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European Urban Charter III (2023): Urban living in the era of transformations

Governance Committee

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Summary

The European Urban Charter III provides a revised body of common principles and concepts that enable towns and cities to meet the current challenges of urban societies. It builds on the original [European Urban Charter and the European Declaration of Urban Rights](#) (1992) and on the [European Urban Charter II – Manifesto for a new urbanity](#) (2008).

It takes into account the transformations that have occurred in recent decades and the major challenges confronting urban societies, such as the Russian Federation's war of aggression against Ukraine, terrorism, the exacerbation of inequalities, the accelerated pace of climate change, natural disasters and public health crises.

The revised Charter is an invitation to all those who are involved in urban development to review their practices and to further strengthen the implementation and ensure the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms. The revised principles aim to provide for a stronger and more sustainable local governance and to improve forms of living together in our cities and towns.

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

DRAFT RESOLUTION

1. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe (Congress) refers to:
 - a. the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ETS No. 5) and the case law of the European Court of Human Rights;
 - b. the European Charter of Local Self-Government (ETS No. 122) and its Additional Protocol on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority (CETS No. 207);
 - c. the Rule of Law Checklist adopted by the Venice Commission;
 - d. the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
2. The Congress:
 - a. builds on the first edition of the [European Urban Charter and the European Declaration of Urban Rights](#) (1992) and on the revised [European Urban Charter II – Manifesto for a new urbanity](#) (2008);
 - b. acknowledges that the last 15 years have seen considerable transformations in our societies;
 - c. stresses the crucial role played by local authorities in shaping contemporary urban living and the need to further implement and ensure the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms for better and more sustainable urban governance and living together;
 - d. welcomes the contribution made by the Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) of the Council of Europe in the development of the European Urban Charter III.
3. The Congress resolves to endorse the European Urban Charter III as part of its global effort to improve local governance responses to crises, to improve the quality of democratic governance for the benefit of local residents, to reduce socio-economic inequalities, to strengthen sustainable development and to promote the use of digital and artificial intelligence tools for the benefit of local communities.
4. The Congress calls on:
 - a. local authorities in Council of Europe member states to implement the principles set out in the European Urban Charter III through their policies and actions;
 - b. national and international associations of local and regional authorities as well as other relevant stakeholders at local and regional levels, to take into account the principles set out in the European Urban Charter III in their activities;
 - c. its statutory bodies, and in particular its committees, to take into account the present resolution in the framework of their respective activities.

EXPLANATORY MEMORANDUM

EUROPEAN URBAN CHARTER III

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I. PREAMBLE²

1. The aim of the Council of Europe is to achieve greater unity between its members for the purpose of safeguarding and realising the ideals and principles which are their common heritage and facilitating their economic and social progress.
2. This aim can be achieved if the ideals and principles guiding the action of the Council of Europe are rooted at the local and regional level in member States in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity.
3. The first European Urban Charter, adopted in 1992; and the European Urban Charter II – Manifesto for a new urbanity, adopted in 2008, are landmark documents recognising the role played by towns and cities in the development of European societies.
4. Significant transformations and developments of the last 15 years have had a considerable impact on urban living, including the increased use of digital tools and artificial intelligence, as well as innovations in democratic, social and technological fields.
5. Urban living has faced multiple challenges including the Russian Federation's war of aggression against Ukraine, terrorism, the exacerbation of inequalities, the accelerated pace of climate change, natural disasters and the Covid-19 pandemic.
6. Current challenges emphasise the importance of resilient democratic institutions and the need for best practices for the development of European cities and towns.
7. Urban policies should be guided by the rights and principles enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5), the European Charter of Local Self-Government (ETS No. 122) and its Additional Protocol on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority (CETS No. 207), as well as by the Rule of Law Checklist adopted by the Venice Commission.
8. The United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular Goal 11 (make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable), Goal 16 (promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies) and Goal 17 (revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development) further provide significant guidance.
9. On 17 May 2023, on the occasion of the Council of Europe Summit in Reykjavik, Heads of States and Governments adopted a declaration that specifically highlights the need to stay united around Council of Europe values and to strengthen democracy and good governance at all levels throughout Europe.

² Report prepared with the contribution of Prof. MMag. Dr. Christina Binder, Expert, Member of Group of Independent Experts (GIE).

II. PRINCIPLES FOR MODERN URBAN LIVING

10. The following principles for modern urban living are to be read and interpreted in the light of the Council of Europe's values and standards on human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Towns and cities should aspire to streamline mainstream these values and standards in all urban policies, programmes and actions. The principles are grouped under six themes below.

1. DEMOCRACY AND URBAN RESIDENTS' PARTICIPATION

- **FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION:** recognise the fundamental value of freedom of expression as an essential foundation of democratic societies; strengthen free, independent, pluralistic and diverse media; ensure that there are safe spaces for public debate and expression for vulnerable and marginalised groups.

- **FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY AND ASSOCIATION:** safeguard the right to peaceful assembly and association; ensure safe interactions between residents and guarantee safe spaces for individuals to gather to express, promote, pursue and defend common interests collectively.

- **FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT:** ensure that everyone lawfully residing within the territory of a State enjoys the right to liberty of movement and freedom to choose their residence.

- **ELECTIONS:** ensure that elections comply with the principles of the European constitutional heritage, including universal, equal, free, secret and direct suffrage, and that elections are held periodically; ensure that the general conditions for fulfilling these principles are met, namely respect for fundamental human rights, stability of electoral law and procedural guarantees.

- **CONSULTATION AND PARTICIPATION:** support inclusive dialogue between urban residents and local authorities; promote residents' consultation on projects affecting the community; ensure inclusive, responsive and informed modes of participation and decision-making; promote direct involvement of residents, in particular through local referendums and citizen assemblies.

- **INCLUSION AND NON-DISCRIMINATION:** ensure full, equal and effective participation for all, irrespective of race, colour, language, religion, nationality, national or ethnic origin, age, disability, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, or other status; and promote the participation of vulnerable and marginalised groups as well as of resident foreigners.

- **GENDER EQUALITY:** accelerate the achievement of gender equality and the full, equal and effective participation of all in public life, irrespective of gender; empower women and girls through education and capacity building; increase gender equality in political participation by introducing affirmative action measures such as quotas.

- **YOUTH PARTICIPATION:** ensure and promote the participation of young people; encourage youth involvement and active citizenship through political education and by lowering the minimum voting age to 16; involve young people in planning, implementation, evaluation and decision-making processes.

- **INVOLVEMENT OF OLDER PERSONS:** support the effective participation of older people in the democratic process to promote inclusive and sustainable communities and intergenerational solidarity.

2. SOCIAL RIGHTS AND ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

- **HEALTH:** safeguard equal access to affordable and quality healthcare, including preventive healthcare; ensure an environment and facilities that are conducive to physical and psychological health; promote proactive behaviours, sports and recreational activities; encourage community-based health initiatives and participation.

- HOUSING: ensure adequate, affordable, secure and salubrious housing, including access to water and adequate sanitation; take measures in relation to homelessness; ensure diversity, choice and mobility in housing; create and maintain social housing in towns and cities for disadvantaged residents.

- EDUCATION: develop programmes aimed at engaging various communities in educational activities, including members of vulnerable and marginalised communities; adopt strategies tailored to the needs of various communities, including an interdisciplinary and multicultural approach to municipal educational offers.

- WORK: provide adequate and accessible employment opportunities for all; ensure equal pay for work of equal value; promote women's economic empowerment and equal sharing of unpaid care and domestic work; develop lifelong career guidance and learning opportunities to facilitate access to the labour market.

- SOCIAL SECURITY AND WELFARE: ensure that social rights are at the forefront of social security systems and that they help the most vulnerable, without discrimination; ensure food assistance measures for those in need to prevent under- or malnutrition; provide the necessary assistance to people experiencing homelessness.

- SOCIAL COHESION AND INTEGRATION: empower marginalised groups, including elderly people, children and youth, people with disabilities, national minorities, foreigners and internally displaced persons (IDPs); embed a gender perspective in social policies, programmes and actions.

- CULTURE AND INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE: ensure access for and the participation of different ethnic, religious and linguistic communities in a wide range of cultural and creative activities; promote peaceful co-existence between all people; further intercultural dialogue; and promote and protect the languages and cultural heritage of different ethnic, religious and linguistic communities.

- ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND INFRASTRUCTURE: support balanced and forward-looking economic development, taking into account environmental protection; develop urban-rural interplay, notably, through adequate infrastructure; develop co-operation between public and private sectors; promote protected heritage as an asset for economic development.

