

# ACTIVITY REPORT

September 2022 - March 2023



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

1462th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies  
5 April 2023

# **Activity Report of the Congress**

(September 2022 – March 2023)

**Communication by the Secretary General of the Congress  
at the 1462nd meeting of the Ministers' Deputies**

**5 April 2023**

Layout: Congress of Local and Regional Authorities  
Print: Council of Europe  
Edition: May 2023

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Communication by Mathieu Mori, Secretary General of the Congress .....	4
<b>I. POLITICAL AGENDA.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>II. ACTIVITIES OF THE CONGRESS BODIES.....</b>	<b>11</b>
A. THE BUREAU.....	11
B. THE SESSION.....	12
C. THE CHAMBERS .....	14
D. THE COMMITTEES.....	15
<b>III. MONITORING OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL DEMOCRACY.....</b>	<b>16</b>
A. MONITORING ACTIVITIES .....	16
B. OBSERVATION OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL ELECTIONS .....	18
<b>IV. THEMATIC ACTIVITIES .....</b>	<b>20</b>
A. MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES.....	21
B. YOUTH .....	22
C. ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE .....	23
D. FAKE NEWS AND HATE SPEECH.....	23
E. HUMAN RIGHTS .....	24
F. GENDER EQUALITY .....	24
G. DIGITALISATION AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE.....	25
H. CULTURAL HERITAGE.....	26
I. EUROPEAN LOCAL DEMOCRACY WEEK (ELDW).....	26
J. WORLD FORUM FOR DEMOCRACY.....	27
K. UNITED NATIONS AGENDA 2030 – IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGs).....	27
<b>V. INSTITUTIONAL CO-OPERATION WITHIN THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE .....</b>	<b>28</b>
A. THE COMMITTEE OF MINISTERS.....	28
C. EUROPEAN COMMISSION FOR DEMOCRACY THROUGH LAW (VENICE COMMISSION).....	29
D. THE NORTH SOUTH CENTRE.....	29
E. COMMITTEE ON ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE.....	29
<b>VI. EXTERNAL CO-OPERATION AND PARTNERSHIPS .....</b>	<b>29</b>
A. THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION.....	29
B. EUROPEAN ASSOCIATIONS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES .....	31
C. NATIONAL ASSOCIATIONS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES .....	31
<b>VII. CO-OPERATION PROGRAMMES AND ACTION PLANS .....</b>	<b>32</b>
A. BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA.....	33
B. GEORGIA .....	33
C. THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA.....	34
D. UKRAINE.....	34
E. MULTILATERAL PROJECT ON MIGRATION.....	35
F. SOUTH MED PARTNERSHIP .....	35
<b>APPENDICES.....</b>	<b>37</b>

## Communication by Mathieu Mori, 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 27 September 2022. It covers the key issues of the Congress' work since then.

The text below is based on the oral presentation by Mathieu Mori, Secretary General of the Congress, to the Ministers' Deputies on 5 April 2023.

[Previous Activity reports](#)

# I. POLITICAL AGENDA

## HIGHLIGHTS

### **Annual meeting of the Congress Group of Independent Experts on the European Charter of Local Self-Government (GIE), Strasbourg, 15-16 September 2022**

The Group of Independent Experts discussed the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in the presence of the Chair of the Monitoring Committee, Gudrun MOSLER-TÖRNSTRÖM (Austria, SOC/G/PD), as well as the Congress' activities in the observation of local and regional elections. In the context of the war in Ukraine, an analysis of the conformity of martial law in times of armed conflict with the provisions of the Charter was presented to the GIE members. Other topics included the Congress report on human rights and the environment, which was submitted for adoption at the 43<sup>rd</sup> Congress session, as well as digital transformation in European local governments, deliberative democracy with the experience of the Dublin Citizens' Assembly, the GIE study on the direct election of mayors, the fight against hate speech and fake news, and the draft revision of the European Urban Charter II - Manifesto for a new urbanity in the context of major crises. On the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the entry into force of the Additional Protocol to the Charter on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority, an overview of the application of the Protocol in member States was presented to the members of the GIE.

### **Meeting with the President of the Committee of Ministers, Irish Minister of State for European Affairs, 12 October 2022**

The Congress President met with the President of the Committee of Ministers, the Irish Minister of State for European affairs, Thomas BYRNE. He underlined the unique role of the Congress in the institutional architecture of the Council of Europe and the paramount importance of the local and regional authorities' grass-root contribution to addressing the challenges faced by its member States. The President of the Committee of Ministers welcomed the work of the Congress, particularly in the areas of promotion of human rights, participatory democracy, youth engagement, and inclusion. The two Presidents also discussed the future of the Council of Europe and the 4<sup>th</sup> Summit of Heads of States and Government of the Council of Europe and the contribution of the Congress.

### **International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, 17 October 2022**

In his statement at the CINGO event, which focused on the issue of the non-take-up of rights, the President of the Chamber of Local Authorities, Bernd VÖHRINGER (Germany, EPP/CCE) stressed that local and regional authorities' proximity to citizens makes them uniquely well-placed to understand the barriers to accessing rights and services. He highlighted the efforts of the Congress to bolster the position of social rights within its work, in particular through the 2<sup>nd</sup> volume of its human rights handbook which focuses on these rights and provides concrete examples of best practices of service delivery from across the continent. He also called for more involvement, consultation, and integration of local and regional authorities in the implementation of national policies on the non-take-up of rights.

### **4<sup>th</sup> Parliamentary Forum of Regions, Rabat, 19 October 2022**

At the opening of the Forum, the President underlined that the Congress was providing its support to strengthening local and regional self-government and promoting citizen participation at local and regional level in the Kingdom of Morocco, which was the first country to be granted the status of Partner for Local Democracy with the Congress. He also reaffirmed the Congress' commitment to sharing experiences and lessons learned from the implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in European countries with Moroccan partners.

### **Election of the new Secretary General of the Congress, 25 October 2022**

Mathieu Mori (France) was elected as Secretary General of the Congress for a five-year term of office, during the 43<sup>rd</sup> Session in Strasbourg.

## **Statement on the World's Cities Day, 31 October 2022**

Bernd VÖHRINGER stressed that the World Cities' Day had never resonated so prominently in Europe, in view of the crises European societies are going through, including accelerated climate change, pandemics and the war. He had a special thought for Ukrainian cities, which are facing unimaginable suffering and destruction. He also highlighted that the 2022 theme of the Day, "Act local to go global", highlights the importance of local and regional authorities in providing responses at the grassroots.

## **International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, 24 November 2022**

Congress spokesperson on Gender Equality, Eirini DOUROU (Greece, SOC/G/PD), stated that inclusive societies start with inclusivity at decision-making levels. However, women still remain under-represented in politics. The Congress is therefore convinced that ending violence against women is key for the fulfilment of women rights and for promoting women's involvement in local and regional public life. She mentioned the instruments developed by the Congress to help local and regional authorities combat sexist violence and facilitate women's participation in public life. She also recalled that the Congress was the first body of the Council of Europe to put in place quotas for balanced representation amongst its members. She underlined that it was now needed to make sure local and regional authorities take action, for example by setting up complaint mechanisms within their administrations, developing confidential counselling mechanisms and introducing codes of conduct prohibiting sexist speech or harassment in local and regional councils.

## **2022 Mayors Summit Against Antisemitism, Athens, 1 December 2022**

The President stressed that there is a particularly special role for local authorities in creating inclusive societies, as Europe's cities become increasingly diverse places. Mayors and local authorities can create the sense of security by tackling discrimination, antisemitism and xenophobia and creating spaces for respectful and constructive dialogue. He recalled that citizen's trust is essential in strengthening democracy and can only be achieved when all groups feel free and safe to participate in public life. He presented the tools and work developed by the Congress, including a toolkit to promote intercultural and interreligious dialogue at the local level, a report exploring the role for local authorities in the protection of Jewish cemeteries as well as human rights handbooks. The President highlighted the responsibility of mayors, city councillors, and regional representatives in the achievement of SDG11 (*Sustainable cities and communities*) which calls for inclusive and sustainable urbanization, with a focus on citizen's participation.

## **Meeting of the Congress President with the Greek authorities, December 2022**

The President, accompanied by Congress Vice-President Konstantinos KOUKAS (Greece, EPP/CCE), met with the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Mayor of Athens, as well as with the Vice-President of the Association of Greek Regions and governor of the Attica region and the President of the Central Union of Greek Municipalities. They discussed the importance of the local and regional dimension of the work of the Council of Europe in the field of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law in order to obtain tangible results closer to the citizens. The President called on the Greek authorities to extend the implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government and, in particular, to ratify its Additional Protocol on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority.

## **International Anti-Corruption Day, 9 December 2022**

Congress Spokesperson for Ethics and Prevention of Corruption, Vladimir PREBILIČ (Slovenia, SOC/G/PD), stated that the active engagement of sub-national authorities is crucial for the success of national anti-corruption policies. Integrity and anti-corruption measures support local democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, contributing to a better quality of life and trust in public institutions. He also underlined that municipalities and regional authorities are responsible for a variety of public services and need to commit to sustained efforts to streamline the culture of integrity, with adequate risk management, transparency and oversight, appropriate framework for conflicts of interests and effective enforcement mechanisms. He recalled that the monitoring of the European Charter of Local Self-Government contributes to enhance integrity and lower corruption. The Congress has adopted a series of thematic reports in this field, and it has enhanced integrity standards for its own members and consistently supports integrity reforms through its cooperation activities.

## **Human Rights Day, 9 December 2022**

Congress spokesperson on Human Rights, Harald BERGMANN (Netherlands, ILDG), recalled the unprecedented challenges that citizens were currently facing, namely the ongoing consequences of the pandemic, the fallout of climate change, havoc caused by war in Europe, and the cost-of-living and energy crises. He underlined that it was local leaders' duty to provide the support citizens are asking, due to their proximity to citizens, and that they should lead by example and place citizens and their rights at the heart of their policies and their implementation.

He also reiterated the importance of adopting a human-rights based approach to local and regional governance, saying that citizens need equal access to rights, a fair distribution of public services and sustainable environmental solutions at the level closest to them.

He also stressed that the Congress had invested an important amount of effort into human rights protection and making them a tangible reality, closer to citizens, namely through its series of Human Rights Handbooks for local and regional authorities.

## **Statement on Istanbul Mayor's sentence, 16 December 2022**

Following the prison sentence and political ban imposed on the Mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem İMAMOĞLU, by a Turkish court on 14 December, the President expressed his extreme concern about this decision, which aims to remove the mayor of the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality from political office. He highlighted that this decision not only violated the rights of the mayor himself, but that it also disregarded the suffrage expressed by the voters of Istanbul. He referred to it as being a direct attack on local democracy. He recalled the importance of freedom of expression as a fundamental right in any democracy, never more important than during election periods. He concluded by stating that this decision was very worrying in terms of the state of democracy in Türkiye.

## **International Migrants Day, 18 December 2022**

The Chair of the Current Affairs Committee Thomas ANDERSSON (Sweden, ILDG) stressed that the politicisation and instrumentalisation of migrants' journeys and lives by elected officials at all levels of governance must be prevented, as it only serves to exacerbate divisions and spread hatred. He underlined that local and regional authorities had a specific responsibility on this and mentioned the work of the Congress to support them in these efforts, namely the report on the situation of women and children refugees and the ways in which towns and regions can help overcome the risks they face. He emphasised that local and regional authorities had to be involved in the development of national migration strategies, from reception to integration, as way to build coherent, safe, and inclusive societies from the bottom up.

## **Ratification of the Additional Protocol to the Charter by Portugal, 21 September 2022**

Portugal has become the latest member state to ratify the Additional Protocol to the European Charter of Local Self-Government on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority, with the ratification taking effect on 1 January 2023. The ratification has taken place following Congress Recommendation 445 (2020), which recommended formalising this commitment. Portugal is the 22<sup>nd</sup> member state of the Council of Europe to ratify the additional protocol. The Congress welcomes this step and encourages all remaining member states to sign and ratify the additional protocol.

## **Exchange between the new Secretary General of the Congress and the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, 18 January 2023**

The Congress Secretary General reaffirmed his commitment to defend the values of the Organisation at local and regional levels and recalled the key points of his programme: supporting the reconstruction of Ukraine, strengthening communities and the means of action of elected representatives on the three pillars of the Council of Europe, based on the European Charter of Local Self-Government, promoting the role of the Congress in the architecture of the Council of Europe and the participation of youth. He also highlighted that the Congress' contribution to the 4<sup>th</sup> Council of Europe Summit offers a unique opportunity to highlight the essential role of the territorial dimension in order to make democracy and human rights a tangible reality as close as possible to the citizens.

### **Meeting of the Congress President with the Parliamentary Assembly President, 24 January 2023**

The two Presidents discussed the prospects for the reconstruction of Ukraine and the importance of using the expertise of the Council of Europe field offices, as well as the preparation of the 4<sup>th</sup> Summit of the Council of Europe Heads of State and Government. The two Presidents stressed the importance of coordination and political co-operation between the two assemblies, which play a complementary role in the institutional architecture of the Council of Europe. The two political assemblies will be present in Reykjavik to represent the parliamentary and territorial dimension of the institution.

### **Meeting between the President and Secretary General and the Human Rights Commissioner of Ukraine, 31 January 2023**

The discussions focused particularly on the prospects for cooperation between the Commissioner's decentralised services and the Congress in the context of its activities in the field of local democracy and human rights. A plan to work on human rights at the local level in times of war or major crises at the local level was also discussed.

### **Statement on the earthquakes in Türkiye, 7 February 2023**

The President expressed solidarity with the Turkish authorities following the devastating earthquakes that struck the country on 6 February 2023, leaving thousands of people dead and many more thousands injured, causing massive destruction of infrastructures. He expressed his deepest condolences to the victims and their families as well as his full solidarity and support to the authorities in the affected towns and regions and to the relief workers who tried to save as many lives as they could. He also called on local and regional authorities in other Council of Europe member States to provide possible assistance to their Turkish counterparts in this challenging moment, to help them to rebuild their communities hit by the disaster.

Congress Vice-President and Mayor of Izmir Metropolitan Municipality Tunc SOYER (Türkiye, SOC/V/DP) called on European local and regional authorities to support the emergency aid campaigns launched following these earthquakes.

