

**European Week of Regions and Cities - Workshop on 'Improving governance and preventing corruption in the EU and EaP countries'**

## Speaking notes by Herwig VAN STAA (Austria, EPP-CCE), Congress Spokesperson on promoting public ethics and preventing corruption

*Check against delivery*

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Dear Chairman,

Dear colleagues,

- 1) As spokesperson for the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities on promoting public ethics and preventing corruption, and also as member of CIVEX, I am pleased to be here to present to you some of the activities carried out by the Congress in the fight against corruption.
- 2) There is a broad consensus that corruption poses a major threat to the legitimacy of our democratic institutions; as well as to the trust the European citizens put in their representatives. This issue must be dealt with in all our member States, and at all levels of government. Local and regional authorities are not spared by this phenomenon. They suffer from the consequences of corruption as much as other public authorities.
- 3) In all its various forms - the lack of transparency in public procurement, nepotism in the recruitment process and in the abuse of administrative resources in election campaigns - corruption is estimated to cost European governments billions of euros each year. It affects citizens, governments and business alike, increasing unpredictability and impeding new investment.
- 4) As I said, the problem is acute at all levels of government, including local and regional levels. With increased decentralisation, local and regional authorities have substantial responsibilities for public spending and the management of European funds. However, despite their budgets and competences have increased, adequate control mechanisms to reduce the risks of abuse are still lacking.
- 5) As public awareness of the risks and scale of corruption in local and regional public life grows, spurred by the rapid developments in communications, there is a corresponding increase in citizen impatience and intolerance of this situation.
- 6) The fight against corruption needs to remain a long-term priority for local and regional governments and their associations. Concerted preventive action is paramount in order to foster economic growth, improve living conditions and ultimately regain citizens' trust.
- 7) While we welcome the numerous actions which have been taken by European countries in order to fight corruption, local and regional authorities also need to take initiatives to develop anti-corruption strategies. Though the national level can facilitate the harmonisation and

enforcement of anticorruption policies, the involvement of local and regional authorities is essential to ensure that their particular situations and needs can be properly addressed.

- 8) Although there is no clear connection between corruption and decentralisation, corruption is sometimes used to justify increased oversight or recentralisation by centralised authorities. So local authorities need to be seen to be fighting corruption, to prevent national authorities from using this excuse to reduce local autonomy.
- 9) The Congress has responded to this need by adopting - in October 2016 - a "Roadmap of activities for preventing corruption and promoting public ethics at local and regional levels". This is a comprehensive and long-term approach to corruption prevention that sends a clear signal of our intention to make this a priority activity for 2017 and the years to come. This roadmap has several objectives.
- 10) First, we need to work on our own awareness and understanding of corruption at the local and regional level. The specific role of the Congress, as a forum for dialogue and cooperation, can contribute to a better understanding of the risks of corruption at the local level.
- 11) In that respect, the Congress is preparing six thematic reports, covering the most relevant issues local and regional authorities are currently facing, namely: the abuse of administrative resources in election campaigns, corruption in public procurement, conflicts of interests at local and regional levels; the protection of whistle-blowers, nepotism in the recruitment of staff; and transparency and open government.
- 12) The first of these reports - on the abuse of administrative resources in election campaigns - has already been adopted by the Congress, and the report on public procurement will be adopted at our plenary session next week, in the framework of a large debate on "Young people and open government in the fight against corruption".
- 13) You might be surprised that we are having a special debate on the role of young people in the fight against corruption, but we are indeed convinced that they have a special role to play – they are often the first to sound the alert and to mobilise civil society in fighting for cleaner government – and our experience is that more open and cleaner government can only come about with an increased involvement of civil society.
- 14) We are also preparing a thematic report on the protection of whistle-blowers. I would like to make a digression here. The protection of whistle-blowers is important, but it should only be granted for disclosures made with a reasonable belief that the information is true, detailed and relevant for the case at the time of disclosure. We should be aware of the serious impact of unfounded and unjustified attacks on the reputation of politicians and their further political life, especially when these attacks take place in public. Like any other case of slander, such impeachments should be considered as criminal offences and punished when they turn out to be unfounded.
- 15) The second objective of our roadmap is to revise the European Code of Conduct for the political integrity of local and regional elected representatives. This Code is an essential tool for our cooperation activities, our workshops and seminars, and has proved its worth as a European standard. Yet it is a child of its time, written almost 20 years ago, and it is widely recognised that we need a new code to embrace the new challenges that have arisen when it comes to ethics, transparency and the prevention of corruption.
- 16) We have set up an advisory group to undertake this revision. It has identified three main areas of revision. Firstly the Code should extend to all people working in the provision of public services, and not just apply to elected representatives. Secondly, it should take into account the impact of digital technology and new forms of communication and address the issue of the privacy of data.
- 17) Finally, the attitudes and expectations of citizens about good public behaviour are changing. We are currently witnessing a growing mistrust toward public institutions and their representatives. In this regard, mechanisms and institutions for effective implementation and compliance with standards of conduct are essential. Independent auditors and audit courts play a major role in the fight against corruption at the national, regional and local levels.

- 18) Likewise, an independent ombudsman or commission can investigate complaints, resolve conflicts through mediation and recommendations, and serve as a trusted institution, to which people can turn anonymously.
- 19) The revised Code should be designed with its implementation in mind, to make sure it is not another ghost document. This revision is going to be a major undertaking. However, we are hoping to complete this work next year.
- 20) The third objective of our roadmap is to supplement our statutory activities through the implementation of cooperation activities. We are finding that seminars and workshops for young local leaders, mayors and local councillors on fighting corruption are very much appreciated in the member states in which we have special programmes.
- 21) In four CORLEAP countries - Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, we are piloting strategies to promote accountability, public ethics and transparency, to increase political trust in local authorities. We are developing handbooks on "Transparency and citizen participation" for local authorities to strengthen local institutions and contribute to the implementation of the anti-corruption mechanisms in these countries.
- 22) The Congress is working closely with its institutional partners on this issue - in particular the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, the Group of States against Corruption and, of course the European Committee of the Regions. You may recall that we organised last year a joint conference on "The role of local and regional authorities in preventing corruption and promoting good governance" in Brussels. Within the Council of Europe institutions, the Congress also regularly asks the GRECO for comments on its reports.
- 23) I am very pleased that the Congress has also been working closely with the Committee of the Regions in preparing the recommendation by CORLEAP to the fifth EAP summit, taking place here in Brussels next month, on 24 November.
- 24) The Congress has is contributing substantially to enhancing good governance and preventing corruption at local level through our statutory work and cooperation activities. It is vital that we maintain this dynamic to ensure that the local dimension is strengthened in the 20 deliverables for 2020, so as to make a real impact on corruption at local level.
- 25) Corruption has always been with us. It is not something that can be overcome once and for all. Preventing corruption and reducing its risks takes time and energy. We have greater impact in this field when we work together. Let our two institutions continue to strengthen our cooperation in this sphere.

Thank you for your attention.