- ARCHITECTURE AND HERITAGE: protect urban architecture and heritage; ensure space for arts and culture; ensure design for inclusive cities, taking into account the needs and expectations of various groups for a healthy, safe and stimulating living environment; promote architectural creation and development for a quality urban townscape, including accessible distances to local services.

- SPORT AND LEISURE: provide a wide range of safe, inclusive and well-designed sporting and recreational facilities accessible to all, including dedicated leisure areas and protected natural areas; ensure that residents have the opportunity to develop their expertise in sport up to their individual potential.

3. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, PROTECTION OF THE ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE

- PROTECTION OF THE ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE: protect the environment from air, water, ground and noise pollution; protect, restore and manage natural habitats; ensure that urban policies are multi-dimensional, mainstream environmental protection and the fight against climate change into urban policies; mitigate the consequences and reduce the impact of climate change.

- ENVIRONMENTAL DECISION-MAKING: engage in awareness-raising and information campaigns on environmental issues, to strengthen the participation of residents, including resident foreigners, in environmental decision making; intensify scientific research on the various effects of climate change on different segments of the urban population; involve urban residents in development projects before they begin, through environmental impact assessments.

- FOOD SECURITY: foster resilient, cost-efficient urban agri-food systems that are adapted to climate change; ensure that all urban residents have access to safe, nutritious and affordable food at all times.

- NATURAL WEALTH AND RESOURCES: ensure the responsible management of natural wealth and resources to the benefit of all residents; manage urban waters in a sustainable manner; promote renewable energy and energy efficiency; promote green technologies.

- CIRCULAR ECONOMY: promote a transition to a circular economy so as to produce goods and services in a sustainable way, reduces waste and encourages longevity, reuse and recycling.

- SUSTAINABLE MOBILITY: promote and improve climate friendly means of mobility; ensure affordable and adequate public transportation to reduce the use of private cars; support the sharing of roads and public spaces; ensure access to various urban services in the immediate vicinity.

4. INTEGRITY AND THE PREVENTION OF CORRUPTION

- INTEGRITY POLICY AND ETHICAL RULES: introduce and implement integrity policies, with adequate risk management, organisational ethics management and control mechanisms; draw up and promote codes of conduct; promote ethical leadership; provide counselling and advice on ethical dilemmas and integrity risks; ensure adequate and transparent financial compensation of local elected representatives and local officials to lower the risks of corruption; ensure fair recruitment and promotion as well as adequate training; establish and promote the protection of individuals who report and disclose corruption and wrongdoing (whistle blowers).

- CONFLICTS OF INTEREST: promote proactive disclosure and the timely resolution of conflicts of interest; define clear procedures to identify, manage and solve conflicts of interest; promote the introduction of reporting channels to identify potential occurrences of favouritism or conflicts of interests.

- PUBLIC PROCUREMENT: assess different corruption risks involved in procurement; set-up internal controls and evaluation mechanisms; enhance transparency by publishing data and procurement details at all stages of the process; embed human rights and sustainability considerations in procurement standards.

- TRANSPARENCY AND OVERSIGHT: adopt and implement open data standards; encourage public participation in decision-making processes; publish key documents and information; promote public consultation processes; support the monitoring and implementation of transparency measures; ensure effective complaints mechanisms and remedies.

5. SECURITY AND CRIME PREVENTION

- SECURITY: ensure a secure and safe city, free from all forms of violence, crime, delinquency and aggression; take measures against trafficking in human beings, sexual and gender-based violence, harassment and domestic violence; provide support services for victims of violence; promote cybersecurity in line with international standards and best practices; develop mechanisms to protect against cyberattacks and ransomwares.

- CRIME PREVENTION: ensure that crime prevention involves all members of the community, through efficient, cost-effective and inclusive crime prevention strategies based on a relationship of cooperation between communities and law enforcement authorities.

- RESILIENCE: provide effective and adequate responses to crises and emergencies, such as natural disasters (e.g. heat waves and droughts, earthquakes, floods), terrorist attacks or armed conflicts; develop contingency plans based on risk and needs assessments to strengthen resilience, including measures for rescue, food and energy security, water supply and essential services.

6. DIGITALISATION AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

- PROTECTION OF PERSONAL DATA AND PRIVACY: take measures to protect individuals in the processing of personal data; ensure that users retain control over their data.

- SMART CITIES AND E-GOVERNANCE: further the development of smart cities; promote e-information, e-consultation and e-decision-making mechanisms; improve provision of public services through digital and artificial intelligence tools; adopt and implement open government standards; ensure compliance with human rights, democracy and the rule of law online in accordance with relevant Council of Europe standards.

- DIGITAL INCLUSION: promote digital inclusion and access to affordable and safe internet and new technology; provide sufficient digital literacy training for all; address the risk of a digital gap, including a digital gender gap; establish clear mitigation strategies and maintain in-person support.

- ASSESSMENT AND MITIGATION OF RISKS: identify, assess, prevent and mitigate risks and adverse impacts resulting from the application of new technologies and artificial intelligence tools in relation to human rights, democracy, the rule of law and sustainable development; ensure continuous evaluation and oversight of the use of new technologies, paying special attention to artificial intelligence.

III. EXPLANATORY REPORT

11. This Explanatory memorandum contextualises and clarifies the principles contained in the European Urban Charter III (2023): “Urban living in the era of transformations”. The European Urban Charter III is the second revision of the first European Urban Charter of 1992.

12. The first [European Urban Charter](#), adopted by the Council of Europe’s Standing Conference on Local and Regional Authorities of Europe in 1992, was a landmark document that represented a key stage in the necessary recognition of the role of towns and cities in the development of our societies. It contained the European Declaration of Urban Rights and establishes a body of common principles and concepts for urban living. The Congress complemented the European Urban Charter in 2008 with the [European Urban Charter II – Manifesto for a new urbanity](#). The manifesto updated the original Congress Urban Charter and proposed a more contextual approach to urban living, urging the Council of Europe member states to build sustainable towns and cities.

13. Since 2008, a series of transformations and developments has had a considerable impact on urban living, including the Russian Federation’s war of aggression against Ukraine, an increased risk of terrorist attacks, the Covid-19 pandemic, deeper social and economic inequalities, the accelerated pace of climate change and more frequent natural disasters. The many facets of urban transformations have been accompanied by an urban-rural interplay that entails the necessary balance between the development of cities and their surrounding areas.

14. Urban living conditions in Europe have undergone major changes and adaptations dictated by the Covid-19 public health crisis. In Europe and beyond, towns and cities were at the forefront of the response to the pandemic and were required to adapt rapidly while simultaneously delivering basic public services and preventing a further spread of the virus. The pandemic not only impacted the way local authorities interacted with national authorities but also challenged the way in which they envisaged transportation, health, education, as well as political participation, including elections. Ultimately, it reaffirmed the need for more sustainable towns and cities. European towns and cities managed to rise to the challenge and to even use the crisis as an opportunity to review their efforts to create more cohesive societies and to further engage urban residents. In this respect, Ukrainian towns and cities are exemplary of the incredible resilience and capacity of local authorities in facing unprecedented crisis situations. Together with the people of Ukraine, they cope with the multiple challenges caused by the Russian invasion and they could further count on other European towns and cities providing their assistance and hosting refugees from Ukraine³.

15. This new European Urban Charter III builds on the original European Urban Charter of 1992 and the Manifesto of 2008 and responds to the need to further develop the European Urban Charter in the light of new challenges and developments in the era of transformations. This second revision aims to bring together the idea of urban society, as it exists today, and the Congress priorities of promoting resilient, democratic, cohesive, sustainable and digital societies⁴. As the driving forces for local, regional and national development, towns and cities, in all their diversity, remain critical assets for societies confronted with unprecedented challenges. Local authorities, with a political leadership accountable to urban residents, are key players in guaranteeing human rights, supporting democracy and strengthening the rule of law. They ensure the promotion of ethical governance, sustainable development and solidarity and thus enable towns and cities to meet the current challenges of urban societies.

³ The Congress supported the [Cities4Cities platform](#) which matches the demands and needs of Ukrainian cities with the capacity, know-how and supply from other European cities.

