

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities



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Priorities of the Congress 2013-2016

Bureau of the Congress

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Summary

Since 2010, the Congress focused in particular on the development and promotion of local and regional democracy by strengthening its activities in the field of monitoring, election observation and promotion of human rights at the local and regional level. It also developed cooperation and partnership in relation to its monitoring activities. It intensified its political dialogue with the Member States and the Committee of Ministers and its relations with other institutional partners - Parliamentary Assembly, Commissioner for Human Rights, the Venice Commission.

But the adaptation of the Congress to change took place within a European context marked by a particularly serious economic and financial crisis, which also affects local authorities and their ability to fulfill their missions to the citizens. The magnitude of this crisis makes it necessary to consider the different levels of local and regional governance and how they work and needed to find answers to new challenges.

The priorities that the Congress has set for 2013-2016 are aimed at enabling it to continue to adapt to change while strengthening its activities in its areas of expertise, working closer to the needs of local and regional authorities and their citizens and seeking to provide visible and lasting results in the field.

¹ L: Chamber of Local Authorities / R: Chamber of Regions
ILDG: Independent and Liberal Democrat Group of the Congress
EPP/CD: European People's Party – Christian Democrats of the Congress
SOC: Socialist Group of the Congress
ECR: European Conservatives and Reformists Group
NR: Members not belonging to a political group of the Congress
NPA: No political affiliation



DRAFT RESOLUTION²

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities:

1. Is the assembly of local and regional authorities of the Council of Europe and helps to ensure the participation of local communities, their elected officials and citizens in achieving a Europe which respects democracy, the rule of law and human rights;
2. Has been reforming its political and administrative structures and its functioning which has enabled the strengthening of cooperation with the various institutional partners and dialogue with the Member States;
3. Has implemented its 2011-2012 priorities as part of its statutory functions, based on the European Charter of Local Self-Government and the Reference Framework for Regional Democracy, in line with the new priorities of the Council of Europe;
4. Defines its new priorities and the outline of its activities at each renewal session of the Congress;
5. Having considered the appended project on priorities for 2013-2016, fully endorses the general orientations on:
 - raising the quality of local and regional democracy and governance, human rights and the rule of law in Council of Europe Member States,
 - helping local authorities to rise to the new challenges resulting from the economic and financial crisis,
 - developing cooperation and partnerships;
6. Adopts therefore the priorities and instructs its Bureau to implement them.

² Preliminary draft resolution approved by the Bureau on 14 September 2012.

Bureau members:

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N.B: The names of members who took part in the vote are in italics.

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APPENDIX

1. INTRODUCTION

1. The Congress is the Council of Europe's assembly of local and regional representatives. It speaks on behalf of over 200 000 local and regional authorities and ensures the participation of their elected representatives and the citizens in building a Europe that respects democracy, the rule of law and human rights.

2. To adapt to the new challenges raised by the profound changes taking place in Europe, where there is not only an unprecedented economic crisis but also much questioning with regard to what it means to be European, the Congress has since 2009 been reconsidering its goals, its activities and its working methods, and this has led to a far-reaching reform of its Charter and its Statutory Resolution as well as its rules of procedures and secretariat.

3. By refocusing on its new priorities, putting new political and administrative structures in place and adopting an operational approach geared towards practical results, the Congress has established itself as a key partner for the issues concerning local and regional democracy within the Council of Europe.

4. At the same time, the Council of Europe has embarked on a more general reform, which has allowed the Congress to strengthen cooperation with the various institutional partners and improve dialogue with the Member States. The Congress will rise to the challenge of reaching the local and regional levels of government through its recommendations through a continuous follow-up and communication strategy with the national local and regional associations whose work is crucial for reaching the elected representatives.

5. These new orientations have triggered cooperation also with partners such as the European Union and authorities of countries of the neighbourhood policy

Implementing the priorities for 2011- 2012

6. The Congress focused on developing and promoting local and regional democracy and gave the monitoring process a fresh impetus – monitoring visits became more frequent, regular and systematic and more open to political dialogue on the ground with the States concerned. Follow-up to reports was given special attention to ensure impact of the Recommendations and Resolutions.

