

ACTIVITY REPORT

(July 2020 – February 2021)



Communication by the Secretary General of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities

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**Communication by the Secretary General of the Congress
at the 1397th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies**
3 March 2021

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Communication by Andreas KIEFER, Secretary General of the Congress

This activity report is an overview of the work of the Congress since the last communication of the Secretary General to the Committee of Ministers on 8 July 2020. It covers the key issues of the Congress' work since then.

The text below is based on the oral presentation by Andreas Kiefer, Secretary General of the Congress, to the Committee of Ministers' Deputies on 3 March 2021

This introduction complements the written report covering eight months and addresses three parts:

- Main activities of the Congress since the last communication in July 2020,
- The new Congress mandate and the spring session in two parts
- Current activities and political dialogue.

Let me first congratulate the new Deputy Secretary General, Bjorn Berge, the new Secretary General of the Parliamentary Assembly, Despina Chatzivassiliou-Tsovilis and the Secretary *ad interim* of the Committee of Ministers, Leyla Kayacik, on behalf of the Congress. I wish them luck and success and look forward to our good co-operation.

Together we can make best use of the opportunities which lie in the different remit and role of our respective structures and bodies. Only together we can successfully implement the values, the legal acquis and the policies based on the values to promote and – more and more - defend human rights, democracy and the rule of law at the different levels: here in Strasbourg and in our member states. This was so clearly underlined in the Athens declaration with linking the intergovernmental dimension in the Council of Europe with multi-level governance within member states: at national, regional and local level.

Secondly, I would like to thank the Ambassadors for having responded so positively to the request I presented to you in July 2020, namely, to support the work of the Congress by seconding officials to the Congress secretariat. We have received many very promising applications for the published positions, and we will start the selection process now. We are however still looking for a person to run the Alliance of cities and regions for Roma inclusion.

Main activities since last communication on 8 July 2020

The Congress continued remote activities in all areas:

- Institutional co-operation with the Committee of Ministers
 - o substantial contribution for the Athens Ministerial
 - o conference "COVID-19 - local and regional authorities at the frontline" with German chairmanship Minister of State Michael Roth
- With intergovernmental committees (CDDG, CAHAI, ECRI, CAHROM, CDCPP...)
- With the Parliamentary Assembly: rapporteurs, monitoring committee
- With the Venice Commission and Council for Democratic Elections
- With partners in the EU: the European Committee of the regions
- With European associations of local and regional authorities
- With National authorities (General Assemblies) (the association of towns and municipalities of Serbia for example)
- By contributing to the World Forum for Democracy: joint round table of PACE and Congress on „representative democracy against the climate crisis" (on 18 Jan 2021)

The Congress organised its statutory work in the Bureau, the Committees, the Statutory Forum in remote format.

It was the first Council of Europe body to hold remote elections outside a meeting in November 2020 for the election of two Vice-Presidents and the Secretary General of the Congress.

The Congress was also pioneering in developing remote solutions for monitoring, election observation and fact-finding missions:

The monitoring activities: Thanks to the authorities of Bulgaria, The Netherlands and Azerbaijan for their help in organising these new remote visits – which comprised all the meetings we normally have in an on-site visit. However, remote missions are not a long-term solution but a temporary approach in order maintain the monitoring cycle as much as possible and not to have the existing backlog of visits grow too much.

Election observation: missions performed remotely for the local elections in Ukraine, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Mostar.

Fact-finding mission in Poland: organised remotely on increasing attacks and discrimination against LGBTI people stemming from activities of municipalities, cities, provinces and regions. The delegation (Committee chair, rapporteurs, expert and joined by the Rapporteur of the Parliamentary Assembly on LGBTI issues) gathered facts and information from the government, parliamentarians, the Commissioner for Human Rights, local and regional authorities and their associations, as well as NGOs. A report will be presented to the June-part session of the Congress.

Different consequences of remote procedures: When rapporteurs personally have full access to information needed, they will propose to the Committee a report with a recommendation (Charter monitoring and fact finding); When the rapporteurs or the delegation cannot have a personal assessment – like not being able to access polling stations and when they complement the meetings they have with information from domestic election observers, they present a report with conclusions (not a recommendation). These conclusions then are endorsed by the Congress Bureau and a basis for exchanges with the authorities of the member states concerned to go for improvements, as necessary.

Co-operation activities in the framework of Council of Europe Action Plans (Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, Kosovo*) and South-Med partnership (Morocco and Tunisia): remote meetings are fine for communicating facts, holding presentations and listening to experiences of others but not possible for relation- and team-building, inter-active group workshops which very much rely on the human factor. It is much easier to continue activities already under way than to launch new ones with new participants.

We are very pleased to notice that France, as a concrete follow-up to a Congress recommendation, ratified the Additional Protocol to the European Charter of Local Self-Government (ECLSG) on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority (effective on 1 January 2021).

Lessons learned from “remote experiences”

Some – formal - activities can be performed and decisions be taken, but the processes to take decisions lack inclusion, informal contacts, participation and therefore possibly ownership on the long run. “

- “Meeting fatigue” of video conferences → inflation of online meetings, webinars, events offered by different domestic and international bodies, in which our mayors, councillors, members of regional parliaments and governments participate
- More prepared statements than spontaneous discussions
- More tacit approval than comments
- “parallel meetings” with distraction
- While in-person meetings allow to focus, to network, to react spontaneously: support, object, comment ...
- The Congress limits its meetings to 2,5 hours per half day to allow other business to be taken care also of by our local and regional politicians, who have full agendas
- “All that is human, informal, relational cannot be seen and therefore cannot be counted”. It is the invisible and intangible that we are missing.
- Congress contributes to investments in IT- and videoconferencing infrastructure (from unspent budgetary balance)

Unfortunately, we were not able to celebrate the 35th anniversary of the opening for signature of the ECLSG in October last year. We will come back to this at the given time to reach out. We feel it is

important to mark this anniversary as the Charter is one of the 17 Council of Europe conventions to have been ratified by all 47 member states.

New Congress mandate and renewal session in March and thematic second part session in June

The Congress reform has been completed and the new Congress Charter is in force:

- Mandate of 5 years with renewal of political leadership in October 2023 (mid-mandate)
- an upgrade of the ethical standards for Congress members with a Code of Conduct and a declaration of interests to be signed by all members in order to activate their membership account which gives access to registration for meetings and is the precondition to participate in Congress activities
- Possibility for member states without regions to nominate the whole delegation to the Chamber of Local Authorities. We welcome that this possibility is being used by almost all member states concerned, some will reconsider after the next local and regional elections and may change this for the next mandate (beginning of 2026)
- Flexibility in dividing delegations between chambers: not 50:50% but, for example, larger part in Chamber of Local Authorities and smaller part in Chamber of Regions is used by some delegations
- More representativity: 17 posts in Bureau with voting rights from 17 different national delegations
- A single status as “representative” of a member in all structures (instead of previously a substitute being a full member in a chamber or in a committee)
- the coherence of the work of the Congress with the priorities of the Council of Europe, the implementation of Congress activities in Council of Europe Action Plans.

This may all sound bureaucratic – but it is the basis that the political work can be done in a result-oriented manner and in a rule based, inclusive and transparent framework.

The Bureau held on 12 February 2021 decided to split the spring session in two parts:

- **The 1st part as renewal part-session** on 23 and 24 March 2021 with the statutory and institutional requirements and needs, such as
 - the constitutive meetings of the Congress, the two chambers, their respective bureaux and the three committees,
 - elections of Congress President, Chamber Presidents and vice-presidents, Committee chairs and vice-chairs (14 elections for 35 posts)
 - approval of the Congress priorities for 2021-2026 (to be evaluated and updated at mid-mandate in Oct 2023 to ensure on-going coherence with the priorities of the organisation)
 - approval of the Recommendation to the Committee of Ministers on the budgetary needs of the Congress to be able to perform and deliver on its tasks
 - approval of the report “Ensuring the respect of the European Charter on Local Self-Government in major crisis situations” taking into account the requirements for remote monitoring activities
 - exchange of views with Michael Roth, Minister of State for Europe, on behalf of the German Presidency of the Committee of Ministers.

I welcome that the good practice of briefing meetings for the new delegations is kept up and that you or your representatives participate in the online-delegation meetings and contribute to raising awareness about the Council of Europe as a whole and the roles of your countries in the different political and expert structures of the organisation.

I thank the Permanent Representations for their support in the renewal process.

The next president of the Congress will be a member of the Chamber of regions and we understand the group of SOC/G/PD group will propose a candidate.

- **The 2nd part session** “before the summer”, most likely mid-June 2021 – will provide the occasion for an exchange of views with Secretary General Marija Pejčinović Burić and in-depth debates on thematic reports.

The October session is planned for 25-28 October 2021 and we hope to be able to meet in the hemicycle of the Palais de l'Europe and can welcome the Hungarian CM chairmanship there in person.

Current activities and political dialogue

From the thematic activities I want to underline the Contemporary Commentary on the explanatory memorandum to the European Charter of Local Self -Government (December 2020) and the recent publication of the second volume of the Congress Human Rights Handbook on Social Rights. Regrettably it is only available in the official languages. In order to reach out further, we would welcome if member states would be willing to support the production of additional language versions – by financial contributions or by providing the translation into your respective languages directly. The production then would be done by the Congress.

This new volume addresses the issues of health, education, work, housing and social security, protection, inclusion and integration and presents good practices implemented at local and regional level regarding these issues, in particular in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic. 65 concrete projects and initiatives developed in local and regional authorities from 27 Council of Europe member states illustrate the topics, supplemented by recommendations aimed at developing solutions tailored to citizens' needs. No theoretical concept can be as convincing and motivating as successfully implemented projects.

At the beginning I mentioned that the Congress statutory, operational work continued. This also holds true for the political dialogue with governments: we are about to finalise the signature of a roadmap for implementing key elements of the last Monitoring report on the Republic of Moldova and I would like to thank the Ambassador for her support.

We thank the Ukrainian authorities for having associated the Congress to a major national event last week launching the “Ukrainian Congress of local and regional authorities” and an inclusive process to elaborate a new municipal code. I was very pleased to hear so many references to the European Charter of Local Self-Government as guiding Council of Europe convention from the highest authorities (President of Ukraine, Speaker of the Verhovna Rada, Prime Minister...). We will continue our co-operation and the political dialogue.

The Congress' priorities for the next 5 years to be adopted at the renewal session in March 2021 are fully in line with the Council of Europe's priorities and the Secretary General's quadrennial strategic framework for 2022-2025, they contribute to the Council of Europe's work for the implementation of the SDGs and will focus on 5 areas:

- Resilient societies: effective responses to public health crises,
- Democratic societies: quality of representative democracy and citizen participation,
- Cohesive societies: reducing inequalities in the field,
- Sustainable societies: environmental issues and climate action,
- Digital societies: digitalization and artificial intelligence in the local context.

The new Congress President will have an opportunity for an exchange of views with the Committee of Ministers on 31 March 2021 and present his / her programme and the details of the Congress priorities for the new mandate.

He / she will also present the recommendation on the budget 2022-2023, which covers the much needed human and financial resources to allow us to perform and deliver - in addition to the encouragement and support the Congress enjoys by the Committee of Ministers, which is very welcome.

I. POLITICAL AGENDA

HIGHLIGHTS

Communication to the Committee of Ministers, 8 July 2020

Secretary General Andreas KIEFER presented the work of the Congress since October 2019 to the Ministers' Deputies (see V. INSTITUTIONAL COOPERATION WITHIN THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE)

Statement on the adoption of amendments to the Election Law of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 9 July 2020

The Congress spokespersons for the observation of local and regional elections, Jakob WIENEN (Netherlands, EPP/CCE) and Stewart DICKSON (United Kingdom, ILDG), welcomed the adoption of amendments to the Election Law of Bosnia and Herzegovina by the Parliament in Sarajevo which pave the way for elections to be held in Mostar, a city that has been deprived of democratic local elections since 2008. They underlined that this decision responds to the recommendations and declarations adopted by the Congress since 2017, in particular within the Reflection Group on Mostar which was set up in association with the EU Committee of the Regions.

Message to the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, United Nations, 9 July 2020

The President of the Congress Anders KNAPE stated that in the current situation of crisis, it was all the more essential that national, European and international authorities take into account the local and regional dimension and that strategies are defined in a multi-level approach. He welcomed the debate planned within the Forum on how to strengthen local action to control the pandemic as a recognition of the importance of the local dimension and encouraged all partners to pursue the debate with all levels of governance. The President referred to the concern expressed in a Congress Bureau Declaration, adopted on 9 June 2020, about the democratic and financial autonomy of local and regional authorities in Council of Europe member states, particularly in the face of the recovery plans in the wake of the crisis.

Message to the Ministerial Segment of the High-Level Policy Forum for Sustainable Development, United Nations, 14 – 16 July 2020

The President stated that the Sustainable Development Goals commit all levels of governance - international, European, national, local and regional. He said the success of the UN 2030 Agenda was based on this multi-level approach. The Congress defends a broad definition of the concept of sustainability covering several aspects - democratic, social, economic and environmental - which must be based on the principles of local self-government, dialogue and inclusion of all citizens in the decision-making process at local level. He stressed that the Congress was working on 12 of the 17 objectives set out in the 2030 Agenda and will also pay particular attention to the challenges of climate change and the impact on local and regional governance.

Statement on the 6th anniversary of the entry into force of the Istanbul convention, 30 July 2020

Jelena DRENJANIN (Sweden, EPP/CCE), Congress Spokesperson on Gender Equality, stated that today, in the face of the retrogressive tendencies that are being expressed in several countries, particularly Poland, it was important to strongly reaffirm that the Istanbul Convention constitutes an essential legal basis for the protection of women against violence. Questioning this major treaty, or slowing down its ratification, is a worrying alert and a serious setback for women's rights. From the very first steps that led to the adoption of this treaty in 2011, the Congress has mobilised to encourage governments to draw up this legal instrument and has constantly called on national, local and regional authorities to set up awareness-raising, prevention and protection mechanisms to put an end to this scourge. During the period 2006-2008, the Congress actively participated in the "Stop Domestic Violence against Women" campaign, in many European cities, with poster campaigns in the streets and subways under the slogan "Cities and regions take a stand" and a photo exhibition entitled "Breaking the silence on domestic violence".

Statement on the Roma Holocaust Memorial Day, 2 August 2020

John WARMISHAM (UK, SOC/G/PD), Congress Rapporteur on Roma, called on all levels of governance to commit themselves to combat continuing discrimination and violence against Roma, recalling that seventy-six years ago, thousands of Roma - women, men and children - were exterminated by the Nazi regime. He said local and regional elected representatives have a particular responsibility in this regard and can contribute to the integration of Roma on their territories, but it was essential that strategies are coordinated between all levels of governance: local, regional, national, European and international.

France ratifies the Additional Protocol to the European Charter of Local Self-Government on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority, 1 September 2020

The Congress President welcomed the ratification by the French authorities of the Additional Protocol and underlined that it testifies to France's commitment to local and regional democracy. The Protocol will enter into force on 1 January 2021. With this ratification, twenty countries have now recognised the exercise of the individual right of citizens to participate in the affairs of local communities.

Statement on the International Day of Democracy, 15 September 2020

The President stressed that local democracy offers a unique opportunity to engage citizens in decision making. He said democracy is a form of government which allows the full participation of citizens in the decisions that affect them, and, must be practiced daily through concrete measures. It is based on a real partnership between the different levels of governance and with the citizens. This is the objective defended by the Congress through the European Charter of Local Self-Government and its Additional Protocol which advocates the establishment of consultation procedures, local referendums or petitions, access to public documents, or even mechanisms allowing citizens to address local authorities.