⁴ Priorities of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities 2021-2026 (2021)

16. The European Urban Charter III is guided by the rights and principles enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5), the European Charter of Local Self-Government (ETS No. 122) and its Additional Protocol on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority (CETS No. 207) and by the Rule of Law Checklist adopted by the Venice Commission. These urban policies aim to contribute to the protection and promotion of human rights. Within the limits of their competencies, local authorities should contribute to the implementation of the ECHR and to the execution of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights. Furthermore, these policies are guided by and contribute to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).⁵

17. In its Preamble and the European Urban Charter III solemnly introduces the ensuing principles with reference to the values and commitments on which the second revision is based. Following the Preamble, the principles for modern urban living are presented under six main themes: 1. Democracy and urban residents' participation; 2. Social rights and economic and cultural development; 3. Sustainable development, protection of the environment and climate change; 4. Integrity and prevention of corruption; 5. Security and crime prevention; 6. Digitalisation and artificial intelligence. The explanatory report is structured along the same six themes. A list of relevant Congress documents is presented in the appendix.

1. DEMOCRACY AND URBAN RESIDENTS' PARTICIPATION

18. Democracy and urban residents'⁶ participation have been in the spotlight recently. On the one hand, there are new and diversified forms of participation, especially through social media, but also deliberative methods that enable ever stronger involvement and more direct participation of urban residents. The idea is that people should be at the centre of policy and decision-making processes. Direct forms of democracy are gaining importance at a subnational level, with a rise in the number of local referendums and other forms of direct participation. They encourage urban residents' participation and are tools with considerable potential to improve the quality of democracy. This development is furthered by new information and communication technologies (see Theme 6), which are important tools in enhancing effective and informed participation. They open up new forms of democratic participation, including online participation, informal groups and petitions, townhall meetings and participatory budgets. Towns and cities are key stakeholders in maximising this democratic potential.

19. However, at the same time, participation takes more extremist, nationalist and populist turns, especially where controversial topics such as measures relating to Covid-19 or policies to counter economic crisis are concerned. This trend presents a danger to pluralist democracy and to effective, free and informed participation. There is thus a much felt need for action.⁷

20. New forms of democratic participation are required in towns and cities alike, with non-electoral direct participation being seen as a valuable complement to representative democracy, which is viewed as too minimalist and fragile in times of rising populism and extremist political discourse.⁸ More particularly, the following dimensions are of specific relevance and – as incorporated in the respective principles – should be considered by local authorities with a view to improving the quality of democracy and urban residents' participation.

⁵ In particular Goal 3 for good health and well-being, Goal 5 for gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, Goal 6 for clean water and sanitation, Goal 7 for affordable and clean energy, Goal 11 for sustainable cities and communities, Goal 13 for climate action, Goal 14 for life below water, Goal 15 for life on land, Goal 16 for just, peaceful and inclusive societies and Goal 17 for partnerships for the goals.

⁶ Note that the term "citizen" is used interchangeably with "urban residents".

⁷ See Congress Priorities 2021-2026, Priority 6.b, which emphasizes the necessary improvement of the quality of representative democracy and citizen participation.

⁸ See Congress Report "Beyond elections: The use of deliberative methods in European municipalities and regions" (2022), Resolution para d.

21. **Freedoms of expression, assembly, association and movement:** To enable meaningful political participation, whether representative or direct, relevant preconditions and safeguards are necessary, in which, towns and cities have an important role to play. Most importantly, several human rights guarantees, in particular the freedoms of expression, assembly, association and movement, must be recognised.

22. First, **freedom of expression** is of fundamental importance for democratic societies, to enable free and diverse political discourse. It includes academic freedom and artistic freedom, to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas, both online and offline. The guarantees of freedom of expression also depend on the availability of free, independent, pluralistic and diverse media, a level playing field with room for different opinions, and objective, non-partisan information (in different languages if necessary). Safe spaces for public debate and expression are necessary, in particular for vulnerable and marginalised groups of the population. Measures are also necessary to combat discrimination, hate speech, disinformation and misinformation, in line with the European Convention of Human Rights and the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights.

23. **Freedoms of assembly and association, as well as freedom of movement** are essential preconditions for urban residents' meaningful political participation. They ensure interactions between urban residents and guarantee safe spaces for individuals to gather, to engage and to exchange with each other and to form a political will. More specifically, the rights to peaceful assembly and association are instrumental for democratic purposes, including the creation of political parties.⁹ Strong and effective volunteers' involvement contributes to meaningful public participation. Likewise, the freedom of movement of persons residing lawfully within the country, in the territory of their municipality or between municipalities is necessary for truly democratic elections. If, in exceptional cases, persons have been displaced against their will, there should, provisionally, be the possibility of their being considered as residents in their former place of residence.¹⁰

24. These freedoms and human rights guarantees should be provided for in line with Council of Europe standards, most notably the European Convention of Human Rights, the European Charter of Local Self Government and other relevant international standards. European towns and cities, within their competencies, play a unique role in their implementation and realisation. Restrictions of these rights must comply with the European Convention of Human Rights and, more specifically, with the requirement that they have a basis in law, pursue a legitimate aim and respect the principle of proportionality.¹¹

25. **Elections** are the main means of transforming the people's power into governmental power and are thus key to political participation and ultimately democracy. To enable an informed and meaningful participation in decision-making, elections need to be held in accordance with international standards. International instruments such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the European Convention of Human Rights and the case law of the European Court of Human Rights and the Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters of the Venice Commission provide for these standards in elections.¹² They enshrine the principles of universal, equal, free, secret and direct suffrage in periodically held elections. Among the general preconditions to be met for holding elections are the stability of electoral law, procedural guarantees and respect for fundamental human rights (see above freedoms of expression, assembly, association and movement).

26. International electoral standards and best practices, especially the principles of universal, equal, free, secret and direct suffrage, apply equally to elections at the local or regional level. However, rules and exceptions may differ slightly in the sub-national context. Voters' nationality and place of residence are of special importance, according to the principle of universal suffrage. As the nationality condition is less strictly applied in local elections, it is advisable for resident foreigners to be allowed to vote after a given period of residence. The residency condition is more significant at a local level because of the need for an active connection between voters and the place of voting.¹³

⁹ Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters (Venice Commission), (2002), 2.1.a.

¹⁰ Ibid, Explanatory Report, paras 6 and 62.

¹¹ See Articles 8(2), 10(2), 11(2) and 2 of Protocol 4 of the ECHR; see also the Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters (Venice Commission), 2.1.b.

¹² Note that Article 3 of Protocol 1 to the ECHR and the relevant case law of the ECtHR are generally not applicable to local level, given the reference to "legislature". They can nonetheless be referred to by analogy.

¹³ Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters (Venice Commission), (2002), I.1.1.

27. **Consultation and participation:** Other forms of participation complement participation in decision-making through elections. For example, local referendums are a tool of direct democratic participation that is increasingly relied on.¹⁴ Furthermore, citizen assemblies – as a deliberative form of democracy – are another means of supporting an inclusive dialogue between urban residents and local authorities.¹⁵ Neighbourhood councils enable the direct experiences of city residents to inform policies as well as the revision of policies.¹⁶ The push for deliberative methods is not aimed at replacing representative democracy but is rather intended to be a complementary tool to reinvigorate democracy.

28. The implementation of direct democracy at a local level, in line with the principles of subsidiarity and devolution, may indeed be vital to increase the interest and involvement of urban residents in local politics. At the same time, direct participation may also provide an important input for local authorities when deciding on matters that affect people's lives. In doing so, forms of direct democracy may contribute to good decisions, adopted as close as possible to urban residents. This is in line with the idea of decentralisation which puts people at the heart of public action and should be promoted with adequate means.¹⁷

29. In many areas tools for a genuine, inclusive and transparent dialogue between urban residents and local authorities are much needed; especially in projects directly affecting the community. Institutionalising such tools has proven to be beneficial. Particularly relevant areas of engagement are those that are of most direct concern to urban residents, including the expansion of municipal infrastructure and healthcare, the organisation of urban management and planning, mobility, culture, as well as environmental and climate related policies.¹⁸ For a full, equal and meaningful participation in these areas, towns and cities must provide adequate funding and establish appropriate institutional and administrative frameworks.