7. The election observation programme was expanded – observation exercises were extended to cover the entire electoral process and an election observation training programme was carried out.

8. Cooperation and partnership activities were also expanded, in particular to provide practical responses to the problems identified during monitoring and election observation activities. To this end, relations with the other institutional partners – Committee of Ministers, Parliamentary Assembly, Commissioner for Human Rights and Venice Commission – and the Council's operational directorates were stepped up.

9. The Committee of Ministers lent its support to these developments and invited its rapporteur groups to engage in dialogue with the Congress whenever their work could benefit from Congress input.

10. Local and regional elected representatives have a major responsibility in terms of safeguarding the fundamental rights of their citizens and their participation in the democratic process. The Congress encouraged its members to protect the most vulnerable groups and to promote greater citizen participation in local and regional life.

11. It contributed actively to the Council of Europe campaigns to combat sexual abuse of children and stop violence against women and to the neighbourhood policy conducted with the countries of the Southern Mediterranean in particular. It stepped up partnerships and cooperation agreements and contributed actively to the work of other institutions, while taking care to perform its role in a complementary manner that ensured added value.

12. Building the capacity of towns, cities and regions, promoting good governance and ethics, implementing effective integration policies and helping to establish mutual understanding at the grassroots were the aims which the Congress pursued throughout the programme and which it will continue to pursue in the years ahead.

Renewed dialogue with the intergovernmental sector

13. The report by Manuel Chaves, former Spanish Minister for Territorial Policy and Public Administration, on multi-level governance at the Council of Europe was adopted unanimously at the Conference of Ministers responsible for Local and Regional Government in Kyiv in November 2011. It underlines the key role of the European Charter of Local Self-Government for all Council of Europe activities in this field and stresses that monitoring the Charter is part of the Congress' statutory mandate.

14. It also highlights the need to strengthen stable political relations between the Ministerial Conference and the Congress.

15. The Chaves report recommends that an Agenda in common be prepared, in a process also involving the Parliamentary Assembly and NGOs, in areas of common interest such as monitoring the impact of the financial and economic crisis on local and regional government, strengthening citizens' democratic participation, developing the concept of multi-level governance, promoting human rights at local and regional level and transfrontier cooperation.

16. The report has been fully endorsed by the Congress who has urged its partners to implement an Agenda in common and will make sure that the thematic proposals are central to its priorities for the coming years.

17. The priorities and actions described in this document could thus help to identify the future elements of the Agenda in common.

2. THE PRIORITIES AND ACTIONS OF THE CONGRESS IN 2013-2016

18. From 2013 to 2016, Congress activities will be based on three major objectives:

- i. Raising the quality of local and regional democracy and human rights in Europe
- ii. Helping local authorities to rise to the new challenges resulting from the economic and financial crisis
- iii. Developing cooperation and partnerships.

19. These activities will be regularly assessed and adjusted, in line with the priorities of the Council of Europe and on the basis of consultation with all the Congress' partners.

I. Raising the quality of local and regional democracy and human rights in Europe

20. Under its statutory competencies, the Congress has the role of improving the standard of local and regional democracy in the Member States. In the course of its reform in 2010 and 2011, the Congress has adopted a series of measures aimed at adopting a more operational, more concrete and more result-oriented approach. It has in particular started to recenter its action on more comprehensive and higher-quality monitoring of local and regional democracy, notably by reinforcing its dialogue with the governments.

21. It has better structured and codified the observation of local and regional elections and has undertaken a better follow-up of its recommendations. It has also introduced the local and regional dimension of human rights as a new priority.

22. These new orientations will stay at the heart of its mission and at the centre of its activities in the coming years and when it will have to make strategic choices.

a) Monitoring local and regional democracy

23. In the firm belief that the first response in times of crisis should be to strengthen democracy, in particular at local and regional level, the Congress will continue to ensure that the European Charter of Local Self-Government and the Reference Framework for Regional Democracy have a lasting and practical impact.