### **Exchange of views with the Deputies, 8 February 2023**

The President expressed his sincere condolences and the support of the Congress to the Ambassador of Türkiye, the authorities and to the people of her country, following the series of earthquakes.

The President assured that the Committee of Ministers could continue to count on the support of the Congress to implement the Council of Europe's vision and ensure democracy, the protection of human rights and the rule of law rooted in the territories of all the member States. The 4<sup>th</sup> Summit will be an opportunity to confirm the Congress as the second political assembly of the Council of Europe, reflecting the reality of decentralised governance in most member States. The President stressed that since the war in Ukraine started, the Congress had stepped up its work with local authorities and associations of local and regional elected representatives in the country to help them, particularly in terms of humanitarian and technical assistance and exchanges of experience with their European peers, including through the online Cities4Cities Platform. Topics such as the resilience of cities and regions as well as the localisation of the Sustainable Development Goals were also discussed with the delegates.

### **Participation of the President to the meeting of the Standing Committee of the PACE, The Hague, 2-3 March 2023**

Congress President stated that today's threats and challenges affect societies without exception and all levels of governance. He thus advocated strengthening the role of the two assemblies of the Council of Europe, the Parliamentary Assembly and the Congress. He said the Congress wanted to strengthen its activities with regard to the execution of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights concerning local and regional authorities, or with regard to the promotion of human rights institutions at local level. He said he hoped that the Reykjavik Summit would pave the way for a strengthened and renewed multilateralism, that is inclusive and sensitive to the voice of local governments, who demonstrate every day their indispensable role to citizens.

### **International Women's Day, 8 March 2023**

Eirini DOUROU called for recognition of women's courage in crisis situations, highlighting that, in the midst of the myriad of crises Europe's communities are facing, on top of being disproportionately affected by them, they proved to be important actors of change, driving forces for recovery and catalysts for resilience in critical situations. Women are regularly showing their outstanding resilience in the face of adversity and have proved to be adaptive and innovative when access to immediate and vital needs is lacking. Following the recent earthquakes in Türkiye and Syria, female organisations have deployed enormous efforts to support the victims remaining in destroyed cities, to respond to their basic needs and health conditions. Congress Spokesperson also mentioned the "undeclared war" on women in Europe during the post-pandemic period, as expressed by the rising number of femicides. She underlined that it is the responsibility of local leaders, mayors and councillors to ensure that recovery and resilience-building policies are developed in the most gender-sensitive and inclusive manner, based on female potential and knowledge.

### **Statement on the dissolution of local councils in Tunisia, 13 March 2023**

The President expressed grave concern about the decision of the President of the Republic of Tunisia to dissolve elected local councils, saying it represented a setback for local democracy in the country. He underlined that local councils, formed following the local elections in Tunisia in May 2018, which were observed by the Congress, represented the result of the implementation of the new Tunisian Constitution of 2014 and of the Code of Local Authorities developed in co-operation with the Congress. Through their democratic legitimacy, these councils met the expectations of citizens. The decision of the Tunisian President thus means a return to the situation that existed before May 2018. The Congress President added that the existence of elected local councils having allowed the Congress to grant the status of Partner for Local Democracy to Tunisia and the participation of a delegation of Tunisian elected representatives in the work of the Congress, the dissolution of elected councils calls into question this status. He expressed his strong hope that the new law on local elections would allow for the holding of new local elections in the country as soon as possible.

### **Meeting with the Mayor of Istanbul, Istanbul, 15 March 2023**

Congress Vice-President Bernd VÖHRINGER and Secretary General met with Mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem İMAMOĞLU, on 15 March 2023. The meeting was an opportunity to re-affirm the Congress solidarity with the mayor, following the prison sentence and political ban imposed on him by a Turkish court, as well as to exchange on the situation at local level following the earthquakes which have hit the country. The Mayor of Istanbul thanked the Congress for its continuing support and its decisive role in defending the ever-so-fragile local democracy. He expressed confidence that justice will prevail.

## **WAR OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION AGAINST UKRAINE**

### **Statement of the Bureau on the so-called Russian referendums organised in the occupied territories of Ukraine, 23 September 2022**

At its meeting in Lelystad in September 2022, the Bureau endorsed the President's statements of 31 August and 5 September 2022 on the so-called referendums organised in the occupied territories of Ukraine and reiterated that these constitute an abuse of this democratic instrument and a further attempt to destroy democracy and the rule of law. It also condemned the pressure exerted on the citizens of the occupied territories as well as the continuing abduction of local elected representatives, identifying those as clear attempts to intimidate the civilian population through coercion and suppress their resistance in the occupied territories.

### **Statement of the President on the illegal annexation by the Russian Federation of Ukrainian territories, 30 September 2022**

The President condemned the process of illegal annexation of Ukrainian territories that has been launched by the Russian Federation in flagrant violation of international law which Russia continues to disregard. He said that President's Putin decision to illegally annex the occupied territories in the Ukrainian regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia dangerously escalated the war of aggression against Ukraine and gravely imperilled the legal order which has existed in Europe since 1945, based on the respect of international law and its principles of territorial integrity and political independence of States. He reiterated the commitment of the Congress to the sovereignty,

independence and territorial integrity of Ukraine, within its internationally recognised borders, and said that it would continue to extend its unwavering support to Ukraine and its people in their struggle against the aggressor.

### **Statement of the President on Russia's airstrikes on Ukrainian cities and the deliberate targeting of civilians, 11 October 2022**

The President unequivocally condemned Russia's airstrikes on Kyiv, Zaporizhzhia and other multiple Ukrainian cities all across the country that have reportedly targeted specifically civilians, residential areas and civilian infrastructure. He said that this act of aggression was a further step of unacceptable escalation of violence in Russia's unprovoked and senseless war against Ukraine. He deplored the loss of lives, including children, and the high number of injured. He emphasized that the Congress would not waver in its solidarity and firm support to the Ukrainian people and cities during these critical moments. He also joined other Council of Europe leaders in calling upon the Russian Federation to cease the deadly attacks immediately and unconditionally and stop the deliberate targeting of the civilians and the indiscriminate shelling of civilian areas in breach of international humanitarian and human rights law. He concluded saying that those responsible for the attacks must be held accountable.

### **Statements of the Mayor of Kyiv and of the Ukrainian Minister for Community and Territorial Development at the 43<sup>rd</sup> Congress Session, 25 October 2022**

A debate on the Russian Federation's war on Ukraine was held during the 43<sup>rd</sup> Congress Session, during which Congress members reiterated their support for Ukraine and their solidarity with its people. The Ukrainian Minister for Communities and Territories Development and the Mayor of Kyiv addressed Congress members on this occasion, remotely (see II. ACTIVITIES OF ITS BODIES).

### **Statement of the President at the World for Ukraine Summit, Rzeszow, 8 December 2022**

The President praised the key role of local and regional authorities in Ukraine's survival and resilience and reaffirmed the Congress' unwavering commitment to the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine. He shared concrete examples of how Congress has been supporting its Ukrainian partners at local level since March 2022, including the launch of Cities4Cities, a platform aimed at matching the needs of Ukrainian cities and regions with the supply capacity and knowledge of other European cities and regions, which today counts over 200 registered local authorities. He highlighted the Congress' early support through coordination meetings with six major European associations of local and regional authorities – all of which have now joined the European Alliance of cities and regions for the reconstruction of Ukraine, which was launched by the European Committee of the Regions, and to which these meetings can be considered a precursor. Congress President finally presented the ongoing co-operation project with Ukraine, which provides direct support to the Association of Ukrainian Cities in co-ordinating humanitarian aid and efforts aimed directly at upholding democratic values and promoting open government principles at local level.

### **Council of Europe joint statement on the one-year anniversary of the Russian Federation's war against Ukraine, 23 February 2023**

As the war of aggression against Ukraine enters its second year, the Icelandic Minister for Foreign Affairs and President of the Committee of Ministers, the President of the Parliamentary Assembly, the Secretary General, the Commissioner for Human Rights and the Congress President condemned in the strongest possible terms Russia's persisting aggression and reiterated their unwavering support for Ukraine and its independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity within internationally recognised borders. They condemned the Russian Federation's decision to escalate the hostilities through the mobilisation and deployment of additional forces, and the illegal annexation of the occupied territories in Ukraine. They urged the Russian Federation to immediately halt its aggression and withdraw its occupation forces from the territory of Ukraine. They also reiterated the imperative of ensuring accountability for all crimes, including the crime of aggression. They deplored the reported unlawful forcible deportations and transfers of Ukrainian citizens, including children, to Russia and within Ukraine's temporarily occupied territories by Russia.

### **Declaration of the Bureau on the one-year anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, 23 February 2023**

The Bureau of the Congress joined the international community's call for Russia to end its war against Ukraine and withdraw its troops from the territory of Ukraine immediately, fully, and unconditionally. It condemned the horrific war crimes and acts of possible genocide that have been committed by Russian forces. The Bureau highlighted the critical importance of seeking justice for victims and holding Russia

accountable for its brutal war of aggression and reiterated its support for Ukraine in its accession process to the European Union. The Bureau recalled that it stood by the Ukrainian people and believed in a common, democratic future based on respect for international law and a just peace.

### **President meets Ukrainian refugees in Romania, 24 February 2023**

In his capacity as King's Commissioner for an aid programme for Ukraine implemented by his region and the Maramures Region, the President met with Ukrainian refugees in the this Romanian on the border with Ukraine. He also visited a logistic centre supporting humanitarian aid to refugees and to Ukraine. The President praised the efforts of Romanian local authorities and NGOs to host and provide assistance to the refugees as well as the solidarity and support to Ukraine shown by other cities and regions across Europe.

### **Meeting of the European Committee of the Regions' Working Group on Ukraine, 24 February 2023**

Vice-President Gunn Marit HELGESEN (Norway, EPP/CCE) stressed that the Congress supported local authorities in Ukraine in strengthening transparency and good governance even in times of war. She praised Ukrainian local authorities which have shown that, against the background of the terrible consequences of the war, transparency, accountability and inclusive governance are high on the agenda of Ukrainian local and regional leaders. Accompanied by the Congress Secretary General, she had the opportunity to exchange with a broad range of European institutions on further enhancing the co-operation efforts to support cities and regions in Ukraine. On the same day, she addressed a public rally of Ukrainian and Polish mayors and civil society. She reaffirmed that the Congress stands by the Ukrainian people at this historically decisive time for Ukraine and the world.

## **II. ACTIVITIES OF THE CONGRESS BODIES**

### **A. THE BUREAU**

#### **Lelystad, 23 September 2022**

The Bureau continued its discussion on the Russian Federation's war against Ukraine, endorsed the President's statements of 31 August and 5 September 2022 on this issue and published a new statement reaffirming its commitment to independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Ukraine. It described the so-called referendums held in Ukraine as a denial of rule of law, human rights and democracy, and called upon the Congress members to make full use of the Cities4Cities platform to help Ukrainian cities. In view of the 4<sup>th</sup> Summit of Heads of State and Government, the Bureau approved the contribution of the Congress to the High-Level Reflection Group on the future of the Council of Europe and agreed to continue the discussions during the upcoming Congress session. The Bureau also took note of the situation of local and regional democracy in Türkiye, where opposition politicians including Congress former members, are in long-term detention. The Bureau considered the cantonal and local elections taking place respectively in Bosnia and Herzegovina on 2 October 2022 and in Slovenia on 20 November 2022 and the Congress delegation which would participate in the observation of these elections.

#### **Strasbourg, 5 December 2022**

The Bureau discussed, among other things, the preparation of the 4th Summit of Heads of State and Government. It approved the agenda of the 44th Session of the Congress and, in view of the Summit, Bernd VÖHRINGER, President of the Chamber of Local Authorities, and Harald SONDEREGGER (Austria, EPP/CCE), President of the Chamber of Regions, were instructed to prepare a report on the future of the Council of Europe and the Congress therein. The Bureau members held an exchange of views with the Permanent Representative of North Macedonia to the Council, Chair of the Committee of Ministers' Rapporteur Group on Democracy (GR-DEM). In particular, the GR-DEM President stressed the importance of the Congress' contribution to the 4th Summit in bringing the voice of local and regional authorities to the organisation's triptych: human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. Furthermore, the Bureau reiterated its concern regarding the Russian Federation's war against Ukraine and reaffirmed its support for Ukrainian local and regional authorities, notably through the Cities4Cities platform and the Alliance for the reconstruction of Ukraine.

## Strasbourg, 10 February 2023

The Bureau expressed its most sincere condolences to the families of the victims of the earthquakes which struck Türkiye and Syria and observed a minute of silence in their memory. The Bureau called for the urgent opening of more humanitarian corridors on the border between northern Syria and Türkiye. It approved the preliminary draft recommendation on the future of the Council of Europe which details the Congress' contribution to the 4th Summit. The Bureau also decided to present a declaration to mark the anniversary of the beginning of the war of the Russian Federation against Ukraine and approved the invitation to observe local elections in Albania on 14 May 2023. Furthermore, the Bureau expressed its deep concern regarding the prison sentence imposed on the Mayor of the Metropolitan Municipality of Istanbul, and recalled the situation of Nurhayat ALTUN and Leyla GÜVEN, former members of the Turkish delegation to the Congress.

## Bureau declaration on the one-year anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, 21 February 2023

The Bureau adopted a declaration to mark the anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. This declaration was presented during the Congress session in March for adoption (see I. POLITICAL AGENDA).

## B. THE SESSION

The Congress held its 43<sup>rd</sup> Session from 25 to 27 October 2022 in Strasbourg.

A debate on the Russian Federation's war against Ukraine took place, with the online participation of the Mayor of Kyiv, Vitali KLITSCHKO, and the Ukrainian Minister for Community and Territorial Development, Oleksiy CHERNYSHOV. The debate followed the Congress' statements deploring the loss of life and destruction caused by Russian aggression and calling on the Russian Federation to immediately and unconditionally stop its war in Ukraine.

A debate on partial local elections held in Albania on 6 March 2022 as well as a debate on the revision of the European Urban Charter II (2008) took place in the Chamber of Local Authorities (see C. THE CHAMBERS).

Two thematic debates – one on regional identities and one on regional finances in response to crises – took place in the Chamber of Regions; and the respective reports were adopted (see C. THE CHAMBERS).

