

44th SESSION

Report
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AMENDMENTS

Embedding democracy at grassroots level: the future of the Council of Europe and the role of the Congress therein

Congress contribution to the 4th Summit of the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe on 16-17 May 2023 in Reykjavik, Iceland

Co-rapporteurs:¹ Bernd VÖHRINGER (Germany, L, EPP/CCE), President of the Chamber of Local Authorities
Harald SONDEREGGER (Austria, R, EPP/CCE), President of the Chamber of Regions

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Summary

Thirty years ago, the First Summit of Heads of States and Governments, considering that one of the bases of a democratic society is the existence of a solid and effective local and regional democracy, in conformity with the principle of subsidiarity, decided to create another consultative organ – the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities. This confirmed the Council of Europe's ambitious will to be an intergovernmental institution bringing together not only national governments and parliamentarians but also local governments.

Since the 1993 Vienna Summit, the role of local and regional authorities in managing challenges, together with national governments, has greatly increased as also acknowledged by the second and third summits in 1997 and 2005.

Today, in the Council of Europe, the Congress represents, through its members, 130,000 local and regional authorities from 46 member States. This network of elected representatives constitutes a huge asset for the Organisation and its member States as it contributes to anchoring the fundamental values of the Organisation and to the implementation of its activities at local and regional level.

The intergovernmental work carried out by the Council of Europe is thus firmly rooted in the life of the local and regional communities.

¹ L: Chamber of Local Authorities / R: Chamber of Regions
EPP/CCE: European People's Party Group in the Congress
SOC/G/PD: Group of Socialists, Greens and Progressive Democrats
ILDG: Independent Liberal and Democratic Group
ECR: European Conservatives and Reformists Group
NR: Members not belonging to a political group of the Congress

In order to successfully address common challenges and respond to European citizens' needs, the Congress, together with the Parliamentary Assembly, as the two political assemblies of elected representatives within the Council of Europe, should play a greater role in fulfilling the Council of Europe's mandate and acting as multipliers of the Organisation's standards and values at all levels of governance.

To this end, the Congress is asking the Heads of State and Government at the Reykjavik Summit to recognise the role of local and regional authorities in delivering democracy, human rights and the rule of law in their communities, and thereby the role of the Congress in transmitting the work and values of the Council of Europe at the level closest to the citizen.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION**The Congress, one of the two political assemblies within the Council of Europe**

1. Since the Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe in Vienna in 1993, where the creation of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities was decided, the member States have increasingly recognised the fundamental role of the institutions of local democracy in preserving stability in Europe.
2. It is undeniable that greater unity both between States and within the States themselves starts at the level of cities, municipalities and regions. Local and regional authorities play an important role in making European democracy more stable and more resilient and have proven their capacity to relay and implement national policies while duly fulfilling their responsibilities in tackling everyday challenges and crisis situations as clearly highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine.
3. Today, in the Council of Europe, the Congress represents, through its members, 130,000 local and regional authorities from 46 member States. This network of elected representatives delivers the local dimension of the Organisation's work in the fields of human rights, the rule of law and democracy, thus constituting a crucial asset for the Organisation and firmly rooting the intergovernmental work carried out by the Council of Europe in the life of local and regional communities.
4. A greater involvement of local and regional authorities and the Congress in monitoring democratic progress, ensuring respect for human rights at the local level and defending the rule of law, would bring Europe and its values closer to the citizens.
5. The increasing role of local and regional governments in embedding democratic values at the grassroots, delivering on policies and recommendations of the national governments and the European Organisations has to go hand in hand with a stronger recognition of the Congress' key contribution to the political mission of the Council of Europe, as the conduit transmitting the work and values of the Organisation to the level closest to the citizen.
6. In order to successfully address common challenges and deliver solutions and support for all European citizens, local and regional authorities, and the Congress as their representative assembly at the European level, need recognition from national governments of the reality of decentralised governance in the member States and a strong, renewed commitment to grassroots democracy. This commitment should be reflected in a stronger political position for the Congress in the institutional architecture of the Council of Europe.

Amendment 1

Presented by Josef FREY, Germany, R, SOC/G/PD.

Signed by: Stefan FASSBINDER, Germany, L, SOC/G/PD; James MOLONEY, Ireland, L, ILDG; Véronique BERTHOLLE, France, L, SOC/G/PD; Axel BOOMGAARS, Netherlands, L, SOC/G/PD; Joris BENGEOVOORD, Lithuania, L, SOC/G/PD

In paragraph 6, insert the following sentence at the end of the paragraph:

Ideally, the role of the Congress within the Council of Europe could be upgraded to that of a second political chamber comparable to the Parliamentary Assembly.

