

**Keynote address by Róbert Grúman, Chair of the Governance Committee,
Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe**

**European Committee on Democracy and Governance (CDDG) Thematic Meeting
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**A Democratic Governance Response to COVID-19
"The frontline role of local authorities"**

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to participate in this meeting today, in my capacity as Chair of the Governance Committee of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and as the Vice-President of the Covasna County Council in Romania.

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic is far more than a health crisis, it has been affecting societies and economies all over the world in a profound and unprecedented manner. As we all know, it has already vast financial and structural consequences for local and regional authorities in Europe as well as the national governments.

The examples for such impact at the territorial level are numerous: In the short term, some local governments are facing liquidity problems as many tax deadlines have been postponed. In the longer term, authorities will face large revenue declines that may lead to drastic budget cuts and to the reduction of public services.

The pandemic has shown shortcomings of sanitary systems of certain European countries and regions. It seems that some government systems were more resilient and better prepared to such a major crisis than others, and that co-operation between the different tiers of government functioned better in some regions than in others.

Therefore, the Governance Committee of the Congress will organise a thematic debate on multi-governance and cooperation aspects during the next meeting scheduled for 21 September. We hope to be able to hold it in Strasbourg – but this will depend, not least, on the further development of Covid-19.

We will also consider an exchange of views on the very practical side of local and regional governance – digital meetings of councils, legal implications of remote decision-making and citizen participation in municipalities and regions in times of major crisis, to mention only some interesting topics. This could result in a compilation of practical guidelines for our Congress members. In any case, we will continue this debate during the Congress Plenary Session, normally due to be held in October.

We will look into these questions and must make use of the valuable experiences gained over the last months to improve health care and other public services for the benefit of the general public. This is a challenge and a chance at the same time!

Dear colleagues,

I believe that consultation between all levels of governments is the key to success in coping with the crisis and with possible future challenges. Let me emphasise in this context the basic principles of the European Charter of Local Self-Governance: self-government, consultation and financial autonomy. It is essential that national authorities fully embrace these principles of our Charter and remove restrictions which have been implemented, in some countries, in the initial phase of the crisis. Extraordinary measures must always be temporary only and under democratic control.

We must prevent, under all circumstances, this crisis – irrespective of its dramatic economic impact - from destroying our democratic values and our free and pluralistic societies.

I would like now to conclude by a few words about the challenges we are currently facing in my own country Romania and, more specifically, in Covasna County, where I have my elected mandate.

On the 13th of March Romania introduced a state of emergency to prevent and control the spread of COVID-19. After two months, a state of alert was instated at the national level, starting from the 15th of May.

Currently, Romania has 22.415 cases (1.437 death)

Like worldwide, the restrictive measures and regulations put a lot of pressure on people, in everyday life, but to sustain the smooth operation of the public institutions and the emergency healthcare system, the pressure was put on the local government.

The Covasna County Council as the budgetary sustainer of the county emergency hospital allocated extra financial resources for the provision of services, materials, and special equipment to battle the virus.

In strong partnership and co-operation with the NGO's health care and youth associations, since the beginning of the lockdown, throughout the cities and rural areas, we were helping to provide the daily needs of elderly people.

Being one of the smallest counties in Romania, after 3 months, we can say that we were quite fortunate, having disciplined citizens who understood and respected the lockdowns and the strict regulations.

Last but not least I find it very important to speak out about the economic effects of the pandemic. We are facing factory lockdowns, mass layoffs, and the struggle of the HORECA and tourism sector.

Now, as restrictions are being eased across the country, industry players are trying to find a way to regain the trust of tourists and breathe new life into empty leisure accommodations.

To help them, the county's tourism association has recently announced the "Visit Covasna Safe Place" program, which grants hoteliers a "COVID Safe Place" certification. So far, more than 60 properties in Covasna County have complied with the measures recommended by the association and received such a certificate, throughout the county.

Thank you for your attention.