The Congress also adopted four thematic reports during its plenary sessions among which two were related to prospects and challenges for local and regional governance.

The report on “**Smart cities and regions – prospects for a human rights-based governance approach,**” prepared by Anthony BUCHANAN (United Kingdom, NPA) and Jan MARKINK (Netherlands, ILDG), includes a recommendation of the Congress to deploy technologies within the framework of proactive policies to optimise the administration and management of public affairs by developing inclusive initiatives for sustainable and human-centred cities and regions.

The report on “**hate speech and fake news: the impact on working conditions of local and regional elected representatives**” prepared by co-rapporteurs Wilma DELISSEN VAN TONGERLO (Netherlands, ILDG) and Kristoffer TAMSONS (Sweden, EPP/CCE) highlights the toxic impact of these phenomena, online and offline, on the working conditions of local and regional elected representatives and on democracy. Furthermore, the report helps with identifying tools and strategies to tackle hate speech and fake news.

The report on “**the reception of women and child refugees in Europe's cities and regions**” presented by the co-rapporteurs Annika VAIKLA (Estonia, ILDG) and Bernd VÖHRINGER, underlines the limits of mass reception facilities, which are often unsuitable, and proposes good practices for local authorities regarding housing, healthcare and education, with a view to ensuring safe reception and respect for the human rights of women and children fleeing their countries. To ensure the long-term protection of women and child refugees and asylum seekers, the Congress encourages local and regional authorities to co-operate with the other levels of governance and civil society organisations and to develop gender-sensitive and child-friendly reception policies.

The report on “**a fundamental right to the environment: a matter for local and regional authorities**”, prepared by co-rapporteurs Belinda GOTTARDI (Italy, SOC/G/PD) and Levan ZHORZHOLIANI (Georgia, NR) calls for a green reading of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, and for consideration to be given to drafting an additional protocol to ensure proper recognition for local and regional authorities’ role in the environmental field. This entails empowering local and regional authorities to take a more active role in fighting climate change. The report also calls for increased citizen participation regarding environmental issues, for greater intermunicipal and inter-regional co-operation and for setting up more environmental protection networks and associations.

During this session, the Congress also adopted a resolution on the third volume of the Human Rights Handbook for Local and Regional Authorities on environment and sustainable development (See IV. THEMATIC ACTIVITIES)

Lastly, a debate on the co-operation programmes of the Congress allowed members to hold a dialogue with representatives of associations of local authorities or governments from Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, and, for neighbouring states, Morocco and Tunisia, who were able to express their expectations for the future and testify on the contributions of these programmes.

Also, on the agenda of the session were reports on the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in Denmark, Sweden, Czech Republic, and Belgium (see III. MONITORING OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL DEMOCRACY).

The Congress members considered reports on the observation of partial local elections in Belgrade and several other municipalities in Serbia and in Albania, as well as a report on the observation of municipal elections in the Netherlands (see III. MONITORING OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL DEMOCRACY).

In addition, as at every session since the launch of the Congress’ “Rejuvenating Politics” initiative in 2014, youth delegates participated in the session. The 2022 generation of young delegates presented 21 projects carried out in the field at the end of their mandate. All the projects aimed at popularising the work of the Congress and inspiring future political, educational or communication vocations in the field of human rights and participatory democracy. Marc COOLS (Belgium, ILDG) urged his colleagues to seriously consider integrating young people into the official bodies of their municipalities on the same principle as at the Congress.

Among the invited personalities were Peter BURKE, Minister of State for Planning and Local Government, on behalf of the Irish Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers, Caroline CONROY, Lord Mayor of Dublin, David SLAMA, Acting Deputy Minister of the Interior Public Administration and eGovernment of the Czech Republic, as well as, online, Vitali KLITSCHKO, Mayor of Kyiv, and Oleksiy CHERNYSHOV, Minister for Community and Territorial Development of Ukraine.

The **Minister of State for Planning and Local Government**, on behalf of the Irish Presidency of the Committee of Ministers, underlined that the war in Ukraine was an international crisis that had strong local repercussions. He praised the “key role of the Congress in helping the cities and regions of Ukraine suffering the hardships of war”. He reminded Congress members that the work of the Congress had also been a key element of the Irish Presidency’s priorities which have focused on the promotion of human rights, participatory democracy, youth engagement and inclusion.

The **Lord Mayor of Dublin** said that the city of Dublin had entered into a formal Twinning arrangement with the City of Kyiv, which demonstrated its undivided solidarity with the elected government and people of Ukraine. She underlined that her city like other European local and regional authorities, had been working with the national government and other agencies to provide assistance to the people of Ukraine who fled the country. She stressed that the current challenges – from the Russian war against Ukraine and its consequences to the long-term crises that are climate change and loss of biodiversity, as well as demographic declines and increases, migration challenges, housing, among others, needed to be tackled at the local/regional level and could not be left to resolve to national governments or international bodies. She concluded that, as local representatives are the closest to the citizens, they must do their utmost to listen, understand, and work with others for a more tolerant and inclusive public sphere and society.

The **Acting Deputy Minister of the Interior Public Administration and eGovernment of the Czech Republic** presented the progress as far as implementing the European Charter of Local Self-Government in his country is concerned. He stated that the Ministry of Interior was working in cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to extend the commitments of Czech Republic to the Charter, as the country did not accept six provisions when ratifying the Charter in 1999. He underlined that the overall goal was to bring public administration closer to citizens. He also mentioned that Czech authorities made sure that associations representing regions and municipalities were involved in all activities relating to the financing of public administration. He concluded that the development and modernization of public administration was a never-ending process and ensured that he would do his best to make sure that the most recent Congress recommendations, following the third monitoring visit in 2022, are implemented.

The **Mayor of Kyiv** reminded Congress members of the high number of civilians that had been killed and of refugees that had fled the country since the beginning of the war, highlighting that the war in Ukraine did not follow any rules of international law. He underlined that Russian missiles are hitting Ukrainian cities without any military objective and targeting Ukrainian power plants and essential infrastructure. He also recalled that more than 50 local government representatives had been kidnapped since the beginning of the war, calling on the Congress to continue to support Ukrainian local governments. As President of the Association of Ukrainian Cities, he spoke of future reconstruction, saying that Ukraine was ready to work with the Council of Europe and the Congress in the framework of a "Marshall Plan".

The **Minister for Community and Territorial Development of Ukraine** underlined that Ukrainian administration continued to function despite the bombings and the imposition of martial law, outlining Ukraine's needs for the emergency and the medium - and long-term recovery plan. He added that Ukrainians had their eyes on this prospect, bearing in mind the reforms needed within the framework of a state governed by the rule of law, even if for the moment the main concern is to survive.

## C. THE CHAMBERS

### The Chamber of Local Authorities

The Chamber held a debate during the 43<sup>rd</sup> Congress Session, on 26 October 2022, to examine different aspects of the **revision of the European Urban Charter II (2008)** to support local and regional authorities to build more democratic, cohesive, sustainable and digital societies which also reflect the Congress' priorities for 2021-2026.

Taking account of the Congress' acquis, the new Urban Charter will bring under one umbrella the work carried out in the different committees, in particular to promote a healthy environment, reduce social inequalities, strengthen the urban-rural interplay as well as smart and human-centered cities. Against the backdrop of current threats to liberal democracy, the Urban Charter III will highlight the importance of safeguarding democracy at the local level by improving the quality of representative democracy and citizen participation, notably of young people, in cities and towns.

The draft Urban Charter III will be presented for adoption to the Congress during its October 2023 Session.

The Chamber also discussed an information report on the **partial local elections held in Albania** on 6 March 2022, following a hybrid election observation mission on 24-25 February and 8 March 2022 (see III. MONITORING OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL DEMOCRACY).

### The Chamber of Regions

During the 43<sup>rd</sup> Congress Session, the Chamber of Regions discussed the report on **"Regional identities: promoting dialogue and diversity in unity"**, presented by Rapporteur Karl-Heinz LAMBERTZ (Belgium, SOC/G/PD). This document, adopted by the Congress, aims to help regions to develop their own identity, but from a perspective of openness towards their neighbours, and not of withdrawal into themselves. The report proposes a "toolbox" of mechanisms to ensure diversity and manage tensions peacefully. It takes up the concept of identity in many European regions and shows how to improve the dialogue around regional identities, both within regions themselves, between neighbouring regions, and between regions and central governments. Providing regions with legitimate representatives and involving them in the decision-making process, taking into account cultural and

linguistic diversity and involving citizens in debates on possible changes to territorial boundaries are the main ways in which regional identities can be harmoniously articulated, and tensions prevented.

The second debate organised by the Chamber was on "**Regional finances in response to crises**". The debate presented an OECD survey which asked its 38 member countries to examine how regions were coping with the financial consequences of the lockdowns imposed during the Covid 19 pandemic. It found that the best equipped regions to deal with economic crises were those with their own fiscal capacity and also clearly defined responsibilities. The Senior Advisor and Head of the Secretariat of the OECD Network on Fiscal Relations said during the debate that governments needed to increase the fiscal capacity of regions, particularly to enable them to run services under their jurisdiction more effectively. He advocated the establishment of stable fiscal policies that are better suited to combating tax avoidance and evasion as well as "flexible" responses to crises. The Director General for Cooperation with the State and the European Union of Madrid Region pointed out that several large regions with extensive powers have already initiated crisis recovery strategies, such as the 30 economic measures introduced by the region of Madrid in 2021. The financial measures and actions taken in Finland, Germany and Austria in response to the COVID-19 crisis were also discussed, as well as the financial capacities and roles of the regions in some main issues such as environment, education and ageing population.

## **D. THE COMMITTEES**

### **The Monitoring Committee**

The Monitoring Committee met in Strasbourg on 9 February 2023. The meeting was opened by Chair Gudrun MOSLER-TÖRNSTRÖM, by a minute of silence in memory of the victims of earthquakes that hit Türkiye on 6-7 February 2023.

During this meeting, Vladimir PREBILIĆ was elected 5<sup>th</sup> Vice-Chair of the Committee.

The members adopted a draft report on the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in Romania. The rapporteurs presented recent developments regarding local and regional self-governments in this country and an analysis of the implementation of the Charter, article by article. Besides that, reports on cantonal elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina (2 October 2022) and on local elections in Slovenia (20 November 2022) were also adopted. The members agreed to adopt the draft report on the observation of the repeat regional and district councils' elections in Berlin (12 February 2023) by written procedure. These reports were debated for adoption at the 44<sup>th</sup> Session.

The Committee heard the Head of the National Delegation of Ukraine, Liliia PASHYNNA (Ukraine, ILDG), on the situation in Ukrainian cities and regions in wartime and expressed its support and solidarity with Ukraine.

Furthermore, the Committee held an exchange of views and approved the preliminary draft terms of reference for a report on Direct Elections of Mayors in Council of Europe Member States as well as the outline of the fourth Volume of the Human Rights Handbook for local and regional authorities on Human-Centred Artificial Intelligence.

Also on the agenda was an exchange on the situation of local and regional democracy in the Republic of Moldova in the context of the implementation of the roadmap and the post-monitoring political dialogue between the Congress and the Moldovan authorities.

The next meeting of the Committee will take place on 21 March during the 44<sup>th</sup> session.

### 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 46 Member States of the Council of Europe.*

#### **Monitoring visits**

##### **Romania, October 2022**

The Congress delegation composed of the rapporteurs on local and regional democracy, Marc COOLS and David ERAY (Switzerland, EPP/CCE) carried out a visit from 12 to 13 October 2022 to assess the implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in Romania since the previous monitoring report adopted by the Congress in 2011.

The rapporteurs met with government ministers, members of both houses of the national parliament, representatives of Court of Accounts, Commissioner for Human Rights, the Constitutional Court as well as national associations of local and regional authorities and senior local government officials.

The draft report was debated at the 44th Session.

##### **Slovakia, December 2022**

The Congress delegation composed of rapporteurs Matthias GYSIN (Switzerland, ILDG) and Levan ZHORZHOLIANI (Georgia, SOC/G/PD) carried out a monitoring visit from 6 to 8 December 2022 to assess the implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in the Slovak Republic since the previous monitoring report adopted by the Congress in 2016.

The Congress delegation met with central government officials, representatives of the Supreme Audit Office, the Public Defender of Rights, the prosecutor general's office, mayors, representatives of self-governing regions and of the Union of Slovak Towns and Cities.

##### **France, March and September 2023**

The Congress delegation led by the rapporteur on local and regional democracy Bryony RUDKIN (United Kingdom, SOC/G/PD) carried out the first part of a visit to France from 7 to 9 March 2023 to assess the implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in the country since the previous monitoring report adopted by the Congress in 2016.

The second part of the monitoring visit is scheduled for 5-7 September 2023. The rapporteurs will meet remotely with the representatives of the Regional and Departmental Councils of La Réunion, the Mayor of Saint-Denis (La Réunion), the President of the Regional Audit Chamber of La Réunion and Mayotte, and the members of the national delegation of France to the Congress.

Meetings also took place with the representatives of the Regional Council of Bourgogne-Franche-Comté and with the Prefect of the Bourgogne-Franche-Comté Region as well as the President of the Regional Audit Chamber of Bourgogne-Franche-Comté.

#### **Adopted recommendations (43<sup>rd</sup> Session – October 2022)**

##### **Denmark, 25 October 2022**

In the Report and Recommendation 479 assessing the implementation of the Charter in Denmark, the rapporteurs conclude that the system of local self-government in the country is well-functioning, and the obligations undertaken under the Charter are generally fulfilled. They note with satisfaction that the Danish political and legal framework is marked by an efficient culture of consultation and trust between the central government and local authorities where unwritten rules and norms play an important role in the regulation of political agreements.

The report highlights that the challenges to the Danish system of local self-government mainly stem from the demographic context marked by an ageing population and expenditure pressure, and points to the difficulties in the coordination between municipalities and regions as regards the delivery of health

services. The rapporteurs suggest redefining the framework of collaboration and the distribution of tasks between municipalities and regions on the delivery of health services, in consultation with associations of local and regional authorities.

The rapporteurs also note that, although Denmark has shown good practices regarding citizen participation in public affairs at the local level, it has not yet signed the Additional Protocol to the European Charter of Local Self-Government on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority.