Call for solidarity with local authorities to urgently remedy refugee situation after Moria fires, 28 September 2020

Following the devastating fires in the "Moria Reception and Identification Centre" on the Greek island of Lesbos, Yoomi RENSTRÖM (Sweden, SOC/G/PD), Rapporteur on migration, deplored that the current response of authorities across Europe was far from sufficient and called for solidarity with local authorities to urgently remedy refugee situation. She said it was yet another worrying example of what happens when there is a lack of cooperation and solidarity and lack of joint action in Europe. The Rapporteur also highlighted the need for a new multilevel approach to asylum across Europe, based firmly in respect for human rights and the rule of law and urged Council of Europe member to ensure responsibility-sharing with Greek authorities. In its report adopted in 2017, the Congress already warned about the overcrowding, underfunding and understaffing of refugee camps in Greece and called for European solidarity with the Greek national and the local authorities.

Statement on the 35th anniversary of the opening for signature of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, 14 October 2020

The President stressed that the European Charter of Self-Government has a key role for promoting local democracy and Europe's pluralist society model. He underlined that the Charter is one of only 17 Council of Europe Conventions which have been ratified by all 47 member States of the Council of Europe and it is a landmark document which, since its entry into force, has been the legal basis for around 180 Congress monitoring reports and recommendations leading to changes in the legislation and constitutions of the member states. In times of crisis, such as the one of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Charter also provides the legal basis for the member States to defend the principles of local democracy and self-government and to develop responses for safeguarding the functioning of democratic institutions

Contribution to the 130th Session of the Committee of Ministers, 4 November 2020

The President stated that the health crisis caused by COVID-19 has a major sanitary, social, economic impact on societies but also on the role and functioning of institutions of democratic governance, including at the local and regional level. He highlighted that successful responses need flexibility in coping with emergencies as they are better suited to specific needs. He called on the governments of the 47 member States to take advantage of the capacity and competence of the mayors and councillors, their networks and experience to better manage major crisis of all nature and help providing sustainable and democratic solutions in full respect for Democracy, the Rule of Law and Human Rights. The

Congress provided the Foreign Ministers of the Council of Europe member States with a contribution to their reflection on “effectively responding to a public health crisis in full respect for Democracy, Rule of Law and Human Rights” (see FOCUS).

Message for the 70th anniversary of the European Convention on Human Rights, 4 November 2020

In his video message, the President commended the Council of Europe and the political leaders of the time for having had the vision and courage to adopt and commit themselves to this binding treaty which has since become worldwide one of the most important instruments of human rights protection. He stressed that ensuring that the citizens’ fundamental freedoms and human rights are promoted, respected and implemented is a responsibility shared by all levels of governance. He underlined that the role of local and regional authorities is evidenced by the case law of the European Court of Human Rights, where numerous judgments include a territorial dimension, dealing with freedom of assembly, policing, the right to vote, freedom of expression, the environment and minority rights and their role is all the more important in the current health crisis, where the fundamental rights of the most vulnerable are endangered by the prevailing sanitary, social, and economic emergencies.

Statement on the European Day on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse, 18 November 2020

The chair of the Current Affairs Committee, Gabrielle NEFF (Germany, ILDG) called for urgent action to put an end to the sexual abuse of children. To that end, society must altogether prevent abuse, protect victims, prosecute the perpetrators of violence and also ensure the full participation of children in the entire process. She said local and regional authorities can take action not only to educate people but also to cater for social needs, and can contribute to the setting up of alert and support systems to protect children, emphasising the situation of unaccompanied child refugees, who are particularly at risk. She referred to the Congress’ Pact of Towns and Regions to Stop Sexual Violence against Children, which currently brings together some 80 cities, towns, regions and municipal and regional associations from 24 European countries and aims at sharing good practices and promoting a transversal, multidisciplinary approach that takes all stakeholders into account and draws on the Council of Europe’s legal standards and instruments.

Election of two Vice-Presidents of the Chamber of Local Authorities and the Secretary General, 17 and 18 November 2020

Elections for two vice-presidents of the Chamber of Local Authorities and for the Congress Secretary General, originally scheduled to take place during the March 2020 session and postponed due to the COVID-19 crisis, were organised as secure electronic elections. Kirstine BILLE (Denmark, SOC/G/PD), 2nd deputy mayor of Syddjurs Municipality and Konstantinos KOUKAS (Greece, EPP/CCE), Mayor of Mykonos and Head of the Greek Delegation to the Congress, were elected respectively as 6th and 7th Vice-Presidents of the Chamber of Local Authorities for the rest of the current Congress mandate. Andreas KIEFER was re-elected as Secretary General of the Congress.

Participation in the handover ceremony of the Presidency of the Committee of Ministers from Greece to Germany, 18 November 2020

The President praised the ability of the Greek authorities to successfully implement their priorities despite the difficult circumstances of the sanitary crisis and underlined that the Greek Chairmanship was the first e-presidency of the Committee of Ministers. The President also welcomed Germany’s priorities for the coming six months, in particular Germany’s intention to promoting human rights, democracy and the rule of law, bringing the Council of Europe closer to the citizens as well as strengthening youth participation and gender equality in political life. He said the Congress will actively support also Germany’s priority to contribute to global efforts to address the current environmental challenges.

Statement on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, 25 November 2020

Jelena DRENJANIN declared that the COVID-19 pandemic shows that crisis situations are doubly dangerous for women. In April 2020, in Europe, emergency calls from victims or women threatened by their partners increased by 60% compared to April 2019 and the Congress spokesperson underlined that local and regional authorities can make a difference on the ground, closer to citizens, by helping coordinate the prevention of violence, structure assistance to victims and promote women’s

participation in public life. She also called for support to UNESCO's "Orange the World" campaign and the "16 Days of Activism" initiative against violence against women.

Statement on Human Rights Day, 10 December 2020

Harald BERGMANN (Netherlands, ILDG), Congress Spokesperson on human rights, stressed that mainstreaming human rights at the levels closest to the citizens helps to strengthen social cohesion and citizens' confidence in their institutions. He recalled that as part of its action plan for the promotion of human rights, the Congress actively seeks to foster human rights' territorial dimension through its statutory work - particularly when monitoring the European Charter of Local Self-Government - and its co-operation and thematic activities. He also referred to the adoption by the Congress of the 2nd volume of the *Human Rights Manuals for Local and Regional Elected Officials* series devoted to social rights. Issues addressed include health, education, work, housing and security as well as social inclusion and integration in close connection with non-discriminatory principles and with a focus on the COVID-19's impact. The 1st volume, published in 2018, is devoted to the right to non-discrimination of refugees, asylum seekers, migrants and IDPs, Roma and Travelers and LGBTI people.

Statement on International Migrants Day, 18 December 2020

Harald BERGMANN stressed that the increase of the number of migrants in Europe represents a major challenge for all levels of governance. Underlining that migrants are among the most impacted by the upheavals caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, he said that local and regional authorities are in the front line in providing a dignified welcome and respect for human rights to migrant, even in times of major crisis

Statement on Holocaust Remembrance Day, 27 January 2021

The President of the Congress stated that more than ever it is essential to remember, to honour and to never forget for it was on the ashes of a continent devastated by war that the Council of Europe was founded to bring about European unity and to stand guard of democratic principles. He recalled that the Council of Europe had, over seven decades, brought to life a human rights protection system unique in the world, and a democratic system where governments, parliaments, local and regional authorities and civil society work together as indispensable parts of the whole. He said he was alarmed to hear extremist political discourse and to see anti-Semitism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, anti-gypsyism and homophobia on the rise again in Europe and underlined it was a stark reminder that the rights and freedoms citizens are enjoying are not a given, and that even absolute values can be questioned if they are not constantly upheld and defended.

POLITICAL STATEMENTS

Belarus, 26 August 2020

The President underlined that the events in Belarus following the Presidential election have brought to the fore the people's desire for democratic change in the country and urgent need for dialogue between citizens and authorities. He stressed that the Congress has pursued its co-operation with Belarus aimed at improving local self-government in the country and will continue its support for democratisation. He said the Congress stands ready to bring its expertise in order to improve the country's legislative framework, in the light of the European Charter of Local Self-Government and its Additional Protocol on the right of citizens to participate in the affairs of local authorities.

Turkey, 1st October 2020

The President deplored yet another blow to local self-government in Turkey. He said he was deeply concerned about continued arrests, of democratically elected representatives from the opposition in Turkey, notably of Ayhan BILGEN, Co-Mayor of the city of Kars in the south-east of the country, who is a member of the Congress, and further detentions including also Co-Mayor Şevin ALACA. He recalled that the Congress has repeatedly denounced the excessive use of legal proceedings against local elected representatives in Turkey and their replacement by state-appointed trustees. Further to the observation of the local elections held in 2019 in Turkey, the Congress brought this serious issue to the attention of the Venice Commission which found it in violation of Turkey's international commitments in a legal Opinion adopted on 18 June 2020.

Mostar, 20 December 2020 and 5 February 2021

Commenting on the local election held in Mostar (Bosnia and Herzegovina) on 20 December, for the first time in 12 years, the President underlined that Mostar made the first step towards a return to democratic normality. He said the second step must follow now, and the newly elected City Council needs to adopt a revised Statute and elect a Mayor. He stressed that the Congress has been engaged in different activities for the re-establishment of voting rights at the local level for some 100,000 citizens of Mostar and the situation of local democracy in the city will remain on top of the Congress' political agenda, also in the coming years.

Following these first local elections in 12 years in the City of Mostar, the inaugural session of the City Council of Mostar, composed of 35 local councillors, was held on 5 February 2021. On this occasion, Stewart DICKSON, Congress Spokesperson on the Observation of Local and Regional Elections, welcomed the constitution of the City Council, as well as the election of its President and two deputies.

FOCUS

The Congress during the COVID-19 pandemic

Thematic debates in the three committees

The Governance, Current Affairs and Monitoring Committees held their meetings respectively on 15, 16 and 17 September 2020 online with debates on the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic and the stakes of major crises for European local and regional authorities.

The Congress' Governance Committee discussed in particular "The COVID-19 pandemic and challenges for multi-level governance". The debate examined how the pandemic has resulted in an urgent 'recentralisation' of multi-level governance structures for many European countries, regardless of the fact that regional and local levels have at times been much more responsive in responding to related challenges. It concluded that limiting decentralisation may put in danger the constitutional contract and the pluralism as a whole.

The Current Affairs Committee debated "Protecting minorities in cities and regions in times of fundamental crisis". The debate has underlined that in the COVID-19 pandemic, as it is often the case during major health, social or economic crises, the most vulnerable groups or marginalised especially minority groups, have been particularly exposed to risks and negative consequences.

The Monitoring Committee debated on "Safeguarding the European Charter of Local Self-Government in extreme crisis situations". The debate has highlighted that the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the balance between the local, regional and national levels of many countries, and even sometimes put local democracy "on hold". Furthermore, the promulgation of states of emergency and the strengthening of centralisation, but also the increased financial difficulties linked to the cessation of economic activities have complicated cooperation between the different levels of power.

The Group of Independent Experts on the European Charter of Local Self-Government (GIE) also held a debate on these issues at its meeting on 18 September 2020.

The Group discussed the fact that the pandemic is presenting a worrying picture for local and regional governance everywhere in Europe and that accompanying centralisation trends put the vertical division of powers under stress. A second issue concerned the conflicts between different levels of government while facing the pandemic. The experts underlined that response to COVID-19 does not depend on the government system but on capacity and efficiency and needs quick and coordinated action.

Local elections in times of crisis

On 28 September 2020, the Congress members held a debate on how to preserve local and regional elections during major crises based on a report prepared by co-rapporteurs Stewart DICKSON and Jos WIENEN.

The report advocates for a balance to be struck between preserving local and regional elections as a pillar of local democracy and taking into account the risks induced by crisis situations. It calls on member states to respect international human rights law and international electoral standards and good practice in their decisions to maintain or postpone elections for all tiers of government. It also encourages the authorities to use the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to identify examples of best practices in this regard, and to assess relevant mitigating measures on election day and possible alternative voting methods.

In order to address the challenges posed to the observation of local elections by major crisis situations, the Congress proposes to develop an alternative strategy for on-site election observation. This strategy will allow to respond rapidly to invitations from Council of Europe member States while guaranteeing the security of observers. It should be temporary, limited to the duration of the major crisis, and should not replace fully-fledged election observation missions carried out within the framework of the Congress' statutory activities.

In October, the Congress contributed its findings and recommendations on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic to the European Committee of the Regions of the EU and its debate on the state of cities and regions (Local and Regional Barometer) (see VI. EXTERNAL COOPERATION AND PARTNERSHIPS).

Contribution to the Committee of Ministers' reflection on "effectively responding to a public health crisis in full respect for Democracy, Rule of Law and Human Rights".

The Congress provided the Foreign Ministers of the Council of Europe member States with its contribution to their reflection held under the auspices of the Greek Presidency.

The Congress highlighted the essential role played in emergency situations by local and regional authorities which take up an increasing share of operational and financial responsibilities together with national governments and are on the frontline to deliver basic and emergency services and mitigate the social and sanitary consequences of the crisis for their communities. The Congress stressed that the pandemic had shown a great need for solidarity, especially to safeguard social and economic rights and preserve businesses and jobs. Since the key players in the field of implementing solidarity are the local and regional authorities, the Congress called for their full involvement in the decision-taking process. As recognised also by the Council of Europe Secretary General in her guidelines and by the Foreign Ministers in the Athens Declaration, the Congress shared its conviction that emergency situations require more multilateral co-operation and multi-level governance as flexibility of responses which are better suited to specific needs of the communities.

Online event on "COVID-19: local and regional authorities at the front line"

On 7 December 2020, the Congress organised an online event which brought together Council of Europe leaders, national government representatives and other personalities to discuss with Congress members the best ways to ensure effective responses to the health crisis.

The first debate built on the Athens Declaration (adopted under the Greek presidency of the Committee of Ministers on 4 November 2020) and examined how to respond effectively to a public health crisis in full respect of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The Congress President, the Secretary General of the Council of Europe Marija PEJČINOVIĆ BURIĆ and, via video message, Michael ROTH, the Minister of State of the Federal Foreign Office of Germany, Special Representative of the Federal Government for the German Presidency of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe.

The Congress President stressed that good governance based on better coordination and interaction between the different levels of government is essential, otherwise the responses to the sanitary crisis are ineffective, fragmented and inadequate. The quality of the responses provided has helped to maintain the confidence of citizens and will have an impact on the way forward. He underlined that the Athens Declaration resulting from the 130th ministerial session in November 2020 is a milestone and a practical guide on how to meet these challenges without compromising the pillars of societies, reaffirming the capacity and competences of local and regional authorities to provide sustainable and democratic solutions in this regard. He ensured that the Congress will continue to be the platform for exchange, sharing and support for all European local and regional authorities.

The Council of Europe Secretary General stressed the need to ensure adequate funding and resources for local and regional authorities in order to enable them to respond to emergencies and provide appropriate public services. Referring to the Athens Declaration, she underlined that these principles apply to the functioning of local democracy, just as much they do to central government. The Athens Declaration seeks to guide member states in responding effectively to the public health crisis in full respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law. It calls for the protection of vulnerable populations, sets out the obligations entrusted to member states during major crisis situation and recalls that exceptional measures must be strictly necessary, proportionate, limited in time and in full compliance with the European Convention on human rights.

The German Minister of State for Europe stressed the unique role of local and regional authorities in facing COVID-19, which have to strike the right balance between public health needs, social and economic consequences and restrictions to fundamental rights. This comes with a great deal of responsibility and only works if decisions find acceptance among the public. He said the Athens Declaration issued on the day of the 70th anniversary of the European Convention on Human Rights, reinforced the importance of safeguarding human rights, rule of law and democracy under exceptional circumstances such as states of emergency, adding that consultation between, cooperation among and inclusion of relevant stakeholders and decision-makers is key to tackling Covid-19 effectively and safeguarding human rights.