7. The Congress, together with the Parliamentary Assembly, as the two political assemblies of elected representatives within the Council of Europe, should play a greater role in fulfilling the Council of Europe's mandate and acting as multipliers of the Organisation's standards and values at all levels of governance.

A historic duty: supporting Ukraine

8. Since Thursday 24 February 2022, Ukraine has been subjected to an aggression by the Russian Federation. This war is a tragedy for Ukraine and its people who have shown strength and courage in their resistance. This war is also a tragedy for Europe.

Amendment 2

Presented by the Co-Rapporteurs Bernd VÖHRINGER, Germany, L, EPP/CCE and Harald SONDEREGGER, Austria, R, EPP/CCE

In paragraph 8, replace “an aggression” by “a full-scale invasion”:

The paragraph would read:

Since Thursday 24 February 2022, Ukraine has been subjected to a full-scale invasion by the Russian Federation. This war is a tragedy for Ukraine and its people who have shown strength and courage in their resistance. This war is also a tragedy for Europe.

9. European and international solidarity has supported Ukraine in many ways, by welcoming refugees, by supporting the country financially or by providing defence and fighting capacities.

10. In this large mobilisation, the Ukrainian local and regional authorities have helped the country stand steadily and face the consequences of the war.

11. The Congress has unfailingly expressed its commitment to the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Ukraine, and it will continue to extend its unwavering support to Ukraine and its people.

12. In its areas of competence, the Congress has strengthened, and will continue to strengthen the local and regional authorities' resilience in the face of this aggression and its aftermath. In addition to condemning Russia's aggression and every action taken since then that undermines democracy, human rights and the rule of law, the Congress is mobilising its networks of cities, regions, institutions, and associations to support the creation and coordination of partnerships, humanitarian aid, exchange of know-how and technical co-operation between Ukrainian local and regional authorities and their counterparts in Europe. Under the Congress patronage, the matching platform “Cities4Cities/United for Ukraine” was established and continues to create long term partnerships between Ukrainian and other European cities and regions in delivering aid and support.

13. Since 2011 and now, within the new Council of Europe Action Plan “Resilience, Recovery and Reconstruction”, the Congress is implementing activities to strengthen and consolidate local democracy in the country and to promote multi-level governance, open government and a human-rights based approach at local level. It will also work to ensure the return to the respect of the principles of the European Charter of Local Self-Government after the end of the martial law.

14. These areas of cooperation are being identified together with the Ukrainian delegation to the Congress, the Ukrainian national authorities and the Ukrainian associations of local and regional authorities.

Securing a continent with strong democracies and more inclusive, sustainable and cohesive societies

15. The war in Ukraine has added to the unprecedented challenges that have undermined democratic security and trust over the past years.

16. Democratic societies are facing internal threats expressed in the increasing polarisation, socio-economic inequalities, the rise of populism, extremism, disinformation and hate speech. They are confronted also with external threats related to the impact of the war in Ukraine, migratory movements, pandemic threats, climate change, the energy transition and its consequences, which have also contributed to undermining citizens' trust in democratic institutions.

17. Some of these challenges are not new but the recurrence and gravity of the crises democratic societies are facing makes it ever more important to reassert unity and solidarity in Europe and to reflect on how to reinforce democracy, rule of law and human rights protection on the continent.

18. Challenges and crises affect all levels of governance. Central and local governments must act together, in synergy to respond to them in an efficient and sustainable way.

19. Adopting a bottom-up approach to defining strategies and policies at the highest level and engaging local governments, communities, and their leaders as partners can cement the political commitments of States, anchor the fundamental values of the Organisation, secure democratic stability, develop resilient, inclusive, and peaceful societies and thus prevent the atrocity of war.

20. The Congress stands ready to actively contribute to the implementation of the results of the 4th Summit of Heads of State and Government within its realm of competences, in complementarity with the Parliamentary Assembly and the intergovernmental sector, for the future of the continent and its citizens,

21. Within the Council of Europe, it can further provide tools and obtain results in enhanced quality of local democracy, increased participation and engagement of citizens and youth with its statutory activities based on the European Charter of Local Self-Government, with its cooperation activities and its thematic contributions.

22. In the light of the above, the Congress wishes to make the following recommendations to the 4th Summit of the Council of Europe member States set out below.

