

Chamber of Local Authorities

40th SESSION
Second part

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Dear colleagues,

as you are all aware, the first part of the 40th Session was held in March and focused, primarily, on the more institutional issues, notably the renewal of the Congress.

We have now the opportunity to turn our attention to thematic and political topics and, of course, to link them to the priorities of the Congress for 2021 to 2026 which were adopted in March.

Our Chamber sitting this afternoon will start by the presentation of a report to assess the situation of local democracy in Armenia through the major legal tool of the Congress, the monitoring of the European Charter of Local Self-Government. Our colleagues Gunn-Marit HELGESEN from Norway and Bryony RUDKIN from United Kingdom will present the findings from a mission which took place already in 2019. Due to the pandemic, it was not possible to discuss and adopt this report earlier which shows how COVID-19 did impact also the work schedule of our Congress over the last one and a half years.

The problems of organising meetings of the Congress apart, one can almost say that COVID-19 has left no stone unturned. A virus has shaken the foundations of our societies - and after COVID the “normal” could be profoundly different. This is why, before the summer break and with some hope to see the end of the tunnel, we decided to cast a glance into the future of the situation in our municipalities against the backdrop of experiences made at the local level during the pandemic.

The second debate is called “the post-COVID city – the impacts of the pandemic on socio-political and democratic processes in Europe’s cities and towns” which makes it obvious that this debate should serve as a “door-opener” for further discussions and actions including possibly also dedicated thematic reports to be prepared by the Congress. Our guest

speakers this afternoon cover a wide range of areas – from scientific research to local politics and youth engagement.

I think that it is clear that the repercussions of the last one and a half years will certainly be felt long after the immediate threat of the virus is behind us.

We will have to ask ourselves a number of critical questions. Such as: How will city-life change in the future? How will smaller municipalities and town centres develop and what's about the urban-rural interplay? Will there be a new exodus from cities instead of the exodus from rural areas which occurred in the past and has left areas in some member States practically uninhabited.

Working from home modalities have shown that, with a stable Internet connection, it is possible to live well outside the city in which you are employed. Therefore, how will workspaces look in the future? Will they decrease, or else become multi-use spaces and what are the consequences for city development and spatial planning, more generally.

The various lockdowns and curfews imposed across many European cities suggested that limiting cars within cities could be a marketable strategy in the near future. Will public transportation need to adapt to these changing times?

However, from another perspective, if less people will be travelling for work in future, how will this affect planning in respect of infrastructure and public transport?

The sharp decrease in car and air travel related pollution was also noticed around the world, which again highlights the environmental commitments European States have previously made. Could more green space, such as bike highways and activity zones, be the answer?

However, probably the most difficult question is about the future of democracy and, within the remit of our Chamber, about democratic institutions at the local level. How will the aftermath of this pandemic affect democracy and how will democratic processes look like? Will e-democracy be the way of the future, and if so, is it possible to integrate new technologies including digitalisation and Artificial Intelligence, across all Council of Europe member States, also at the local level? How can technology-related gaps between generations and different groups of society be bridged to avoid the digital divide which can have an explosive social impact?

What will be the consequences for the involvement of citizens in politics at the community level and how can local elected representatives contribute to re-establishing trust and repair damage to the image of public institutions? What is our role, for example in the context of multi-level

governance, in this democratic recovery process – which is needed, equally important as the COVID-related recovery.

Dear colleagues, back in 2008, the Congress adopted a booklet entitled “Manifesto for a new urbanity”, within the European Urban Charter II, which looked at how urbanity changed in the 15 years since the Congress had adopted the first European Urban Charter document in 1992.

We could argue that more developments have occurred in the last 13 years than in those first 15. We could even dare to make the claim that again more changes have occurred over the last 14 months, since the outbreak of the pandemic in Europe.

As such, one of the outcomes of our debate on the post-COVID city of today could be to revisit this “Congress Manifesto for a new urbanity” and update it to focus on urbanity in the new post-pandemic context.

This would also allow us to tie the idea of urbanity, as it is today, with the Congress priorities, adopted for the coming years until 2026, of promoting resilient, democratic, cohesive, sustainable and digital societies.

This is only an idea of potential next steps ahead of the debate, which I am sure will ignite a number of possible topics that could be looked into more concretely, through further debates and actions in the frame of this Chamber but also other Congress bodies.

Dear colleagues, I will end here, and I would be happy to receive your feedback – today or later by e-mail - in particular, regarding the proposal to revisit and up-date the “Congress Manifesto for a new urbanity” in the light of our debate regarding the post-COVID city.

Thank you!