

**CDDG thematic meeting on
"A democratic governance response to COVID-19"
18 June 2020 by videoconference
From 10.30 am to 1 pm and from 2.30 to 4 pm**

Elements for the concluding remarks by Snežana Samardžić-Marković,
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(The closing session is planned from 3.30 to 4 pm. There will be a debate followed by concluding remarks by the Chair of the CDDG and Snežana)

[Introductory remarks]

I would like to thank all the participants for the fruitful meeting.

I would also like to thank the Greek chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers for supporting this meeting and including it under its activities.

[Covid-19 and democracies]

COVID-19 is the first pandemic of this millennium. Some experts say that it will not be the last one. Moreover, it is not behind us, as some countries are still struggling with high infection rates and a second wave or regional surges cannot be excluded.

Even if Covid-19 is not yet behind us, it is not too early to draw some lessons from this crisis.

The first lesson is that democracies which uphold human rights, the rule of law and the principles of good democratic governance are best placed to manage a challenge of such a magnitude and complexity.

Only a system of government based on the protection of fundamental rights, legality, transparency, openness, inclusion, dialogue, respect of national minority's rights,

public ethics and accountability can deliver durable and trustworthy solutions, which are supported by citizens and all stakeholders. Tackling this crisis is not only about bringing down the infection rate. It is about ensuring the protection of public health while continuing to protect people's rights and deliver good governance.

Today's meeting has given us a wealth of information and examples of responses to Covid-19.

I see four areas where we can draw lessons from this crisis and from the way public authorities at all levels have handled it. These areas correspond to the stages of crisis management.

[Preparedness], response, return to normality, aftermath

The first area is preparedness.

Being prepared to tackle a pandemic means relying on the scientific community on the one hand, and public bodies responsible for health and public safety on the other hand, to identify the first signs of an outbreak. It means having a pre-existing plan in place. It means establishing communication channels between different authorities involved and having an alert system to warn other States of the incoming threat.

[Response]

To be able to respond to the pandemic, Council of Europe member States have adopted exceptional emergency measures, either under existing legislative frameworks or newly established ones.

The response to the public health threat has involved primarily preventing the spread of the virus and ensuring the supply of medical care and equipment. In addition, it has required ensuring the continuation of essential services and addressing the immediate socio-economic consequences provoked by the virus and the measures that were taken to tackle it.

Authorities at all levels of government have been involved in the response. The need to ensure coordination, concertation and a constant flow of information between them has been crucial to the effective handling of the crisis. I hope that member States will draw inspiration from the examples they heard today to strengthen their capacity in this area even further.

We have also heard powerful examples of how local authorities have been in the frontline in mobilising the solidarity effort, addressing situations of vulnerability and reducing the impact of the crisis on the economic fabric of their communities. This is a vital responsibility which needs to be supported by adequate financial resources.

The response to Covid-19 is a reminder that openness and transparency are essential components of democratic governance: the public has the right to be informed and be provided with up-to-date and reliable information on the pandemic and the measures to tackle it.

After having listened to the interventions by member States today, it is also clear that Covid-19 has been a catalyst for change.

Member States had to find different, innovative ways to reach out to the public and to continue to provide essential services, to ensure in so far possible that people could continue to have a normal life.

Increased teleworking possibilities for all employees, including in the public administration; videoconference meetings for elected and government bodies; digital tools for providing administrative services to the public are new practices that have been mentioned by all the participants.

[Return to normality]

I sincerely believe that, these practices could have a durable legacy now that a number of member States approach the stage of the return to normality.

E-democracy and e-governance could become the new normal. Or at least, reticence against them could be more easily overcome, especially in the face of increased expectations by the public.

[Aftermath]

Dear Chairperson, distinguished participants: the Covid-19 pandemic is a stress test for our democracies. Unfortunately, this test is not over.

Even once the virus is defeated, there will remain heavy social and economic consequences to deal with.

I believe that in the difficult times that lie ahead of us, some lessons learnt in these last few months, and which we have reviewed together today, will continue to be extremely relevant.

I sincerely hope that today's discussions will be reflected in the political declaration that is planned for the Athens Ministerial Session in November, which was mentioned this morning by the Secretary General.

With its manifold cooperation activities and the work of its monitoring mechanisms and steering committees, the Directorate General of Democracy remains at the disposal of member States to help them respond to this unprecedented challenge while remaining true to the fundamental values of democracy and governance.

Thank you.