23. *With regard to the Congress as one of the two political assemblies at the Council of Europe, the Congress recommends that the Heads of State and Government:*

a. confirm and support the essential role of local and regional authorities in advancing and fulfilling the States' commitments to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law;

b. promote the political impact and work of the Congress in the institutional framework of the Council of Europe as the body representing the voices of 130,000 local and regional authorities;

c. recognise the role of local and regional authorities in delivering democracy, human rights and the rule of law in their communities, and thereby the role of the Congress – one of the two political assemblies of the Council of Europe – as the conduit transmitting the Organisation's values and work to the level closest to the citizen;

d. strengthen the Congress' coordination with the Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly as well as its contribution to the three pillars of the Organisation by:

i. inviting the Congress to participate in the joint committee coordinating the action between the Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly;

ii. consulting the Congress:

- on the admission / withdrawal of member States since it could inform on the state of local democracy in the State in question;

- before the adoption of draft conventions and protocols in order to make sure they are in line with the principles of local democracy;

e. mainstream all activities of the Organisation involving municipalities, cities and regions and their national associations under the umbrella of the Congress in order to ensure the coherence and efficiency of the Council of Europe activities on local democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

24. *With regard to the historic duty of supporting Ukraine, the Congress recommends that the Heads of State and Government:*

a. promote the ongoing and future work of the Congress in supporting Ukrainian local and regional authorities and their associations as well as their engagement with counterparts in other European countries, including in support of Ukrainian refugees;

b. support the Congress to further strengthen the capacities, competencies and resilience of local and regional authorities and their national associations, facilitate peer exchanges with their counterparts in Europe, contribute to their EU integration efforts and, when the time comes, to pursue Ukraine's local self-government reform;

c. involve the Congress as well as local governments in the recovery and reconstruction efforts of Ukraine;

d. support the "Cities4Cities/United for Ukraine" platform in further establishing a Europe-wide partnership programme between Ukrainian and other European cities.

25. With regard to securing a continent with strong democracies, the Congress recommends that the Heads of State and Government:

a. reaffirm their commitment to regular and comprehensive monitoring of the implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, the treaty setting out the principles of local democracy and ensure increased and more comprehensive co-operation between all Council of Europe monitoring mechanisms;

b. acknowledge the role of the Congress recommendations as an "early warning system" for the Council of Europe on the state of local and regional democracy in Europe, to reverse the worrying trends of democratic backsliding;

c. express their commitment to apply international electoral standards in local and regional elections and to facilitate their observation;

d. allow the Congress to observe local and regional elections on its own initiative;

Amendment 3

Presented by the Co-Rapporteurs Bernd VÖHRINGER, Germany, L, EPP/CCE and Harald SONDEREGGER, Austria, R, EPP/CCE

In paragraph 25.d replace: "allow the Congress to observe local and regional elections on its own initiative" by "automatically invite the Congress to observe local and regional elections".

e. commit to more active participation by States in post-monitoring and post-electoral political dialogue and, when needed, to further cooperation activities with some countries;

f. confirm the role of the Congress, together with local and regional authorities which hold a significant share of public power, in putting human rights at the core of their work and by setting up human rights institutions at local level;

g. uphold the importance of the Congress' activities on human rights, in cooperation with national authorities, in particular when assessing and improving the implementation of the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights related to local and regional authorities;

h. allocate the necessary means to the Congress to ensure its capacity to deliver regularly on the monitoring of the Charter and the observation of elections, two statutory duties assigned to the Congress by the member States, and to strengthen its activities on human rights and the rule of law.

26. With regard to more inclusive, sustainable and cohesive societies, the Congress recommends that the Heads of State and Government:

a. decide to further promote ways to enhance citizen participation and to build inclusive communities, at local and regional levels as a cross-cutting feature of Council of Europe activities and call upon the States to adhere to the Additional Protocol to the European Charter of Local Self-Government on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority;

- b.* support the Congress in its continuing efforts to involve young people in decision making by helping local authorities improve their youth work policy and practice;
- c.* secure the future funding of the successful “Rejuvenating Politics Initiative” which gives the opportunity to 46 young people each year to take an active part in the Congress sessions and committees’ work;
- d.* give priority to concerted action to be undertaken at all levels of government in order to respond to environmental challenges and tackle the climate crisis while recognising the essential role of local and regional authorities in this respect;
- e.* proactively involve local and regional authorities when designing preventive and curative public policies to manage climate and environmental crises since all major crises will eventually impact all levels of governance;
- f.* support the Congress’ work in promoting the role of local and regional authorities in reaching the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the Congress areas of competence;
- g.* recognise the role of local and regional authorities as key partners of national governments in addressing the challenge of migratory flows and, accordingly, involve them in the development and implementation of migration, reception and integration policies;
- h.* ensure that local and regional authorities are enabled to effectively deliver migration, reception and integration policies, while upholding social cohesion, by resettling migrants and refugees across European and national territories in a balanced manner, including between urban and rural areas;
- i.* support local and regional authorities in their action to protect the human rights of migrants and refugees in vulnerable situations, including by preventing and combating human trafficking or exploitation for labour or sexual purposes.