30. **Inclusion and non-discrimination:** Moreover, inclusive participation, based on the principles of equality and non-discrimination in decision making is crucial to further cohesion and resilience in societies. This requires the participation of marginalised, vulnerable groups, such as low-income people, minorities, resident foreigners, and, where applicable, IDPs. Discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity should also be addressed. The composition of town and city councils and of citizen assemblies should reflect urban societies and this requires a renewed focus on the participation of previously underrepresented or marginalised groups. The political participation of resident foreigners at a local level is a key tool for facilitating their integration and is thus crucial for promoting inclusive and cohesive societies.¹⁹

31. **Gender equality:** The political participation of women is crucial for the full, equal and effective participation of all people in public life. Affirmative action, including the adoption of quotas, may be necessary and is also required by international standards to counter women's underrepresentation until *de facto* equality is achieved.²⁰ The most important measures for achieving gender equality are education and capacity-building initiatives. Therefore, states must commit to promoting equal opportunities for the full participation of women in all aspects of political and public life. Local authorities in towns and cities are at the forefront of these efforts as political life at the local level is a natural starting point for entering politics.²¹

¹⁴ Local referendums can give citizens an opportunity to decide practical issues of local importance and cut through political divides. Congress Report "Holding referendums at local level" (2021), para 7.

¹⁵ Citizen assemblies provide an important arena for civic participation of citizens and resident foreigners by involving them in decisions affecting their everyday life. See Congress report "Beyond elections: The use of deliberative methods in European municipalities and regions" (2022), para 3.

¹⁶ See Congress Report "Home sharing platforms: challenges and opportunities for municipalities" (2021), paragraph 93.

¹⁷ See Congress priorities 2021-2026, para 66.

¹⁸ Cf Congress Report "Beyond elections: The use of deliberative methods in European municipalities and regions" (2022): "access to direct and qualitative consultation methods linked to the policy making process contribute to directly involving citizens in agenda setting on possibly thorny issues directly impacting citizens' direct lives."

¹⁹ To grant the right to vote and stand for local elections in urban assemblies to resident foreigners and to promote, in addition, their participation in direct forms of democracy is thus instrumental to fostering their successful long-term integration. Congress Report "Holding referendums at local level" (2021), para 6.

²⁰ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Articles 7, 8.

²¹ Congress Report "Women's political participation and representation at local and regional levels" (2016).

32. **Youth participation:** The involvement of young people and their effective participation in decision-making and governance at the local level can be realised by various means, through elections, public deliberation, local think-tanks or platforms, civil society initiatives or other tools.²² Towns and cities should play a central role in these efforts to encourage youth involvement and active citizenship through political education. Another measure may be the lowering of the voting age and, more generally, encouraging the young people to participate in consultations, from the age of 16.²³ Overall, young people need to be involved in planning, implementation, evaluation and decision-making processes.

33. **Involvement of older people:** The effective participation of older people in public life is crucial to cohesive societies and intergenerational solidarity. This may involve overcoming the urban-rural divide and the digital gap, which can prevent older people from actively participating in democratic processes. The direct and informed participation of older people in the design of public policy is also critical for their integration as rights-holders who are protected from social exclusion and isolation. To ensure that age-sensitive laws and policies are developed and implemented, and to create inclusive and sustainable communities, it is necessary for older people to participate politically in their communities.

2. SOCIAL RIGHTS AND ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

34. The Covid-19 pandemic and the economic and energy crises have magnified existing social and economic inequalities. Negative trends have increasingly been observed in European cities and towns as growing numbers of people struggle close to, at or below the poverty line and experience diminishing access to healthcare and welfare services, social security and employment opportunities. These trends bring to light existing social and economic differences within societies and are often at the root of growing social tensions.

35. Towns and cities can be key players in promoting social cohesion and equality²⁴. Their proximity to the population gives local authorities a specific responsibility for this, notably through the provision of adequate social services such as housing, healthcare, education, welfare and employment. Given these considerations, investing in social issues must be central to the efforts of towns and cities to build sustainable communities. In sum, the social dimension at the local and regional level is crucial. The most relevant areas are taken up in the respective principles and explained in greater depth in what follows.²⁵

36. Economic development and investments in infrastructure are essential for urban economic strength and flourishing urban-rural interplay. They support social services and facilities as well as adequate quality of life. Sport and recreational activities enhance the quality of life in urban areas.

37. Towns and cities are also dynamic environments that nurture cultural development through their cultural diversity, cultural and creative activities, tourism and cultural exchange²⁶.

²² See Congress priorities 2021-2026, para 67.

²³ See for further reference Congress report on Voting at 16 – Consequences on youth participation at local and regional level, 2015.

²⁴ The relevant Council of Europe standards include in particular the revised European Social Charter (CETS n°163) which guarantees fundamental social and economic rights.

²⁵ See also Congress human rights handbook for local and regional authorities: volume 2-Social rights, (2021).

²⁶ Relevant Council of Europe standards include European Cultural Convention (ETS n°18, Paris Convention), Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (CETS n°199, Faro Convention), Convention for the Protection of the Architectural Heritage of Europe (ETS n°121), revised Convention for the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage of Europe (ETS n°143, Valetta Convention).

38. **Health:** The Covid-19 pandemic brought to the fore the importance of the right to health; that is, the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. It highlighted the need for equal access to the healthcare system; particularly for the most vulnerable and marginalised groups in society (e.g. elderly, children, foreigners).²⁷ Cities and towns may play a key role in providing access to healthcare and medical assistance, not only through infrastructure (facilities/personnel) but also through information campaigns (e.g. about vaccination) and, more broadly, by raising awareness of health issues and by encouraging community-based health initiatives and participation. Local authorities are in a position to implement broader social protection measures to fully ensure equal access to quality healthcare, develop inclusive and resilient healthcare systems and guarantee the availability and affordability of healthcare, including preventive healthcare for all. This is also reflected in the 1992 Urban Charter, which established the right to (a healthy) environment and a range of facilities conducive to physical and psychological health. Sports and recreational activities in all urban neighbourhoods can contribute to this. It is also important to promote a multidisciplinary and holistic approach to health issues based on a “One health” approach for living beings and ecosystems. Public health policies need to be reviewed regularly and adapted to emerging challenges and needs, including the needs of the most vulnerable groups of the population.

39. **Housing:** The Covid-19 pandemic as well as other crises highlighted the importance of housing matters. The 1992 Urban Charter defined the right to housing as the right to an adequate supply and choice of affordable, salubrious housing, guaranteeing privacy and tranquillity. As elaborated in the Congress human rights handbook (Volume 2) the right to housing includes access to a safe, secure, habitable, and affordable home with freedom from forced eviction. It includes providing access to habitable housing at accessible prices, as well as preventing and reducing homelessness. This definition is in line with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11 which considers housing to be a key part of safe, sustainable and resilient cities. Given the importance of housing, local authorities should make clear that housing within their towns and cities is not a commodity but an essential human right of urban residents. Importantly, towns and cities are best suited to establish and solve housing needs, as well as to plan and coordinate appropriate housing development projects. Cities and towns also need to counter challenges such as an increase in socio-spatial segregation and the growth of informal settlements, and to develop sustainable urban planning schemes. Accordingly, there needs to be a relevant social mix in housing and neighbourhoods, ensuring diversity as well as mobility in housing. Groups of residents who are especially disadvantaged need to be given special consideration in social housing projects.

40. **Education:** Towns and cities play a unique role within their competencies in ensuring the right to education. Implementing the right to education means that local authorities develop programmes that ensure access for all to quality schools and to an education aimed at the full development of the human personality. Education enables every person to participate effectively in a free and democratic society and therewith contributes to social cohesion. It is essential that equal access and opportunities are available to all people, including those from vulnerable and marginalised communities. Strategies should be tailored to the needs of various communities, given that schools are places that can foster the integration of foreigners into the urban context, and alternative pathways to learning for non-traditional learners should be available. Emphasis should be placed on youth and on frequent high drop-out rates among young people in towns and cities, which can lead to a vicious intergenerational circle of childhood and adult poverty as well as low educational achievements. Another dimension may be opened by universities as hubs for innovation. Interdisciplinary and multicultural approaches to education may be especially important.

²⁷ Including empowerment measures and supporting autonomy.

41. **Work/employment:** The right to work is essential in an urban context where general conditions and quality of life to a certain extent depend on economic factors. During periods of rising inflation and energy crises, local authorities need to put a greater emphasis on creating an environment that is conducive to providing new job opportunities while retaining existing ones. Adequate employment, and, more generally, the economic development of towns and cities are fundamental to achieving people's financial autonomy, especially in places that have been more badly impacted by economic difficulties and unemployment. Local authorities need to ensure a decent living for workers and their families through opportunities for everyone to find fulfilling and dignified work in safe and healthy conditions that pays fair wages. Freedom from unemployment and the right to organise are also essential as are women's economic empowerment and the equal sharing of unpaid care and domestic work. Local authorities in towns and cities may also play a role in providing vocational training, facilitating the transition to working life, setting labour standards and ensuring decent working conditions as well as workers' health and safety. These are especially important for young people and vulnerable or exposed individuals entering the labour market. It is also important for local authorities to develop lifelong career guidance and learning opportunities to facilitate access to the labour market.