The second debate was devoted to the specific role of local and regional authorities. It included statements by the President of the Chamber of Regions, the President of the Chamber of Local Authorities, the Chair of the Current Affairs Committee as well as the Mayor of Athens, Kostas BAKOYANNIS. A selection of youth delegates also presented via video messages the projects they have carried out in their communities.

Participants in this debate highlighted that in the fight against the pandemic, the competences of local governments have sometimes been re-centralised or disproportionately controlled by central governments. Local authorities have often had to overcome the challenges posed by COVID-19 without sufficient financial resources and some decisions concerning them have been adopted without proper consultation. They stated that these situations reflect a flaw in good governance and referred to the Athens Declaration, underlining that the political philosophy behind it is the same as that on which the work of the Congress is based. The crisis has revealed that the effectiveness of pandemic responses depends on the quality of multi-level governance and has shown that decentralised structures allow for rapid and flexible responses, adapted to the population's real local needs. Participants called in particular for active consultation and better coordination between the different levels of government. They noted that local democracy is not a hindrance, but a lever for finding best solutions. They stressed also that the COVID-19 crisis was as much a challenge as it was an opportunity to reinvent the city both by responding to the highlighted structural inequalities and by introducing new digital tools to provide all the necessary services to citizens.

The results of the discussions were integrated in the transversal report on “Ensuring the respect of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in major crisis situations” to be presented at the March 2021 Congress session.

II. ACTIVITIES OF THE CONGRESS BODIES

A. THE BUREAU

Remote meeting of 28 September 2020

Among the topics discussed by the Bureau was the situation of local democracy in Turkey, in particular concerning the replacement of elected candidates by government administrators, as well as the detention of local elected representatives in south-eastern Turkey and in this respect, the Bureau took note of the opinion by the Venice Commission of 18 June 2020 on the replacement of elected candidates and mayors in Turkey.

The Bureau also granted guest observer status with the Congress to the Federation of Local Authorities in Israel. This status is granted for a period of five years renewable, on an ad hoc basis, to associations representing local and/or regional authorities from territories which do not have a national delegation to the Congress, or which are non-European. Currently five associations hold this status: two from Belarus, one from China, one from Japan and the association of Kosovo* Municipalities.

The Bureau decided to cancel the 39th Session which was due to be held from 26 to 27 October 2020, considering that the technical requirements for remote connection and voting of all members were not met. It examined other options for continuing the work of the Congress, such as organising a Statutory Forum before the end of the year.

Remote meeting of 26 November 2020

Members discussed the future priorities of the Congress for the period 2021-2026, the proposed Code of Conduct of Congress members, as well as the agenda of the next Statutory Forum and the event "COVID-19: local and regional authorities on the front line" which would both be held on 7 December. Also on the agenda were the situation of local and regional democracy in Turkey, Nagorno-Karabakh, Cyprus and the Republic of Moldova as well as the remote observation of the local elections in Ukraine and in Bosnia and Herzegovina which took place respectively on 25 October and 15 November 2020.

It approved an information report on the remote observation procedure regarding the local elections held in Ukraine on 25 October 2020.

Remote meeting of 12 February 2021

The Bureau approved the national delegations proposed for the 2021-2026 mandate and decided to submit these delegations to the Congress on 23 March 2021 at the opening of its 40th session for ratification. It also approved the convening of the 40th session, from 23-24 March 2021, as a remote, first part-session, held for constitutive and renewal reasons and to ensure continuity of the Congress' work. A second part session shall be held before the summer break to discuss and approve thematic reports. The Bureau approved holding of the elections of the Congress executives using the KUDO and SCYTL platforms in the context of the remote session.

It approved an information report on the local elections held in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Mostar.

Furthermore, the Bureau approved the preliminary draft resolution on the Congress priorities for 2021-2026 for presentation for adoption at the forthcoming March part-session. It also decided to grant the title of "Partner of the European Local Democracy Week 2020" to 19 local and regional authorities and 1 association.

B. THE SESSION/ THE STATUTORY FORUM

Following the cancellation of the 38th and 39th Session of March and October 2020 due to the COVID 19 pandemic, the Congress organised remote meetings of its Statutory Forum on 28 September and 7 December 2020 and on 12 February 2021.

The Statutory Forum acts on behalf of the Congress between sessions and is convened upon decision of the Bureau of the Congress. It is comprised of the heads of all national delegations and the members of the Bureau. The outgoing president, the chairs of committees and the presidents of political groups participate without voting rights.

Remote meeting of the 4th Statutory Forum, 28 September 2020

The Statutory Forum adopted the Congress' revised Rules and Procedures and reports on the state of local democracy in Portugal - presented by co-rapporteurs Xavier CADORET (France, SOC/G/PD) and David ERAY (Switzerland, ILDG) and in Austria - presented by co-rapporteurs Marc COOLS (Belgium, ILDG) and Andrew DISMORE (United Kingdom, SOC/G/PD) as well as a report on the observation of local elections in the Republic of Moldova (20 October 2019) - prepared by rapporteur Vladimir PREBILIČ (Slovenia, SOC/G/PD).

The issue of local and regional elections in major crisis situations was debated on the basis of a report presented by co-rapporteurs Stewart DICKSON and Jakob WIENEN and Resolution 455(2020) was adopted which introduces a remote election observation format as a temporary procedure in exceptional situations, such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic

Remote meeting of the 5th Statutory Forum, 7 December 2020

The Forum adopted reports on the developing urban-rural interplay - prepared by co-rapporteurs Wilma DELISSEN VAN TONGERLO (Netherlands, ILDG) and Matija KOVAC (Serbia, EPP/CCE) - and fighting sexist violence against women in politics at local and regional level - prepared by Congress Spokesperson on Gender Equality Jelena DRENJANIN. It also adopted a "Contemporary commentary on the explanatory report of the European Charter of Local Self-Government" - prepared by Jakob WIENEN - aimed at providing a modern understanding of the explanatory report of the Charter and a fact-finding report on territorial reform in Latvia - prepared by co-rapporteurs Xavier CADORET and Marc COOLS - as well as the second volume of the series *Human Rights Handbook for local and regional elected authorities*, devoted to social rights, presented by Harald BERGMANN.

Remote meeting of the 6th Statutory Forum, 12 February 2021

The Statutory Forum adopted revised Rules and Procedures to strengthen its ethics regime, including the obligation to declare conflicts of interest and a new Code of Conduct for the Congress members. Co-rapporteurs Liisa ANSALA (Finland, ILDG), Harald SONDEREGGER (Austria, EPP/CCE) and Tamar TALIASHVILI (Georgia, SOC/G/PD) stressed that having ethical provisions that are both clearly set out and, through a self-standing Code of Conduct and separate Declaration of Interests, mandatory, is the key to protecting the Congress and its members and contributing to an ethical and transparent culture. The signature of the Code of Conduct and the Declaration of Interests will be mandatory for all new members and a prerequisite for members of the Congress to exercise full membership rights, including the right to participate, speak, vote and enjoy defrayal of expenses.

The Forum also adopted reports on "youth work: the role of local and regional authorities - presented by the co-rapporteurs Thomas ANDERSSON (Sweden, ILDG) and Ilsur METSHIN (Russian Federation, ILDG), on the Status of Capital Cities" - presented by Amelie TARSCHYS INGRE (Sweden, ILDG) - as well as a report on the local elections in Bosnia Herzegovina and Mostar and a report on the monitoring of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in Hungary - presented by the co-rapporteurs Marc COOLS and Jean-Pierre LIOUVILLE (France, SOC/G/PD).

Following the debate on the report, Miklós DUKAI, Deputy State Secretary for Local Government of Hungary, delivered a statement, followed by questions from members of the Statutory Forum to which a written replay would be made.

Further details on the adopted reports are displayed below under II. ACTIVITIES OF THE CONGRESS BODIES/ C. THE COMMITTEES and III. MONITORING OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL DEMOCRACY.

C. THE COMMITTEES

The Monitoring Committee

In its remote meeting on **17 September 2020** the Committee held with a debate on the protection of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in extreme crisis situation. At the opening, the Chair of the Committee Leendert VERBEEK (Netherlands, SOC/G/ PD) stressed that the COVID-19 crisis has tested the capacity of local and regional authorities, to ensure good local governance, deliver services and meet citizens' expectations. He underlined the impossibility of carrying out monitoring visits to member states due to COVID-19-related measures and the need to innovate in order to adapt statutory activities to this new environment. He said the monitoring of the application of the European Charter of

Local Self-Government is the very essence of the work of the Congress and the pandemic must not become an obstacle to defend grassroots democracy in Europe (see also I. POLITICAL AGENDA / FOCUS)

The Committee decided to pursue its statutory activities remotely as an alternative procedure allowing it to maintain political dialogue with national stakeholders. This was implemented for the first time for Bulgaria on 14 and 15 December 2020 (see III. MONITORING OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL ACTIVITIES) It will be used until Congress members will be able to travel again in safe conditions.

The Committee adopted a report on the monitoring of the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in Austria, following a monitoring visit carried out in December 2019 by the co-rapporteurs Marc COOLS and Andrew DISMORE (see III. MONITORING OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL DEMOCRACY).

It also adopted a report on the implementation of the Charter by Ukraine by co-rapporteurs Gunn-Marit HELGESEN (Norway, PPE/CCE) and Gudrun MOSLER-TÖRNSTRÖM (Austria, SOC/G/PD) who stressed that adherence to the principles of the Charter is visible in Ukraine through the decentralisation reforms that have been initiated. The report recommends that the decentralisation reform should be pursued through a constitutional review, that a clear delimitation of competences between multi-levels of governance be established, and that financial autonomy of local governments be promoted. It also recommends that a system of regular consultation with local authorities be introduced and that the full exercise of the mandate of elected representatives be guaranteed by abolishing local recall procedures for mayors and councillors. In addition, the co-rapporteurs call for the suppression of deposits considered disproportionate and still required today to stand as a candidate in local elections. The implementation of these recommendations would enable Ukraine to respect the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality in accordance with the Charter.

The Committee finally adopted Volume II of the *Human Rights Handbook for Local and Regional Authorities* on social rights, presented by Harald BERGMANN. The aim of this Handbook is to take stock of the efforts of local and regional authorities in Council of Europe member States to ensure a rights-based approach to social rights in their policies. The Handbook underlines that, by virtue of their competences in the social field, local and regional authorities play a crucial role in facilitating the exercise of social rights by their communities' residents. Organised around six social rights - health, education, work, housing, social security and social protection and social inclusion and integration - sixty-five practical examples and recommendations complement the Handbook to show how local and regional authorities can take advantage of their proximity to citizens to develop local solutions. In addition, a chapter is devoted to the main challenges local authorities face in their efforts to promote social rights, such as changing technologies, demographic ageing, climate change, and limited local budgets. The Handbook was published as a continuation of the series of *Human Rights Handbooks*, the first volume of which, published in 2018, was devoted to the right to non-discrimination.

In the remote meeting held on **11 February 2021**, the Committee adopted a report on "Ensuring the respect of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in major crisis situations" prepared by co-Rapporteurs Leendert VERBEEK and Robert-Csongor GRUMAN (Romania, EPP/CCE) who stated that in times of major crisis, guaranteeing the respect of the European Charter of Local Self-Government is essential to safeguard local democracy and ensure the resilience of local self-government. They stressed that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a centralisation of competences in some countries to the detriment of local autonomy and has deepened social and territorial inequalities regarding access to healthcare and prosperity and invited Governments to consider the territorial dimension of the impact of COVID-19 and ensure a multi-level governance approach in responding to various pandemic-related challenges. The report asks central governments to prioritise appropriate consultation with local authorities and the allocation of adequate financial resources, as well as refrain from excessive supervision, and to establish a stronger political dialogue with the Congress. It also encourages the Congress to pursue its monitoring activities remotely and develop other alternative strategies to on-site monitoring during the sanitary crisis. The rapporteurs also underlined the positive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which in some cases has led to strengthening multi-level governance, inter-municipal co-operation and the role of local associations in consultation.

The Committee also adopted a report on "Holding referendums at local level" presented by Rapporteur Vladimir PREBILIC (Slovenia, SOC/G/PD). The report alerts to the risk that referendums be misused by populist movements to circumvent higher ranking laws or principles whose change would normally require more substantial debate and broader consensus and stresses that it is essential that local referendums are held in a way that voters are familiar with procedures, being able to understand the

referendum question and consequences of their vote and able to access quality information to be able to make an informed choice. It invites local authorities to make more use of citizens' assemblies and similar deliberative democracy tools to accompany the holding of local referendums in order to enhance citizens' informed decisions. It also calls upon State authorities to grant the right to vote in local referendums to foreigners who have been residing legally in their country for a period of five years.

Furthermore, the Committee adopted the periodical report on the "Recurring Issues Based on Assessments Resulting from Congress Monitoring and Election Observation Missions (Reference Period 2017-2020)". The report was presented by co-rapporteurs Leendert VERBEEK and Stewart DICKSON and shows that the major compliance issues with the Charter pointed out in the first report of 2017- including financial resources, division of competences, consultation, and applicability of the Charter - remain relevant. The Committee found systematic shortcomings in meeting the requirements of Article 7 on the conditions of office of local elected representatives and member states are increasingly facing difficulties in ensuring a safe political and legal environment for the exercise of local elected mandates. However, unlike the previous report, this report shows some positive developments of the Charter's application in Council of Europe member States including a strengthened role of local associations in promoting local interests, a greater variety of legally available instruments of citizens' participation in local public affairs, the introduction of direct election of mayors and the ratification of the Additional Protocol to the Charter. The Committee welcomed the implementation of voting rights for internally displaced persons in Ukraine and the reinstatement of local elections in the City of Mostar in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The Governance Committee

In its remote meeting on **15 September 2020** the Committee held a debate on "The COVID-19 pandemic and challenges for multi-level governance". Robert Csongor GRUMAN, Chair of the Committee, stated at the opening of the meeting that the COVID-19 crisis has been affecting societies and economies all over the world in a profound and unprecedented manner, causing real financial disarray and creating arduous working conditions for local and regional authorities and national governments alike. He underlined that consultation between all levels of government, a key principle of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, is particularly relevant in this context. He pointed out how some government systems were more resilient and better prepared to such a major crisis than others, and how efficient co-operation between different levels of government resulted in better crisis management (see also I. POLITICAL AGENDA / FOCUS)

The Committee adopted a report on "Status of Capital Cities" presented by rapporteur Amelie TARSCHYS-INGRE (Sweden, ILDG). The report underlines the need to take into account capital cities' specific needs in a framework that is both flexible and guarantees their autonomy. It advocates that instead of a rigid approach to impose some kind of special status on all capitals, states should have a certain margin of appreciation to take into account the specific conditions of each country. The measures recommended concern the legal framework of the capital's administration, a clear division of powers between boroughs and sufficient resources to implement them. In addition, if a special statute was to be designed, it should be developed in accordance with the principles set out in the European Charter of Local Self-Government.

It also adopted a report prepared by co-rapporteurs Wilma DELISSEN VAN TONGERLO (Netherlands, ILDG) and Matija KOVAC (Serbia, EPP/CCE) on the development of urban-rural interplay. The report stresses that interplay between the different levels of government must be guided by the principle of subsidiarity not only in the relations between the national, subnational and local levels, but also in the relations within the local level. It identifies the strengths and weaknesses of urban and rural areas and encourages authorities to take these features into account. This requires mutual understanding of very different realities, taking into account the specificities of each area and equal treatment in policymaking. The report proposes to formalise this interaction, at the national level, through incentives for co-operation. Development of public transport, reduction of the digital divide and equal access to essential public services are all areas in which interconnection and interaction between urban and rural areas are essential. The draft recommendation and resolution will be presented for adoption at a future Congress session.