24. The principle of subsidiarity, which is a key element of the Charter and the Reference Framework, is of even greater importance in times of crisis. The Congress will thus pay attention to the consultation and dialogue established with national associations of local and regional authorities both by national governments and by international bodies, including the Congress itself. It will also foster exchanges between the national associations and contribute to enabling participation of local and regional authorities in the drawing up of national policies and international programmes.

25. In particular, the Congress will continue to improve its monitoring of local and regional democracy and to examine the problems encountered. The aim is to regularly monitor States and identify common problems, innovative activities and new solutions which could help States to frame local and regional democracy policies. Indeed, the Congress aims not only to identify problems but also to seek concrete solutions together with the States concerned. Developing good practices by comparing and learning from each other is both a money-saving solution in this context of limited resources and a means of taking into account past and current experiences.

26. To this end, the Congress will devise transnational procedures for evaluating its monitoring so as to identify problems which are common to or recur in several States. This will enable it to submit conclusions to the Committee of Ministers and propose cross-sectoral and/or thematic activities involving other Council of Europe entities.

27. It will also continue to urge member States to lift their reservations to the Charter of Local Self-Government when they are no longer necessary. It will encourage States to assess their national situations so that they can identify any remaining obstacles to full accession to the Charter and will offer to help them in seeking practical solutions. It will develop specific activities to this end (see Chapter III).

28. For the Congress, the idea is to turn the Council of Europe Member States into a unified “100% Charter” area where the Charter is observed and applied without discrimination and where local and regional self-government is exercised in an optimal manner with appropriate citizens’ participation.

29. In order to continue to improve the quality of its monitoring work, the Congress will organise specific and regular training sessions for members who take part in its monitoring visits as rapporteurs.

30. Post-monitoring activities will henceforth be an important part of the Congress arsenal to make a concrete impact on local democracy. To ensure that its recommendations are implemented, the Congress will follow-up developments in Member States between monitoring visits, update its information and invite national authorities to give feedback.

b) Promoting Human Rights at local and regional level

31. With the aid of institutional partners within the Council of Europe – Commissioner for Human Rights, Committee of Ministers and its Steering Committee on Human Rights (CDDH) – and outside – European Union Fundamental Rights Agency – the Congress will also seek to promote human rights at local and regional level.

32. Due to the close relationship between citizens and their elected representatives, local and regional bodies are best placed to identify problems which arise and take action to solve them. Local authorities’ responsibilities continue to increase along with their decision-making powers. Their awareness of relevant human rights issues and discrimination issues (such as gender parity, rights of the LGBT, disabled persons etc.) is therefore crucial. When, for example, mayors take decisions on events that may raise issues of public order, they may enter into conflict with fundamental liberties such as the freedom of expression and the right of assembly. The Congress has put on its agenda the task of raising awareness on human rights among elected representatives in Member States and, with this in mind, it is developing tools such as indicators for data collection and analysis.

33. An information note on human rights and local authorities is henceforth appended to each country monitoring report. It is also intended to prepare five-yearly reports based on a comparative analysis of the situation in the Member States in order to pinpoint common and recurrent issues, which can then be the subject of awareness-raising campaigns through events such as the European Local Democracy Week.

34. The Congress will convene an international conference on raising local authorities' awareness of human rights, in order to debate questions relating to the implementation of human rights at local level and to propose a Congress action plan on this issue.

c) Observing local elections

35. From 2013 to 2016, the scope of election observation exercises will be extended so as to make the Council of Europe's Member States a zone of free and fair local elections. To this end, the Congress will step up cooperation with its institutional partners within the Organisation, in particular the Venice Commission and the Parliamentary Assembly, and outside, in particular the EU Committee of the Regions, so that the activities are conducted in a concerted, complementary manner, thereby avoiding duplication of effort.