42. **Social security and welfare:** The development of social security and welfare systems in Europe is particularly pertinent to urban living. The right to social security guarantees that everyone, without discrimination and regardless of age or the ability to work, has the necessary means to procure goods and services to cover their basic needs. Food assistance measures are required for those in need to avoid under- or malnutrition. Local authorities are best placed to improve the provision of local welfare or to include social clauses in public procurement. This is especially important in times of crisis, such as a health emergency, an economic downturn or when energy costs rise steeply. In delivering on this role, local authorities must consider vulnerable groups, such as unemployed young people. People going through homelessness will also need assistance. Last but not least, local authorities have to ensure that flexible and affordable childcare is available.

43. **Social cohesion and integration:** Drawing on the principle of non-discrimination, policies of social inclusion and integration in urban societies should provide everyone, including marginalised groups of people, with access to public services, social security, employment, participation and other areas relating to urban life. Local authorities should implement these policies to improve the terms on which individuals and groups take part in society, especially those who are disadvantaged on the basis of their identity.²⁸ Social exclusion threatens urban residents with disabilities, national minorities, in particular Roma and Travellers²⁹, foreigners and IDPs, in particular migrant women and children as well as seniors, people living in poverty or in deprived areas, and the long-term unemployed. Social policies, programmes and actions should reflect a gender perspective.

44. **Culture and intercultural dialogue:** European cities and towns have a fundamental role to play in promoting cultural identities, diversity and cultural exchanges in a wide range of cultural and creative activities. The primary goal of these activities is to ensure access to and the participation of different ethnic, linguistic and religious communities. Cities and towns can be successful agents of integration and genuine laboratories of intercultural dialogue, provided that they commit strongly, continuously, and across the political spectrum to embracing diversity as a positive factor of development and adopt the principles of interculturalism. Cities and towns can put in place a range of structures, policies and programmes to facilitate intercultural learning and dialogue, cross-cultural debate and conflict resolution so as to promote peaceful co-existence. To be effective, efforts must be based on an adequate legal framework, included in nation-wide intercultural training and capacity-building programmes, and be given the freedom to create structures and to implement policies that favour constructive and meaningful intercultural relations.

²⁸ See Report "Regional identities: promoting dialogue and diversity in unity" (2022).

²⁹ The term "Roma and Travellers" is used at the Council of Europe to encompass the wide diversity of the groups covered by the work of the Council of Europe in this field: on the one hand a) Roma, Sinti/Manush, Calé, Kaale, Romanichals, Boyash/Rudari; b) Balkan Egyptians (Egyptians and Ashkali); c) Eastern groups (Dom, Lom and Abdal); and, on the other hand, groups such as Travellers, Yenish, and the populations designated under the administrative term "Gens du voyage", as well as persons who identify themselves as Gypsies. The present is an explanatory footnote, not a definition of Roma and/or Travellers.

45. **Economic development and infrastructure:** Urban economic success is no longer restricted to areas that are traditionally wealthy or that have access to natural resources. Among the deciding factors today are the quality of human resources and the existence of a climate of trust and confidence. Therefore, urban authorities need to focus on providing a high standard of education, participating in the knowledge-based economy and enabling entrepreneurship and innovation in the business sector, while developing cooperation between public and private sectors. Partnerships, clusters, sector-based groupings and cross-border cooperation can be decisive in sustainable urban growth and balanced economic development while taking environmental protection into account. Investment in infrastructure, particularly in transport and telecommunications, is essential for the mobility of ideas, people, goods and finance and for a flourishing urban-rural interplay. Adequate infrastructure, especially roads, railroads, ports, airports, and telecommunications are not only key factors in developing urban economic strength, but they are also essential with regard to its attractiveness to new investors. Due regard should also be given to protected heritage as an asset in economic development.

46. **Architecture and heritage:** The rich and varied historical and architectural heritage of European towns and cities is an important component of European identity that must be safeguarded and nurtured for future generations. Planning laws that protect heritage are therefore essential. Local authorities need to show openness and transparency in the decisions they take so as to boost urban residents' confidence in their decision-making processes on major construction and urban planning projects. This can be facilitated by setting up permanent forums for exchanges with urban residents, including public discussions and consultations on projects affecting their neighborhood, which will bring the local population on board as a genuine stakeholder (see Theme 1). Ultimately, it is up to urban residents themselves to strike a balance between the protection of the historic urban heritage as an essential part of their cultural identity and the need to modernise or adapt this heritage. Towns and cities evolve just as living organisms do and must be able to respond and adapt to the requirements of the time, in accordance with the preferences of their populations. Inclusive cities take into account the needs and expectations of various groups for a healthy, safe and stimulating living environment, including services that are accessible to local residents as well as space for arts and culture.

47. **Sport and leisure:** Municipal sport policies impact local populations as a whole, and municipalities should promote sport and recreational activities by providing a safe and well-designed infrastructure that is accessible to all, as well as by promoting activities for children, young people and older people. There should also be dedicated leisure areas and natural areas of preservation. In the longer term, these priorities should be central to the policies of municipalities, which can find a powerful ally in a soundly established civil society in form of diverse sport clubs and local associations. All urban residents and groups with an interest in sports-related issues should be able to approach the municipal authorities responsible for sport. They should be able to develop their expertise in sport up to their individual potential. Local authorities should also offer advice on matters relating to sport, and, where possible, provide assistance with the organisation of sports events.³⁰

³⁰ Congress Report "Integration through Sport", (2007).

3. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, PROTECTION OF ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE

48. The consequences of environmental pollution are being felt with ever increasing force in European towns and cities. Air and water pollution, the extinction of species (a dramatic reduction of biodiversity) and soil and plant degradation are affecting urban life. The climate crisis is also having an impact on towns and cities, with the general rise in temperatures as well as an increase in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather phenomena such as thunderstorms, heat waves and heavy rain falls. Given these threats to urban life, environmental issues and climate action in cities and regions are high on the agenda. Living conditions must be radically improved through innovative local policies that respect the environment and combat climate change.³¹ The action of local authorities should be guided by the following principles³².

49. **Protection of the environment and climate change:** Environmental degradation and climate change are of great concern to European towns and cities and sustainability is high on the agenda. Therefore, European towns and cities are taking immediate action to step up their efforts to protect the environment from air, water, ground and noise pollution, in line with the SDGs.³³ A fundamental part of these efforts is the protection, restoration and management of natural habitats through multidimensional policies. Targeted policies are also needed to mitigate the consequences and to reduce the impact of climate change. Towns and cities are best suited to tackle these challenges as they are at the forefront of having to deal with the consequences of environmental degradation and the climate crisis.

50. **Environmental decision-making:** Environmental protection measures may be controversial topics in local politics because environmental objectives can clash with local vested interests. European towns and cities need to be aware of the potentially controversial nature of environmental measures and to counter this by involving urban residents in environmental decision-making. Indeed, the involvement and participation of urban residents in information gathering and decision-making are vital in protecting the environment and combating climate change. Local authorities should strengthen environmental decision-making by involving urban residents, including resident foreigners, who will be directly affected, through actively including them in planning and implementing the relevant local policies and providing them with access to environmental information.³⁴

51. **Education and awareness-raising:** local authorities can inform residents about sustainable ways of life through campaigns for example on how to repair devices, save energy, manage water and waste and recycle, and promoting the consumption of local products. The need for sustainable forms of mobility (walking, cycling, public transport) should be emphasised and pro-actively supported.³⁵ All this presupposes scientific research and investigations of the effects of environmental degradation and of climate change, on various segments of the urban population. The active involvement of the people concerned is of crucial importance, and this is recognised in both human rights and environmental instruments. The right to receive relevant information and to participate in decision-making ahead of the realisation of projects that impact on the environment seems essential.³⁶ Towns and cities, as the level closest to urban residents, can play an important role in the realisation of these rights.

³¹ See Congress priorities 2021-2026, Priority 6.d.

³² The relevant Council of Europe standards include the Landscape Convention (ETS n°176, Florence Convention) and Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (ETS n°104, Bern Convention).

³³ SDGs 11, 13, 15.

³⁴ Congress Report "A fundamental right to the environment: a matter for local and regional authorities - Towards a green reading of the European Charter of Local Self-Government", Resolution 489 (2022), 2.g.