### **Sweden, 26 October 2022**

In the Report and Recommendation 485 assessing the implementation of the Charter in Sweden, the rapporteurs conclude that the system of local self-government in the country is efficient overall. They welcome the establishment in 2019 of fully-fledged regional self-governments, the wide scope of responsibilities attributed to local and regional authorities, and the high turnout in municipal and regional elections.

However, the rapporteurs found that, while some of the issues raised in the previous Congress recommendation (2014) were resolved, others are still present. For instance, new obligations can be imposed by the state on municipalities and regions without allowing sufficient space for discretion. The rapporteurs also observe a tendency towards a shift in the division of roles between state governance and local/regional self-government at the cost of the latter. Overall, there is a lack of systematic formal consultation procedures on all matters that concern subnational authorities.

Hence, the rapporteurs invite Sweden to grant local and regional authorities sufficient space for discretion when new obligations are imposed on them, find ways to include local authorities in new governance and policy implementation arrangements, and introduce an efficient system of indexation of state grants. Overall, they suggest that these issues be addressed through the implementation of formal consultation procedures that include more policy areas.

### **Czech Republic, 26 October 2022**

In the Report and Recommendation 486 assessing the implementation of the Charter in Czech Republic, the rapporteurs conclude that the system of local self-government in the country is functioning well and point to progress made in this respect since the previous monitoring in 2012.

However, as the report highlights, the government needs to pay particular attention to some specific areas to achieve full compliance with the Charter. For example, local and regional authorities lack commensurate resources to perform their tasks. Coupled with municipal fragmentation, this leads to inefficiencies in service delivery. Subnational governments, and in particular regions, are highly dependent on predominantly earmarked grants and transfers from the state, and their own sources of income are not sufficiently diverse and buoyant. Furthermore, consultation rights of local and regional authorities on all matters that concern them could be enhanced.

Recommendations to the national authorities to further increase the degree of compliance with the Charter include guaranteeing that funding matches the tasks to be fulfilled, reducing earmarking of grants, diversifying sources of income, and strengthening participation and consultation rights of local and regional authorities' associations. The rapporteurs also suggest further promoting and supporting intermunicipal co-operation to counter the effects of fragmentation. Finally, the Czech Republic is invited to ratify Articles 4.5, 6.2 and 7.2 of the Charter that it did not ratify in 1999 but with which it complies in practice and sign and ratify the Additional Protocol to the Charter.

### **Belgium, 27 October 2022**

In the Report and Recommendation 487 assessing the implementation of the Charter in Belgium, the rapporteurs observed general respect for the Charter provisions which have been ratified and conclude overall that the Belgian system of local self-government functions well.

Despite this, they have highlighted several ways in which compliance with the Charter could be improved. For instance, the report notes that there is sometimes insufficient consultation and dialogue between different governance levels. This is particularly acute between the federal and local level and between the government of Brussels-Capital Region and the local authorities. The latter is, in part, due to the absence of an official consultation system. In addition, concerns were raised regarding the uncertain status of provinces, the restrictions on local authorities wishing to recognise and pay their

employees and the current system of burgomaster appointment in Flanders which contravenes Article 8.3 of the Charter.

As a result, Congress recommendations include making the principle of local self-government more explicit in the constitution and/or regional legislation and improving consultation processes between different governmental levels by means of a federal bilateral body. Regional authorities are invited to provide greater clarity regarding the status of provinces, hold referenda before municipal amalgamation, and give local authorities greater control over the management of human resources. There are also several specific recommendations addressed to every region and to the German-speaking community.

The report encourages Belgium to ratify the additional protocol to the Charter and Article 9.7, which is already applied in practice.

## **B. OBSERVATION OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL ELECTIONS**

*The Congress' election observation 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.*

### **Election observation missions**

#### **Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2 October 2022**

A Congress delegation, composed of 19 participants from 17 countries, was deployed as part of an election observation mission in the 10 cantons of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and in the Brčko district to observe the regional (cantonal) elections of 2 October 2022 in some 110 polling stations. Prior to the election date, the delegation, led by Stewart DICKSON (United-Kingdom, ILDG), met with the President of the Central Election Commission (CEC), members of the diplomatic corps as well as with representatives of political parties and candidates running in the elections.

Overall, the delegation found that the Central Election Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina has made many efforts to increase the transparency of procedures and to make electoral management more accessible to citizens. Efforts to improve the accuracy of voters lists and voter registration procedures were noted as a positive development. The same applies to the establishment of a security stamp to prevent the circulation of falsified ballots. However, the "assisted voting" procedure for voters with visual impairment, as well as the accessibility of polling stations for the elderly and disabled, need to be reviewed before the next elections. Moreover, the electoral amendments introduced by the High Representative concerning hate speech seem to have contributed to a slightly less aggressive campaign climate, even if the sanctions in the event of irregularities and abuses should be issued quicker to protect candidates running for office, notably female candidates.

The regional (cantonal) elections were held on the same date as presidential and parliamentary elections. Congress observers reiterated the recommendation to hold regional (cantonal) elections at the same time as local elections, on different dates from national elections, to avoid local issues being overshadowed by the presidential and parliamentary campaigns.

The election observation report including propositions to the authorities was debated at the 44<sup>th</sup> Session.

#### **Slovenia, 20 November 2022**

A 13-member Congress delegation observed the nationwide local elections in Slovenia held on 20 November 2022. On Election Day, Congress observers were deployed to 120 polling stations throughout the country.

Prior to the Election Day, the delegation, led by David ERAY, met with representatives of the diplomatic corps, the Ministry of Public Administration of Slovenia, the State Election Commission, and the Office of the Government for National Minorities. Meetings were also held with the Secretary General of the Association of Municipalities and Towns of Slovenia, domestic NGOs active in the field of elections,

media representatives as well as candidates and representatives of political parties running in the local elections.

The Congress delegation noted a calm and orderly Election Day and a high level of confidence in the Slovenian electoral system, both on the part of voters and candidates. The existence of special voting rights for the country's three ethnic minorities were seen as an important feature of a truly democratic and inclusive environment. However, the delegation also insisted on the need for more coherent regulations regarding the sealing of the ballot boxes and the set-up of polling stations. It also encouraged reflection to introduce term limits restricting mayors to two consecutive terms. Incumbent Slovenian mayors are very difficult to be challenged by new competitors, which is not conducive to democratic change, creates a risk of accumulation of power, lack of transparency and disengagement of the younger generation from politics. Furthermore, while welcoming the election of a woman to the presidency of Slovenia for the first time, the delegation indicated that progress remains to be made regarding the involvement of women in local politics, as women only make up around 10% of elected mayors.

The election observation report including propositions to the authorities was debated at the 44th Session.

### **Berlin – Germany, 12 February 2023**

A delegation observed local and regional elections to the Berlin House of Representatives as well as Berlin District Councils in Germany on 12 February 2023. These elections represented a re-run of the elections of 26 September 2021, which were declared invalid by the Berlin Constitutional Court on 16 November 2022. On Election Day, Congress teams including 14 participants from 12 countries were deployed to all twelve districts of Berlin and visited over 80 polling stations.

Prior to the Election Day, the delegation, led by Vladimir PREBILIČ, held online briefings with members of the Delegation of Germany to the Congress and representatives of regional and district election administration bodies, domestic and international NGOs, and the media. The delegation also held in-person meetings with representatives and candidates of political parties running in the repeat elections.

The delegation highlighted the significant efforts made to conduct these elections including the provision of additional polling booths, incentives to build staff capacity and extensive training. It also highlighted public confidence in the electoral process, which remained high despite the unfortunate sequence of events leading up to the repeat elections.

However, preliminary conclusions call for clarification of the distribution of responsibilities between the main actors in local and regional elections in Berlin. In addition, improvements could be made concerning the ballot boxes so that they are sealed in a unified way to secure the votes. The Congress delegation also recommends uniform and standardized procedures in all constituencies concerning the organisation of the administration of the vote, as well as strengthening the competences of the regional level, to improve quality and efficiency. The delegation also called for improvements to campaigns and party finance regulation and suggests regulating the status of election observers to clarify the modalities of their mission on election day.

The election observation report including propositions to the authorities was debated at the March Session.

### **Adopted reports and recommendations (43<sup>rd</sup> Session – October 2022)**

#### **Serbia, 26 October 2022**

The Congress adopted a report and Recommendation 482 following a mission carried out to observe the partial local elections held on 3 April 2022 in Belgrade and several other municipalities in Serbia.

Overall, the Congress delegation found the 2022 partial local elections calm and orderly, despite recent adoption of legal amendments and revision of the composition of polling boards which resulted in an uneven level of training and preparedness of the polling staff. In general, the campaign was highly polarised and marked by numerous allegations of vote buying, pressures on voters, uneven access to the media and misuse of administrative resources. The Election Day was generally transparent and in

line with the appropriate provisions in most polling stations visited, despite some notable procedural inconsistencies and incidents.

The Congress delegation identified several areas where there is still room for improvement, notably regarding previous Congress, OSCE/ODIHR and Venice Commission recommendations which remain to be addressed, in particular on voter registration, regulation of campaign and party finance, media access, misuse of administrative resources, announcement of results, layout and accessibility of polling stations and composition and professionalisation of polling boards. Furthermore, the delegation reiterates previous Congress recommendation that local elections should be held separately from national polls not to overshadow local issues and to overload election administration bodies.

#### **Albania, 26 October 2022**

The Congress debated an information report (CPL(2022)43-03) on partial local elections in Albania held on 6 March 2022 following a hybrid election observation mission carried out on 24 and 25 February and 8 March 2022.

The Congress expressed satisfaction with the orderly and well-administered elections and with the campaign in which pertinent rules were generally respected by all stakeholders. The Rapporteur, Stewart DICKSON, also strongly welcomed the fact that the election results were accepted by all contestants.

However, the Congress report also identified several areas where there is still room for improvement, notably regarding the implementation of previous recommendations by the Venice Commission which remain to be addressed, including measures to depoliticise lower-level election commissions and still existing criminal liability for defamation. The report invites the Albanian authorities to address these long-standing recommendations and increase efforts to promote the participation of women candidates in mayoral elections.

Furthermore, the Rapporteur suggested measures to ensure free conditions for media reporting and safeguards to prevent the misuse of administrative resources and to provide a level playing field for all contestants.

#### **Netherlands, 27 October 2022**

The Congress adopted a report and Recommendation 488 following a hybrid-format mission to observe local elections in the Netherlands on 16 March 2022.

The Congress delegation observed generally well-administered, transparent and orderly elections with a high degree of public trust in elections and high inclusiveness of the electoral process in the country.

At the same time, the Congress regrets that several longstanding issues regarding democratic elections in the Netherlands remain unaddressed, in particular the under-regulated campaign finance environment, proxy voting and the lack of elections for mayors.

The Congress therefore invites the authorities of the Netherlands to strengthen the regulatory framework ensuring transparency and accountability of campaign and party finances on the local level. It also recommends limiting the use of proxy voting in view of possible risks to electoral integrity, particularly for vulnerable groups of voters, and examine introducing other alternatives, such as early or postal voting.

The delegation also raised the longstanding issue concerning the appointment of mayors. A 2021 Congress monitoring report on local and regional democracy in the Netherlands recommended the appointment of mayors and King's Commissioners by democratic election, to ensure citizens' right to participate in the conduct of local public affairs and comply with fundamental principles of democracy.

## **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 actively contributes to the work being done in this regard within the Council of Europe and within its partners at European level.*

## **A. MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES**

### **31<sup>st</sup> meeting of the Committee of the Parties of the Council of Europe Convention in Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings, 25 November 2022**

Congress rapporteur on women and child refugees, Annika VAIKLA, stressed that cooperation across all levels of government is vital in ensuring a comprehensive approach to trafficking, reminding that countries often develop their strategies at the national level, but local and regional authorities are the first line to ensuring their effective implementation. She thus urged national authorities to consult with their country's local and regional representatives to work together towards the fight against exploitation and trafficking of vulnerable refugees, in particular women and children.

The Congress report adopted at the 43<sup>rd</sup> session on 'Reception of women and children refugees in Europe's cities and regions' includes best practices from a variety of countries about how cities and regions can help combat human trafficking and protect vulnerable persons.

### **Meeting of the Network of Focal Points on Migration, 2 December 2022**

Congress Rapporteur on women and children refugees, Bernd VÖHRINGER, said that cities are instrumental policy actors, practitioners and spaces for refugee and immigrant reception and inclusion in local communities. He recalled that it is on the ground, in cities and regions, that national policies have to be implemented.

Presenting the recent Congress report on the reception of women and children refugees, he outlined four concrete actions that the Congress is suggesting to national authorities: involve cities and regions in the development of their reception policies, provide them with funding and capacities to take care of reception and integration, co-operate in terms of data sharing and further develop rural areas.

He concluded that the Congress works both to make national governments aware of their duty to involve cities and regions in reception and integration policies, but also to raise awareness amongst Congress members about their role as receivers of migrants and protectors of their human rights.

### **Meeting of the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons of the Parliamentary Assembly, Paris, 7 December 2022**

Bernd VÖHRINGER stressed that cross-border cooperation and solidarity between European cities were crucial in times of crises. Cities and regions in various Council of Europe member States have valuable experiences that can be used to strengthen reception policies for successful long-term integration of migrants and asylum seekers and for building inclusive societies.

He stressed that growing geopolitical tensions and human rights abuses could lead to an increasing number of refugees in Europe's cities and regions. He reiterated the need to build stronger dialogue and co-ordination between local/regional authorities, and their national associations on migration-related issues as well as with central authorities and counterparts from other European countries.

While referring to the support for Ukraine, he highlighted the importance of fostering longer-term partnerships and co-operation in view of rebuilding the country. He emphasized that the Cities4Cities platform, aimed at matching the needs of Ukrainian cities and regions with the supply capacity and knowledge of other European cities and regions, was an important example of city-to-city solidarity and exchange of expertise in this endeavour.

### **Statement by Thomas ANDERSSON on International Migrants Day, 18 December 2022 (SEE I. POLITICAL AGENDA)**

## **B. YOUTH**

### **Annual Conference of the AEBR on “New solutions for the future of cross-border regions”, Novi Sad, 29 September 2022**

Thomas ANDERSSON stated that according to the Congress decentralised cross-border co-operation is a crucial factor for territorial development and territorial cohesion on the European continent.