At the meeting on **10 February 2021**, the Committee adopted a report on "Home sharing platforms: challenges and opportunities for municipalities" prepared by its Chair and rapporteur Róbert-Csongor GRUMAN which highlights the opportunities offered by home sharing platforms and recalls the negative impacts of the overgrowth of home sharing to the detriment of the residents. The report aims at

promoting long-term policies and legal and regulatory frameworks which foster sustainable development, fair play for all actors and improved protection of fundamental rights of both residents and tourists. Best practices such as registration and provision of data by platforms, as well as simplification of regulations and digitalisation of systems are promoted. The local and regional authorities are encouraged to have dialogue and partnership with platforms and with community stakeholders as well as to raise awareness about existing rules, to better enforce them. The report also points out that relevant policies need to be reviewed with appropriate political backing from different levels of governance.

Current Affairs Committee

In its remote meeting on **16 September 2020** the Committee held a debate on "The COVID-19 pandemic and challenges for multi-level governance". (see I. POLITICAL AGENDA / FOCUS)

The Committee adopted a report on cultural heritage management for local and regional development, prepared by co-rapporteurs Barbara TOCE (Italy, SOC/G/PD) and Eirini DOUROU (Greece, SOC/G/PD). The report focuses on the understanding of cultural heritage as tangible objects on the one hand, and as intangible practices, knowledge and experiences on the other. Underlining that Europe is going through an identity crisis, where identity policies are pitting different communities against one another, the rapporteurs called on the international community to reinvest in international cooperation and to promote dialogue between communities. The report highlights the lack of tools for the preservation of intangible cultural heritage and the lack of inclusive governance schemes. It encourages national authorities to adopt a "responsible tourism" approach and to financially support major European cultural heritage initiatives, such as the European Capitals of Culture or the Council of Europe Cultural Routes. The report will be presented to the Congress before the summer.

The Committee also adopted a report prepared by co-rapporteurs Thomas ANDERSSON and Ilur METSHIN on Youth work. The report identifies young people as valuable partners for public authorities, that must ensure living and working conditions in which efficient youth work can be carried out. It calls on local and regional authorities to engage in dialogue with young people, design and implement innovative youth policies and invest sufficient human and financial resources to provide training for youth workers and spaces where they can develop. The report also underlines the need to pay particular attention to the situation of isolated or disadvantaged youth. The rapporteurs underlined how young people are increasingly active in dealing with the issues societies face today, such as integrating refugees, raising environmental awareness and responding to the COVID-19 crisis, either on the frontlines as health workers or as researchers, activists, innovators, and communicators..

Furthermore, the Committee debated the preparation on a new report on the role and responsibilities of local governments in protecting LGBTI+ persons. It also decided to carry out a fact-finding mission to Poland, following the request of the members of the Polish *Sejm* (Parliamentary Intergroup on Equal Rights of the LGBTI Community and Parliamentary Intergroup on Cities), who drew the Congress's attention to the increasing attacks and discrimination against LGBTI persons in Poland, where many cities and regions had approved declarations against the so-called "LGBT ideology" and family charters“.

In its remote meeting on **10 February 2021** the Committee debated these two reports. The report on the role and responsibilities of local and regional authorities in the protection of LGBTI persons outlines different ways in which backsliding on international commitments or adopted legislation affects the lives of LGBTI people. It provides good practice examples from cities and regions that have adopted policies and legislation and taken action in defense of LGBTI people's rights. It calls on local and regional authorities to mainstream LGBTI equality in their policies and to introduce legislation forbidding hate speech and crimes. The report provides local and regional authorities with concrete policy recommendations to promote the social rights, inclusion, and well-being of LGBTI citizens and to ensure the safety of LGBTI youth at school. It invites governments of member states to develop national action plans on anti-discrimination and LGBTI inclusion and to gather data regarding these issues. The recommendation and resolution will be presented for adoption to the Congress before the summer.

The report of the fact finding mission summarises the findings of the delegation which gathered information on the increasing attacks and discrimination against LGBTI people in Poland, speaking to interlocutors including the government, parliamentarians, the Commissioner for Human Rights, local and regional authorities and their associations, as well as NGOs. It focuses on the issue of family charters and resolutions adopted against the so-called "LGBT ideology". The report, drafted by co-

rapporteurs Andrew BOFF (United Kingdom, RCE) and Yoomi RENSTRÖM, (Sweden, SOC/G/PD), emphasises that these documents are detrimental to the rights, safety and well-being of LGBTI people in Poland and contrary to the crucial role that territorial authorities should have in defending citizens' rights and promoting dialogue and social cohesion. It points out that the legislative framework and government action has gaps in the protection of LGBTI persons and should be improved. The Committee has agreed to prepare a resolution calling on Polish local and regional authorities to withdraw their declarations and family charters and to develop policies that will protect the rights of vulnerable groups. This resolution will be presented for adoption to the Congress before the summer.

The next meetings of the Committees will be held on 23 March 2021 (elections) and in May 2021.

III. MONITORING OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL DEMOCRACY

A. MONITORING ACTIVITIES

The core mission of the Congress is the effective monitoring of the situation of local and regional democracy in member States by assessing the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, adopted in 1985 and ratified by the 47 Member States of the Council of Europe.

Due to the inability to carry out monitoring visits to Member States as a result of COVID-19 related health measures, monitoring of the Netherlands, Bulgaria, Albania Azerbaijan, Ireland, Spain and Germany originally on the work programme of 2020, were first postponed, before the Congress decided to introduce a new format of virtual meetings as a temporary procedure. The first monitoring in this remote format was conducted with Bulgaria and followed by the Netherlands and Azerbaijan.

Remote monitoring visits

Bulgaria, 14 – 15 December 2020

Remote meetings were organised as part of the monitoring of Bulgaria to assess the implementation of the provisions of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in the country. The delegation composed of the Congress Rapporteurs, Bryony RUDKIN (United Kingdom, SOC/V/PD) and Randi MONDORF (Denmark, ILDG) participated in a joint meeting with members of the Bulgarian delegation to the Congress as well as representatives of the National Association of Municipalities of the Republic of Bulgaria (NAMRB) and the National Association of Municipal Council Chairpersons (NACMC) and exchanged views with the Mayor of the City of Sofia and the President of the Constitutional Court. On 15 December, the delegation met with the Deputy Minister of Regional Development and Public Works, representatives of the Ministry of Finance and the Ombudsperson, as well as representatives of the National Audit Office, the Mayor of the Municipality of Silistra and the Deputy Mayor of the Municipality of Bolyarovo. The ensuing report will be submitted for adoption to the Monitoring Committee

The Netherlands, 25-27 January 2021

A Congress delegation including Vladimir PREBILIČ and Róbert-Csongor GRÜMAN carried out a series of remote meetings to assess the implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in the Netherlands. The delegation held online meetings with the national associations of municipalities (VNG) and of Provinces (IPO) as well as the national delegation of the Netherlands to the Congress. It also met with the Mayors of the Hague and of Gemert-Bakel, and with the Deputy Mayor of Enschede. Meetings were also held with national authorities including the Minister of Interior and Kingdom Relations, the Chair of the Standing committee on the Interior, the Vice-President of the Council of State and the National Ombudsman; and with regional authorities including the Director of the Court of Audit of the Randstad and the Regional Minister of the Province of South Holland. The ensuing report will be submitted for adoption to the Monitoring Committee.

Azerbaijan, 23 – 25 February 2021

A Congress delegation composed of the co-rapporteurs Bernd VÖHRINGER (Germany, EPP/CCE) and Stewart DICKSON, carried out the monitoring of Azerbaijan's compliance with the European Charter of Local Self-Government since the last monitoring in 2012. The rapporteurs met online with the national delegation of Azerbaijan to the Congress, the national associations of local and regional authorities, the Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on Regional Relations of the National Assembly, the Constitutional Court, the Court of Auditors and the Commissioner for Human Rights of Azerbaijan as well as the Deputy Minister of Justice, the Head of the Centre for works with Municipalities and the

Ministry of Finance, the executive power of Baku and other local authorities. The ensuing report will then be considered by the Monitoring Committee.

Adopted recommendations

Portugal, 28 September 2020

In Recommendation 445(2020) on local and regional democracy in Portugal adopted by the Statutory Forum on 7 December 2020, following two monitoring visits in June 2019 and in November 2019 by rapporteurs Xavier CADORET and David ERAY, the Congress praises the progress made by Portugal in the field of local and regional governance. It welcomes that the Portuguese Constitution gives prominence to local and regional self-government and that the reforms carried out at the local level since 2013 have brought improvements in the economic, social and administrative spheres. However, it also expresses concern that local authorities and their representative associations are not systematically consulted on the basis of a clear, generally binding and functioning procedure, that some municipalities are not benefiting from adequate funding support from the State and that local and regional authorities lack sufficient autonomy with regard to taxation.

The Congress recommends local authorities to be given more autonomy with respect to local taxes and setting up special aid programmes to enable municipalities in financial difficulties to rebalance their budget. The Congress also advocates that Portugal introduces a procedure for systematic consultation of local and regional authorities on any question directly concerning them and grants the associations representing local authorities' interests the right to appeal directly to the Constitutional Court.

After the adoption of the recommendation, an exchange of views took place with Jorge BOTELHO, Secretary of State for Decentralisation and Local Authorities of Portugal who stated that the decentralisation reform which is being carried out in Portugal will allow municipalities to play a bigger part in the management of the national budget and underlined that the COVID-19 pandemic has shown the importance of strong local governments.

Austria, 28 September 2020

Adopted by the Statutory Forum of 7 December 2020, Recommendation 446(2020) on the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in Austria – following a monitoring visit carried out in December 2019 by the co-rapporteurs Marc COOLS and Andrew DISMORE – welcomes reforms in Austria that have clarified the distribution of powers between the Federation, Länder and municipal authorities. It also praises the introduction of Länder Administrative Courts to strengthen Austrian federalism. But it also underlines challenges, including insufficient fiscal autonomy for municipalities and Länder. The rapporteurs regretted that local and regional authorities have almost no freedom of action with regard to local taxes and are too dependent on intergovernmental transfers calling this lack of fiscal autonomy a “recurring problem”. The recommendation calls on the Austrian government to enlarge the Länder's and municipalities' tax-raising power, by providing them with greater freedom to set the rates and base of their own-source taxes. According to the report, this will strengthen local fiscal autonomy and accountability and ensure the financial sustainability and long-term resilience of sub-national government. Among other issues raised, criminal legislation on breach of trust (*Untreue*) continues to impose disproportionate personal liability on mayors. The Congress urges the Austrian federal authorities to revise this legislation, which would guarantee local elected representatives the free exercise of their mandate in accordance with Article 7 of the Charter.

At the end of the debate, an exchange of views took place with Karoline EDTSTADLER, Federal Minister for the European Union and the Constitution at the Federal Chancellery of Austria who indicated that the evaluation of local taxation and of the liability of mayors were on the agenda of the Austrian Government.

Fact finding missions

Latvia, 7 December 2020

In Recommendation 447(2020) adopted on 7 December 2020, the Congress expresses its concern about the deterioration of local democracy in Latvia since its last report in 2018, in particular the lack of consultation in the framework of the territorial administrative reform. The report was prepared after a fact-finding mission in December 2019 which took place following a complaint addressed to the Congress by the Latvian Association of Local and Regional Authorities regarding the modalities of a wide territorial reform that was adopted last June, despite the Congress' calls to postpone the enactment of the law in order to allow for adequate consultation with Latvian local authorities and their association. In their statement, co-rapporteurs Xavier CADORET and Marc COOLS regretted that this was a missed opportunity for Latvia to adopt a territorial reform in full compliance with the European Charter of Local Self-Government which it has ratified, especially as it leads to a massive reduction in the number of local authorities and their financial autonomy.

In the adopted recommendation, the Congress calls on the Latvian authorities to strengthen the responsibility of local authorities in financial management by adopting legislative and regulatory measures and to ensure that the transfer of responsibilities to the local level is accompanied by corresponding financial resources. In addition, the Latvian authorities are invited to revise the legal framework governing the suspension of the president of a municipality or city council and the dissolution of the council in order to reduce the discretionary power of the Minister (as is the case in Riga) to activate these mechanisms by providing a more precise legal framework for the cases and conditions under which such measures may be used.

The previous monitoring report on Latvia was adopted in 2018.

B. OBSERVATION OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL ELECTIONS

Over the last 15 years, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities has observed more than 100 local and regional elections in Council of Europe member States and occasionally also beyond. Such missions are conducted further to the invitation of the national authorities or competent electoral bodies and they complement the political monitoring of the European Charter of Local Self-Government. Assistance in following-up to Congress' recommendations prepared further to observation missions can be provided through a post-electoral dialogue.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Congress adopted a report on local and regional elections in times of crisis (see I. POLITICAL AGENDA / FOCUS) and decided to implement a strategy including alternatives to sending observer delegations to the field replaced by remote observation procedure. These procedure remains exceptional and is not intended to replace real election observation missions.

Remote observation missions

Ukraine, 25 October 2020

Following an invitation by the Ukrainian authorities, the Congress conducted a remote observation procedure regarding the local elections in Ukraine which took place on Sunday 25 October 2020. The delegation comprised the Congress members represented on the Council for Democratic Elections/Venice Commission, Stewart DICKSON, Jos WIENEN, Rosaleen O'GRADY (Ireland, ILDG) and Vladimir PREBILIČ. Further to online briefings with a broad range of electoral stakeholders held on 19 and 20 October, the remote procedure was rounded-off by an online debriefing with a local domestic observer who visited polling stations in Kyiv and the surroundings on the E-Day on behalf of the Congress.

The Congress delegation acknowledged the extraordinary circumstances in which the elections were held, not only in view of the COVID 19 pandemic, but also with regard to decentralisation and constitutional reform and the recent amendments to the Electoral Code of Ukraine that fundamentally changed the electoral system, It welcomed in particular the fact that some of the long-standing Congress recommendations have been implemented by Ukraine before the October elections, notably voting rights of IDPs who were, for the first time, able to register to vote in constituencies of their current residence. The issue of disenfranchisement of IDPs in Ukraine has long been central for the Congress and various activities have been pursued in order to achieve this historic change. At the same time, regrettably, only around 100.000 Ukrainian citizens made use of the new provision out of estimated 1 million IDPs in Ukraine.

Following the remote procedure, an information report was compiled and presented to the Congress Bureau on 26 November 2020. The Congress will continue its political dialogue with the Ukrainian authorities and will use this information report as a basis for developing co-operation activities with Ukraine, in particular as regards electoral matters and voting rights at the local level.

During a national virtual conference on “2020 Local Elections: Lessons Learned and Recommendations” organised by the Central Election Commission of Ukraine, International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), OSCE Project Co-Ordinator in Ukraine and the Council of Europe Office in Ukraine on **27 January 2021**, Stewart DICKSON presented findings of the Information report on local elections in Ukraine to major election stakeholders. They exchanged their opinions on a variety of topics, such as strengthening the capacities of election commissions; the role of political parties in local elections; challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the potential introduction of electronic instruments and technologies during elections (see V. EXTERNAL COOPERATION AND PARTNERSHIPS).

Bosnia and Herzegovina, 15 November 2020

The Congress carried out a remote observation procedure, on 29 and 30 October, for the local elections set to take place in Bosnia and Herzegovina on 15 November 2020, upon invitation from the country's authorities. The delegation comprised the Congress members represented on the Council for Democratic Elections/Venice Commission, Stewart DICKSON, Jos WIENEN, Rosaleen O'GRADY, Vladimir PREBILIC and Randi MONDORF. The delegation held several online briefings with stakeholders in the election process, in particular with the President of the Central Election Commission of BiH, as well as with representatives of the international community in Sarajevo, the Association of local authorities of Republika Srpska, the Association of municipalities and cities of the Federation of BiH, and the media, with the Head of BiH Delegation to Council of Europe and President of the Federation of BiH and the members of the Congress Delegation to BiH, as well as with mayoral candidates and representatives of political parties running in the elections and representatives of several domestic NGOs. Co-operation with domestic observers was upgraded in order to support the virtual mission and provide first-hand information on the events on the Election Day.

