as relevant today as it was 70 years ago, is now being pursued in the context of a global transformation which concerns all societies and all aspects of people's lives, whether political, economic, social or cultural.
6. The tangible effects of global warming, and more generally the widespread perception that our environment is deteriorating as a result of human action, the onset of a serious decline in biodiversity, the struggle to cope with the increasing pace of technological change and its consequences on employment, the challenges of migration, the globalisation of our economies and its impact on our traditional cultural references are the "visible part" of this worldwide systemic shift.
7. These transformations affect the way we see the world around us and think about it. A number of our intellectual reference points are becoming less and less certain, leading to social anxiety and an evolution in our political perceptions, reflected more specifically in a crisis of representation that manifests itself in many European countries, in particular by the rise of anti-liberal tendencies, the return of authoritarian temptations, the resurgence of nationalism along with territorial aspirations for secession, and the emergence of a "clash" society in which confrontation is the norm, with new forms of individual and collective violence. Many of these phenomena have been observed during Congress monitoring and electoral observation missions.
8. For years prior to these developments, there has been a growing loss of public confidence in elections and in democratic institutions, which has resulted in increasingly worrying abstention rates and a rising number of votes for extreme parties, particularly the extreme right, and a widespread crisis of confidence in the media that has shaken our very conception of factual truth.
9. The European Union's Eurobarometer of November 2018 showed a fall in public confidence in the main national political institutions. More than 6 out of 10 EU citizens do not trust their government or parliament. As for political parties, 8 out of 10 EU citizens express their mistrust.

10. Although these analyses reveal a mixed picture in various European countries, they nevertheless show that in some of our democracies the political link between institutions and citizens has suffered considerably. A growing proportion of citizens do not feel that they are properly represented nor secure and voice their dissatisfaction with the national politicians.

11. Even before this crisis of political representation, we witnessed a weakening of intermediate bodies such as political parties, trade unions, professional associations and churches (until then seen as coherent, protective and inclusive micro-societies). The decline of these structures paved the way for a social divide between "Us" and "Them", separated by a political and social void that populist or radical movements seek to fill, offering simplistic responses to complex challenges while claiming to be new representatives of the people.

12. How can we restore the political link where it has been damaged? How can we safeguard democracy where it is being threatened? How can we repair the social fabric where it has come apart? This is the challenge of the transformations that are unfolding. All levels of governance are concerned by these questions:

- the Council of Europe, founded on the three pillars of the rule of law, democracy and human rights, which, together with other international organisations, cannot remain indifferent;
- the central governments of the member States that have to deal with these questions on a daily basis', and
- local and regional authorities, who are in permanent contact with the citizens and at the frontline of addressing citizens' concerns.

All levels clearly share these new challenges that we must meet by including in our political agenda the key question: "How to live together today?"

13. We, the members of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, are convinced that while responding to these challenges is a task falling primarily to central governments and multilateral organisations such as the Council of Europe, the response is also to be found at community level.

14. We also firmly believe that while this transformation may appear to be a systemic crisis having multiple dimensions, it is not a crisis that has no solution. With the right political will, the commitment of public institutions and the active involvement of societies and citizens, these negative changes can be reversed. A crisis is not the end, it represents a critical time in any process of transition to a new paradigm, and an opportunity for improvement which compels us to think about alternatives. The reflection about the future of the Council of Europe should be approached in this spirit.

15. Although our societies are complex and the global challenges serious, never before in human history have citizens had such a high level of information and freedom of opinion. A 16-year-old Swedish girl, Greta Thunberg, for example, inspires huge crowds across Europe to walk in support of climate issues. This youth has thus become a symbol of the collective awareness of climate change.

16. Our local communities – this close-knit network of entities on a human scale, often forged by centuries of history and culture – lost political visibility at the time when the idea of nationhood emerged in our political cultures. Today, given the various crises we are facing, local communities must become the focus of renewed interest.

17. In 1957 the Council of Europe, an intergovernmental organisation by nature, showed its political vision by creating its own conference of local authorities. The member States reaffirmed this vision 25 years ago when they transformed the conference into the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, with the task of strengthening the important role played by local and regional communities, their mayors and elected representatives, and of integrating their input into the Council of Europe's legal instruments and policies to create a space of common values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law at grassroots level.

18. Over decades, the Congress, as a unique pan-European platform for co-operation of local and regional authorities, has built a balanced mechanism of advancing local and regional democracy on our continent through monitoring the implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in all the 47 member States, observing local and regional elections, recommending the necessary changes

to governments, and sharing experiences of local and regional authorities to improve the governance of their communities.