He highlighted the Congress' contributions to territorial co-operation, presenting good practices and Congress recommendations regarding cross-border cooperation and drew attention to the importance of youth as a generator of change, in line with the conference's focus on youth participation in cross-border cooperation. He stressed that promoting young people's engagement in building transborder communities is one solution to guaranteeing the future of cross-border regions.

### **AER online workshop “Regions4Youth: Strengthening Cohesion Through Youth Empowerment”, 11 October 2022**

Congress Rapporteur on rural youth, Aida JALILZADE (Azerbaijan, ECR), stated that social cohesion cannot be achieved without providing younger generations with opportunities to thrive, and without including them in decision-making processes.

She underlined the importance of making the younger generation “part of governance” in line with the Council of Europe standards and of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

She underlined that even if there is no single recipe for building quality youth policies, there are commonly agreed best practices and guidelines that help to build inclusive and resilient communities, and in this regard, she presented Congress activities in this field including the report on the future of youth in rural areas, the report on youth work, the guidelines recently adopted and the “Rejuvenating Politics” initiative.

### **Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean's Euro-Mediterranean and Gulf Economic Forum, Marrakesh, 7-8 December 2022**

Thomas ANDERSSON stressed that the representation of women and young people in political institutions is key to empowering and amplifying their voices throughout societies. He called on local and regional authorities to take actions for a better participation of women in decision-making, by implementing Congress recommendations and its practical guide on “Preventing and combatting sexism at local level”.

He underlined that communities were best placed to engage young people and youth organisations directly in democratic processes, highlighting the Congress commitment to promote youth participation in civic life in both rural and urban settings. He referred in particular to the European Charter on the participation of young people in municipal and regional life, and to the Congress reports on “Youth and democracy: the changing face of youth political engagement” and on the future of youth in rural areas.

He stressed the importance of developing partnerships across the Mediterranean Sea, such as the Congress South-Med programme, as these partnerships are a good opportunity for peer-to-peer exchange of experiences and good practices. He concluded saying that the Congress will continue supporting the efforts of local and regional authorities on both shores of the Mediterranean to promote the political representation of women and young people and their participation in decision-making processes.

### **Round table “Democracy now: how to revitalise democracy, respond to current challenges and give a meaningful role to young people?”, 1 February 2023**

Véronique BERTHOLLE (France, SOC/G/PD) stressed that the involvement of young people in decisions that influence their lives is a key step to encourage them to be an integral part of our communities. She presented the work of the Congress in the field of youth, making references to the European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life, and the children's booklet and guidelines encouraging local and regional authorities to involve children in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

She encouraged young people to continue to contact their local elected representatives and to consider running for office themselves in order to play an active role in the decision-making process.

## **C. ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE**

### **PACE's meeting of the Network of Contact Parliamentarians for a healthy environment, Izmir, 23 September 2022**

Congress Spokesperson on Environment and Climate Change, Cemal BAŞ (Türkiye, EPP/CCE), stressed that national and international climate plans could only succeed if they were developed with the involvement of local and regional authorities. He underlined the importance of cooperation between Congress and PACE on the right to a healthy environment. He expressed the Congress' support for an additional protocol to the European Charter of Local Self-Government on environmental matters, which would enshrine the right of local authorities to participate in decision-making on environmental matters.

He also drew attention to the third volume of the Human Rights Handbook for local and regional authorities on the environment and sustainable development, and the joint report on "A fundamental right to the environment: a matter for local and regional authorities", which was adopted during the 43<sup>rd</sup> session.

He highlighted that, in the current context, good local and regional governance had to include a green thinking. Cities and regions must take preventive action, as they are first responders to the effects of climate change.

### **New publication: Vol. 3 of the Human Rights Handbook "Environment", 14 November 2022**

The third volume of the Human Rights Handbook is dedicated to the environment and sustainable development. It presents the international legal framework for human rights and environmental protection, explains how sub-national authorities contribute to the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and covers the main challenges in this respect. This volume addresses transport, housing, sustainable economy, education, public procurement, and local strategies for sustainable development.

## **D. FAKE NEWS AND HATE SPEECH**

### **Conference on "Hate Speech and Fake News – Fate or Issue to Tackle?", CEE e|Dem and e|Gov Days 2022, Budapest, 22-23 September 2022**

Rapporteur Kristoffer TAMSONS stated that hate speech and fake news are on rise in Europe, particularly on the internet and social media, and have a detrimental, paralysing effect on working conditions and effectiveness of local and regional elected representatives and by extent on local and regional democracy as a whole. He underlined the absolute need to provide an adequate legal and regulatory framework at the national level to counter online and offline threats, while ensuring the balance between freedom of expression and the limitations that can or must be apply to freedom of expression.

### **Transatlantic Mayoral Dialogue on preventing hate, extremism and polarization, and safeguarding local democracy, The Hague, 15 November 2022**

The President of the Congress called for strengthened dialogue and trust between citizens, civil society, and territorial governments to combat hatred and intolerance. He highlighted that the prevention of hate, the fight against disinformation, the strengthening of resilience and the protection of vulnerable refugees were at the centre of the Congress's concerns. He recalled that despite their differences, local and regional authorities across Europe face similar threats that erode social cohesion and democratic values, but that they are also best placed to counter these threats.

He presented the tools and work developed by the Congress, namely the toolkit to promote intercultural and interreligious dialogue at the local level. He also mentioned the report on the reception of refugee women and children, based on a field mission in Poland, and the report on the impact of hate speech and fake news on the working conditions of local elected representatives, that were adopted during the 43<sup>rd</sup> Session.

**Statement by the President at the 2022 Mayors Summit Against Antisemitism, Athens, 1 December 2022 (see I. POLITICAL AGENDA)**

**Steering Committee meeting on Media and Information Society, 7 December 2022**

Congress Rapporteur on local and regional media, Cecilia DALMAN EEK (Sweden, SOC/G/PD), stated that a democratic society needs a pluralistic media landscape of which local and regional media are an integral part. She warned that local and regional media can be allies to strengthen democracy, but many of them are in difficult situation and cannot fully play their role as watchdogs of democracy. She highlighted that mayors, city councillors, and regional representatives have a responsibility to ensure that citizens can access reliable and transparent information about what is happening in their communities.

## **E. HUMAN RIGHTS**

**4th European Policy Dialogue Forum, Barcelona, 9-10 November 2022**

Speaking during a plenary session on “Cities: key challenges and trends of creating integrated communities: where should we be investing?”, Thomas ANDERSSON regretted that over the past two decades, there had been a stark increase in hate speech towards migrants and refugees, expressions of radicalisation and terrorism and movements questioning the rights of women and LGBTI persons. He stressed the shared responsibility to act for better social inclusion and integration in European societies which demands strong cooperation between civil society, faith communities and local authorities.

He said that the Congress was devoted to being a part of this work towards more inclusive societies and was convinced that cities and regions, given the right tools, were crucial in realising this. He highlighted existing Congress work related to inclusion and social cohesion notably the 2020 report on threats to the rights of LGBTI persons.

**Statement by Congress spokesperson on Human Rights Harald BERGMANN on Human Rights Day, 9 December 2022 (see I. POLITICAL AGENDA)**

**Academy and Conference on Human Rights at the Local and Regional Level 2023, 1- 8 February 2023**

During this event which focused on management concepts and instruments for local governments to provide human rights-based governance, Congress Spokesperson for Human Rights, Harald BERGMANN, said that faced with the continuing consequences of the pandemic, the fallout of climate change and a war in the heart of Europe, citizens are increasingly turning to their communities for support. He stressed that in this period of significant decline in democracy and regular threats to fundamental rights, especially for the most vulnerable, it is local leaders' duty to be resilient and strong. In this respect, he recalled the importance of Europe based on the principles of democracy and decentralization as contained in the preamble of the European Charter of Local Self-Government. He also highlighted that it had been demonstrated that it is through decentralization that public service becomes more responsive to local needs, that the responsible exercise of power is ensured and that trust in public authorities is stronger.

Moreover, he said that local and regional authorities, as the authorities closest to the citizens can enter into a real dialogue and partnership with the people living in their territories which leads to policies being truly democratic, relevant and effective because they are based on the needs of citizens. In this perspective, Harald BERGMANN referred to various tools elaborated by the Congress, such as the Human Rights handbooks at local and regional levels.

He also stressed the importance of active participation of young people in civic life. The Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life illustrates the Congress' commitment to promote such participation.

## **F. GENDER EQUALITY**

**Statement by Congress Spokesperson on Gender Equality Eirini DOUROU on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, 24 November 2022 (see I. POLITICAL AGENDA)**

**Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean's Euro-Mediterranean and Gulf Economic Forum, Marrakesh, 7-8 December 2022**

**Participation of Thomas ANDERSSON in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean's Euro-Mediterranean and Gulf Economic Forum in Marrakesh, on 7-8 December 2022 (see B. YOUTH).**

**Statement by Congress Spokesperson on Gender Equality Eirini DOUROU on International Women's Day, 8 March 2023 (see I. POLITICAL AGENDA)**

## **G. DIGITALISATION AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE**

**2<sup>nd</sup> plenary session of the Council of Europe Committee on Artificial Intelligence (CAI), Strasbourg, 21 September 2022**

Congress Spokesperson for Artificial Intelligence, David ERAY, said that the governance of artificial intelligence (AI) and digitisation must be human-centred, focusing on human rights and sustainable development.

He expressed the Congress' support to the CAI in the development of the draft Convention of the Council of Europe on Artificial Intelligence, Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law. This draft aims to develop common principles for the design and application of AI systems and to ensure respect for human rights in a context where AI systems assist or replace human decision-making. These principles are also upheld in the report on "Smart Cities and Regions" prepared by the Congress.

The Spokesperson emphasized that AI tools must be used wisely, in accordance with the requirements of the principles of the Council of Europe, in order to contribute to a proper functioning of local democracy as well as to allow better participation in local public affairs, stressing the importance of adequate regulation for local and regional authorities, especially regarding the protection of personal data, cybersecurity and the integrity of electoral processes, whilst also calling for greater efforts to overcome the digital divide.

**19<sup>th</sup> European Conference of Electoral Management Bodies on the topic "Artificial Intelligence and Electoral Integrity", 15 November 2022**

Congress rapporteur on hate speech and fake news Wilma DELISSEN VAN TONGERLO highlighted the impact of artificial intelligence and harmful content on local and regional electoral processes, referring to the Congress report on hate speech and fake news adopted in October 2022.

She underlined that artificial intelligence was used for disinformation campaigns in relation to elections, spreading fake news and propaganda. Such a toxic environment pushes some local and regional elected representatives to resign from office or to decide not to run for re-election. Political representatives of underrepresented groups and the opposition politicians are particularly vulnerable. Consequently, hate speech and fake news damage the very fabric and processes of local and regional democracy and citizen engagement and participation is weakened. She mentioned the practical remedies against hate speech and fake news recommended in the Congress report, such as pursuing a comprehensive national strategy including relevant internet intermediaries which relies on legal remedies and preventative measures

**4<sup>th</sup> Plenary meeting of the Council of Europe Committee on Artificial Intelligence (CAI), Strasbourg, 1 February 2023**

David ERAY emphasized that communities can become better places to live if the use of Artificial Intelligence systems is maximised for the benefit of the environment. He highlighted the growing importance of the environment priority in the activities of the Congress and recalled the Congress recommendation and report on a "green reading" of the European Charter of Local Self-Government. He underlined that there could be no good local governance without taking into account the environmental issue and highlighted the need to reduce the carbon print of artificial intelligence and to develop AI models with sustainable energy and water consumption.

## H. CULTURAL HERITAGE

### **First Annual Forum for History Education “Sites of Memories: Learning spaces for democracy”, Belgrade, 4 November 2022**

Congress Rapporteur on Cultural Heritage Management, Barbara TOCE (Italy, SOC/G/PD), declared that the Congress believed that cultural heritage could be an educational tool in upholding democratic values. She warned that, without protecting these values at a local level, peace and stability are impossible.

She referred to the 2021 Congress report “Culture without borders”, which focuses on cultural heritage management for local and regional development and recognises cultural heritage as a tool to strengthen democratic values amongst the younger generations.

## I. EUROPEAN LOCAL DEMOCRACY WEEK (ELDW)

*The European Local Democracy Week (ELDW) is a pan-European initiative co-ordinated by the Congress since 2007. Throughout the year, municipalities and their national associations are invited to organise initiatives all over Europe aimed at promoting citizen participation, fostering dialogue between the community and public authorities, strengthening trust in elected representatives and institutions and providing a European dimension to local initiatives. Flagship events take place during the week of 15 October, the date of the signature of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in 1985.*

*The theme of the 2021-2022 editions was “Protecting the environment: local communities take action”, focusing on local action to prevent environmental degradation, fight climate change, strengthen resilience and work towards achieving Sustainable Development Goals 11 (building resilient communities) and 13 (climate action) of the United Nations Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development. The theme for the ELDW 2023-2024 editions is “Local communities: putting democratic resilience at the forefront”.*

### **ELDW Webinar to share best practices from active municipalities, 4 October 2022**

A webinar brought together ELDW national coordinators and participating municipalities, with the participation of Congress Thematic Spokesperson on the ELDW Bryony RUDKIN and Congress Secretary General, on 4 October 2022. ELDW participants from Germany, Portugal and Türkiye presented their initiatives aimed at providing local responses to environmental and climate challenges, in line with the 2022 ELDW. Congress Youth Delegate for Ireland Nina KOISTINEN spoke about youth engagement in response to current challenges.

### **Launch of ELDW events in Malta, 22 October 2022**

On 22 October 2022, Bryony RUDKIN participated in the launch of the ELDW in Malta, including a place-making workshop and a series of events and presentations, organised by the Malta Local Councils’ Association, in collaboration with NGOs, regional councils, the Senglea Local Council and academics.

The importance of citizens’ involvement, particularly the youth, to the decision-making, the challenges facing democratic participation, such as the polarisation of society, extremism and needs for re-engaging dialogue and civic debate within the society and building more resilient local and regional authorities were underlined in the meeting.

