

Launch of the Project “Promoting deliberative democracy and innovative approaches to citizen participation in South-East Europe”

Opening remarks by Bernd Vöhringer (Germany, EPP/CCE), Vice-President of the Congress

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Bar, Montenegro, 18 April 2024

Dear Mayor, Mr Raičević

Dear Ambassador, Mr Felten,

Dear Head of the Council of Europe Office, Ms Dervišagić,

Dear members of NALAS, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to address you today in my capacity as Vice-President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe and to launch our project on “Promoting deliberative democracy and innovative approaches to citizen participation in South-East Europe”.

This project comes at a very important moment for all of us.

It focuses on **citizen participation**, which is a **core principle of human rights** and a **condition for effective democratic citizenship for all residents**.

Active role of the citizens and importance of citizen participation in decision making was stressed by 46 member states of the Council of Europe at the Reykjavik Summit in May last year. They adopted a **declaration which sets out a common vision** for the future of our continent, which highlights the priorities to **protect and fight for human rights** everywhere, to ensure **the dignity of all citizens**, and to **strengthen democracy and good governance at all levels** in Europe.

The Summit also reaffirmed the **role of local authorities and grassroots elected representatives** in upholding democracy, human rights and the rule of law. This recognition gave a **momentum for local democracy** and a strong impetus to the Congress, which marks its **30th anniversary** this year, as the Council of Europe is celebrating its 75th anniversary.

Our action, funded by Germany, through the project “**Promoting deliberative democracy and innovative approaches to citizen participation in South-East Europe**” is one of the testaments to our commitment to European values and to meeting the needs and interests of citizens, of European citizens.

I would like to express our thanks once again to the Federal Republic of Germany for this support and to welcome the Ambassador Felten, who is with us today.

Furthermore, this action addresses citizen participation through the lens of **deliberative democracy**, which we, at the Congress, see as an effective way to amplify the voices of our citizens and learn from them on decisions that impact their lives.

Deliberative processes, in its many formats, be it citizens’ assemblies, citizens juries, mini-publics – are a mechanism to include all perspectives and experiences, especially those of under-represented groups, in particular **women and youth**.

The key characteristic of deliberative democracy is the **random selection** of participants, thereby allowing strong involvement of those in our communities who do not usually have the opportunity or the motivation to speak up.

It is my understanding that some of you had the opportunity to hear more about the features of deliberative democracy in the workshop we held this morning, but allow me at this point to emphasise that deliberative processes **are not just a mere experiment**, they are part of a movement to innovate democracy and make it more resilient.

They are a **genuine endeavour** which **complements more “traditional” ways** of involving citizens. Deliberative approaches **strengthen representative democracy**, and have proven to be successful in various contexts, even on difficult topics.

This position is re-affirmed through the concrete framework set up at the Council of Europe.

In 2022, the Congress adopted a [report and a recommendation on the use of deliberative methods at local and regional level](#), while the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers' [Recommendation on deliberative democracy](#) (2023) sets out the first international standard in this area. Furthermore, and coming back to the Reykjavik Summit, the [Reykjavik Principles for Democracy](#) (2023), refer to the active encouragement of citizen participation at national, regional and local levels, including, as appropriate, through deliberative democracy.

Our regional action not only is in line with the aforementioned, but it builds on the results of the Congress interventions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in particular the citizens assemblies in Banja Luka and Mostar. I am glad that we have the representatives from the city of Banja Luka today who will share their very recent experience of a deliberative process on youth in entrepreneurship.

And we are very pleased to witness the growing interest of local authorities across the region to engage further with the population and boost democratic innovation.

Our shared vision for **inclusive, human-rights-based local democracy** requires ongoing efforts to amplify everyone's voices, particularly of those unheard.

It also requires continuous engagement with citizens in **all stages** of policymaking and **embracing innovative approaches** in doing so.

I am also very glad that this project will be implemented in partnership with Network of Associations of Local Authorities in the South-East Europe - NALAS – which, since its establishment, has been a true advocate and our devoted partner in the efforts to strengthen local government in the South-East of Europe.

I would like to thank the Presidency and the Secretariat of the NALAS for their support and I look forward to our co-operation through this project as well.

In the Congress, we consider associations of local authorities as our **main partners** and in that framework, we highly value the efforts of your respective Associations for the continuous advocacy to strengthen the position of local authorities within the multi-level governance system and in line with the European Charter of Local Self-Governments.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This launching event is an opportunity to exchange and discuss key principles of innovative and inclusive local government, as an important element of thriving democracies. In these challenging times, we all need to work towards building resilient, inclusive and sustainable local communities.

The Congress stands ready to continue supporting you - local authorities, associations, and citizens alike to ensure that democracy at the local level is not just a concept but a vibrant and people-powered reality.

I wish you all a successful event and project.

Thank you.