Mostar, 20 December 2020

Welcoming the fact that, for the first time in over a decade, citizens of the city of Mostar in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) will be able to vote at the local level on 20 December 2020, a Congress delegation led by Stewart DICKSON, conducted a remote observation procedure ahead of the elections, further to an invitation from the country's authorities. Online meetings were held on 17 December with the different interlocutors in Sarajevo and Mostar including the High Representative for BiH, the Chairman of the Central Election Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina, representatives of domestic NGOs as well as political parties, notably the SDP of BiH in Mostar, the SDA Mostar and the SNSD and SDS coalition "Ostajte ovdje - Zajedno za naš Mostar" (Stay here - together for our Mostar). The delegation noted the magnitude of this milestone election, particularly for young people, since many of them will be voting at the local level for the first time in their lives.

Adopted recommendations

Local elections in the Republic of Moldova

In Recommendation 443 (2020) prepared by the Head of Mission of the Congress observation delegation to the October 2019 elections in the Republic of Moldova, Vladimir PREBILIC and adopted by the Statutory Forum on 28 September, the Congress called on the Moldovan authorities to improve the legal framework and the practical management of electoral processes. The Congress welcomes that the October 2019 local elections in Moldova were effectively administered, and that the polling day was, in general, calm and orderly. It also acknowledges the efforts by the Moldovan authorities to improve the legal framework for elections, in particular amendments aiming to improve the financing of political parties and the regulation of electoral campaigns, but regrets that these amendments were adopted shortly before the elections, a practice which is contrary to the Venice Commission's Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters. The Congress invites the authorities to make a number of improvements including revising the overly restrictive provisions for the registration of independent candidates, strengthening the participation of women in politics as voters and candidates, strengthening the oversight and enforcement powers of bodies responsible for administration of elections, monitoring of the media and supervision of financial matters.

IV. THEMATIC ACTIVITIES

The Congress supports local authorities in the performance of their duties in respect of their citizens and it supports them in their search for solutions to the challenges they face, in particular in terms of security, integration, dialogue and participation, respect for fundamental human and social rights, and the inclusion of vulnerable populations.

It initiates reflections and projects on these topics and contributes actively to the work being done in this connection within the Council of Europe and at European level.

A. YOUTH

Gianluca ROSSINO (Italy), Youth Delegate presented the role of the Congress in promoting youth participation at the online round table "Europe Goes Local: Supporting Youth Work at the Municipal level", organised on 20 October 2020 by Jint vwz, a Brussels based EU National Agency for the Erasmus+. He drew attention to the recently adopted Congress report which provides guidelines to local and regional authorities to strengthen youth work and to standard setting texts and tools such as the Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People and the European Charter for Local Youth Work and its toolkit.

The Congress initiative "Rejuvenating Politics" aims to promote the participation of young people in public life and in the decision-making process at local and regional levels. Since 2014, this "Youth Delegates" project has allowed young people from the 47 Council of Europe member States to take part in the sessions and in the meetings of the committees, contributing to the discussions on the topics on the agenda. In 2020, the Congress youth delegates worked on field projects to analyse the role of local and regional authorities during the COVID-19 pandemic. These projects cover topics such as the dissemination of false information about COVID-19, lack of transparency, discrimination and stereotypes in schools, ethnic distancing in conflict and post-conflict countries, and sustainable development.

Tina NOVAK (Croatia), Youth Delegate addressed the International Council Meeting of the European Law Students' Association (ELSA) during a panel discussion on "Youth participation in democracy and policymaking at the international level" on 12 November 2020. She stressed the fundamental role that international institutions play in promoting the political participation of youth, citing the Youth Delegates project of the Congress as a good example of young people contributing to the functioning of international organisations.

At the workshop on "Youth work as an integral part of youth policies in Member States" held on 9 December 2020 during the 3rd European Convention on Youth Work, Congress Spokesperson on Youth Thomas ANDERSSON recalled the diversity of existing policies across Member States and reiterated the key role of local and regional authorities in ensuring that youth work receives proper recognition and the resources it deserves. Those areas where youth work has a significant impact were identified by the Congress and include facilitating the integration of refugees, combating radicalisation and implementing the SDGs.

The Congress supports youth work as one of the priorities of the Council of Europe's youth sector strategy 2030.

B. GENDER EQUALITY

The Congress will continue to contribute to the strategic objectives of the Council of Europe (adopted by the Committee of Ministers in March 2018) which are of relevance for local and regional politicians, also keeping in mind the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and in particular SDG 5 (achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls),. The focus in the coming biennium will be on fighting sexism in politics at the local and regional level as well as gender mainstreaming in all policies and measures.

At the webinar on "Intersectional solutions to eliminate violence against women and girls in rural areas", organised on the occasion of the International Day of Rural Women on 15 October 2020, Jelena DRENJANIN stressed that Women's political participation is a key element for gender equality, local democracy and the development of rural areas. She called for the removal of the obstacles that women face in achieving balanced representation. She referred to the application of quota, which has proved

effective in the municipal councils of several Council of Europe member states. Within the Congress itself, the quota system has led to more than 40% women in national delegations. However, she underlined that a culture of sexism and sexist violence that keep women out of politics must be fought. In addition to these obstacles, women in rural areas face specific difficulties such as problems of access, lack of funds and limited infrastructure. She said the presence of women in local government would contribute not only to improving gender equality in general but also to the development of rural areas. The event was part of the series of webinars “A thousand ways to solve our problems: Preventing and responding to violence against women from an intersectional perspective,” co-convened by the European Union, the Council of Europe and UN Women.

Speaking at the 18th meeting of the Council of Europe's Gender Equality Commission (GEC), held online on 22 October 2020, Jelena DRENJANIN stressed that achieving equality between men and women in political representation is key to the functioning of representative democracy. She gave a reminder of the many obstacles that still stood in the way of full participation for women: sexism, violence, hate speech, cyberbullying, difficulties in reconciling private and professional life, stereotyping and negative attitudes and presented the report on "Fighting sexism against women in politics at local and regional level" adopted by the Congress in 2020, which calls for a set of measures to protect and support women holding political office as well as female candidates prior to and during elections, raise awareness among political parties and the public of violence against women in politics, collect and share good practices to that end and foster cooperation with civil society organisations, academia and the private sector.

Jelena DRENJANIN participated in the launch of the online course on “Gender Mainstreaming at Local Level in Ukraine” on 11 December 2020. Speaking in the panel discussion on gender equality at local level and the need for better understanding and awareness, she stressed that overcoming gender inequality and gender-based discrimination is like a dripping of water, that makes the hole in the stone. The Secretary General of the Congress underlined that promoting a gender perspective in local political action, and equal opportunities for women and men to participate in local political life is central to the protection of human rights and the functioning of democracy. (see V. EXTERNAL COOPERATION AND PARTNERSHIPS).

C. EUROPEAN LOCAL DEMOCRACY WEEK (ELDW)

In 2020, 204 local and regional authorities and their associations from 19 countries took part in the ELDW initiative and reported more than 500 events under the theme “Local democracy: building trust”. ELDW activities were organised throughout the year, with the main event taking place in the week of 15 October 2020. Against the background of restrictive measures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most activities were held with the use of online tools for communicating with citizens.

On 9 October 2020, an awareness-raising webinar “ELDW in the Digital Era” took place, with the participation of Thematic Spokesperson on the ELDW Bryony RUDKIN and the Secretary General of the Congress. The meeting brought together more than 30 participants, including ELDW National Coordinators from Council of Europe member states, secretaries of Moroccan and Tunisian delegations, and invited guest speakers (Valongo Municipality from Portugal, the Union of Communities of Armenia and Beşiktaş Municipality from Turkey), to share experience in organising ELDW activities during the pandemic.

On 12 February 2021, the Congress Bureau awarded the annual title of “Partner of the European Local Democracy Week” for 2020 to 19 local and regional authorities and one association in recognition of their commitment and active participation in the ELDW initiative.

The ELDW annual coordination meeting was held online on 26 February 2021. Chaired by Bryony RUDKIN, the meeting brought together 85 participants – the ELDW National Coordinators as well as local elected representatives and municipal officials from 15 countries (Albania, Belgium, Bulgaria, Germany, Greece, Portugal, Republic of North Macedonia, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Sweden, Turkey, Ukraine, Morocco and Tunisia). The participants evaluated the 2020 edition, shared their best practices and agreed to propose to the Congress Bureau a new ELDW theme for 2021 and 2022, focusing on protecting the environment and building resilience at local level. At the end of the online meeting, the Spokesperson presented the ELDW 2020 Partner certificates.

D. WORLD FORUM FOR DEMOCRACY

On 18 November 2020, the President of the Departmental Council of Bas-Rhin and Congress member Frédéric BIERRY (France, EPP/CCE) participated in the launch of the 9th edition of the World Forum for Democracy under the theme: "Can Democracy Save the Environment?" in the presence of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, the French Minister of Ecological Transition and the Mayor of Strasbourg, video messages. He recalled that the protection of the environment is a major issue at all levels of governance in which the local level has a key role to play and called for local and regional authorities' competence in environmental protection to be promoted. He underlined the support the Congress could provide in this matter, for example by proposing additional text to its European Charter of Local Self-Government. On the occasion of the Forum's new "12 months, 1 question" campaign, which will run throughout 2021, the Congress organised two events: one, jointly with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, on the theme of deliberative democracy for the climate, and a second on local initiatives for the environment.

On 18 January 2021, the Congress and the Parliamentary Assembly organised a round table on representative democracy against the climate crisis. In her opening speech, Gunn Marit HELGESEN stressed that the fight against climate change can only succeed if local and regional elected representatives make a decisive contribution to the measures decided at national and international level. The round table was divided into two sessions, focusing on the role and responsibility of parliamentarians and local elected representatives in the fight against climate change, with the participation of Gunn Marit HELGESEN and Magnus BERTSSON, President of the Assembly of European Regions (Sweden, EPP/CCE); and on translating international and regional standards and commitments into action and delivering practical results at local and national level, with the participation of Congress Spokesperson on Climate Change and Environment Vladimir PREBILIČ, CEMR spokesperson on climate and political administrator of the Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy - Europe Belinda GOTTARDI (Italy, SOC/G/PD) and President of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) Mohamed BOUDRA, Mayor of Al Hoceima and President of the Moroccan Association of Presidents of Local Councils (AMPCC).

On 19 January 2021, Congress Vice-President Karl Heinz LAMBERTZ (Belgium, SOC/G/PD) participated in the January Forum Talk, organised by the World Forum for Democracy under the theme "Giving a louder voice to citizens beyond the ballot box". He stressed the importance of using citizens' assemblies as a mechanism of deliberative democracy and presented the example of the citizens' assembly of his German-speaking Community of Belgium, pointing out that the Congress was preparing a report on "Deliberative Democracy at the local and regional level".

V. INSTITUTIONAL CO-OPERATION WITHIN THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

A. THE INTERGOVERNMENTAL SECTOR

The Committee of Ministers

The President and the Secretary General of the Congress hold regular exchanges of views and communications with the Ministers' Deputies. The Congress also contributes actively to the activities of the chairmanships of the Committee of Ministers.

Communication by the Secretary General to the Deputies in the Committee of Ministers, 8 July 2020

Andreas KIEFER focused on the role of local and regional authorities as key actors and the Congress with its supporting activities in the COVID-19 pandemic and the lessons learned in order to respect the democracy, human rights and the rule of law in cities and municipalities also in extra-ordinary situations. He underlined that in this severe sanitary, social and economic crisis in all member States, local and regional authorities found themselves at the frontline in their communities. The Congress leaders were very pleased that this key role has been recognised by the heads of governments, the Chair of the Committee of Ministers, the Secretary General and that the Council of Europe is aware of the role and contributions, which local and regional authorities – via the Congress – can make for the Organisation. He highlighted some concrete achievements of the Congress during this period, in particular the

establishment of an online platform showcasing action by local and regional authorities during the pandemic, in order to provide a swift response to the need for exchange of experience and good practice.

The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI)

Harald BERGMANN participated in the 84th plenary meeting of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), on 2 December 2020. He stressed that the difficult times societies are going through have not improved the already worrying landscape of manifestations of racism, intolerance, discrimination and violence that we are experiencing in Europe. He exposed the recent activities of the Congress on the situation of LGBTI persons in Europe, which continues to deteriorate, informing about the recent fact-finding mission to Poland on the situation of LGBTI people and referred to the examples of good practices and strategies compiled in the first volume of the Human Rights Handbook, published in 2018 on the right to non-discrimination, with regard to refugees, asylum seekers, migrants and internally displaced persons, Roma and Travellers and LGBTI people (see II. ACTIVITIES OF THE STATUTORY BODIES).

The European Committee on Democracy and Governance (CDDG)

Andreas KIEFER addressed the remote Plenary of the European Committee on Democracy and Governance on 26 November 2020, underlining that dialogue and cooperation with the institutions of the Council of Europe is essential for the work of the Congress. He referred in particular to the activities of the Congress during the pandemic and called to join forces at all levels to overcome the serious crisis caused by it. He underlined that in times of crisis, the European Charter of Local Self-Government, on which the work of the Congress is based, provides the legal basis for member States to defend the principles of local democracy and self-government and to develop responses to ensure the functioning of democratic institutions at all levels.

The Steering Committee for Culture, Heritage and Landscape (CDCPP)

During the plenary session of the Steering Committee for Culture, Heritage and Landscape (CDCPP) held online on 12 November 2020, Barbara TOCE presented the Congress report on "Cultures without borders: Cultural heritage management for local and regional development" (see II. ACTIVITIES OF THE CONGRESS BODIES)

Gender Equality Commission (GEC)

Jelena DRENJANIN took part in the 18th meeting of the Council of Europe's Gender Equality Commission (GEC), held online on 22 October 2020 (see IV. THEMATIC ACTIVITIES)

The AD HOC Committee on Artificial Intelligence

Andrew DAWSON participated in the ad hoc meeting on Artificial Intelligence (CAHAI) on 7 July 2020. He underlined that Local and regional authorities are making increasing use of artificial intelligence in the delivery of services to citizens and in recent years, the Congress has placed great emphasis on issues related to information and the use of new technologies. In particular, the Governance Committee has prepared a report on "Open data for better public services". In this report, adopted in 2017, the Congress encourages local and regional authorities to make datasets open to the entire population while ensuring data protection. The Congress also calls on member states to recognise the importance of open data for strengthening local democracy and to provide guidelines in this field. The Committee has also prepared a report on "Smart Cities: opportunities and challenges for democracy" which was adopted on 15 September 2020 (see II. ACTIVITIES OF THE CONGRESS BODIES). Mr Dawson suggested that an additional protocol should be added to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) dealing specifically with artificial intelligence.

B. THE PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY

The Congress holds regular exchanges with the Parliamentary Assembly, in order to increase co-operation at the level of rapporteurs and the respective secretariats as well as in areas of common interest, in particular in the framework of the implementation of Council of Europe Campaigns.

