

2021-2026 priorities of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities

Congress objectives: Ensuring the proper functioning of local and regional democracy and addressing major societal challenges

At the beginning of each new mandate, the Congress draws up an overall framework for its future work, providing a direction and defining priority areas to fulfill its core missions entrusted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. It determines the main issues to be addressed and opportunities to be explored in order to address the evolving problems and challenges within the Council of Europe communities and states.

Adopted at the renewal session of March 2021, the priorities 2021-2026 of the Congress are based on the consultation of its members and of the national and European associations of local and regional authorities. They also take into account the strategic framework of the Secretary General and the priorities of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe – including the priorities of its rotating presidency - and refer to the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as part of the wider Council of Europe contribution to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

Within these priorities, the Congress is determined to enshrine as its core mission the monitoring of local and regional democracy, the observation of local and regional elections, thematic contributions to address current and future challenges and the implementation of co-operation programmes in specific member States.

The COVID-19 pandemic that broke out early 2020 and changed radically the political agenda and the priorities of all political and economic actors, illustrates the need to be able to adapt work and activities to a new situation, new developments and new sanitary, social, economic and politic challenges.

The Congress priorities for 2021-2026, which will be implemented through its statutory meetings, the working programmes of its chambers and committees as well as its cooperation activities, will thus be assessed regularly and in a broader manner, at mid-term mandate, in 2023.

Congress thematic priorities 2021-2026: responses to new challenges

Effective local and regional responses to public health crises: Local and regional authorities are the level of governance closest to the citizens. Through their action on the ground, they are best placed to promote territorial cohesion, sustainable local development and solutions tailored to the specific needs of the communities, based on a strong territorial approach of national and European policies as well as interaction between the population, the democratic institutions and the national associations. The Congress will promote the effectiveness of responses to overcome an emergency situation or health crisis and its consequences to better prepare for future emergencies through the right balance and interaction between centralised and decentralised capacities within a system of multi-level governance.

Quality of representative democracy and citizen participation: Mayors and local councillors play a vital role in promoting the principles of representative democracy at the local level and shared values within their communities. The Congress will continue to promote the quality of democratic governance and support the elected representatives in carrying out their daily tasks. It will continue to actively promote the devolution of powers and the granting of adequate means and funding that make the action

possible at the local level. The Congress will further ensure that citizens are at the heart of public action and will actively promote their participation in the life of their communities.

Reducing inequalities in the field: By implementing innovative policies aimed at ensuring political and social rights, fair redistribution and equitable opportunities, local and regional authorities can help building more resilient and inclusive cities and regions, have a positive impact on reducing inequalities as well as reinforcing participation and trust on the ground. In line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the Congress will further raise awareness on the respect of human rights at the local level, fight corruption and promote transparency, fight discrimination, radicalisation and exclusion, promote inclusion of vulnerable groups, promote gender equality, fight violence against women and children, contribute to the empowerment of youth as well as reducing the divide between rural and urban areas and between central and peripheral regions.

Environmental issues and climate action in cities and regions: The right to a safe and sustainable environment is a fundamental human right and its protection is part of good governance. Local and regional elected representatives are in a unique position to tackle climate emergency, promote sustainable development and implement policies and actions which they can shape to fit to local context and needs. The Congress will further develop activities regarding local responses to environmental and climate challenges, which will call for a strategic approach through education, awareness raising, building resilience and capacity for adaptation on a wide range of issues, such as transport, recycling, water and waste management, production and consumption of local products, building and tourism.

Digitalisation and artificial intelligence in the local context: The digital revolution is changing the face of societies and must be put at the service of democracy. The Congress will support the development of digitalisation in the local and regional communities with ethical, legal, reliable and controlled technologies that takes into account democratic security and the protection of personal data. The Congress' work will aim at seizing fully the opportunities offered by new technologies – from making cities and regions “smart” and digitalising local economy to using them for information and dialogue tools for better inclusion and participation of citizens - while protecting the freedom, integrity and, in general, the fundamental rights of the citizens.

Congress' core mission: promoting the quality of local and regional democracy

Monitoring the European Charter of Local Self-Government : Through its monitoring mechanism, the Congress assesses the application in domestic law of the *European Charter of Local Self-Government*, which binds all 47 Council of Europe member states to respect the rights and responsibilities of local authorities and to work towards the implementation of the principle of *subsidiarity* or shared democracy. The Congress will continue its work to improve compliance with the Charter's provisions, tackling recurring issues and encouraging governments and parliaments to ratify and implement all the provisions of the Charter. Its final objective is to achieve "100% Charter coverage over 100% of European territory" thus advancing local and regional democratic self-government and decentralisation on the whole continent.

Observing local and regional elections : During its observation missions, the Congress assesses whether planning and conduct of local and regional elections adhere to legal provisions and best practice in this matter, thus ensuring that the standards for holding democratic local and regional elections are respected. In addition to this work which gives rise to country-specific observations and election reports, the Congress will follow up issues and challenges identified over the past years in the member States such as the fight against corruption and clientelism, the selection and funding of candidates as well as the use of referendums in the local context and voting rights of migrants and internally displaced persons.

Implementing co-operation activities in the field : Thanks to the expertise and experience of its members, the Congress can offer local and regional authorities and their associations assistance and the means to acquire new skills and know-how and to strengthen their institutional capacities as well as their consultation procedures with national governments. Its aim is to establish close co-operation and

lasting relations with and between the various national associations in member states and to help them defend the rights of local and regional authorities. These activities will be pursued within the framework of the Council of Europe action plans and the Congress' own post-monitoring road maps signed with individual member states, as well as within the framework of specific partnerships

Further developing practical tools, networks and synergies : The Congress has developed numerous tools, publications and practical guides for use by its members and all local and regional authorities, to assist and support them in their daily work. The Congress also aims to bring together local and regional elected representatives from all 47 Council of Europe member states to enable them to work together or carry out joint projects. Furthermore, the Congress will continue developing its partnerships and co-operation with institutional partners within and outside the Council of Europe and with national and European associations and networks through regular exchanges of views, the signature of cooperation agreements and the organisation of common activities.

The Council of Europe, an international platform for exchange and devising democratic and legal standards based on common values

Since its creation in 1949, the Council of Europe has advanced the defence of democracy, the rule of law and human rights at all levels.

In recent years, the Foreign Ministers of the 47 member States that build up the Council of Europe, reaffirmed the importance of the Organisation as a unique platform for dialogue and co-operation, for tackling the challenges to democracy, such as increasing inequality, racism, hate speech and discrimination and addressing urgent issues such as protecting environment, developing legal provisions for artificial intelligence, protecting the right to health and other social and economic rights, on the basis of inclusiveness, non-discrimination and gender equality.

They have also expressed their renewed commitment to European unity, greater solidarity among nations, multilateral co-operation and multilevel governance.

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities was established within the Council of Europe in 1994 to give local and regional authorities a forum to have their say in the process of European integration.

Today the Congress represents the 150.000 local and regional communities and their elected officials in the Council of Europe's member States, ensuring their voices and concerns are reflected in the Organisation's activities.