### **ELDW annual coordination meeting, Strasbourg, 28 February 2023**

The Annual Coordination Meeting of the ELDW was held in Strasbourg, on 28 February 2023. It brought together local representatives from Council of Europe member states, that shared their best practices from the 2022 ELDW edition and discussed proposals for the new biennial theme for 2023-2024. The “partner of ELDW” status was also awarded to 21 municipalities and associations, in recognition of their commitment to the ELDW and of their work for the promotion of local democracy.

## J. WORLD FORUM FOR DEMOCRACY

*Since 2012, when the Council of Europe held its first Forum for Democracy, the Congress has been regularly participating in the event, sponsoring specific Forum labs to promote democracy at the local and regional level. Most of the Forum's projects on local democracy involve important participation from citizens, reflecting the will of the Congress to include citizens and especially young people at the heart of its initiatives to build stronger and more resilient democracies. Since 2021, Congress Youth Delegates are also participating in the Forum as part of the Congress delegation.*

The Forum celebrated in 2022 its 10th anniversary, with the topic: "Democracy: a new hope?". Over 400 applications for 'Democracy Innovation Award' have been received, presenting innovative initiatives, aimed at enhancing democracy and reversing democratic decline around the world. Several such initiatives have been presented during the Lab on "Polarisation and Democratic Engagement", sponsored by the Congress.

Moderated by Thomas ANDERSSON, Lab7 examined processes to reduce polarization in society by involving citizens, through examples of initiatives carried out in the United States, in France, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, or supported by European organisations such as the Council of Europe and the Assembly of European Regions. Speakers included Andrew BOFF (United Kingdom, ECR) and Prodromos TZOUNOPOULOS, Congress Youth Delegate from Greece.

Besides Lab 7, other labs and forum talks were attended by members and youth delegates of the Congress delegation.

## K. UNITED NATIONS AGENDA 2030 – IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGs)

*The United Nations Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development lists 17 objectives to be achieved to build a socially inclusive, environmentally sustainable and economically prosperous society.*

*The Congress' work focuses on 12 of the 17 objectives defined in the Agenda and, in particular, to the Sustainable Development Goals 5 (Gender equality), 10 (Reduced inequalities), 11 (Sustainable cities and communities), 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions) and 17 (Partnership for the goals) respectively.*

*In order to implement the SDGs successfully, the Congress cooperates with a wide range of actors: its institutional partners within the Council of Europe, international organisations representing local and regional authorities and European institutions.*

### **Round table discussion on "Current Challenges for Urban and Rural Municipalities: the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond", Munich, 13-14 October 2022**

Bernd VÖHRINGER, presented the Congress' commitment to promote and support sustainable urban development through the European Urban Charter II – Manifesto for a new urbanity adopted in 2008. Underlining the importance of the revision of the European Urban Charter II, he stressed four key areas of societies which will be in the focus of this revision: democratic; resilient and cohesive; sustainable; and digital.

### **13<sup>th</sup> Plenary Session of the ARLEM, Izmir, 7-8 November 2022**

Congress Vice-President Xavier CADORET (France, SOC/G/PD) stated that the Congress was convinced that it is essential to build resilience and inclusiveness in a sustainable way. In order to achieve this goal, local authorities must be equipped with the relevant competences, adequate finances to fulfil their tasks and the necessary autonomy in decision-making. He stressed that by strengthening local autonomy through decentralisation of power and equitable distribution of resources between different levels of governance resilience and inclusiveness at local level can be increased.

Addressing the topic of climate action in the region, he highlighted the Congress report on 'A fundamental right to the environment: a matter for local and regional authorities', and the Congress' proposed revision of the Urban Charter II.

The Vice-President underlined that the Congress is committed to making communities more resilient and sustainable on both shores of the Mediterranean, as evidenced by peer exchanges and experience sharing between European territorial authorities and their counterparts from Morocco and Tunisia who have the status of Partner for Local Democracy with the Congress.

### **Closing session of the B40 Balkan Cities Network Athens Summit, Athens, 24 February 2023**

Congress Spokesperson on Public Ethics, Vladimir PREBILIČ, stated that urban diplomacy was an important tool for using city power to influence the course of events and respond to today's crises.

He underlined that stronger multi-level governance in our countries should be advocated for, in full respect of the principles of the European Charter of Local Self-Government. He presented the Congress work, in particular its resolution and recommendation adopted in 2008 on city diplomacy activities which call on both local authorities and national governments to use urban diplomacy in support of dialogue and conflict resolution.

He welcomed the Urban Diplomacy Strategy presented by Mayor of Istanbul Ekrem IMAMOĞLU and the Mayor's call on local governments to unite strongly under the flag of democracy.

The Spokesperson also pointed out that local and regional authorities had become a political force to be reckoned with, as fully-fledged political players in the development of their communities. He added that the challenges that Europe and the world are facing require transversal solutions and therefore close interaction between all government levels. He recalled in this regard that the Congress launched a reflection on ways to adapt the principles of urban governance in response to the exigences of urban living in today's era of transformations.

## **V. INSTITUTIONAL CO-OPERATION WITHIN THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE**

### **A. THE COMMITTEE OF MINISTERS**

The Congress President met with the President of the Committee of Ministers, the Irish Minister of State for European affairs, Thomas BYRNE, on 12 October 2022 (See I. POLITICAL AGENDA).

The President of the Congress held an exchange of views with the Minister's Deputies on 8 February 2023 (See I. POLITICAL AGENDA).

### **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 initiatives and campaigns.*

Congress Spokesperson on Environment and Climate Change, Cemal BAŞ, took part in PACE's meeting of the Network of Contact Parliamentarians for a healthy environment in Izmir, on 23 September 2022 (see IV. THEMATIC ACTIVITIES).

Bernd VÖHRINGER took part in the meeting of the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons of the PACE, in Paris, on 7 December 2022 (see IV. THEMATIC ACTIVITIES).

The Congress President met with the PACE President on 24 January 2023 (see I. POLITICAL AGENDA).

The Congress President made a statement at the meeting of the Standing Committee of the PACE in March 2023 in the Hague (see I. POLITICAL AGENDA).

### **C. EUROPEAN COMMISSION FOR DEMOCRACY THROUGH LAW (VENICE COMMISSION)**

*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, Stewart DICKSON and Gunn Marit HELGESEN.*

*The Congress regularly participates in the meetings and activities of the Venice Commission and asks occasionally for opinions.*

Congress rapporteur on hate speech and fake news Wilma DELISSEN VAN TONGERLO participated in the 19<sup>th</sup> European Conference of Electoral Management Bodies, organised by the Venice Commission, on the topic “Artificial Intelligence and Electoral Integrity”, in Strasbourg, on 15 November 2022 (see IV. THEMATIC ACTIVITIES).

### **D. THE NORTH SOUTH CENTRE**

*In the framework of the South-Med Partnership, the Congress also contributes to the activities of the North-South Centre of the Council of Europe as part of its quadrilogue governance which brings together representatives from governments, national parliaments, local and regional authorities and civil society.*

The North-South Centre held its second annual meeting of the Bureau of the Executive Committee on 17 October 2022, in Lisbon, in presence of Xavier CADORET, Congress Vice-President. The jury voted on the nominations of the 2022 North-South Prize of the Council of Europe. The candidate proposed by the Congress for the North, the Association of Ukrainian Cities (AUC), received the highest number of votes. It was officially approved during the Executive Committee meeting on 29 November 2022 that the AUC was the winner of the Prize for the North.

### **E. COMMITTEE ON ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE**

Congress Spokesperson for Digitalisation and Artificial Intelligence, David ERAY, participated in the 2<sup>nd</sup> plenary session of the Council of Europe Committee on Artificial Intelligence on 21<sup>st</sup> September 2022 and in the 4<sup>th</sup> plenary meeting of the Committee on 1<sup>st</sup> February 2023 (see IV. THEMATIC ACTIVITIES).

## **VI. EXTERNAL CO-OPERATION 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 Co-operation Agreement, revised 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 every year to compare the political agendas, set priority areas of co-operation and identify potential for joint action.*

*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 and working groups, exchanges of views with rapporteurs, participation in each other's events and statutory meetings, and organisation of joint activities.*

#### **11<sup>th</sup> Annual meeting of the Conference of the Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership (CORLEAP), Liberec, 3 November 2022**

Congress Rapporteur on local democracy in the Republic of Moldova Marc COOLS called for further strengthening synergies and cooperation between the Congress and the CoR in the Eastern Partnership region. He stated that the reforms in all EU Eastern Partnership countries should include a larger scope for decentralisation, more intense consultation of local authorities through their associations, and enhanced co-creation of local policies. He emphasised the importance of the principle of subsidiarity and the Congress' commitment to the countries in the region, referring to the roadmaps signed for the implementation of Congress recommendations in Armenia, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine.

He underlined that local autonomy was the best antidote against the return to autocratic regimes and that there was an urgent need to discuss the role of local authorities in reversing democratic backsliding. He also highlighted as exemplary the Ukrainian resistance and resilience to the Russian aggression.

Discussions focused on the voice of cities and regions in new geopolitical circumstances, as well as the role of local democracy and the integration of environmental concerns into national, regional, and local political processes.

#### **Annual CoR/Congress High Level Group Meeting, Brussels, 29 November 2022**

The President of the CoR said that advancing cooperation and unity between the two institutions is even more important in the context of growing threats to European democracy, human rights, or the rule of law, including Russia's war against Ukraine but also long existing dangers like disinformation, populism and hate speech.

The Congress President stated that European cities and regions are under increasing pressure from multiple crises which are having a significant and lasting impact on local and regional governance. He highlighted the importance of addressing current challenges against the background of re-centralisation, lack of financial means, and increasing attacks on local and regional elected representatives. He outlined findings from the Congress monitoring of the state of local and regional democracy and underlined the need for joint efforts in defending the role and position of local and regional authorities vis-a-vis national governments and European institutions.

The Presidents also considered critical aspects of local democracy in Europe, including the efforts to promote deliberative democracy. They discussed efforts to support cities and regions in Ukraine through the Alliance of Cities and Regions for the Reconstruction of Ukraine, building on, for example, the Cities4Cities initiative, which is an institutional partner of the Alliance.

#### **Meeting of the European Committee of the Regions' Working Group on Ukraine, 24 February 2023**

The Vice-President of the Chamber of Regions and the Secretary General attended the meeting of the Working Group on Ukraine, in Gdansk (Poland), on 24 February 2023 (see I. POLITICAL AGENDA).

## **B. EUROPEAN ASSOCIATIONS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES**

### **Assembly of European Regions (AER)**

**Online workshop “Regions4Youth: Strengthening Cohesion Through Youth Empowerment”, 11 October 2022**

Congress Rapporteur on rural youth, Aida JALILZADE, participated in the AER online workshop on the topic “Regions4Youth: Strengthening Cohesion Through Youth Empowerment”, on 11 October 2022 (see IV. THEMATIC ACTIVITIES).

**General Assembly, 14 October 2022**

Former Congress Secretary General, Andreas KIEFER, underlined that the AER is an important strategic partner of the Congress which recognises the regions as key partners in the European project. For the Congress, stronger regions with stronger competences and financial autonomy are a crucial part of the multi-level governance system. He stressed the crucial role of the two institutions in the face of current challenges and called for continuing the strategic partnership between.

### **Conference of Regional Legislative Assemblies of Europe (CALRE)**

**Plenary Assembly and 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Namur, 18 November 2022**

Congress Vice-President Harald SONDEREGGER underlined the current priorities shared by both organisations, such as improving the quality of regional democracy, engaging citizens in regional governance, reducing inequalities, fighting discrimination as well as promoting inclusion of vulnerable groups, fostering gender equality, and reducing the urban/rural divide.

Stressing that current multiple crises faced by regions call for urgent responses, he pointed out that regional legislative assemblies were well positioned to lead in framing such regional response measures. He referred to the Congress work on climate change and highlighted the recent report on a “green reading” of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, aimed at recognising the local and regional responsibilities in protecting the environment. He also recalled the commitment of regional parliaments and governments to align their objectives with the need to address climate change, accelerate the ecological transition and build sustainable and more resilient regional communities for the benefit of citizens.

### **Association of European Border Regions (AEBR)**

**Annual Conference on “New solutions for the future of cross-border regions”, Novi Sad, 29 September 2022**

Thomas ANDERSSON participated in this Annual Conference on “New solutions for the future of cross-border regions”, in Novi Sad (Serbia), on 29 September 2022 (see IV. THEMATIC ACTIVITIES).

## **C. NATIONAL ASSOCIATIONS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES**

### **Network of Associations of Local Authorities in Southeast of Europe (NALAS)**

**18<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, Istanbul, 15 March 2023**

In the aftermath of the massive earthquakes which hit Türkiye, the event focused on resilience and sustainability of local authorities, in the context of responding to natural disasters and other major crisis. Vice President Bernd VÖHRINGER highlighted the essential role of local authorities in crisis times which was being proven over again. He stated that, in difficult times, local authorities emerge as primary actors, the ones immediately responding to the needs, providing assistance, and remaining closest to their citizens. He also emphasised that it was more than ever important to focus efforts on building resilient and sustainable local authorities as part of the strong multi-governance system.

Congress Secretary General stressed how the Congress works with Council of Europe member States in changing the usual practices when catastrophes strike. He stated that better coordination between different levels of governance and improved system of regular consultations with local and regional authorities must be established within emergency mechanisms, making subnational authorities an integral part of national crisis management. The Secretary General concluded commending the efforts in this regard taken up by NALAS, a long-standing partner of the Congress, in upholding and strengthening local democracy in the countries of South-East Europe, even in difficult times.

The President of the Chamber of Local Authorities and the Secretary General met with members of the Delegation of Türkiye to the Congress as well as with the mayors from the Marmara region and congratulated the mayor of Fatih for his election as the new NALAS President. These meetings were also an opportunity to discuss the situation in communities affected by the earthquakes as well as the measures and services provided to assist them and to re-iterate once again Congress support and solidarity.