Yoomi RENSTRÖM, co-rapporteur on Turkey, participated in the meeting of the Monitoring Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly held online on 13 November 2020. She stated that the situation of mayors and local elected representatives in Turkey, who continue to be detained and suspended on charges of terrorism-related offences and replaced by State trustees, has long been a matter of serious concern to the Congress. She recalled that the opinion of the Venice Commission confirmed that the decision of the Turkish Supreme Electoral Council to deny winning candidates their legitimate mandate is incompatible with international standards. Also, that the decisions of the Turkish Ministry of the Interior to suspend elected mayors would undermine the very nature of local self-government as enshrined in the European Charter of Local Self-Government. She said the Congress regrets that despite all previous Congress missions, recommendations and declarations, the situation of mayors and local elected representatives remains unresolved and continues to deteriorate. The Congress is however determined to continue to pursue dialogue with the Turkish authorities and to offer advice and assistance, stressing the Congress was convinced that a medium-term strategy must be developed, together with the Turkish authorities, in order to reconcile the deplorable working conditions of local elected representatives in the south-east with the provisions of the European Charter of Local Self-Government.

On 18 January 2021, the Congress and the Parliamentary Assembly organised a round table on representative democracy against the climate crisis (see IV. THEMATIC ACTIVITIES)

C. THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION FOR DEMOCRACY THROUGH LAW

The Congress is working in close co-operation with the Venice Commission, particularly in the field of election observation and the monitoring of the European Charter of Local Self-Government. The Council for Democratic Elections (CED) is a platform for electoral cooperation between the Venice Commission, in its capacity as legal body, the Parliamentary Assembly and the Congress, as political organs responsible for election observation in their respective areas.

Members of the Congress on the Council for Democratic Elections are currently the thematic Spokespersons on the Observation of Local and Regional Elections, Jakob WIENEN, Stewart DICKSON, Vladimir PREBILIC and Rosaleen O'GRADY

As part of the 69th meeting of the Venice Commission's Council for Democratic Elections, which took place online on 7 October 2020, Jos WIENEN and Stewart DICKSON presented the new report on local and regional elections in major crisis situations. They underlined that the Congress report makes clear the minimum core of fundamental principles of democratic elections that have to be respected in all circumstances. The report also refers to difficulties in observing elections during the current pandemic due to travel restrictions, quarantine measures and health risks. Informing the Council for Democratic Elections about the Congress report on local referendums, to be adopted in February 2021, Mr Dickson stressed the importance of referendums organised at the grassroots level for resolving issues which are of fundamental importance for peoples' everyday lives.

D. THE NORTH-SOUTH CENTRE

Contribution to the 26th Lisbon Forum

From 1 to 3 December 2020, the 26th edition of the Lisbon Forum on the theme "Learning from our Global Challenges: Strengthening Solidarity" brought together experts, activists and decision-makers from around the world to exchange during three thematic workshops: "Education and citizen's consciousness", "Addressing vulnerabilities through intersectionality" and "Intergenerational dialogue and environmental protection". The Lisbon Forum marked the conclusion of the North-South Centre's #SolidAction campaign, supported by the Congress since its launch in April 2020, and which aims to promote collective mobilisations for solidarity against inequalities.

It was also in this framework that the North-South Centre's 2019 North-South Prize award ceremony took place, which was presented to the two candidates proposed by the Congress. The winners are

Nabila HAMZA (Tunisia), municipal councillor of La Marsa, sociologist and feminist activist in charge of the European Union programme "Med Dialogue for Rights and Equality" and Leoluca ORLANDO (Italy), mayor of Palermo, in recognition of his efforts for the integration of migrants and human rights at the local level.

The Congress also contributed to the Lisbon Forum through a virtual exhibition presenting the work and tools developed to support cities and regions in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, the Congress launched an online platform "COVID-19: local and regional responses" which provides an array of resources and good practices deployed by European local and regional authorities, partner networks and other organisations.

North-South Centre Executive Committee meeting

Representing the Congress on 13 November 2020, Marc COOLS underlined that current crisis required an effort of adaptation and innovation from all levels of government to build a more sustainable and inclusive future.

VI. EXTERNAL COOPERATION AND PARTNERSHIPS

A. THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

The Congress and the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) of the European Union maintain close co-operation and working relations, both at the political level and the level of the respective secretariats, based on the Cooperation Agreement, revised most recently in March 2018. This co-operation is based on the commonality of the objective of reinforcing local and regional democracy, devolution and self-government in Europe, and on the complementarity of action.

Co-operation is steered by the Congress/CoR High-Level Group (HLG) which includes the Congress President and its two Chamber Presidents, and the CoR President, First Vice-President and President of the CIVEX Commission, assisted by the respective Secretaries General. The HLG meets at the beginning of the year to compare the political agendas, set priority areas of co-operation and identify potential for joint action. In 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a short High-Level Group meeting is scheduled to take place online on 10 July, with a regular meeting planned for December,

The respective Presidents address a plenary session of the other's institution at least once during their mandate.

In practical terms, co-operation includes regular exchange of information and documents, contribution to the preparation of reports and to debates in committees/commissions and working groups, exchanges of views with rapporteurs, participation in each other's events and statutory meetings, and organisation of joint activities (for example, a conference on fighting corruption at local and regional level).

Specific geographic areas of co-operation include the Eastern Partnership of the EU, the South Mediterranean and South-East Europe.

Eastern Partnership: The Congress and CoR co-operate within the Conference of Regional and Local Authorities of the Eastern Partnership (CORLEAP), as well as in the CoR Task Force on Ukraine.

South Mediterranean: The Congress and CoR co-operate within the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM) as well as in the Council of Europe's North-South Centre, where both institutions represent the local and regional dimension of the quadrilogue.

South-East Europe: The Congress and CoR co-operate within the Congress Reflection Group on Mostar (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and the CoR Working Group on Western Balkans; the Congress also shares its monitoring and election observation findings (for example, on Serbia, Turkey and Republic of Moldova) with other relevant working groups.

In addition to its co-operation with CoR, the Congress also co-operates with the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) in support of its "joint-up approach" of ensuring human rights delivery at local and regional level as a shared responsibility of all levels of governance.

High Level Group Meeting of the Congress and the European Committee of the Regions

The meeting held online on 10 July 2020 was attended on behalf of the Congress by its President, the Presidents of its Chambers and its Secretary General and on behalf of the CoR by President Apostolos TZITZIKOSTAS, the Chairman of the Commission for Citizenship, Governance, Institutional and External Affairs (CIVEX) Mark SPEICH and the Secretary General Petr BLÍŽKOVSKÝ. Discussions focused on the COVID-19 health crisis and the responses at the local and regional levels. The presidents of the two organisations presented the actions developed to help support national authorities and the European Union and Council of Europe institutions in ensuring good democratic governance and the respect of human rights and the rule of law also in times of crises. Among the initiatives launched by the two organisations were the CoR's exchange platform "We Stand Together #EuropeansAgainstCOVID-19" and the platform "COVID-19: local and regional responses" developed by the Congress to facilitate the exchange of good practice between municipalities, regions and partners.

Gunn Marit HELGESEN presented the forthcoming work of the Congress and referred to several reports and discussions on the agendas of the Monitoring, Governance and Current Affairs Committees in September, dealing with several issues raised by the COVID-19 crisis: the safeguarding of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, the challenges of multi-level governance and the protection of minorities in cities and regions. The CoR President also congratulated Mr Knape and the Congress on the launch of the project aiming at supporting the process towards local elections in the City of Mostar in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In September 2020, the Congress contributed to the CoR's annual Regional and Local Barometer report, which focused on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the crucial role of local and regional authorities in responding to the crisis. The report was presented by CoR President Apostolos TZITZIKOSTAS on 12 October during the CoR's 140th Plenary Session, organised with the participation, among others, of the President of the European Commission and the Congress President. He presented some of the key findings and recommendations for the legal and procedural measures necessary for safeguarding the capacity to act of municipalities, cities and regions and maintaining the democratic legitimacy of their action in times of crisis.

The next meeting of the High-Level Group is scheduled to take place in April 2021.

The Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR)

During the online meeting on "The path to sustainable and resilient municipalities and regions", organised by the CEMR, the President of the Congress recalled that ensuring the exercise of human rights is a responsibility shared by all levels of governance and is not the exclusive prerogative of national governments. He highlighted the importance of local and regional government action in many areas such as freedom of expression and assembly, the right to housing, education, employment and health care. The President reminded that the rights guaranteed by international treaties, constitutions, national legislation and court decisions correspond to specific competences increasingly delegated by states to local and regional authorities. The decentralisation of competences, as set out in the European Charter of Local Self-Government, is essential in ensuring that local authorities have the necessary resources to fulfil their obligations.

On 28 January 2021, the CEMR celebrated its 70th anniversary with an event "Horizon 2051: Local Futures for Europe". Speaking at the event, Gunn Marit HELGESEN pointed out that the CEMR Charter of Municipal Liberties adopted in 1953 paved the way for the development of the European Charter of Local Self-Government and stressed the special importance for the Congress and the CEMR to pursue the common work against the background of recentralisation and less financial autonomy of local and regional authorities as a result of the health crisis.

The Conference of the Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership (CORLEAP)

Gunn Marit HELGESEN took part in a workshop on "Strengthening resilience in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) through territorial and parliamentary co-operation", co-organised by the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly and the CORLEAP on 12 October 2020. She presented the Congress' findings on the resilience of local and regional governments in times of crisis. She reaffirmed the Congress' conviction that genuine democracy can only be achieved when the needs of both local democracy and human rights are met and respected. She highlighted the significant role to be played by Members of Parliament

in setting an adequate legislative framework for local self-government and fiscal decentralisation as a prerequisite for strengthening the resilience of local government units in the Eastern Partnership region and called for continuous dialogue and consultations with representatives of the local levels of governance, which is a key factor in fostering an enabling environment for good governance and in providing innovative solutions tailored to citizens' needs. Ms. Helgesen also presented examples of good co-ordination and consultations between all levels of governance from various countries.

B. EUROPEAN ASSOCIATIONS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

NALAS

Gunn-Marit HELGESEN took part in the Online Mayors' Conference: Local Governments in South East Europe in Post-COVID-19 Socio-Economic Recovery, organised by the Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South-East Europe (NALAS) where she expressed concern about COVID-related budget cuts at grassroots. She warned about strong recentralisation trends and the impact of the crisis on the functioning of democratic institutions. She also recalled that multi-level governance systems do not hinder responses to the pandemic. She praised the support provided by NALAS, in particular to national associations, and called for solidarity and sharing of experiences to deal with the crisis.

The Assembly of European Regions (AER)

Gunn Marit HELGESEN and Xavier CADORET took part in the Normandy World Peace Forum on 2 October 2020. Speaking at the debate on "Global challenges, local responses: what solutions for the climate?", organised by the AER, Gunn Marit HELGESEN presented the Congress's work aimed at implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations Agenda 2030. The Congress contributes among others to SDG 13, which calls for urgent action to combat climate change and its effects, by focusing on three topics: quality of the environment, impact of climate change on citizens' lives and energy transition. It is currently preparing a publication for children that local and regional authorities can distribute in schools to raise awareness on climate change and the implementation of SDGs. Xavier CADORET explained that the management of the COVID-19 crisis illustrates this fundamental role of the territorial level, which benefits from better knowledge of the situation on the ground and the needs of the population. The transmission of information to central governments makes it possible to co-ordinate common strategies and each level of governance complements the action of the other. He also stressed the need to share good practices in an institutionalised framework, especially in crisis situations.

The European Association for Local Democracy (ALDA)

During the General Assembly celebrating ALDA's 20th anniversary on 9 October 2020, Xavier CADORET recalled that the Congress was at the origin of the creation of the ALDA and both share the same objective of strengthening local and regional democracy by promoting active citizenship. The association has become a key player in building local democracy and strengthening active citizenship and co-operation between local authorities and civil society in Europe and beyond. He welcomed the fact that, despite the current crisis, ALDA has continued to support local authorities in the implementation of programmes involving civil society.

The Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM)

Xavier CADORET took part in the debate on "The transformative potential of the COVID crisis" organised during the 6th meeting of the Commission for Sustainable Territorial Development of the ARLEM on 29 October 2020. He presented the Congress' recommendations to preserve and strengthen local democracy in times of crisis. He recalled the Congress' recommendations to respond to the health crisis, in particular the need to guarantee the financial autonomy of local and regional authorities in accordance with the Charter, to ensure that any emergency measures are temporary and proportional, and to promote multi-level decision-making in order to preserve the democratic legitimacy of responses to the crisis.

On 22 February 2021, Xavier CADORET took part in the debate "Towards a renewed partnership between the EU and its Southern Neighbours in the context of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic", during the 12th plenary session of ARLEM. He stressed the crucial role of local and regional authorities

in managing the crisis and its effects, adding that the crisis had highlighted the need for solidarity and experience-sharing across the Mediterranean in the face of the common challenges caused by the pandemic.

The Association of European Border Regions

Gunn Marit HELGESEN participated in the annual conference of the AEBR on "The future of Europe from the point of view of border regions" held online on 5 November 2020. She congratulated Karl Heinz LAMBERTZ, also Vice-President of the Congress on his election as President of AEBR, which will serve to enhance the cooperation between the two institutions. She stressed that cross-border cooperation does not only allow a better understanding of neighbourly relations, but also to deal with common problems, to develop synergies and to seize economic benefits from sharing public services and infrastructure. She underlined that the disruptive effects of the COVID-19 crisis were particularly felt in cross-border regions due to restrictive measures such as border closures while solidarity and cooperation between regions, including across borders, have often led to effective measures. She called on the examples of good practice of cooperation between EU regions such as Eurodistricts, Euroregions and the 72 existing European territorial cooperation groupings to be extended to the whole continent and even beyond Europe; highlighting the existing legal framework for this, the Council of Europe's 1980 Madrid Convention on Transfrontier Cooperation and its three additional protocols.

The Congress Secretary General contributed to the annual conference of the AEBR held online on 6 November 2020 on "Communication and Networking: AEBR's future cooperation with European Union institutions and other partners". He presented the role of the European institutions in supporting cross-border cooperation in the interest of citizens, municipalities and regions. He proposed to consider the creation of a platform for dialogue, meetings and exchanges on cross-border cooperation, on the basis of existing institutions - for example, an annual high-level exchange of the heads of the institutions concerned to define the cross-border cooperation strategy and coordinate activities for its implementation. He also presented the work of the Congress aimed at promoting territorial cooperation through the creation of Euroregions and the adoption of a series of recommendations, including the drafting of legal provisions on horizontal subsidiarity, the transfer of competences and resources to cross-border cooperation bodies and the need to train and strengthen the capacities of the actors concerned.

C. NATIONAL ASSOCIATIONS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

The Congress Secretary General participated in the 48th General Assembly of the Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities (SCTM) of Serbia on 17 December 2020. He said the Congress stands ready to engage in a political dialogue with the Serbian authorities in order to further implement the reforms of local self-government under way. The provisions of the European Charter of Local Self-Government and the latest Congress monitoring report and Recommendation 403 (2017) on local and regional democracy in Serbia are the appropriate framework. Together with the government and with the Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities (SCTM) additional concrete thematic activities such as public ethics, transparency, the fight against corruption, gender equality or youth participation could be developed and implemented. The Secretary General pointed out that the cooperation activities of the Congress are an extension of its statutory work while welcoming the active participation of the members of the Serbian delegation to the Congress and that of the Standing Conference of Cities and Municipalities as rapporteurs or as members of election observation missions, but also in the cooperation activities carried out in other countries, notably in Ukraine and Armenia.

D. OTHERS

Together with experts from Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean countries, the Secretary General participated in a webinar organised by the Organisation of American States (OAS), the Forum of Federations, and the University of Kent, on 21 September 2020. The webinar, titled "*Subnational Governments and their Growing Pivotal Role in a COVID-19 Scenario in Latin America and the Caribbean*", explored the dynamics and practices of subnational and local governments in effectively responding to the challenges facing Latin America and the Caribbean as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, drawing on country examples from the Americas and Europe. He addressed the effects of the crisis on multilevel governance and finding the right balance between efficiency and effectivity in fighting the

pandemic, underlining the importance of local government for tailor made responses adapted to the needs of the regions, embedded in national strategies. Mr. Kiefer outlined the role of the Congress, and how it acts as a forum for innovation and platform to exchange good practices between the local and regional elected officials and as an institutional platform within the Council of Europe submitting recommendations to the Committee of Ministers.

