

Chamber of Local Authorities

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REMOTE MEETING

15 June 2021, 14.00 – 16.30

Simultaneous interpretation in English, French, German, Italian, Russian

Congress of Local and Regional Authorities – Council of Europe, Strasbourg Chamber of Local Authorities 15 June 2021

Debate on “The post-COVID city - the impacts of the pandemic on socio-political and democratic processes in Europe’s cities and towns”

Outline paper (5 May 2021)

On 15 June 2021, in the frame of the second part of the 40th Congress Session, the Chamber of Local Authorities will organise a debate on a wide range of social and societal repercussions of the ongoing COVID pandemic on everyday life in Europe’s cities and towns.

The purpose is to gain a deeper understanding of what the situation of the “post-COVID city” could be, along with the impacts the pandemic has had on democratic processes in the urban context. Additionally, it is vital to get familiar with different scenarios of urban development in post-pandemic Europe and the influence it will pose on the democratic processes at the local level.

While the whole of 2020 was marked by the pandemic and measures to mitigate the consequences of the outbreak, 2021 should resolutely focus on better understanding how the “new normal” will or rather could look like. The footprint of the crisis, in particular on the urban centers, cities and towns, with respect to the toppling of economies, the changing modality of work and related demographic trends and effects on technical and political processes, urban planning and citizen participation, as well as on social cohesion, vulnerable groups and democratic stability in general, which are aspects still developing, have drastically altered the daily lives of millions of people all across Europe.

Prior to this pandemic, cities were considered the center of human activity and used to attract young and educated people, in particular, who enjoyed the cultural, social and economic benefits of living in urban, densely populated and highly developed areas. During the pandemic, stay-at-home orders forced the emergence of smart-working modalities, requiring many people to set up offices within their own homes.

This affects housing trends, as an exodus was seen from many cities to more favorable country locations, which offer outdoor space. Youth in particular left cities due to higher rental prices, as well as smaller apartments often unsuited for work-from-home orders, which triggered social tensions and domestic violence, a problem that became visible during the pandemic, more generally speaking. Additionally, cities and towns became COVID-19 hotspots which people preferred avoiding.

The pandemic boosted digitalisation and catalysed an IT boom, leading to dwindling down the appeal of cities and towns for certain population groups, since promising job opportunities have successfully been transferred into the digital sphere. At the same time, the increased use of new technologies as accompanying phenomenon of the pandemic can also be seen as a chance to push forward local participatory practices and participation of citizens in crisis situations, and beyond.

There is also the risk of economic and social divide in urban areas caused by the pandemic since Europe's cities and towns host the majority of vulnerable people such as migrants, refugees and IDPs who are mainly employed in the service sector, which was severely hit by the lockdowns imposed by Council of Europe countries.

From another perspective, the strain of the pandemic on the healthcare system, and social services in general, has resulted in another social divide, mainly that of the elderly or those with pre-existing conditions, who are unable to receive their standard level of frequent care in a timely or efficient manner.

There are many different aspects of this topic and the debate on 15 June 2021 should be seen as a "door opener" for possible further activities of the Congress to engage with and support local authorities as the frontline guardians of democracy, human rights and rule of law through existing and developing challenges of a post-pandemic urbanity.

As a consequence of this debate, the preparation of targeted reports in the Congress committees aiming at specific aspects of the "post-COVID city" could be suggested. This could also be the occasion for launching a broader debate and update of relevant Congress' principles and concepts such as the "Manifesto for a new urbanity" (European Urban Charter II), a text adopted in May 2008 that had complemented previous contributions of the Congress as regards urban living in Council of Europe towns and cities.

The debate is envisaged as a lively exchange of views among members of the Chamber of Local Authorities, and will begin with a keynote speech, by an academic expert to initiate the discussion. Following the keynote, invited mayors/local representatives will make contributions to highlight the more practical implications that the pandemic has had on their cities and towns and their respective hopes for democratic processes at the local level, in the post-COVID context.

Finally, Congress members will be invited to take the floor for the exchange of views.