19. Today, the Congress continues to foster dialogue between local and regional authorities and citizens and their greater involvement in decision making, including, among others, the participation of young people, of women and of the whole of civil society. Since its creation, it has supported a broader and more appropriate use of participatory democracy, through legally-regulated grassroots consultations. The Congress also pursues its fight against local corruption and all the other problems that too frequently tarnish the image of politics.

20. However, the grassroots level is not immune to the challenges and upheavals faced by our societies today, which are often aggravated by austerity measures that are affecting the ability of local authorities to serve their communities. Yet it is precisely to their elected representatives in towns, cities and regions that citizens first turn for response.

21. Local and regional authorities are indeed crucial for upholding a strong social fabric, and the increasing importance of the role of mayors in society is a political fact. Mayors, local and regional elected representatives, are at the frontline of major events in community life. This can be seen in the public responses to natural disasters, acts of terrorism and social crises such as in France, with the organisation of the "Great Debate" called for by President Macron in response to the Yellow Vest movement. Mayors and councillors are probably the only democratic elected representatives who can say without any contradiction that "the street is their office". The reactions to the appalling murder of the Mayor of Gdansk speak louder than any political analysis.

22. Mayors and councillors, as local elected officials, are the representatives of public authorities who are closest to citizens, the last line of defence against a more widespread rejection of political representation. The EU's 2018 Eurobarometer found that despite a general climate of mistrust in public affairs, there is a high level of trust (over 50%) in local elected representatives, well above the level of confidence in national governments and parliaments. It is even three times higher than the trust placed in political parties.

23. The confidence in local elected representatives goes hand in hand with the enhancement of the cultural dimension of the local context, which can be seen in the positive view of protected product designations, local distribution channels and the renewal of grassroots cultural identities. This is a powerful approach that may perhaps counterbalance the fears arising from globalisation. This newly favourable situation at local level can strengthen social cohesion at all levels.

24. Central governments can and must use the trust in mayors and our communities to rekindle democracy. There is a need to reassess the impact of the local level on citizens' participation in public institutions and the role of mayors and local elected representatives in building a European democracy. This is in the clear interest of decision makers at all levels of governance.

25. We, the members of the Congress, firmly believe that the current crisis is an opportunity to recognise local democracy as a central pillar of European democracy and to consider the territorial network of municipalities as an asset to ensure a strengthened democratic space, capable of re-establishing citizens' trust and confidence in the system of representative democracy and its actors.

26. The grassroots level is an ideal one for participatory democracy. It ensures a substantial degree of citizen participation in public affairs and decision-making. It provides an excellent platform for using innovative practices and tools such as digitalisation and open government to further strengthen democratic procedures. Local and regional communities are also key players in asserting cultural identity and implementing national policies as well as international covenants – such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals 2030, the localisation of which is already underway in many countries. Cities and regions are also instrumental in putting into practice many Council of Europe conventions – dealing with a wide range of issues from landscape to the Social Charter to gender equality and the rights of minorities or children's rights – which serves to expand the Organisation's outreach beyond member States' central ministries.

27. As we mark the 70th anniversary of the Council of Europe this year, we, the members of the Congress, are convinced that the future of this Organisation lies in strengthening further its role in

ensuring democratic stability on our continent and protection of European citizens, and in developing its role as the pan-European mechanism for intergovernmental, inter-parliamentary and territorial co-operation. We believe that the challenges facing our societies today must be addressed by promoting and using the territorial dimension of European democracy based on a new socio-territorial pact.

28. We believe that the Council of Europe and its member States must invest in resilient local and regional communities. The tool for this is the Congress, which has at its disposal the legal framework of the European Charter of Local Self-Government and the experience of monitoring its implementation. This framework needs to be strengthened further, as does the operational and budgetary capacity of the Congress. Thus, the members of the Congress call for a renewal of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in order to better meet the challenges and new opportunities arising from the Global Development Agenda (Sustainable Development Goals) and digitalisation.

29. Due to its dual nature as both an institution and a monitoring body, the Congress has accumulated a unique knowledge of local and regional experiences which represents a source of strength for the Council of Europe as a whole. More convinced than ever of the political superiority of representative democracy, we recognise the need for political innovation to enable greater citizen participation, starting with genuine innovation and experimentation at local and regional level.

30. The Council of Europe member States created the Congress to strengthen the local and regional dimension of European democracy. To fulfil its mandate, the Congress needs to be sufficiently funded with a share of at least 3% of the overall budget of the Council of Europe. Today, sustaining the European model of a balance of powers requires, as never before, greater reliance on grassroots democracy, a new socio-territorial pact. The Congress stands ready to be involved in implementing these policies and to offer its knowledge of local and regional communities, its experience in solving problems at the grassroots and the tools at its disposal to help meet the challenges brought about by the changes in our societies.