VII. COOPERATION PROGRAMMES AND ACTION PLANS

The Congress provides practical support by means of co-operation projects to address shortcomings of local democracy identified during the monitoring and post-monitoring of the Charter and the observation of local and regional elections. These projects take place within the Council of Europe country-specific Action Plans or within the policy towards neighbouring regions.

Co-operation projects and activities are carried out by the Congress secretariat in close co-operation and synergy with the other entities of the organisation.

Principles and methodology

Since October 2012, more than 1,300 mayors, councillors and young local leaders benefited from the Congress activities in Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine, as well as in Kosovo*¹, Morocco, and Tunisia. Those activities amount to approximatively eleven million EUR, funded by voluntary contributions from member States and the European Union.

The activities implemented are diverse and adapted to the needs of the beneficiaries: workshops, regional seminars, platforms for exchanges and networking, direct support, political mediation, and advocacy support and legal advice. Peer exchange allows for fruitful debates on principles and standards of local democracy and sharing of innovative practices of governance. As of today, more than 90 Congress members representing 28 Member States have taken part in peer work, in addition to the members from the respective national delegations of the beneficiary countries

The co-operation activities are designed to inspire mayors and councillors to lead the change in their municipalities, in order to strengthen transparency, accountability and citizen participation in their decision-making. In addition, the Congress supports them to commonly defend their interests vis-à-vis the national authorities, in close co-ordination with their associations.

The prevention of corruption is a central theme of the political and operational activities. It is based on a set of handbooks on transparency and citizen participation for local authorities in Albania, Armenia, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Kosovo* which result from previous project activities. The work in this field draws from the resolutions and recommendations on transparency and open government, fighting nepotism and conflict of interest, the protection of whistle-blowers, transparent public procurement, and combatting the misuse of administrative resources during electoral processes, as well as on the European Code of Conduct for all Persons Involved in Local and Regional Governance, which is part of the Congress Roadmap of activities for preventing corruption and promoting public ethics at local and regional levels.

The right of local authorities to be consulted is another core feature of co-operation projects, with regards to the guidelines adopted by the Congress in November 2018.² The activities are focused on empowering local and regional authorities and their associations by equipping them with analytical skills which will enable them to unify and defend the positions of their members and advocate for the comprehensive legislative and institutional changes needed.

In addition, a stronger gender perspective was introduced in all activities to foster gender equality and promote the participation of women in local political life. This is directly linked to the human rights dimension taken when carrying out the activities in the field. The support to gender mainstreaming, as well as to the participation and inclusion of under-represented groups, especially internally displaced persons, and minorities at local level, is thereby intensified. The co-operation activities directly contribute to the implementation of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,

¹ (*) All reference to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.

² <https://rm.coe.int/the-consultation-of-local-authorities-by-higher-levels-of-government-g/16808d3c72>

elaborating on the wider Council of Europe contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – in particular to the achieving Sustainable Development Goals 5 (Gender Equality), 10 (Reduce inequality within and among countries), 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions), and 17 (Partnership for the goals).

The implementation of co-operation activities was severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, requiring changes to the project implementation methodology. To preserve active engagement and communication with the all target groups and stakeholders, alternate plans were developed, which included remote expert support and the organisation of online and hybrid meetings.

A. ARMENIA

The Congress provided expert support to the four working groups on political integrity in local governance, established within the Community of Practice of 23 selected Armenian municipalities, in formulating recommendations practical guides for the development of Codes of Conduct for municipal civil servants, preparation of local Anti-corruption action plans, undertaking corruption risk self-assessments, etc. The recommendations were presented to the project stakeholders at their meeting on 9 December 2020, and their practical implementation at local level will be discussed at the next meeting of the Community of Practice in March 2021. Synergies were also built with the Ministry of Justice (in applying local corruption risk assessment tools, developed with the project support, as a contribution to implementing the national anti-corruption strategy).

Members of the Community of Practice on political integrity in local governance, namely mayors, councillors and civil servants, have been supported to act as drivers for change in their communities and address the key elements of ethical and transparent governance, including ways to prevent and combat corruption and foster citizen participation as a means of reinforcing the accountability of local authorities.

As a result of the project's co-operation with Armenia's Open Government secretariat and their active participation in the work of the Community of Practice, the municipalities of Vanadzor and Gyumri were admitted to the Local programme of the global Open Government Partnership (OGP).

Support continued to build capacities of the Communities Association of Armenia (CAA) and its secretariat, including through a grant to strengthen its communication, advocacy, project development and resource mobilisation and to ensure recruitment of a new Executive Director. On-the-job coaching was provided for CAA staff members as well as expert support to carry out the assessment of the CAA Strategic Action Plan 2016-2020 and to develop a further Strategic Action Plan for 2021-2025.

To strengthen advocacy capacities of the Association, expert support was provided to its statutory bodies and thematic committees. This allowed the Association to develop policy opinions related to local governance policies, legal acts and regulations, and some of those include draft Laws on Territorial Administrative Reform, Local Self-Government, Civil Code, etc. Opinions are discussed between 94 local elected representatives, members of the CAA Republican Council, and approved by the CAA Executive Board. Recommendation on changes and amendments to the Electoral Code (developed in co-operation with the CoE project "Democratic Development, Democratisation and Good Governance") were approved by Parliament in July 2020.

In addition, the CAA developed and submitted draft consultation and decentralisation strategies to national authorities, aimed at establishing a consultative mechanism with the central authorities and a dialogue on the continued decentralisation and territorial reform process. However, this process, as well as other co-operation activities, were heavily impacted not only by the Covid-19 pandemic and related mandatory restrictions, but also by the outbreak of hostilities in the area of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

B. BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

In the City of Mostar, a tailored methodology for a deliberative process was developed, as part of the Congress efforts to enhance opportunities for citizens and increase their input in local decision-making within the project "Building democratic participation in the City of Mostar". The first Citizens' Assembly in the City of Mostar will be held in July 2021.

The project was launched in February 2020 and will be implemented until 31 December 2021. In parallel with the deliberative process, the project seeks to enhance knowledge and skills of local political representatives in new democratic approaches, through a number of capacity development activities which will be organised in the upcoming period.

The project was discussed with the Acting Mayor of Mostar and representatives of political parties through a series of online bilateral meetings (23-24 July 2020) and in a specific online event with representatives of the civil society from the City of Mostar (18 November 2020).

On 9 February 2021, the Congress Spokesperson on Observation of Local and Regional Elections welcomed the constitution of the City Council and the election of its President and two deputies, following the local elections held in December 2020. In the meantime, the mayor was elected on 15 February. The establishment of the fully functional local authority represents a favourable step for the effective implementation of the project overall, and in particular for a successful deliberative process.

C. GEORGIA

The Council of Europe and the Government of Austria signed on 15 December 2020 a new project on “Strengthening participatory democracy and human rights at local level in Georgia”. which will be jointly implemented by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and the Directorate General of Democracy of the Council of Europe, under the framework of the Council of Europe Action Plan for Georgia 2020-2023.³

The project aims to protect and promote human rights and strengthen democratic public participation at local level in Georgia by strengthening institutional frameworks and by supporting local authorities and the National Association of Local Authorities (NALAG) in their efforts to promote gender equality and eliminate discrimination.

D. KOSOVO*

In Kosovo*, the Congress is conducting an Assessment of the implementation of the principles enshrined in the European Charter on Local Self-Government. The Assessment report will include recommendations for strengthening local democracy based on research, interviews and focus group meetings with key stakeholders in Kosovo*. The identification of the Assessment findings and recommendations is envisaged with the active contribution of local elected representatives as drivers of change. The assessment will be carried out by local and international consultants, and with the contribution of members of the Group of Independent Expert on the European Charter of Local Self-Government.

A roadmap for the implementation of recommendations stemming from the Assessment will be prepared during the second quarter of 2021. Central and local authorities, and the Association of Kosovo* Municipalities, will be involved in discussing and considering recommendations in order to promote the sustainability of the process of dialogue and consultation of local authorities by higher levels of government.

Furthermore, a training manual and e-course on political integrity, public ethics and open government to further build the capacities of local authorities, is being developed in co-operation with the AKM and its Training Centre.

E. THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

The Congress is implementing the project “Reinforcing the culture of dialogue and consultation of local authorities in the Republic of Moldova” as of June 2020 until May 2021. It aims to enhance dialogue between local authorities and the central level and strengthen the institutional capacities and accountability of the Congress of Local Authorities from Moldova (CALM).

A Baseline Assessment of the institutional position of CALM was developed, presenting strengths and areas for growth, and recommendations for changes in view of improving the effectiveness, sustainability, legitimacy, and accountability of the association. The Congress is currently supporting the elaboration of the strategic orientation of the association considering the opportunities for improvement outlined in the baseline. The process includes the setting-up of a working group and reflections of CALM decision-making bodies on the future priorities to be integrated in the mid-term strategy

³ <https://rm.coe.int/168098f179>

Moreover, from October to December 2020 CALM members of the Administrative Council and Secretariat staff improved their advocacy and policy influencing skills through a capacity development path with varied activities including four online interactive workshops and a webinar for sharing experiences on advocacy with local government associations from other European countries. These enabled members of CALM to exchange on advocacy, and local government and territorial reforms with peers in national associations from Europe and strengthened communication between them. The interactive workshops also included a significant focus on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and were an eye-opener for local elected representatives on how they can contribute to achieving the country's commitments to the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Furthermore, a working group of mayors representing different regions and sizes of local authorities developed a Draft Action Plan on Advocacy for local finances which is key for the discussions on the Draft Fiscal Policy for 2021, the issue regarding the capping of local taxes. Infographics on advocacy, the decision-making process within the association, fiscal decentralisation, consultation, and public procurement were developed, thereby contributing to ensuring inclusiveness within the association and transparency vis-à-vis members and external stakeholders.

F. UKRAINE

The Congress intervention in Ukraine is focused on strengthening policymaking and consultation between local authorities, their associations, and the national authorities within the local self-government reform. The implementation of human rights at local level is included in several components of the project.

Coaching and expert support was continued to 13 Ukrainian local authorities until September 2020, for the implementation of local initiatives. Coupled with a series of online thematic webinars, this integrated support allowed local elected representatives and civil servants to facilitate and improve citizen engagement in their communities using different digital solutions, introducing targeted gender-sensitive local programmes and e-tools, and paying particular attention to under-represented groups and youth.

The consultation of local authorities on the legislative changes related to local self-government in Ukraine was enhanced with the expert support provided by members of the Group of Independent Experts on the European Charter of Local Self-Government, who expressed concern with regards to the alignment of the draft law "On the City of Kyiv - Capital of Ukraine" with the principles of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, in particular the compatibility with the constitutional principle of the separation of powers and with the principle of proportionality laid down in Article 8.3. of the Charter.

Joint action and consultations between the national associations of local self-government were enhanced within the Community of Practice on local democracy in Ukraine, especially during the meeting held on 6 October 2020 in view of October local elections in Ukraine. The Congress report on Local and regional elections in major crisis situations triggered the debate where representatives of all four national associations of local and regional authorities expressed their concerns with obligations imposed on local authorities to finance sanitary measures related to elections from local budgets. Based on the discussions with representatives of the Central Electoral Commission, the Association of Ukrainian Cities (AUC) and the Association of Amalgamated Communities were able to influence the content of the law No.757-IX approved by the Parliament of Ukraine which allocated UAH 1.26 billion of the state budget to sanitary measures, which eased the financial burden of local elections on local budgets.

The findings of the Congress Information report on the local elections in Ukraine were presented and discussed in the framework of the Forum on "Efficient local government as a background of democratic and rule-of-law state" on 9 December 2020. This has contributed to the initiation of further improvements of the national electoral legislation following the local elections 2020.

As a result of the promotion of the open government principles and the effective inclusion of local and regional authorities in the design and implementation of the National Open Government Partnership (OGP) Action Plan, the AUC became a permanent member of Ukraine's Working Group on Open Government. Moreover, three Ukrainian municipalities (Khmelnysky, Ternopil and Vinnytsya) became new members of the OGP Local Programme – a selective global partnership of local governments and civil society organisations – which will positively contribute to the transformation of local governments by strengthening transparency, citizen participation, accountability and public ethics, and streamlining the implementation of e-government tools. In December 2020, the Secretariat of the Cabinet of

Ministers of Ukraine and the Association of Ukrainian Cities (AUC) agreed to establish a Platform for National – Local Dialogue on Open Government in Ukraine, in line with the OGP Local Strategy.

A stronger gender perspective was mainstreamed in all activities in Ukraine and new tools were developed for local and regional authorities and their associations to promote the participation of women in local life and foster gender equality. These include a Guide for women and men in local politics on *Preventing and combatting sexism at the local level in Ukraine* and an e-course on “*Gender Mainstreaming at Local Level in Ukraine*” which was undertaken by more than 100 local councillors and municipal officials since May 2020 who enhanced their knowledge on gender equality and on ways to further promote the empowerment and equal participation of women and men in policymaking at local level in Ukraine. The online course is hosted by the AUC and complements the training offer of the association.

The one-year grant that was awarded to the AUC in January 2020 enabled the development of a new webpage on equal rights and opportunities for women and men, with a compilation of best practices to support the implementation of gender-balanced policies and programmes at local level. The Association also introduced a new internal communication management system, ensuring a more efficient information flow and exchange, including on the analysis of legislation, recommendations to local authorities and communication between staff members of all AUC regional branches and its members.

As a follow-up to youth engagement awareness raising activities on human rights standards and local democracy principles, initiated in 2019, 19 young people from six municipalities in Eastern Ukraine applied their newly acquired knowledge and skills in practice, and have motivated their peers to join them in taking part in local political life and thus in strengthening the community’s social cohesion. Active participation of young people in civic life was further promoted during an online event, held in November 2020, with representatives of more than 20 Ukrainian municipalities who are engaged in creating a nationwide network or partnership of municipalities to combine efforts and experience on youth-related policymaking and develop innovative approaches to youth engagement. A manual for local and regional authorities, civic society organisations, trainers and educators on “Youth empowerment through human rights, democracy and civic participation” was developed as a result of all related project activities to enable young people to have an active role in their local communities. *

At the Conference of the Council for the Development of Communities and Territories in Ukraine held in Kyiv on 25 February 2020, the Secretary General wished the newly established "Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Ukraine" success and encouraged Ukrainian authorities to continue the commitment to an inclusive consultation process with representative associations of local and regional authorities as they are the key partners in ensuring collaboration and consultation between central and local government. This exchange forum brought together the highest political leadership of the country, including Volodymyr ZELENSKIY, the President of Ukraine, Dmytro RAZUMKOV, the President of the Parliament of Ukraine, Andriy YERMAK, the Head of the Office of the President of Ukraine, and Oleksiy CHERNYSHOV, the Ukrainian Minister for the Development of Communities and Territories (Minregion) as well as mayors and local representatives.

G. SOUTH MED PARTNERSHIP

The historic events in the countries of the southern Mediterranean in 2011 paved the way for far-reaching changes in the region, including the start of processes of opening up and democratisation.

In view of the situation and the resulting dynamic, the Council of Europe has conducted a new policy towards its immediate neighbourhood, in particular North Africa, since 2011. The aim of this policy is to enable non-members States of the Council of Europe to benefit from the experience gained in the democratic transition processes in central and Eastern Europe after 1989.

The Congress’ cooperation activities with neighbouring countries are carried out within the framework of the Council of Europe’s neighbourhood policy.

