



Presidency of Georgia  
Council of Europe  
November 2019 – May 2020  
Présidence de la Géorgie  
Conseil de l'Europe  
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## Conclusions of the Presidency

### ***1. Civil Participation in Decision-Making: a priority of the Georgian CM Presidency***

Our representative democracies are increasingly confronted by new challenges: the decorrelation between citizens' preferences and decisions taken by public authorities has been growing, electoral turnout has been decreasing and trust in public authorities is at an historic low. Populism and the appearance of large, grassroots movements and protests would tend to confirm a trend of disaffection for the governors by the governed.

The Georgian Presidency considers that increasing the level of input from civil society and from citizens to guide public decisions can be one way of combating these negative trends. This does not mean that representative democracy should be replaced, but simply complemented by more participatory democracy. Continued civil society and citizens' engagement between elections is fundamental for the functioning of a truly democratic society and opens a society-wide dialogue on critical issues.

Civil participation, by citizens directly and through their NGOs, is not only the direct result of the rights enshrined in Articles 10 and 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights (freedom of expression, assembly and association), but also a common value of European States and a way of governing which can better involve all stakeholders.

The current pandemic crisis only accentuates the need for new and improved forms of involving citizens in the decision-making process at all levels of power. While confined in most of the world and unable to have face-to-face interactions with their authorities, citizens expect that their opinions are sought, that their voices are heard and that their legitimate expectations remain at the centre of policy making even in such dire situation. While some individual rights may be temporarily suspended, democracy must continue to function and shine. We have the tools to make this happen and already many central, regional and local governments are experimenting with new, modern and effective ways of citizen participation. All we need is to disseminate and replicate such good practice.

Georgia had used and promoted and will continue to do so the unique work of the Council of Europe, in particular through some specific legal instruments: Additional Protocol to the European Charter of Local Self-Government on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority (CETS No. 207); Guidelines for civil participation in political decision-

making (adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 27 September 2017); Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)4 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the participation of citizens in local public life as well as the Revised Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the decision-making process adopted by the Conference of INGOs in October 2019. But the work of co-operation, of helping to create bridges between civil society and public authorities which the Council of Europe is implementing is also commendable. In Georgia, Tbilisi has already benefitted from it and we hope that such activities will continue on a bigger scale, both in Tbilisi and in other cities of Georgia but also in other countries. We are all in this together and we can all learn from each other.

## ***2. The Online International Conference: a multitude of good practice highlighted***

Under the aegis of the Georgian presidency, an International Conference on Civil Participation in Decision-making, organised by the City of Tbilisi and the Council of Europe's Directorate General of Democracy was initially planned to be held at the Council of Europe's headquarters on 6 March 2020. But much to our regret, a few days prior to holding the conference, it had to be postponed due to the restrictions related to COVID-19.

But as the subject is too important to be abandoned, an innovative online format was developed, and the conference took place in such format on 6 and 7 May 2020. All panellists' presentations were made available online on 6 May at 9.30 a.m. and participants were invited to send their comments and questions to panellists by 7 May 12.30 p.m.

The Conference was aimed at identifying useful and innovative experiences of successful civil engagement at local, regional and national level and at highlighting and promoting the unique work of the Council of Europe in the area. The programme of the conference was rich and comprehensive, with 20 outstanding speakers representing central, regional and local authorities of the Council of Europe's Member states, Conference of International NGOs, European Committee on Democracy and Governance, Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, civil society organisations and experts.

The Conference was also well attended, and we received over 50 questions and contributions from online participants, to which some of the speakers subsequently responded.

## ***3. Conclusions of the Presidency: civil participation is central to democracy***

- i. The Conference on 6-7 May underscored **the variety and scope of initiatives** in Council of Europe member States which aim to support the engagement of citizens with their democracies from the earliest stages of policy and decision making and agenda setting. From widening consultation practices, to dedicated issue-specific deliberation structures, from semi-permanent citizen juries to online petitions – the diversity of initiatives is deserving of more in-depth review and assessment.

- ii. These various initiatives at local, regional and national levels demonstrate that deliberative and participatory democracy practices provide traditional representative democracy with additional tools to improve the responsiveness of public policies, consolidate community support for political decisions and, ultimately, increase the satisfaction of the citizens.
- iii. The global trend of increasing dissatisfaction of citizens from their own democracies, which is reaching a high in Europe as well, is per se a threat to the democratic fabric of our society and also is a symptom of the decreasing correlation between citizens' legitimate expectations and public policy decisions.
- iv. Global crises, notably of migration of people, the changing climate and the unfortunate regularly-appearing pandemics, require not only the co-ordinated and common responses from global governments, but also large-scale support from citizens and the general population in order to be successful.
- v. There is a clear need to diversify the ways in which citizens are consulted and to make sure that such ways take advantage of modern technology and allow them to participate even when various circumstances keep them away from the physical discussion fora, while avoiding the creation or strengthening of any digital divide between them.
- vi. Representative democracy is our European democratic tradition, and, through free, fair and regular elections, it is the most legitimate form of delegation of sovereignty from the people to a legislative, law-making, body. Representative democracy is enhanced, strengthened and re-invigorated by appropriate forms of deliberative and participatory democracy practices.
- vii. The Committee of Ministers' decisions in Helsinki called for the "strengthening the role and meaningful participation of civil society organisations" in our Organisation, from this we can infer/extrapolate/understand that citizens and civil society ought to have a strengthened role and meaningful participation in their local democratic life. The definition or outlines of "meaningful participation" is therefore an important element to develop within the Council of Europe's mandate for fostering genuine democracy.

#### ***4. Presidency proposals for further action by the Council of Europe: substantial work ahead***

- i. We propose that the Council of Europe, via its CM rapporteur group on democracy (GR-DEM) and its intergovernmental committee on democracy and governance (CDDG), in co-operation with the other relevant Council of Europe bodies, ie the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, the Venice Commission and the Conference of International NGOs, engage in a review of existing practices of participatory, deliberative democracy (building upon the preparation of the 2017 Guidelines

on civil participation), an assessment of their value-added, cost-benefit and levels of result, and give consideration to the potential usefulness of a Council of Europe instrument, standard or further guidelines for incorporating good practices of deliberative and participatory democracy into the European democratic tradition at local, regional, national and European levels.

- ii. We propose that the World Forum for Democracy explore, in its next session in November 2020, deliberative and participatory practices in relation to the Climate Crisis and the need to ensure wide public support for very big societal decisions which could give indications of success/failure and support for specific methodologies, experiments. We believe that the issue of civil participation is central to our democracies and should continue to remain one of the main elements of exchange in the Forum in its next sessions.
- iii. We encourage the Council of Europe to continue its co-operation work with public authorities of all level in order to help them to build (online and offline) platforms of dialogue with civil society in line with European standards and in light of the best European practice and we invite donors to fund such programmes in the more recent members of the Council of Europe.
- iv. We suggest to all Council of Europe bodies, in their work in respect of civil participation in decision-making, to consider the work, co-ordinate and/or cooperate with other international organisations.