36. Implementation of the recommendations made following observation exercises will also be more closely monitored, both by systematically taking account of their conclusions in the monitoring of local and regional democracy and by means of increased dialogue with the Committee of Ministers and the Member States.

37. To make election observation more effective, the Congress will develop its observation training programme. These training courses may concern specific aspects of election observation.

d) Fostering citizen participation

38. The quality of democracy also depends on the trust that citizens place in their institutions and on their participation in the democratic process. As local authorities are closest to the grassroots, they are best placed to take positive action and encourage participatory democracy.

39. The involvement of citizens and the development of dialogue with their elected representatives are vital at all levels of governance. This dialogue must include all local residents without exception, in particular groups which currently feel excluded – young people, migrants, foreign nationals, minorities, Roma, etc.,- in the best interests of both the majority and the minority of the population.

40. The Congress, with the help of various partners and civil society, intends to contribute to the development of local and regional initiatives for increased participation of all citizens. In this context, it will continue to promote the European Local Democracy Week which makes citizens aware of the importance of participatory democracy in a growing number of towns and regions across Europe. It will step up the involvement of towns and associations and foster interaction with other programmes, such as the European Union "A Europe for Citizens" programme.

41. The action taken by the Congress will also facilitate intercultural/interreligious dialogue at local level and make it easier for municipalities to devise intercultural policies. To develop active citizenship, the Congress will support education for democratic citizenship activities and human rights education.

II. Rising to the new challenges resulting from the economic and financial crisis

42. The Congress' adjustment to changes has taken place in a European context which, since 2008, has been characterised by a particularly serious economic and financial crisis. The debt crisis which is affecting most European countries, toxic loans and budget austerity policies all also have consequences for local and regional authorities. In particular, they lead to budgetary choices which may affect local and regional authorities' ability to discharge their remit. The greatest threat concerns social budgets and assistance to the most vulnerable groups.

43. The crisis is accompanied by other challenges – mistrust towards political leaders, increasing voter abstention, disaffection with public life, isolationism, increasing populism.

44. However, the crisis also provides an opportunity to review existing models and methods of operation and makes it necessary to find fresh responses to the challenges posed.

45. One way to support self-governance and help local and regional authorities face new challenges, is to ensure the sustainable development as well as social and economic modernisation of societies, especially in the field of new energies, information communication, green technologies and the environment.

46. The Congress will particularly concentrate, within its ambitious and proactive approach with respect to its future priorities, upon the evaluation of measures taken by member states to overcome the effects of the debt crisis to determine whether they are in line with the “European Charter of Local Self-Government” and the “Council of Europe Reference Framework for Regional Democracy” and whether a fair distribution of the financial burden between the levels of government according to the principle of proportionality is guaranteed.

a) Taking action in response to threats to local and regional funding

47. In times of economic crisis, budgetary choices are difficult and States may be very tempted to reconsider the way in which resources are distributed, often to the detriment of local and regional authorities. In accordance with its statutory responsibilities, the Congress must pay special attention to the consolidation of resources allocated to local and regional authorities, in order to counteract the negative effects of the crisis and to recognise those authorities’ essential role in democracy.

48. The Congress will continue to promote adequate funding of their missions and support the fair sharing and redistribution of funds both of national and international origin, thus guaranteeing that the budgets enable them to continue fulfilling their duties in terms of providing services to local inhabitants.

49. It will also address issues concerning financial and budgetary decentralisation, decision-making autonomy and the means of making the best use of local resources.

50. The Congress will also help to promote solidarity between local and regional authorities in the same country or between different countries and at different levels of governance, so that they can seek joint solutions, particularly with regard to meeting their debts and dealing with the problem of toxic loans.

b) Contributing to discussion of local and regional authority reform

51. In many Council of Europe Member States, the crisis has increased the commitment to reform and restructuring of the different levels of local and regional authorities. While such reforms may in some cases prove to be necessary or useful, they should always be carried out in the interests of local inhabitants and in compliance with the commitments entered into by States under the European Charter of Local Self-Government.