³⁵ See Congress priorities 2021-2026, para 77.

³⁶ Such procedural rights are incorporated, e.g., in the UNECE Aarhus Convention which enshrines procedural entitlements, labelled even as "a group of environmental democracy rights." Most importantly, environmental impact assessments with due involvement of those affected may be required before a project is realised.

52. **Food security** considerations should be integrated into urban policies, supporting local food production, equitable access, sustainable practices and collaboration. It is essential to encourage resilient, cost-efficient agri-food systems which are adapted to climate change, including urban farming, community gardens, organic farming, farmers' markets, healthy food options in schools and workplaces. Appropriate food infrastructure and distribution should be developed. Enhancing food literacy and empowering residents to make healthy and sustainable food choices can contribute to long-term food security. Finally, cities should develop contingency plans and response strategies to ensure the continuity of food supply during emergencies and disruptions.

53. **Natural wealth and resources:** The responsible management of natural wealth and resources is a vital task for local authorities. Through sustainable and environmentally friendly policies, European towns and cities, may play a key role in contributing to environmental conservation to the benefit of urban residents. Environmental conservation includes measures to protect against the extinction of species, the loss of biodiversity and degradation of the earth's ecosystem.³⁷ The sustainable management of urban waters is another important responsibility of towns and cities. Local authorities may also adopt measures to combat climate change, by promoting renewable energy, energy efficiency, sobriety and green technologies.

54. **Circular economy:** The circular economy model is becoming a key tool in the fight against climate change and the aspiration for more sustainable societies. By decoupling economic growth from natural resource use and emphasising longevity, reuse and recycling, the circular economy also has the potential to boost economic efficiency and the resilience of local level economic activity. Local authorities should therefore promote the transition towards a circular economy and the production of goods and services in a sustainable way. They should encourage the use of secondary raw materials in production cycles and processes. Given the complexity of the endeavour, interdisciplinary approaches seem the most promising approach. A circular economy entails the development of new social practices in which cooperation and cohesion are essential.

55. **Sustainable mobility:** Sustainable urban policies include promoting environmentally friendly forms of mobility to reduce the number of private cars in towns and cities. Towns and cities can also focus on carbon-free mobility by supporting walking, cycling and e-mobility. Such policies can be implemented through affordable and effective public transport systems and compact city designs with short distances between home, work, leisure and services in the immediate vicinity. Urban architecture that is conducive to sustainability includes the greening of cities and more general means to counter sectoral segregation.

56. In sum, **a human rights-based approach to environmental protection and the climate crisis** with the local level at centre stage³⁸ is crucial and European towns and cities can and should play a key role in furthering it.

³⁷ Congress priorities 2021-2026, para 73.

³⁸ As stated in Congress priorities 2021-2026: para 75: "Good governance, environmental protection – including climate justice and security - and human rights are linked by a relationship of interdependence: a safe, clean and healthy environment is essential for the enjoyment of human rights, and the exercise of human rights is vital to the protection of the environment. This is a matter of democracy, human rights and rule of law, the core mission of the Congress and the Council of Europe."

4. INTEGRITY AND PREVENTION OF CORRUPTION

57. Corruption and other forms of unethical behaviour diminish public trust and threaten the very essence of democracy as well as economic development, social cohesion, and urban governance. Due to their proximity to the authorities, urban residents expect at high standards of probity from public officials. Poor governance and corruption undermine local democracy, human rights and the rule of law and have a negative impact on the quality of life and trust in public institutions. The active engagement of sub-national authorities is crucial for the success of national anti-corruption policies. The relevant principles on integrity and prevention of corruption provide important guidance for local authorities.

58. **Integrity policy and ethical rules:** Trust in politicians and civil servants remains dangerously low in Europe, undermining democratic process and weakening the quality and efficiency of governance. From the perspective of those elected, such as mayors or councillors, increased accountability and adherence to ethical codes of conduct also contribute to countering the crisis in political representation, populist tendencies and low election turnouts. Urban authorities are responsible for a variety of public services and should be committed to preventing corruption and promoting integrity. Comprehensive policies are needed to ensure a culture of integrity, with adequate standards, codes of conduct, rules on incompatible functions and activities, risk and organisational ethics management, control and effective oversight. Among the priority areas are recruitment and promotion processes which should be transparent as well as adequate training. Moreover, mechanisms should be in place to provide counselling and advice on ethical dilemmas and integrity risks. Support and investment in “soft” instruments such as ethical leadership, have also gained prominence in the policies of integrity. Also, individuals who report and disclose corruption and wrongdoing (whistle blowers) need to be protected.³⁹ Finally, an adequate financial compensation of local elected representatives and local officials lower the risks of corruption.⁴⁰

59. **Conflicts of interest:** While conflicts of interest occur in all aspects of public life, local authorities are particularly at risk, because of their proximity to and closer contacts and ties with urban residents and local entrepreneurs. To reduce the risk of conflicts of interest, integrity policies need to be introduced and implemented, with organisational ethics management and external integrity guardians. Another important practice is the proactive disclosure of information before it is requested by the public, as well as the timely resolution of conflicts of interest where they occur. To this end, clear procedures to identify, manage and resolve conflicts of interest, including adequate reporting channels, need to be in place. While most countries regulate conflicts of interests, the result is too often a proliferation of rules and regulations that may be difficult to manage and enforce. A values based approach, focused on education, training and transparency may have greater impact.⁴¹

³⁹ Congress Report “Conflicts of interest at local and regional levels” (2018).

⁴⁰ See Article 7, paragraphs 1 and 2 of European Charter of Local Self-Government on “appropriate financial compensation”, see also paragraphs 107-118 of “A contemporary commentary by the Congress on the explanatory report to the European Charter of Local Self-Government” as well as Recommendation 434 (2019) and Resolution 443 (2019) on Financial compensation of local and regional elected representatives in the exercise of their office.

⁴¹ Congress Report “Conflicts of interest at local and regional levels” (2018).

60. **Public procurement** involves a large proportion of public expenditure and is therefore vulnerable to various types of corruption. Corruption risks need to be systematically assessed by internal controls and evaluation mechanisms that can identify and assess systemic vulnerabilities such as weak contracting expertise and the revolving door phenomenon.⁴² The mechanisms in place should suggest the practical steps that authorities can take to reduce their exposure to corruption. Transparency is fundamental in this regard and can be achieved by publishing data and procurement details at all stages of the process, to encourage public scrutiny and to involve civil society.⁴³ Finally, public procurement is also an enormous opportunity for cities, through their purchasing practices, to drive the transition to sustainable production and consumption, and to avoid involvement in human rights abuses. These considerations have their place in assessment mechanisms and internal controls that are integrated in the public procurement processes.

61. **Transparency and oversight** in areas such as budgeting, law- and policy-making, contracting and service delivery have great potential to improve the governance of towns and cities. To achieve this goal, open data and open government standards need to be adopted and implemented. The standards should introduce training courses in the administrations of towns and cities and raise awareness of the importance of transparency. Standards and concrete public policies also need to promote popular participation in local public life, in particular by encouraging urban residents' involvement in areas such as defining budget priorities and evaluating procurement contracts. The implementation of transparency measures needs to be monitored and evaluated by the authorities and effective remedies such as complaint mechanisms need to be established.

5. SECURITY AND CRIME PREVENTION

62. Without democratic security and effective crime prevention measures in place, human rights and fundamental freedoms cannot be realised. While cities that are completely secure and free from crime may be unattainable, local authorities have an obligation to pursue this objective to the maximum possible extent. Urban resilience, that is, making cities and towns stronger in coping with destabilising forces that place their residents and structures at risk, is an integral part of this process. This refers not only to the traditional concept of security and crime prevention, but also to strategies to mitigate the impacts of climate change. The relevant principles mainstream this approach.

63. The Russian Federation's war of aggression against Ukraine with its unprecedented impacts on the civilian populations of Ukrainian towns and cities and terrorist attacks on European cities have shown the need for urban resilience and security, especially for the most vulnerable groups in society. The role of local authorities in providing such security to urban residents must not be underestimated or overlooked.⁴⁴

⁴² A situation in which personnel move between roles as legislators and regulators, on the one hand, and members of the industries affected by the legislation and regulation, on the other.

⁴³ Congress Report "Making public procurement transparent at local and regional levels" (2017).

⁴⁴ It is therefore understandable and highly wellcome that Congress Priorities 6.a and 6.c, on resilient and cohesive societies, emphasise social issues and equality.