## VII. CO-OPERATION PROGRAMMES AND ACTION PLANS

*The Congress provides practical support to local and regional authorities 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. The Guidelines for co-operation activities<sup>1</sup> further specify the framework and the principles of Congress co-operation activities, whose importance was reiterated in the Priorities of the Congress 2021-2026.<sup>2</sup>*

*These projects take place within the Council of Europe country-specific Action Plans or within the policy towards neighbouring regions. They are carried out by the Congress secretariat in close co-operation and synergy with the other entities of the Organisation.*

*Currently, the Congress has projects under implementation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, as well as a multilateral project aimed at strengthening resilience in local and regional authorities facing migration challenges in Poland, the Republic of Moldova, and Romania. Since 2011, those activities amount to over fourteen million EUR, funded by voluntary contributions from member States and the European Union.*

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

*The prevention of corruption is central to political and operational activities. To support action in this area, the Congress has produced a set of handbooks on open government and public ethics for local authorities in Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, and Kosovo\*. In addition, since 2021, the bE-Open online tool provides quick and easy access to relevant international standards and local context, legislation, examples of case law related to corruption, guidelines and good practices in open local government and public ethics. This set of tools is complemented by capacity development activities.*

*Stronger gender equality and human rights perspectives are implemented in all activities to promote the participation and representation of women in local political life. The support to gender mainstreaming, as well as to the fight against sexism and the participation and inclusion of under-*

---

<sup>1</sup> Improving the impact of Congress recommendations, Guidelines for co-operation activities in Council of Europe member States, CG/BUR/2015(27)31, March 2015, available at <https://rm.coe.int/168071a684>

<sup>2</sup> 2021-2026 Priorities of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, CG (2021)40-05, March 2021, available at <https://rm.coe.int/2021-2026-priorities-of-the-congress-of-local-and-regional-authorities/1680a1b0bd>

*represented groups, especially internally displaced persons, minorities and migrants at local level, is thereby intensified.*

*The co-operation activities contribute to the implementation of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – to achieving Sustainable Development Goals 3 (Good health and well-being), 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).*

## **A. BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA**

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Congress continued co-operation with the City of Mostar and expanded its activities with 23 other local authorities and their associations within the project on “Innovating democratic participation at local level” (2022-2024), as part of the Council of Europe Action Plan for Bosnia and Herzegovina 2022-2025.

In September 2022, the European Conference on “Democratic Renewal: innovating with deliberative democracy” was held in the city of Mostar. It brought together local and regional officials from Bosnia and Herzegovina and international elected representatives and experts from various cities and regions. The participants discussed deliberative approaches in decision-making as a response to democratic backsliding. Congress members Karl Heinz LAMBERTZ and Stewart DICKSON participated in the conference and shared the experiences from their constituencies in engaging citizens through deliberative processes.

The first Tripartite Memorandum of Understanding between the Congress and the two associations of local authorities from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska was signed in September 2022, to foster the implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, as well as the principles of open government and public ethics at the local level in the country.

In November 2022, local authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina met to discuss the new legislative environment in the area of public procurement, during a two-part online event on “Transparent and accountable public procurement: legislation, trends and good practices”. Congress members James MOLONEY (Ireland, ILDG) and Andrew BOFF participated in the exchange of views with members of the Platform of Exchange on open local governance. Participants discussed the importance of an ethical and accountable approach in the public procurement cycle, and the technology driving reforms in these areas, including open data platforms and portals that contribute to transparency and prevention of corruption at local level, in the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s progress towards the European Union membership.

The cities of Banja Luka and Mostar were granted support by the Congress to commission citizens’ assemblies in 2023. Two grant agreements were signed in February 2023 respectively with the Mayor of Banja Luka, and the Mayor of Mostar and the co-creation processes will run in parallel in the two cities. In addition, the Congress is providing tailored capacity development activities to support both cities in this endeavour, as well as the City of Sarajevo and municipality of Modrica who have demonstrated their interest in embarking on such an approach to citizens’ participation in local decision-making. The peer-exchanges, know-how and lessons learned from these democratic practices will contribute to further strengthen openness and inclusiveness of local authorities in the country.

## **B. GEORGIA**

In Georgia, the Congress is implementing a project on “Strengthening participatory democracy and human rights at local level” (2020-2023) jointly with the Directorate General of Democracy and Human Dignity of the Council of Europe.

The Forum of Exchange on Human Rights met for the second time in October 2022. Georgian mayors shared their current practices, capacities, and visions for human rights implementation at local level, and discussed their needs and perspectives for sustainable change. Based on their reflection on common challenges and practices, the members of the Forum agreed on a Declaration which calls upon the National Association of Local Authorities of Georgia (NALAG) to strengthen its advocacy efforts within human rights multilevel governance, to consolidate its position as a leading stakeholder in multi-level dialogue in Georgia. Congress Spokesperson on Human Rights Harald BERGMANN stressed that mainstreaming human rights made local authorities more accountable towards citizens

and that it was local authorities' responsibility as local leaders to enhance citizens' awareness on their rights and to provide the conditions for their full enjoyment.

A workshop on human rights and the environment at the local level was organised online in December 2022. It brought together 70 participants, including local authorities, representatives from the Prime Minister's Office and the Public Defender's regional offices as well as civil society organisations from Georgia. Congress rapporteurs Belinda GOTTARDI and Levan ZHORZHOLIANI presented the Congress report on "A fundamental right to the environment – a matter for local and regional authorities", and discussed with the participants specific recommendations to help local authorities address challenges in the sphere of environmental protection and climate change, stressing the interrelation between the environment and the relevant human rights at local level in Georgia. The workshop also presented the Congress' latest human rights handbook for local and regional authorities, which has been translated into Georgian. The Georgian local authorities stressed the importance of strengthening the participation of citizens, and especially of youth and vulnerable groups, in identifying sustainable solutions in the fight against environmental degradation and climate change.

A new learning path on antidiscrimination was launched for the members of the Forum of Exchange in February 2023. Co-organised with NALAG, the learning path focuses on strengthening capacities for developing sustainable and innovative anti-discrimination policies and measures, such as inclusive public campaigns, and codes of ethics within public administration. It includes a series of workshops, a roundtable, and online learning tools for peer-exchange and learning. The launching workshop was dedicated to identifying effective tools and mechanisms for developing and updating policies and practices for anti-discrimination and inclusion of underrepresented individuals and groups. 75 representatives of national and local authorities, including representatives of the Ministry of regional development and infrastructure, the administration of the government, and the Public Defender's Office, shared their perspectives for future engagement in efficient anti-discrimination strategies and actions.

Moreover, as part of the support to NALAG, a committee on localising human rights held its first meeting in March 2023. The Committee was established to steer the efforts of the association in advocating for local authorities' contribution to the country human rights commitments.

## C. THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

In the Republic of Moldova, the Congress is implementing the project "Reinforcing the culture of dialogue and ethical open local governance in the Republic of Moldova" (March 2022 – March 2024). It aims to strengthen the political dialogue between local and central authorities, provide support for improving the quality of local governance through integrity, corruption prevention, open government, public ethics, and gender equality at local level, as well as support authorities with migration management.

In partnership with the Congress of Local Authorities from Moldova (CALM), the Congress organised a roundtable to strengthen dialogue-building and promote effective consultation in Moldova, in October 2022. The discussions focussed on the analysis of existing consultation mechanisms in Moldova, and on ways to enhance the functioning and effectiveness of the consultation and dialogue-building process.

At the request of CALM, the Congress contributed to the development of the Public Administration Reform Strategy for 2023-2030, through recommendations to align it with the principles of the European Charter on Local Self-Government. The Strategy was adopted by the Government in March 2023; it took into consideration most important Congress recommendations. The Strategy refers to the 2022 post-monitoring report and to the Roadmap on local democracy signed between the Government of the Republic of Moldova and the Congress in April 2021.

## D. UKRAINE

In Ukraine, the Congress finalised the implementation of the project "Strengthening local democratic governance in Ukraine" (2021-2022) within the Priority Adjustments of the Council of Europe Action Plan for Ukraine 2019-2022 and is currently implementing the project "Strengthening multi-level governance, democracy and human rights at local level" (2023-2024) as part of the Council of Europe Action Plan for Ukraine "Resilience, Recovery and Reconstruction" 2023-2026.

In October 2022, the Congress, Open Government Partnership (OGP) and the Association of Ukrainian Cities (AUC) signed a tripartite Memorandum of Understanding committing to further support Ukrainian local authorities in preserving their adherence to the principles of open government and nurture innovative democratic processes at local level for ensuring rapid and stable reconstruction of Ukrainian communities as well as efficient functioning of local authorities. In the same month, an event to award best local practices on open government in times of war was organised jointly with the AUC and has resulted in around 100 applications.

During the autumn of 2022, the Congress prepared the Concept of a Manual for local authorities and their national associations on responding to the crisis situations. It was developed in close co-ordination with the AUC, and their member communities. The Manual aims to gather and provide good examples of functioning of local authorities in times of war, making efforts to best meet the needs of local population by providing essential services.

The Platform for National-Local Dialogue on open government held its third meeting online, in December 2022, gathering local authorities, members of the AUC, representatives of the Government and the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. The meeting discussions stressed the need to further enhance open government as well as foster multi-level governance synergies in the context of the emergency situation and war context.

In January 2023, the Congress published the survey on the needs and priorities of local authorities of Ukraine in times of war<sup>3</sup> conducted in close co-operation with the AUC. The study sheds light on the readiness of local authorities in Ukraine to respond to multiple war-related crises as they have proven to be actors of democratic resilience.

The new project “Strengthening multi-level governance, democracy and human rights at local level in Ukraine” was officially launched in February 2023, with the participation of Ukrainian stakeholders and the Congress Secretary General who emphasised that the support of the Congress in strengthening and fostering genuine grassroots democracy which cannot be done without strong local authorities and communities. A broad range of Ukrainian partners and stakeholders participated in the event, including representatives of the Parliament and the Government of Ukraine, members of the delegation of Ukraine to the Congress, local and regional authorities and their national associations. They discussed the strategic orientation of the Congress’ new project to better address the needs of project beneficiaries and to further strengthen co-operation with main stakeholders.

In March 2023, around 100 local and regional authorities in Ukraine were introduced with the topic of deliberative democracy. Congress members Jelena DRENJANIN (Sweden, EPP/CCE) and Stewart DICKSON underlined that these innovative practices have proven to be efficient in strengthening inclusive and collaborative decision-making, which is key for a sustainable recovery in Ukraine. The discussions allowed participants to exchange about good practices from other European peers, learning about the key ingredients a deliberative process should embed. As a result of the exchanges, a large number of Ukrainian municipalities expressed strong interest and readiness to introduce deliberative democracy models in their local communities, as they contribute to increase accountability, legitimacy and ultimately trust of local public institutions.

## **E. MULTILATERAL PROJECT ON MIGRATION**

The Congress is implementing a multilateral project aimed at strengthening resilience in local and regional authorities facing migration challenges in Poland, in the Republic of Moldova, and in Romania (January 2023 - December 2024) in the framework of the Council of Europe Action Plan on protecting vulnerable persons in the context of migration and asylum in Europe (2021-2025).

## **F. SOUTH MED PARTNERSHIP**

*The South-Med Partnership is designed as a framework for privileged cooperation with the Council of Europe neighbouring countries. The thematic spokespersons are Xavier CADORET, Gunn-Marit HELGESEN, Konstantinos KOUKAS and Carla DEJONGHE (Belgium, IDLG).*

---

<sup>3</sup> Report of the survey on the needs and priorities of local authorities in Ukraine in times of war: <https://rm.coe.int/1680a9f1fe>

### **Partner for Local Democracy status**

*Introduced in 2014, the Partner for Local Democracy status<sup>4</sup> 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 aimed at strengthening good governance at local and regional level. This status is granted at the request of the countries concerned. Through their participation in the work of the Congress, the delegations from the beneficiary countries help to promote local democracy in their own countries.*

*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.*

The Congress President participated in the 4<sup>th</sup> Parliamentary Forum of Regions in Rabat, on 19 October 2022 (see I. POLITICAL AGENDA).

The Prefect of Rabat, President of the Moroccan Association of Presidents of Councils of Prefectures and Provinces and the Mayor of Raoued, President of the National Federation of Tunisian Communities, addressed Congress members during the 43<sup>rd</sup> Session, during the debate on co-operation activities of the Congress (see II. ACTIVITIES OF THE CONGRESS BODIES).

The President made a statement on the decision of the Tunisian President to dissolve elected local councils in March 2023 (see I. POLITICAL AGENDA).

---

<sup>4</sup> [Resolution 376\(2014\)](#)

# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX 1

43<sup>rd</sup> SESSION – October 2022

### Adopted Resolutions and Recommendations



43<sup>rd</sup> SESSION

#### Adopted texts

##### Recommendations

<i>Recommendation 478</i>	Hate speech and fake news: the impact on working conditions of local and regional elected representatives
<i>Recommendation 479</i>	Monitoring of the European Charter of Local Self-government in Denmark
<i>Recommendation 480</i>	Smart cities and regions - prospects for a human rights-based governance approach
<i>Recommendation 481</i>	Reception of women and children refugees in Europe's cities and regions
<i>Recommendation 482</i>	Partial local elections in Belgrade and several other municipalities in Serbia (3 April 2022)
<i>Recommendation 483</i>	Regional identities: promoting dialogue and diversity in unity
<i>Recommendation 484</i>	A fundamental right to the environment: a matter for local and regional authorities - <i>towards a green reading of the European Charter of Local Self-government</i>
<i>Recommendation 485</i>	Monitoring of the European Charter of Local Self-government in Sweden
<i>Recommendation 486</i>	Monitoring of the European Charter of Local Self-government in the Czech Republic
<i>Recommendation 487</i>	Monitoring of the European Charter of Local Self-government in Belgium
<i>Recommendation 488</i>	Municipal elections in the Netherlands (16 March 2022)

##### Resolutions

<i>Resolution 483</i>	Verification of new members' credentials
<i>Resolution 484</i>	Revised Code of Good Practice on Referendums (adopted by the Council for Democratic Elections and the Venice Commission)
<i>Resolution 485</i>	Hate speech and fake news: the impact on working conditions of local and regional elected representatives
<i>Resolution 486</i>	Smart cities and regions - prospects for a human rights-based governance approach
<i>Resolution 487</i>	Reception of women and children refugees in Europe's cities and regions
<i>Resolution 488</i>	Regional identities: promoting dialogue and diversity in unity
<i>Resolution 489</i>	A fundamental right to the environment: a matter for local and regional authorities – <i>towards a green reading of the European Charter of Local Self-government</i>
<i>Resolution 490</i>	Human rights handbook for local and regional authorities Environment and sustainable development

## APPENDIX 2

### Agenda of the 44<sup>th</sup> session



CG(2023)44-OJ-prov  
23 March 2023

## 44th Session of the Congress

Strasbourg, Palais de l'Europe and European Parliament  
21-23 March 2023

### AGENDA PUBLIC MEETING

Simultaneous interpretation will be provided in the two official languages of the Council of Europe (English and French) and in German, Italian and Turkish 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\(2023\)44-01\]](#)

Key:  
EN English  
FR French  
DE German  
IT Italian  
TR Turkish

Due to renovation of the Council of Europe's Hemicycle, all plenary sittings of the Congress in 2023 will be held in the European Parliament hemicycle.