The South-Med Partnership Programme, launched in February 2017, aims to meet the objectives of the local and regional democracy component of the Council of Europe’s neighbourhood policy by supporting ongoing territorial reforms.

The South-Med Partnership is designed as a framework for privileged cooperation with the countries involved. It is politically supervised by two thematic spokespersons.

The Congress wishes to enable its new partners to benefit from its achievements, instruments and experience and to provide a particularly valuable platform for exchanges and encounters both for the countries of the Southern Mediterranean and also for European local and regional authorities. Reinforced dialogue and working relations with local and regional elected representatives from the neighbouring countries will help to promote the Council of Europe's fundamental values, especially regarding local democracy.

Through the South-Med Partnership, local and regional authorities of the countries concerned can benefit from the Congress's expertise and the experience of its members in the following areas:

- *enhancing political dialogue between European elected representatives and their counterparts from the South and increasing decentralised co-operation between local and regional authorities on the two sides of the Mediterranean including:*
- *legislative assistance and expertise in the Congress's areas of responsibility, in particular in drafting and implementing legislation relating to decentralisation and local and regional governance*
- *assisting with the electoral process and, where applicable, observing local and regional elections*
- *capacity building (especially in terms of leadership) for local and regional elected representatives (and candidates) and their officials through the development of specific awareness-raising and training programmes, with a particular focus on the role of women and young local leaders*
- *helping to set up or strengthen associations of local and regional authorities*
- *supporting the development of participatory democracy, with a particular focus on the role of young people, women and civil society.*

Partner for Local Democracy status

The Congress introduced in 2014, a specific status⁴ for the Council of Europe's neighbouring countries. The Partner for Local Democracy status allows the establishment of a special framework for dialogue and regular institutional contacts between local and regional elected representatives in Council of Europe neighbourhood countries and their European counterparts.

The Partner for Local Democracy status is granted at the request of the countries concerned and is designed as a tool for strengthening good governance at local and regional level. Through their participation in the work of the Congress, the delegations from the beneficiary countries help to promote local democracy not only in their own countries but at pan-European level.

*The **Kingdom of Morocco** and the **Republic of Tunisia** were granted the status of Partner for Local Democracy of the Congress on 2 April and 29 October 2019 respectively. Since then, the two delegations participate regularly in the Congress' statutory work (remote meetings of its Statutory Forum and of its three Committees). According to the Congress' rules and procedures, the delegations will be renewed during the Congress' March 2021 Session.*

Morocco

Since September 2020, expert support has been provided to revise the legal framework of competences of the provinces and prefectures, at the request of the Moroccan Association of Presidents of Prefectural and Provincial Councils (AMPCPP), with the organisation of two focus group meetings and the drafting of recommendations for a new legislative proposal, to be submitted to the Directorate General for Territorial Authorities (DGCT) of the Ministry of Interior in March 2021.

The Congress also provides legislative expertise for the revision of the institutional organisation of decentralised governance in Morocco, at the request of DGCT. This activity contributes to the ongoing work of proposing legislative amendments to the Organic Laws related to the advanced regionalisation reform in the country, undertaken by the three associations of Moroccan territorial elected representatives and the DGCT.

The purpose of project activities is to enhance the capacities of elected representatives and administration staff to assume their new competences. The communication capacity of the associations was enhanced with the development of the new websites for AMPCPP and the Association of Moroccan

⁴ [Resolution 376 \(2014\)](#)

Regions (ARM) and the work to upgrade the website of the Moroccan Association of Presidents of Communal Councils (AMPCC), as well as the development of an online platform for organising training activities for associations' member and staff.

On 19 October 2020, an online webinar was organised on the "Promotion of Public Ethics and Prevention of Corruption at Local and Regional Levels in Morocco", with the participation of Congress members and experts, representatives of the National Authority for Integrity, Prevention and the Fight against Corruption, DGCT and the three Moroccan associations (ARM, AMPCC and AMPCCP), as well as Transparency Intentional Morocco and the Open Government Partnership (OGP). The aim of this webinar was to present the work of the Congress in the field of Public Ethics, including the European Code of Conduct and a set of recommendations adopted by the Congress, which were translated into Arabic, published and disseminated to the associations and DGCT.

On 24 November 2020, an online webinar on "Mechanisms for consultation of local and regional authorities by central authorities" was organised jointly with the Congress co-operation project in Tunisia, with the participation of Congress members and experts, representatives of associations of local and regional authorities from European countries, members of the Moroccan and Tunisian delegations to the Congress, Moroccan and Tunisian government officials and members of the three Moroccan associations (ARM, AMPCC and AMPCCP) as well as of the Tunisian association of local elected representatives (FNCT). The aim of this workshop was to present European experiences and mechanisms in organising regular consultations between central governments and territorial authorities and to identify ways of improving the existing systems or supporting their establishment in Morocco and Tunisia.

Co-operation was also pursued with the secretariats of associations in support of the participation of the Moroccan delegation in the work of the Congress in the framework of the Partner for Local Democracy status.

Tunisia

In Tunisia, the focus was placed on strengthening the Secretariat of the National Federation of Tunisian Communities (FNCT) to enable it to provide better services to the members and lobby for local interests, according to the priorities adopted by the political leadership of the Federation. To this end, a grant was awarded to the Federation for the recruitment of two staff members in charge of lobbying/advocacy, communication and relations with the members. Further support was provided with the recruitment of two long-term experts specialists in communication and advocacy respectively to assist in the implementation of the Federation's strategy and priorities.

Political leadership of the association was renewed during the General Assembly held on 26 September 2020 with the participation of 298 municipalities (out of 350), for which the Congress provided expert support in the field of press and communication to ensure visibility of the event and its outcomes: the adoption of the new statutes of the Federation, the election of the governing bodies, including its new President Adnan Bouassida, Mayor of Raoued. The General Assembly was also an opportunity to raise awareness of the Congress work among the elected representatives through an information stand.

The fight against corruption and the promotion of public ethics at local level was identified as another priority for action and was supported through the translation and dissemination of Congress' recommendations on these topics. Co-operation was established to this end with the National Anti-Corruption Authority (INLUCC) and included a webinar presenting Congress' work and an overview of the situation in Tunisia on 16 October 2020, as well as the participation of Xavier CADORET in the annual Congress of the INLUCC on integrity and transparency in the era of digital revolution, on 9 December 2020.

Constructive dialogue was consolidated with the National Authority for Local Finances (HIFL) and led to the contribution by Congress Secretary General to the first edition of the Tunisian local finances magazine, published in February 2021, and ongoing discussions on possible financial support to building capacities of the HIFL and contributing to the revision of the laws on local finances and taxation.

The President of the HIFL was also invited to contribute to a webinar on consultation mechanisms between central and local authorities held on 24 November 2020, with the participation of Congress members and experts, as well as Moroccan and Tunisian representatives. Co-operation was also

pursued with the FNCT secretariat in support of the participation of the Tunisian delegation in the work of the Congress in the framework of the Partner for Local Democracy status.

APPENDICES

Information on the renewal session of the Congress, 23-24 March 2021

40th SESSION

First part-session

Remote meeting

CG(2021)40-01

2 March 2021

MEETING SCHEDULE

40th SESSION		
TUESDAY 23 MARCH 2021		
Plenary sitting 9.30-12.00 [EN/FR/DE/IT/RU]		
Lunch		
Chamber of Local Authorities 14.00-15.00 [EN/FR/DE/IT/RU]	Chamber of Regions 14.00-15.00 [EN/FR/DE/IT/RU]	
Monitoring Committee 15.30-16.30. [EN/FR/DE/IT/RU]	Current Affairs Committee 15.30-16.30 [EN/FR/DE/IT/RU]	Governance Committee 15.30-16.30 [EN/FR/DE/IT/RU]
WEDNESDAY 24 MARCH 2021		
Bureau of the Congress 9.30-10.15 [EN/FR/DE/IT/RU]		
Plenary sitting 10.30-12.00 [EN/FR/DE/IT/RU]		
Lunch		
Plenary sitting 14.00-15.00 [EN/FR/DE/IT/RU]		
Bureau of the Chamber of Local Authorities 15.00-15.45 [EN/FR/DE/IT/RU]		
Bureau of the Chamber of Regions 15.45-16.30 [EN/FR/DE/IT/RU]		

CG(2021)40-OJ-01

2 March 2021

40th Session of the Congress – first part-session

Remote meeting

23-24 March 2021

DRAFT AGENDA

PUBLIC MEETING

Simultaneous interpretation will be provided in the two official languages of the Council of Europe (English and French) and in German, Russian and Italian, except where otherwise indicated.

Information on the provision of additional languages available for sittings (valid on the date shown above) is indicated:

- throughout this agenda;
- and on the timetable of meetings [CG(2021)40-01]

Key:

EN English

FR French

DE German

IT Italian

RU Russian

Tuesday 23 March 2021

9.30-12.00

Plenary sitting [EN/FR/DE/IT/RU]

* *Deadline for tabling amendments: 10.00 Tuesday 16 March*

9.30	Opening of the 40th Session of the Congress by the oldest Congress representative	
9.35	Verification of new members' credentials [CG(2021)40-12] [CG(2021)40-] Presentation by the co-rapporteurs: Harald SONDEREGGER, Austria (R, EPP/CCE), and Barbara TOCE, Italy (L, SOC/G/PD) Debate and vote on the draft resolution [CG(2021)40-02]*	
9.45	Election of the President of the Congress [deadline for candidatures: 9.30 Monday 22 March 2021] Presentation of the candidates (3 minutes each) Vote using the KUDO Platform Results of the election	
10.10	Statement by the newly elected President of the Congress	
10.30	Adoption of the draft agenda of the first part-session [CG(2021)40-OJ-01] Adoption of the draft minutes of the last sitting of the 37th Session (31 October 2019) [CG37(2019)PV03] Adoption of the composition of Congress committees [CG(2021)40-03]	
10.35	Congress presidency 2018-2021: Statement by the outgoing President Anders KNAPE [CG(2021)40-X] Debate	
11.10	Congress priorities for 2021-2026 Presentation by the co-rapporteurs: Gunn Marit HELGESEN, Norway (R, EPP/CCE), and Xavier CADORET, France (L SOC) Debate and vote on the draft resolution [CG(2021)40-05]*	
12.00	Close of the sitting	

Tuesday 23 March 2021

Chamber of Local Authorities 14.00-15.00 [EN/FR/DE/IT/RU]

14.00	Opening of the chamber session by the oldest representative sitting in that chamber	
14.05	Election of the President of the Chamber of Local Authorities [deadline for candidatures: 12.00 Tuesday 23 March 2021] Presentation of the candidate(s) (3 minutes each) Vote using the KUDO Platform Result of the election	
14.20	Statement by the newly-elected President of the Chamber	
14.25	Adoption of the draft agenda of the chamber [CPL(2021)40-OJ]	
14.30	Statement by the outgoing President of the Chamber of Local Authorities: Xavier CADORET Debate	
14.40	Election of the 7 vice-presidents of the chamber [deadline for candidatures: 12.00 Tuesday 23 March 2021] Presentation of the candidate(s) (3 minutes each)	
15.00	Close of the session of the Chamber by the President	
16.30-18.30	Vote for the 7 vice-presidents of the chamber using the electronic voting system ScytI	

Chamber of Regions 14.00-15.00 [EN/FR/DE/IT/RU]

14.00	Opening of the chamber session by the oldest representative, member of the chamber	
14.05	Election of the President of the Chamber of Regions [deadline for candidatures: 12.00 Tuesday 23 March 2021] Presentation of the candidate(s) (3 minutes each) Vote using the KUDO Platform Result of the election	
14.20	Statement by the newly-elected President of the Chamber	
14.25	Adoption of the draft agenda of the chamber [CPR(2021)40-OJ]	
14.30	Statement by the outgoing President of the Chamber of Regions: Gunn Marit HELGESEN Debate	
14.40	Election of the 7 vice-presidents of the chamber [deadline for candidatures: 12.00 Tuesday 23 March 2021] Presentation of the candidate(s) (3 minutes each)	
15.00	Close of sitting by the President of the chamber	
16.30-18.30	Vote for the 7 vice-presidents of the chamber using the electronic voting system ScytI	

Tuesday 23 March 2021

Parallel meetings of the 3 committees

15.30-16.30 [EN/FR/DE/IT/RU]

15.30	Opening of the committee meeting by the oldest representative, member of that committee	
15.35	Election of the chair of the committee [deadline for candidatures: 18.00 on Monday 22 March 2021] Presentation of the candidates Vote using the KUDO Platform Results of the election	
15.50	Election of the 1st vice-chair of the committee [deadline for candidatures: 18.00 on Monday 22 March 2021] Presentation of the candidates Vote using the KUDO Platform Result	
16.10	Election of the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th vice-chairs of the committee [deadline for candidatures: 18.00 on Monday 22 March 2021] Presentation of the candidates	
16.30	Close of the meeting by the chair of the committee	
16.30-18.30	Vote for 4 vice-chairs in the 3 committees using the electronic voting system ScytI	

Wednesday 24 March 2021

Bureau meeting [EN/FR/DE/IT/RU]

9.30-10.15

Bureau of the Congress

Plenary sitting

10.30-12.00 [EN/FR/DE/IT/RU]

* *Deadline for tabling amendments: 10.00 Wednesday 17 March*

10.30	Results of the elections for the posts of vice-presidents of the chambers and vice-chairs of the committees Communication by the President of the Congress	
10.50	Budget of the Congress for 2022-2023 Presentation by the co-rapporteurs: Anna MAGYAR, Hungary (R, EPP/CCE), and Barbara TOCE, Italy (L, SOC/G/PD) Debate and vote on the draft resolution [CG(2021)40-06]*	
11.20	Ensuring the respect of the European Charter on Local Self-Government in major crisis situations Corapporteurs: Leendert VERBEEK, Netherlands (R, SOC/G/PD and Robert-Csongor GRÜMAN, Romania (R, EPP/CCE) Presentation by Leendert VERBEEK Debate and vote on the draft recommendation [CG(2021)40-07]*	
12.00	Suspension of the sitting	

Wednesday 24 March 2021

Plenary sitting

14.00-15.00 [EN/FR/DE/IT/RU]

14.00	Adoption of the draft minutes of the sitting of the Congress and the sessions of the chambers 23 March 2021 [CG(2021)40-PV01] [CPL(2021)40-PV01] and [CPR(2021)40-PV01]	
14.05	German Presidency of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe (18 November 2020 – 21 May 2021) Statement by Michael ROTH, Minister of State for Europe , on behalf of the German Presidency of the Committee of Ministers Oral reply to written questions [CG(2021)40-08] <i>Deadline for tabling written questions: 15.00 Wednesday 17 March 2021</i>	
15.00	Close of the first part-session of the 40th Session by the President of the Congress	

Meetings of the chamber bureaux

15.00-15.45	Bureau of the Chamber of Local Authorities [EN/FR/DE/IT/RU]
15.45-16.30	Bureau of the Chamber of Regions [EN/FR/DE/IT/RU]

As part of its monitoring of local and regional democracy in Europe, the Congress maintains a regular dialogue with member states of the Council of Europe. The Committee of Ministers, which includes the 47 Foreign Ministers of these states, the Conference of Ministers responsible for local and regional authorities, as well as its Steering Committees are partners in this regard.

Several times a year, the President and the Secretary General of the Congress provide the representatives of the 47 member states in the Committee of Ministers with a record of its activities.



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The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 47 member states, including all members of the European Union. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities is an institution of the Council of Europe, responsible for strengthening local and regional democracy in its 47 member states. Composed of two chambers – the Chamber of Local Authorities and the Chamber of Regions – and three committees, it brings together 648 elected officials representing more than 150 000 local and regional authorities.

The Congress

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