64. **Security:** A central task of local authorities is to ensure a secure and safe city, free from all forms of violence, crime, delinquency and aggression. Urban security is a complex area that includes physical safety, law enforcement and community resilience and empowerment. It is also concerned with the protection of buildings and infrastructure and with cybersecurity. The different actors who should be involved in security matters include first responders (e.g. police, fire fighters, civil protection units), health and social sectors, schools, non-governmental organisations, civil society partners and urban architects to ensure that security is taken into account at all stages of the policy-making process, including in the designing phase of buildings and open spaces in cities. Local policies should reflect a holistic and bottom-up approach. There is a need for measures against trafficking in human beings, sexual and gender-based violence, harassment and domestic violence.⁴⁵ More generally, victims of violence need to be supported through all appropriate means. Finally, there are particular risks with cybercrime and cyberattacks which come with more widespread use of digital technologies and the move towards smart cities (see Theme 6). Therefore, cybersecurity measures are needed notably as a protection against cyberattacks and ransomwares. The use of a distributed data architecture to secure sensitive databases should also be considered.

65. **Crime prevention** in an urban context consists of strategies and measures to reduce the occurrence of crimes and their harmful effects on individuals and society, including fear, by addressing their multiple causes. Crime prevention strategies should include radicalisation prevention and drug prevention measures. Crime prevention must be based on a relationship of cooperation between communities and law enforcement authorities that ensure the involvement of all members of the community through efficient, cost-effective and inclusive strategies. Well-planned crime prevention strategies should ideally not only prevent crime and victimisation, but also contribute to sustainable urban security concepts. For crime prevention to be effective, actors in the justice system have to collaborate with other sectors to address the root causes of societal conflicts, violence and human rights abuses. In relation to crime and violence, this means moving from punitive measures to the prevention of violence particularly violence against women, children, and vulnerable groups.

66. **Resilience:** Building resilience is a continual process that requires effective and adequate responses to crises and emergencies such as natural disasters (heat waves, droughts, earthquakes, floods), terrorist attacks and armed conflicts. It involves adopting contingency plans based on risk and needs assessments and learning lessons concerning measures on rescue, food and energy security, water as well as essential services. This process is adaptive because it aims to continually improve decisions, actions and implementation. Based on existing policies and processes across different sectors and levels of government, it also works in a cross-cutting way. Another relevant feature is its inclusiveness, as it relies on input from a broad range of stakeholders. Resilience should also be embedded in the sustainability: resilient solutions generally counter environmental degradation and climate crisis, for example through climate change mitigation, adaptation and disaster risk reduction.

6. DIGITALISATION AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

67. Digitalisation and artificial intelligence play an ever more important role in today's towns and cities. They have an increasing impact on the life of urban residents and the functioning of modern urban life. It has long been predicted that public management, public information and political participation, among other spheres, would benefit immensely from the introduction of digitalisation. It was the Covid-19 pandemic which created the need to expand the use of digital tools to many more areas of everyday life. European towns and cities became the front-runners in this process when they were impacted at a local level by the Covid-19 crisis and needed to find innovative solutions.⁴⁶ Ukrainian cities and towns have proved to be more resilient in the face of Russian aggression thanks to the digitalisation reforms coupled with the decentralisation reforms.

⁴⁵ See the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (CETS n°210, Istanbul Convention).

⁴⁶ See also Congress report on Smart cities and regions – prospects for a human rights-based governance approach (2022).

68. The rapid digitalisation of urban areas during the Covid-19 crisis played a major role in maintaining a measure of “normality” in people’s everyday lives. However, there are numerous dangers attached to the use of digital tools. The risk of abuse that is inherent in digitalisation also proved challenging at the local level and increased with the rapid spread of digital solutions during the pandemic. There is room for improvement, regarding data security, safeguards against abuse and a need for a human rights’ centred approach to the use of digital tools, including artificial intelligence. A sound regulatory framework is required to ensure respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms both offline and online. Digital capabilities require investments in education and high-level expertise. In many respects, European towns and cities represent the starting point of these processes. The relevant principles may guide action in this field.

69. **Protection of personal data and privacy** needs to be a core consideration in the digitalisation of towns and cities. Municipalities should establish clear guidelines and policies on data collection, ensuring that personal data is collected and used in compliance with relevant privacy legislation.⁴⁷ Awareness-raising on the right to privacy and on the use of data generated by new technologies is important. The indiscriminate collection of data without consent presents a risk to human rights. Privacy risks need to be assessed before any collection of information, and the information should be collected proportionally and only for a limited period of time. The subjects should be notified about the intended use of their information and must give their consent. Authorities should engage in efforts to actively address privacy concerns and ensure that users maintain control over their data.⁴⁸ Data security measures should be in place to protect against unauthorised access and to safeguard sensitive data.

70. **Smart cities and e-governance** are key features of modern urban life. New information technologies have fundamentally transformed urban societies and created both opportunities and challenges. Municipalities are gradually introducing smart technologies to improve public service delivery, economic growth and general well-being for urban populations. These ever more sophisticated technologies and easily accessible data represent a huge opportunity to achieve more sustainable, participatory and resilient cities that are receptive to urban residents’ needs.⁴⁹ Accordingly, it is crucial to further develop smart cities, including e-information, e-consultation, and e-decision making mechanisms.

71. In the context of quickly transforming cities and towns in today’s digital age, domestic and international obligations should be discussed and adopted to ensure the respect of fundamental freedoms in the design and use of information and communication technologies. Smart technologies should be a tool to serve human rights and democracy. In order to maximise their benefits for all, potential risks must be mitigated. Yet too many smart city initiatives are still led by big business rather than being driven by the needs of urban residents. Therefore, it should be kept in mind that not all technological change is necessary, and not all smart solutions contribute to the public good. Technologies alone do not make towns and cities smarter; it is necessary to put people at the centre of digital transformation. Digitalisation needs to be driven by the needs and expectations of urban communities. In this regard, the adoption and effective implementation of open government standards is of key importance. More generally speaking, smart cities and e-governance initiatives must comply with human rights, democracy and the rule of law in accordance with relevant Council of Europe standards.

⁴⁷ An adequate legislation and its implementation in line with the European Convention (modernised) Convention for the Protection of Individuals with Regard to the Processing of Personal Data (ETS n°108 and CETS n°223) is a prerequisite for adequate policies on privacy at the local level. In the European Union the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) regulates the right to data protection.

⁴⁸ See Congress Report on Smart cities and regions – prospects for a human rights-based governance approach (2022); 5.1 Privacy and data security safeguards.

⁴⁹ In line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (3, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 16).

72. **Digital inclusion:** Nobody should be left behind in this rapid digital evolution. Accordingly, digitalisation initiatives developed by local authorities should promote digital inclusion and widespread and affordable access to the internet and new technologies, especially in poor communities and for marginalised groups of the population. An uneven distribution of smart solutions and an exacerbation of the digital divide must be prevented and addressed. Measures combating digital illiteracy and the resulting digital isolation should aim to teach not only generic skills such as how to use computers and smart-devices but also demonstrate how to use e-services. This can boost efforts to ensure a transition to clean energy and to promote new forms of mobility. Smart cities can also provide opportunities for the use of open data to strengthen local democracy and improve the delivery of public services aimed at reducing the digital gap, including the digital gender gap. The objective of digital inclusion likewise calls for clear mitigation strategies and the maintenance of in-person support.

73. **Assessment and mitigation of risks:** Municipal authorities implementing digitalisation should make sure that they continually assess needs, mitigate risks and reduce the adverse impacts of relevant policies, paying particular attention to the input and feedback of local stakeholders and urban residents. Mitigation strategies need to be put in place to ensure that urban residents welcome and accept digitalisation and benefit from it. Municipalities should not rush to adopt digital solutions uncritically. They should instead make sure that the application of new technologies and artificial intelligence tools is carried out in a democratically responsible and purposeful manner, in line with human rights, democracy, the rule of law and sustainable development considerations. Mitigation strategies should also include the continuous evaluation and oversight of the use of new technologies, in particular of artificial intelligence.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ The Council of Europe Convention on artificial intelligence (currently under elaboration) will provide valuable guidance to ensure that design, development and application of artificial intelligence tools are in line with the Organisation's standards on human rights, democracy and the Rule of Law.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

74. The European Urban Charter III builds on the original European Urban Charter (1992) and the European Urban Charter II – Manifesto for a new urbanity (2008) and takes into account the urban challenges and developments of the past 15 years.