52. The Congress will ensure that reforming and restructuring of local authorities are done in consultation and dialogue with the national associations in accordance with the Charter and the Reference Framework for Regional Democracy, and that these are aimed at strengthening local and regional democracy, not weakening it.

53. The Congress will undertake to reflect on the role of intermediate local authorities, the evolution of regionalisation and the reform of different levels of local and regional governance.

c) Promoting good governance

54. In response to the multiple challenges of economic and financial crisis, the Congress supports all initiatives to promote good governance, which rely on a transparent management of public goods. It is in this spirit that it will continue to support the establishment of organs of administrative and financial control (such as mediators and Territorial Court of Auditors).

55. Examples of good practices of functioning and management of local and regional institutions that will have been identified will be shared with interested national, local and regional authorities.

d) Fostering social inclusion

56. Local and regional authorities bear great responsibility for ensuring respect for their citizens' fundamental rights. Protection of this kind is particularly necessary for the most vulnerable groups, which require closer attention and greater efforts. It is especially important in a difficult economic situation, which involves severe financial restrictions and leads to community isolationism and rejection of others on the part of some citizens.

57. The financial and economic crisis may also increase rural exodus and step up problems linked to the uncontrolled development of cities. The Congress will support a balanced approach in the development of societies, while striving for a dynamism of rural regions on the one hand and creating the necessary conditions for social integration of new urban populations on the other.

58. Local and regional elected representatives' determination to develop or maintain good conditions for the integration of vulnerable groups, including Roma and Travellers, will have the Congress' backing and assistance too.

59. It is with this in mind that the Congress has launched a European Alliance of Cities and Regions for Roma Inclusion, the purpose of which is to form a framework for cooperation and exchanges to help cities and regions to strengthen their capacity in this area, implement effective integration policies and establish mutual understanding at the grassroots.

60. From 2013 to 2016, the Alliance will conduct a series of thematic and cross-sectoral activities supported by the Congress and its partners, including the Special Representative of the Council of Europe Secretary General on Roma issues, and designed to meet the priority needs of its members in the field. This activity will be followed up at political level by resolutions addressed to local and regional authorities and recommendations to national governments.

61. The Congress will also continue to actively contribute to Campaigns and actions of the Council of Europe, especially on sexual violence against children, trafficking in Human Beings as well as the integration of disabled people.

e) Strengthening elected representatives' commitment to ethical conduct and to combating corruption at local and regional level

62. One effect of the economic crisis has been to reveal and underline people's aspiration for greater transparency and integrity among political players and in the authorities which they run. It has therefore made it all the more necessary for local and regional representatives to act in accordance with ethical values and to combat corruption.

63. The conference held by the Congress in Messina (Italy) in 2010 confirmed the risks facing local and regional authorities in performing their duties and underlined the importance of combating corruption at local level. After the conference, the Congress launched a series of activities and studies on this topic.

64. From 2013 to 2016, the Congress will move on to the operational phase of the activity on integrity and corruption at local and regional level which is to be carried out in conjunction with the Committee of the Regions.

65. The Congress will propose various measures at grassroots level, taking into consideration the results of the studies carried out, in particular a survey on good practices for fostering transparency at local and regional level.

66. In this activity, the Congress will adopt a cross-sectoral approach and involve other international organisations such as the OECD and specialised bodies of the Council of Europe (Group of States against Corruption (GRECO)) and the European Commission (Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF)).

III. Developing co-operation and partnerships

67. With its reform, the Congress decided to strengthen its partnerships and to establish new forms of cooperation and action directly related to its statutory competencies. Under these new, more targeted

and more practical arrangements, the Congress will draw on its members and the potential for peer-to-peer work which they offer. It will seek to provide practical solutions to specific or cross-sectoral problems identified during its monitoring and election observation activities.

68. It will also take part in the programmes and action plans developed by the Council of Europe, by providing specific local and regional democracy activity input.

