

1568th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies

9 September 2026, 12:00

CM Room

Gunn Marit Helgesen, President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities

Mister President,

Mister Secretary General,

Distinguished Ambassadors,

Before speaking as President of the Congress, allow me to say, as a Norwegian, how grateful I am for the thoughtful messages received from the Council of Europe leadership and from your countries following the passing of King Harald V. They have been deeply appreciated.

This is also the first time I have the honour of addressing the Committee of Ministers as President of the Congress. I would like to thank you for your warm welcome and for the many constructive

exchanges I have already had with so many of you. And let me also congratulate the new Deputy Secretary General on her election.

For my first address to this Committee, I would like to take the long view.

Not simply to report on the work of the Congress, but to share with you what we see when we look at the state of European democracy **from the ground up**, and how, together, we can respond to the warning signs of democratic backsliding.

Our monitoring of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, together with our observation of local elections, gives us a unique, evidence-based picture of how democracy works in practice across our member states. **So, what do we see when we look at democracy from the ground up?**

The picture is mixed.

There are good reasons for confidence. But there are also warning signs that none of us should ignore.

Across our membership, local democracy has made real progress.

Subsidiarity is increasingly embedded in national legislation.

Territorial reforms have strengthened the capacity of local authorities. And citizens are increasingly being given a direct voice in local decisions.

These are important achievements.

But they tell only one part of the story.

In a number of countries, we also see increased centralisation of power, unclear divisions of responsibility, and consultations that do not always work in practice.

We also see restrictions on the rights of the political opposition.

And when governments face economic, security or other crises, the temptation to resort to top-down solutions can be strong.

Yet it is precisely in times of crisis that our democratic safeguards matter most.

We are also concerned by the use of criminal legislation to prosecute and detain elected mayors, particularly where questions arise about proportionality and the targeting of political opponents.

The use of prolonged pre-trial detention is particularly questionable when they apply to elected representatives and may call into question convention rights as recently stressed by a Venice Commission report.

This summer, our Turkish Congress Vice-President Sinem Dedetaş was detained. She joins two other Congress members from the Turkish national delegation and numerous opposition mayors currently in detention. Istanbul Mayor Ekrem Imamoglu has now been in pre-trial detention for almost one and a half years.

We will continue to raise these concerns, firmly but constructively, in our political dialogue with Member States.

But the role of the Congress is not simply to observe democratic deterioration.

Our role is to help detect it, prevent it and, when necessary, respond to it.

First, **we detect.**

Through our monitoring, election observation, post-monitoring and close relationships with local authorities, we can identify warning signs early.

And very often, when democracy begins to weaken, **we see it locally first.**

We see it when elected councils lose competences without genuine consultation.

We see it when local authorities are given responsibilities without the resources to exercise them.

And we see it most starkly when the democratic choices made by citizens at the ballot box are undermined.

Second, **we prevent**.

Through political dialogue and cooperation, we help improve legislation, implement decentralisation reforms, strengthen consultation and create meaningful opportunities for citizens to participate in public life. We also work with Member States to implement reforms, for example in the Western Balkans with the Eu funded LORAI project.

And third, **we respond**.

When a situation becomes particularly serious, we must be ready to act through political statements, fact-finding visits, dialogue and other measures aimed at finding solutions together.

This capacity to **detect, prevent and respond** is precisely what the Congress can bring to the New Democratic Pact for Europe and to the wider reform of our Organisation.

When the Secretary General first launched the idea of a Democratic Pact, it was clear that the Congress should and would engage.

Because the Pact will succeed only if it reaches the level where citizens actually experience democracy in their daily lives.

This is why we have been so active in the consultation process.

Our proposals will focus on issues including electoral integrity, deliberative democracy and violence against elected representatives.

We also look forward to contributing to the Secretary General's reform proposals, particularly the development of possible alert mechanisms in situations of democratic crisis.

And nowhere is the importance of resilient local democracy clearer today than in Ukraine.

Ukraine reminds us that local democracy is not a luxury reserved for times of peace.

It is part of a country's democratic resilience including in wartime.

As long as Russia's war of aggression continues, Ukraine will remain the Congress's paramount priority.

We believe in Ukraine and its leaders, and we work with them at all levels of government through our High-Level Dialogue supporting decentralisation, the transition from military to civilian administration, strategies for de-occupied territories and preparations for future local elections.

The objective is not only reconstruction.

It is to help ensure that, as Ukraine rebuilds, it does so on the foundations of **strong, accountable and democratic local government**.

Democratic resilience is not the only challenge testing our communities.

The environmental crisis is doing so as well.

A very significant share of climate mitigation measures is implemented at subnational level. There can therefore be no successful environmental transition without the involvement of our towns, cities and regions.

The Congress has made sustainable development an important part of its work from natural disasters and climate hazards to water stress, coastal erosion and biodiversity.

At the United Nations, I also stressed, when I met the UN Secretary General, the importance of implementing the Sustainable

Development Goals locally, and of ensuring that the post-2030 agenda has a strong local dimension.

Mister President,

Mister Secretary General,

Distinguished Ambassadors,

The challenges I have described today are different in nature.

Democratic backsliding. War. Environmental disruption.

But they have something important in common.

Ultimately, they are experienced by people in the communities where they live.

And this is why strong local democracy is a key concern of our Organisation. It is part of the democratic security of Europe.

The Congress is ready to play its full part with its political mandate, its monitoring expertise, its cooperation capacity and its presence on the ground.

Nearly two centuries ago, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote:

“A nation may establish a system of free government, but without the spirit of municipal institutions, it cannot have the spirit of liberty.”

His words have not aged.

If anything, they have become more urgent.

Because democracy is experienced locally.

Democratic resilience is built locally.

And the warning signs of democratic decline often appear locally first.

That is why the Congress stands ready to work with you: to detect those signs earlier, to respond to them together, and to strengthen democracy from the ground up.

Because democratic security begins at the local level.

And if we fail to protect it there, it can end there too.

Thank you.