75. It provides a set of revised principles to guide urban policies in an era of transformations.

76. Local governments, with a political leadership accountable to urban residents, are key players in guaranteeing human rights, strengthening democracy and the rule of law. By promoting ethical governance, sustainable development and solidarity they enable towns and cities to meet the current and future challenges of developing urban societies.

V. APPENDIX: CONGRESS REFERENCE DOCUMENTS

1. DEMOCRACY AND URBAN RESIDENTS' PARTICIPATION

- # *European Charter of Local Self-Government (ETS No. 122), Article 3.2*
- # *Additional Protocol to the European Charter of Local Self-Government on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority (CETS No.207)*
- # *Congress Report "Beyond elections - the use of deliberative methods in European municipalities and regions" (2022)*
- # *Congress Report "The situation of independent candidates and the opposition in local and regional elections" (2022)*
- # *Congress Priorities 2021-2026: Priority 6.b Democratic societies (2021)*
- # *Congress Report "Holding referendums at local level" (2021)*
- # *Congress Report "Youth work: the role of local and regional authorities" (2021)*
- # *Congress Report "Local and regional elections in major crisis situations" (2020)*
- # *Congress Report "Developing urban-rural interplay" (2020)*
- # *Congress Report "Fighting sexist violence against women in politics at local and regional levels" (2020)*
- # *Congress Report "Voting rights at local level as an element of successful long-term integration of migrants and IDPs in Europe's municipalities and regions" (2018)*
- # *Charter of European Political Parties for a Non-Racist Society (revised, 2017)*
- # *Congress Checklist for compliance with international standards and good practices preventing misuse of administrative resources during electoral processes at local and regional level (2017)*
- # *Congress Report "The use of languages by local and regional authorities" (2017)*
- # *Congress Report "Women's political participation and representation at local and regional levels" (2016)*
- # *Congress Report "Electoral lists and voters residing de facto abroad" (2015)*
- # *Congress Report "Criteria for standing in local and regional elections" (2015)*
- # *Congress Report "New forms of local governance" (2015)*
- # *Congress Report "Bridging down barriers to youth participation: adopting a lingua franca for local and regional authorities and young people" (2015)*
- # *Congress Report "Voting at 16 – Consequences on youth participation at local and regional level" (2015)*
- # *Congress Report "Empowering Roma youth through participation: effective policy design at local and regional levels" (2014)*
- # *Congress Report "Integration through self-employment: promoting migrant entrepreneurship in European municipalities" (2013)*
- # *Congress Report "Youth and democracy: the changing face of political engagement" (2012)*
- # *Congress Report "Education for democratic citizenship: tools for cities" (2011)*
- # *Congress Report "The situation of Roma in Europe: a challenge for local and regional authorities" (2011)*
- # *Congress Report "Meeting the challenge of interfaith and intercultural tensions at local level" (2011)*
- # *Congress Report "Achieving gender equality in local and regional political life" (2010)*
- # *Congress Report "Cultural integration of Muslim women in European cities" (2010)*
- # *Congress Report "Integration of young people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods" (2010)*

2. SOCIAL RIGHTS, ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

- # Congress Report *“Reception of women and children refugees in Europe’s cities and regions”* (2022)
- # Congress Report *“Regional identities: promoting dialogue and diversity in unity”* (2022)
- # Congress Priorities 2021-2026: Priority 6.a. Resilient societies: Effective local and regional responses to public health crises; Priority 6.c. Cohesive societies: Reducing inequalities in the field (2021)
- # Congress Report *“Ensuring the respect of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in major crisis situations”* (2021)
- # Congress Report *“Protection of LGBTI people in the context of rising anti-LGBTI hate speech and discrimination: the role of local and regional authorities”* (2021)
- # Congress human rights handbook for local and regional authorities: volume 2-Social rights (2020)
- # Congress human rights handbook for local and regional authorities: volume 1-Fighting against discrimination (2019)
- # Congress Report *“Social rights of young people: the role of local and regional authorities”* (2019)
- # Congress Report *“The role of local and regional governments in protecting internally displaced persons (IDPs)”* (2019)
- # Congress Report *“Unaccompanied refugee children: the role and responsibilities of local and regional authorities”* (2018)
- # Congress Report *“Promoting human rights at local and regional level”* (2018)
- # Congress Report *“Forever young? The role of youth policies and youth work at local and regional levels in supporting young people’s transition to autonomy and working life”* (2017)
- # Congress Report *“From reception to integration: the role of local and regional authorities facing migration”* (2017)
- # Congress Report *“Gender budgeting”* (2016)
- # Congress Report *“The situation of Roma and Travellers in the context of rising extremism, xenophobia and the refugee crisis in Europe”* (2016)
- # Congress Report *“Organising intercultural and interreligious activities: a toolkit for the use of the local authorities”* (2016)
- # Congress Report *“Fighting the increasing poverty of women: the responsibility of local and regional authorities”* (2015)
- # Congress Report *“Promoting diversity through intercultural education and communication strategies”* (2014)
- # Congress Report *“Best practices of implementation of human rights at local and regional level in member states of the Council of Europe and other countries”* (2014)
- # Congress Report *“Developing indicators to raise awareness of human rights at local and regional level”* (2010)
- # Congress Report *“Intercultural cities”* (2009)
- # Congress Report *“Social approach to the fight against racism at local and regional level”* (2008)
- # Congress Report *“Integration through Sport”* (2007)
- # Congress Report *“Reconciling heritage and modernity”* (2006)

3. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, PROTECTION OF ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE

- # Congress Report “A fundamental rights to the environment: a matter for local and regional authorities. Towards a green reading of the European Charter of Local Self-Government” (2022)
- # Congress human rights handbook for local and regional authorities: volume 3 - environment and sustainable development (2022)
- # Congress Report “Smart cities and regions – prospects for a human rights-based governance approach” (2022)
- # Congress Priorities 2021-2026: Priority 6.d. Sustainable societies (2021)

4. INTEGRITY AND PREVENTION OF CORRUPTION

- # European Charter of Local Self-Government (ETS No. 122), Articles 6, 7 and 8
- # Congress Report “Fighting nepotism within local and regional authorities” (2019)
- # Congress Report “The protection of whistle blowers – challenges and opportunities for local and regional government” (2019)
- # Congress Report “Financial compensation of local and regional elected representatives in the exercise of their office” (2019)
- # Congress Report “European Code of Conduct for all Persons Involved in Local and Regional Governance” (2018)
- # Congress Report “Conflicts of interest at local and regional level” (2018)
- # Congress Report “Transparency and open government” (2018)
- # Congress Report “Making public procurement transparent at local and regional levels” (2017)
- # Congress Report “Preventing corruption and promoting public ethics at local and regional levels” (2016)
- # Congress Report “The misuse of administrative resources during electoral processes: the role of local and regional elected representatives and public officials” (2016)
- # Congress Report “Rights and duties of local and regional elected representatives: the risks of corruption” (2010)

5. SECURITY AND CRIME PREVENTION

- # Congress Priorities 2021-2026: Priority 6.a Resilient societies (2021)
- # Congress Report “Ensuring the respect of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in major crisis situations” (2021)
- # Congress Report “Congress strategy to combat radicalisation at grass-root level” (2015)
- # Congress Report “Combating radicalisation at grassroots level: the role of local and regional authorities” (2015)
- # Congress “Guidelines for local and regional authorities on preventing radicalisation and manifestations of hate at grassroots level” (2015)
- # Congress Report “Making cities resilient” (2012)
- # Congress Report “Combating domestic violence against women” (2009)
- # Congress Report “Preventing violence against children” (2009)
- # Congress Report “Urban security in Europe” (2006)
- # Congress Manual on Local Authorities and Urban Crime Prevention (2001)

6. DIGITALISATION AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

- # *Congress Priorities 2021-2026: Priority 6.e. Digitalisation and artificial intelligence (2021)*
- # *Congress Report “Smart cities and regions – prospects for a human rights-based governance approach” (2022)*
- # *Congress Report “Hate speech and fake news: the impact on working conditions of local and regional elected representatives” (2022)*
- # *Congress Report “Home sharing platforms: challenges and opportunities for municipalities” (2021)*
- # *Congress Report “Transparency and open government” (2018)*
- # *Congress Report “Open data for better public services” (2017)*
- # *Congress Report “E-media: game changer for local and regional politicians” (2015)*
- # *Congress Report “E-democracy: opportunities and risks for local authorities” (2009)*