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### Speech of Thomas Andresson, Sweden (R, ILDG)

Mr President,

Madame President of the Conference of INGOs,

Dear Colleagues,

It is a pleasure for me to take part online at the International Conference on Civil participation in decision-making.

I am here today as Rapporteur on civil participation representing the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe. In my country, Sweden, I am the President of the Regional Council of Jämtland and Härjedalen.

Before I start on my presentation, I would like to thank the Georgian Presidency of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe for organizing this event, giving us the opportunity to present the specific contribution of the Congress to this subject at local and regional government level.

One of the major concerns of modern democracies is the alienation of citizens from politics, and it is part of the responsibilities of elected representatives closest to the citizens to keep them engaged.

Civil society participation constitutes an essential component of the democratic process. It provides citizens with an alternative path, alongside those provided by political parties and lobbies. It gives them an avenue to channel their views and interests in the decision-making process.

As local and regional authorities, we must target and ensure participation at all levels, from simply being informed to consultation, dialogue and finally to partnership.

We recognize partnership as the highest form of civil participation in decision-making. It implies shared responsibilities at each step of the political process; from the agenda setting to the implementation of policy initiatives.

Local partnership constitutes a major tool in this regard. It brings together all the relevant actors (civil society, NGOs, local governments) with the purpose of improving a given situation in a local area. It also gives each community the chance to work on a certain issue with a direct approach rather than through delegate systems.

To highlight the effectiveness of this tool, I would like to give you few good practice examples of cooperation at both local and national levels:

- In 2013, in the framework of the European Week for Local Democracy (ELDW), the municipality of Büyükçekmece, in Turkey, established three new Councils for Children, Youth and Women to promote more active participation. The main goal was to make citizens come together, talk about their wishes and needs and give them the possibility to suggest solutions to the authorised institutions. Those meetings indeed enabled them to actively participate in the policy-making process and to implement their ideas, strengthening their co-operation with the local government;
- On the national level, one such example concerns citizen involvement in public matters. Following the green wave of the last few years, Croatia established the Green Phone Service with the aim of involving citizens in the process of identifying and solving environmental problems. The main idea here is to make the citizens co-operate with the local authority departments and services in order to encourage their active participation and political activism.

These examples demonstrate that when the will and the means are there, citizens participate in affairs that concern them and everyone wins.

I now want to draw your attention to one specific category of population whose participation is vital for the future of our democratic societies. I am talking about youth.

I would like to say few words in this context on the responsibility we have, as local and regional authorities, to promote youth participation in decision-making process and to help young people achieve their full potential as autonomous members of the society.

This is why, since 2014, we have Youth Delegates in our Congress as part of our 'Rejuvenating Politics' strategy. They represent their countries and take part in our sessions, comment on reports, ask questions in committee meetings and participate in conferences as Congress delegates. Their role has evolved during the five years we worked with them and we will look for ways in which we can expand their action and move towards more collaborative decision making.

This is also why we recognise youth work and youth workers, whether they are municipal employers or volunteers, as crucial contributors to the empowerment and engagement of young people in the development of inclusive and democratic societies.

I would like to take this opportunity to highlight the fruitful co-operation we had with the Council of Europe Youth bodies and particularly the Advisory Council on Youth with whom we are collaborating on a report on youth work which will be adopted by the Congress in October 2020.

Before I conclude, I would like to say a few words about the collaboration between the Congress and the Conference of INGOs on the Revised Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision-making Process.

The Revised Code - as adopted by both our institutions in 2019 - is an instrument which defines a set of general principles, guidelines, tools and mechanisms.

If and when it is used effectively, it can be a powerful tool for guiding our action on the terrain.

It is devised to help local authorities and civil society organisations to enter into an effective dialogue and cooperation. Its aim is to enable public authorities and civil society to work together in order to strengthen human rights and achieve democracy. It is based on practical experiences from NGOs across Europe, and the sharing of their good practices and valid methods to engage with public authorities.

We, in the Congress, have endorsed and encouraged it from the very beginning, as we have always recognized the importance of citizen participation in public life as a means to ensure the democratic supervision of public authority.

Concerning the implementation of the Revised Code by local and regional authorities and by civil initiatives and organisations in the present and in any future scenario, we must recognize that we are operating in a rapidly changing social environment, heavily influenced by the rise of digital technologies.

The development of the internet provides very useful new options of participation available to the public such as e-Governance or social media.

New forms of non-organized civil participation, community-driven citizen participation and grassroots movements need to be explored. Indeed, they often have a local aspect which has gone out of focus in recent years.

One thing to underline here is that the participatory process must be efficient and effective. This process demands an evaluation and follow-up of the results, and the new Code aims at addressing this monitoring process more clearly. This is why we encouraged member States to support the utilisation of the Code by local authorities and by civil society initiatives.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Citizen participation is the strongest pillar of a functioning democracy.

Top-down approaches work only up to a point.

We must open up spaces and specify procedures for a more systematic cooperation with the citizens and transmit their concerns to Europe's governing bodies.

Thank you for your attention.