69. At the same time, it will focus on trans-frontier and inter-regional cooperation and assisting reforms in countries of the southern Mediterranean and the Eastern Partnership, under the Council of Europe policy towards neighbouring countries and access extra-budgetary funding for these activities.

a) Targeted cooperation

70. Local and regional authorities have become major political stakeholders in shaping democratic political systems. Their elected officials must act as facilitators of democracy within their local areas and regions. The action of the Congress will therefore mainly concern the quality of local governance and the consolidation of reforms in this field, the improvement of the leadership capacities of local elected representatives and their ability to engage in constructive dialogue with both central government and local inhabitants.

71. The Congress will work in close cooperation with the different Council of Europe bodies, in the context of the programmes and action plans of the Organisation as a whole.

72. Its programmes will cover Member States such as Ukraine, Moldova and those from the South Caucasus and the Balkans.

b) Local and regional democracy in Europe's neighbouring countries

73. The Congress adopted, during its 23rd session, a Resolution and a Recommendation on the "the changes underway in the Arab countries - opportunities for local and regional democracy" as well as a Resolution on "the Council of Europe new policy towards neighbouring regions: role of the Congress". These texts take a close look at the way in which the Congress can contribute to the development of local and regional democracy in countries of the Southern Mediterranean, in particular Morocco and Tunisia. The Congress thus decided to take the necessary administrative and regulatory steps which will allow it to adopt a special "Partner for local democracy status" that may be granted to elected representatives of local authorities in those neighbouring countries.

74. On the basis of these texts and in the light of the dialogue engaged with these countries, the Congress will propose activities aimed at promoting the principles enshrined in the European Charter of Local Self-Government and the Council of Europe Reference Framework for Regional Democracy. Extra-budgetary resources shall be made available for these activities.

c) Inter-territorial cooperation

75. The Congress has many years' experience in the field of trans-frontier and inter-regional cooperation. The Seminar held in Innsbruck in May 2012 outlines the future framework of its activities on the subject.

76. In the follow up of the Seminar, the Governance Committee will prepare, in 2013, a report on trans-frontier cooperation, capacity building, knowledge sharing and networking, which will also establish the main thrusts of future activities.

77. The Congress will continue to promote the implementation of the 1980 European Outline Convention on Trans-frontier Cooperation between Territorial Communities or Authorities and its additional protocols, in particular Protocol No 3, which opens the way for trans-frontier cooperation between EU and non-EU local authorities. It will also continue its discussions in this area with the EU Committee of the Regions, with which it has established an active cooperation.

78. The Congress will continue to contribute to the development of various forms of inter-territorial cooperation.

d) Cooperation with the European Union

79. The Council of Europe has, over the past few years, intensified its cooperation with the European Union, particularly through joint projects and programmes. The Congress is also contributing to this process by adding a dimension of local and regional democracy and governance.

80. It will continue to hold regular exchanges and to organise joint activities with the Committee of the Regions in the context of its Statutory Resolution, the Memorandum of Understanding signed between the Council of Europe and the European Union and the revised Cooperation agreement with the Committee of the Regions signed in 2009. The cooperation will be based on reciprocity and complementarity and will seek to optimize efforts, ensure efficiency and avoid duplications.

81. The two institutions will coordinate their respective positions and work on issues of common interest, with the main objective of improving local and regional democracy. They will, in particular, cooperate in the fields of local elections observation, law enforcement and counteracting corruption in local and regional administrations. The Congress will give visibility to its partnership with the Committee of the Regions and will seek to increase the impact of common actions.

82. The Congress will play an active role also within the Conference of the Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership (CORLEAP), in which the Congress holds observer status. On Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, the Congress will take part in the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM) organised by the Committee of the Regions.

83. Finally, building on the know-how of the Fundamental Rights Agency in the area of analyses, surveys and questionnaires, the Congress will carry forward its work on human rights indicators designed to help elected representatives who wish to conduct policies which genuinely respect human rights.