All other meetings will be held in the Palais de l'Europe.

*By taking the floor to speak in the meeting, you agree for your statement to be filmed and recorded. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe may use the material for internal and external communication purposes.  
Personal data will be processed in compliance with the [Secretary General's Regulation of 17 April 1989 instituting a system of data protection for personal data files at the Council of Europe](#), and with due regard to the [Convention for the Protection of Individuals with regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data \(ETS No. 108\)](#) and its [Amending Protocol \(CETS No. 223\)](#).  
The Council of Europe is not responsible for any use made of the video or audio material of this meeting by a third party, which requires express consent of the participants in the session.*

## Monday 20 March 2023 – meetings held in the Palais de l'Europe

Bureaux meetings [EN/FR/DE/IT]	
9.30-10.30, Room 6	Bureau of the Chamber of Regions
9.30-10.30, Room 8	Bureau of the Chamber of Local Authorities
10.45-12.15 and 14.00-15.30, Room 9	Bureau of the Congress
Political group meetings - 15.45-17.45	
Room 9	European People's Party Group in the Congress (EPP/CCE) [EN/FR/DE/IT/TR]
Room 8	Socialist Group, Greens and Progressive Democrats (SOC/G/PPD) [EN/FR/DE/IT/TR]
Room 6	Independent and Liberal Democrat Group (ILDG) [EN/FR/DE/IT/TR]
Room 10	European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR) [EN/IT/TR]
Secretaries of national delegations meeting - 15.40-16.20	
Room 11	Information meeting followed by an informal coffee break with the youth delegates

## Tuesday 21 March 2023 – Palais de l'Europe

8.30 **OPENING** in the lobby of the hemicycle of the Palais de l'Europe:  
Solidarity market in aid Türkiye organised jointly with the Parliamentary Assembly and the Staff Amicale of the Council of Europe

### Committee meetings [EN/FR/DE/IT/TR] – meetings held in the Palais de l'Europe

Monitoring Committee	9.00-11.00, Room 1
Current Affairs Committee	9.00-11.00, Room 9
Governance Committee	9.00-11.00, Room 5
11.10	<b>EVENT: Inauguration: Solidarity market for Türkiye</b> (organised jointly with the Parliamentary Assembly and the Staff Amicale)
<b>Workshop on the revision of the European Urban Charter</b> [EN/FR/DE/IT/TR] 11.15-12.30, Room 1  <div style="display: flex; justify-content: center; gap: 20px;">  <a href="#">CG-GOV(2023)1-04</a> ;             <a href="#">CG-GOV(2023)1-05</a> </div>	
12.30	<b>EVENT: Musical interlude with traditional performers and national pastries on the occasion of Novruz</b> (Permanent Representation of the Republic of Azerbaijan)
13.00	<b>EVENT: "Role of local and regional authorities in education for democratic citizenship"</b> organised by the Organisation internationale de la francophonie and the Council of Europe - Room 9, Palais de l'Europe (French only)

**Tuesday 21 March 2023 - meeting held in the European Parliament Hemicycle**  
**Plenary sitting** [EN/FR/DE/IT/TR]

14.30-19.00

\* Deadline for tabling amendments: 10.00 Tuesday 14 March 2023

14.30	<b>Opening of the 44th Session of the Congress by the President</b> Leendert VERBEEK
14.35	<b>Verification of new members' credentials</b> [CG(2023)44-04]  Presentation by the co-rapporteurs: Xavier CADORET, France (L, SOC/G/PD) and Aleksandra MALETIĆ, Serbia (R, EPP/CCE) Debate and vote on the draft resolution [CG(2023)44-02]* 
14.50	<b>Adoption of the agenda of the 44th Session</b> [CG(2023)44-OJ] <b>Adoption of the minutes of the last sitting of the 43rd Session (27 October 2022)</b> [CG(2022)43-PV-03] <b>Adoption of the composition of Congress committees</b> [CG(2023)44-03] 
15.00	<b>Communication by the President</b> [CG(2023)44-12] Debate
15.30	<b>Statement by Marija PEJČINOVIĆ-BURIĆ, Secretary General of the Council of Europe</b> Questions
16.15	<b>The Russian Federation's war against Ukraine</b>  Presentation by the rapporteur: Leendert VERBEEK, Netherlands (R, SOC/G/PD) Video message from: - Dmytro LUBINETZ, Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights  Debate  Vote on the amendments [CG(2023)44-18-AMDT] and on the draft declaration [CG(2023)44-16]*
17.45	<b>Statement by Tiny KOX, President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe</b> Questions
18.30	<b>Regional Council and District Assembly Elections in Berlin, Germany (12 February 2023)</b>  Presentation by the rapporteur: Vladimir PREBILIC, Slovenia (L, SOC/G/PD)  Debate and vote on the draft recommendation [CG(2023)44-14]*
19.00	<b>Close of the sitting</b>
20.00	<i>EVENT: Classical music concert under the auspices of the Icelandic Presidency of the Committee of Ministers – Notre-Dame Cathedral, Strasbourg (registration required via the link on the Congress session website)</i>

**Wednesday 22 March 2023** *meeting held in the Palais de l'Europe*

**Chamber of Local Authorities** [EN/FR/DE/IT/TR]

9.30-12.30, Room 1

\* *Deadline for tabling amendments: 10.00 Wednesday 15 March 2023*

9.30	<b>Opening of the session of the chamber by the President</b> Bernad VÖHRINGER	
9.32	<b>Adoption of the agenda of the chamber</b> <a href="#">[CG(2023)44-OJ]</a>	
9.34	<b>Communication by the President</b> <a href="#">[CPL(2023)44-01]</a>	
9.50 	<b>Report on the observation of local elections in the Republic of Slovenia (20 November 2022)</b> Presentation by the rapporteur: David ERAY, Switzerland, (R, EPP/CCE) Debate and vote on the draft recommendation <a href="#">[CPL(2023)44-02]*</a>	
10.20 	<b>Strong democracies through youth engagement at local level</b> <a href="#">[CPL(2023)44-03]</a> Statements by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Hugo BIOLLEY, Mayor of Vinzieux, France</li><li>- Kerry HOPPE, VOTE 16 Initiative</li><li>- Despoina PANTELI, Youth delegate, Greece</li></ul> Debate	
11.30 	<b>Direct election of mayors</b> <a href="#">[CPL(2023)44-04]</a> Statements by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Marianne SCHUURMANS-WIJDEVEN, Mayor of Haarlemmermeer, The Netherlands</li><li>- Joanne ANDERSON, Mayor of Liverpool, United Kingdom</li><li>- Konstantinos KOUKAS, Mayor of Mykonos, Greece</li></ul> Debate	
12.29	<b>Adoption of the abridged report of the session of the chamber</b> <a href="#">[CPL(2023)44-DEC]</a>	
12.30	<b>Close of the session of the chamber by the President</b>	
12.30	<i>EVENT: Testimonies of Ukrainian Prisoners of War and their families (Ukrainian national delegation and Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs) – Lobby of the hemicycle of the Council of Europe</i>	

Wednesday 22 March 2023 - meeting held in the Palais de l'Europe

Chamber of Regions [EN/FR/DE/IT/TR]

9.30-12.30, Room 9

\* Deadline for tabling amendments: 10.00 Wednesday 15 March 2023

9.30	<b>Opening of the session of the chamber by the President</b> Harald SONDEREGGER	
9.32	<b>Adoption of the agenda of the chamber</b> [CG(2023)44-OJ]	
9.34	<b>Communication by the President</b> [CPR(2023)44-01]	
9.50	<b>Report on the observation of cantonal elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina (2 October 2022)</b> Presentation by the rapporteur: Stewart DICKSON, United Kingdom (R, ILDG) Debate and vote on the draft recommendation [CPR(2023)44-02]*	
10.20	<b>Are regional interests sufficiently represented through the second chamber of parliaments?</b> [CPR(2023)44-03] Statements by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Rafael BUSTOS GISBERT, Member of the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe, Spain</li><li>- Günter KOVACS, President of the Bundesrat, Austria</li><li>- Vasile DÎNCU, Senator, Chairperson of the European Affairs Committee, Romania</li><li>- Daria TERRÁDEZ SALOM, Director General for the European Union of the Valencia Region, Spain</li></ul> Debate	
11.30	<b>Regional strategies for the protection of the environment</b> [CPR(2023)44-03] Statements by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Levan ZHORZHOLIANI, Co-rapporteur on the green reading of the European Charter of Local Self-Government / on human rights and the environment, Georgia, R (SOC/G/PD)</li><li>- Pascale GAILLOT, Regional Councilor and President of the Environment Commission of the Grand Est Region, France</li><li>- Joris BENGEOORD, Treasurer of the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR), Mayor of Winterswijk, Netherlands</li><li>- Richárd Levente BAKKAY, Youth delegate, Hungary</li></ul> Debate	
12.29	<b>Adoption of the abridged report of the session of the chamber</b> [CPR(2023)44-DEC]	
12.30	<b>Close of the session of the chamber by the President</b>	
12.30	<b>EVENT: Testimonies of Ukrainian Prisoners of War and their families (Ukrainian national delegation and Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs) – Lobby of the hemicycle of the Council of Europe</b>	

Wednesday 22 March 2023 - meeting held in the European Parliament Hemicycle

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

14.30-19.30

\* Deadline for tabling amendments: 10.00 Wednesday 15 March 2023

14.30	Adoption of the minutes of the sitting of the Congress on 21 March 2023 <a href="#">[CG(2023)44-PV-01]</a> 
14.32	Adoption of texts approved by the Chamber of Local Authorities and the Chamber of Regions <a href="#">[CG(2023)44-08]</a> 
14.35	<b>Icelandic Presidency of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe (9 November 2022 – May 2023)</b> <b>Statement by Sigurður Ingi Jóhannsson, Minister of Infrastructure, on behalf of the Icelandic Presidency of the Committee of Ministers</b> Questions
15.35	 <b>Embedding democracy at grassroots level: the future of the Council of Europe and the role of the Congress therein. The Congress contribution to the 4<sup>th</sup> Summit of the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe on 16-17 May 2023 in Reykjavik, Iceland</b> Presentation by the co-rapporteurs: Bernd VÖHRINGER, Germany (L, EPP/CCE) and Harald SONDEREGGER, Austria (R, EPP/CCE)  Debate  Vote on the amendments <a href="#">[CG(2023)44-10-AMDT]</a> and on the draft recommendation <a href="#">[CG(2023)44-10]*</a>
16.50	<b>Statement by Síofra O'LEARY, President of the European Court of Human Rights</b>
17.20	 <b>Localisation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)</b> Presentation by the co-rapporteurs: Xavier CADORET, France (L, SOC/G/PD) and Gunn Marit HELGESEN, Norway (R, EPP/CCE) Video message from Maimunah MOHD SHARIF, Executive Director of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) Statements by: - Armen GEVORGYAN, General Rapporteur on local and regional authorities, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe - Gail MacGREGOR, Councillor, Annandale North Ward Dumfries and Galloway, CEMR spokesperson on Agenda 2030 and SDGs - Abdelaziz DEROUICHE, Prefect of Rabat, President of the Moroccan Association of Presidents of Councils of Prefectures and Provinces, Morocco Debate  Vote on the amendments <a href="#">[CG(2023)44-13-AMDT]</a> and on the draft recommendation <a href="#">[CG(2023)44-13]*</a>
19.30	Close of the sitting

Thursday 23 March 2023 - meeting held in the European Parliament Hemicycle

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

9.30-13.00

\* Deadline for tabling amendments: 10.00 Thursday 16 March 2023

9.30	<b>Adoption of the minutes of the sessions of the chambers and of the sitting of the Congress on 22 March 2023</b> <a href="#">[CPL(2023)44-PV]</a> , <a href="#">[CPR(2023)44-PV]</a> and <a href="#">[CG(2023)44-PV-02]</a> 
9.35	<b>Statement by Dagur B. EGGERTSSON, Mayor of Reykjavík, Iceland</b> Exchange of views
10.25 	<b>Monitoring of the European Charter of Local Self-government in Romania</b> Presentation by the co-rapporteurs: Marc COOLS, Belgium (L, ILDG) and David ERAY, Switzerland (R, EPP/CCE) Debate and vote on the draft recommendation <a href="#">[CG(2023)44-11]</a> *  <b>Statement by Attila-Zoltán CSEKE, Minister for Development, Public Works and Administration of Romania</b> Exchange of views
11.25	<b>Resilience of cities and regions in the face of multiple crises</b> Presentation by Andrew BOFF, United Kingdom, (R, ECR) Statements by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Uğur İbrahim ALTAY, Mayor of Konya Metropolitan Municipality, Türkiye, Executive President of United Cities and Local Governments</li><li>- Marvin REES, Mayor of Bristol, United Kingdom</li><li>- Dema ELYA, Youth delegate, Netherlands</li></ul> Debate
12.55	<b>Adoption of the abridged report of the 44th Session</b> <a href="#">[CG(2023)44-DEC]</a> 
13.00	<b>Close of the 44th Session by the President of the Congress</b>

**A**s 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 46 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 46 member states in the Committee of Ministers with a record of its activities.



[www.coe.int/congress](http://www.coe.int/congress)  
[congress.adm@coe.int](mailto:congress.adm@coe.int)

PREMS 024823

ENG

[www.coe.int](http://www.coe.int)

The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 46 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 46 member states. Composed of two chambers – the Chamber of Local Authorities and the Chamber of Regions – and three committees, it brings together 612 elected officials representing more than 130 000 local and regional authorities.

The Congress  
  
Le Congrès

COUNCIL OF EUROPE  
  
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE