

MARUF 25

Istanbul, 1 – 3 October 2025

Presentation by Bernd Vöhringer, Vice-President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe

Opening session - 1 October 2025, 10.00 -11.30

Panel 1 - Guiding question: How is it possible to have a fair city with participatory, reliable and accountable institutional structures where local democracy is rooted?

The questions you will be addressing in this year's edition of MARUF are the ones mayors and councillors are to ask themselves every day. As the Mayor of the German city of Sindelfingen for over 16 years, I know that local elected representatives bear huge responsibilities.

As mayor, you must commit yourself to caring about the wellbeing of your fellow citizens, to fulfilling your promises and meeting citizens' expectations, to delivering for them, to finding innovative and efficient ways of involving and consulting them and to acting in a transparent and accountable way.

It is a huge and exciting responsibility, but you cannot succeed alone. Mayors and councillors must have the power and the means to fulfill their missions, and they must work together with all other levels of governance – regional, national and European.

But above all, they need you – individually, as citizens, experts, young activists, and collectively, as civil society, social and economic partners and academics.

If we want to make our societies **fair, resilient, caring places that embrace diversity and social cohesion**, then together, we must regain and restore trust in democracy and its institutions and invent new ways to make it work. We must rethink our methods and innovate.

Yes, democracy is not perfect, but it is essential. Why?

Because it is built on the resilience of our societies and communities, and it is about the people that live there.

Because democracy, unlike other systems, upholds the principles of freedom, equality, security and justice.

Democracy is not just a system of governance, it is not only about elections, laws, institutions and procedures. It is a living, breathing ideal that gives every citizen a voice and every voice a value. It is a daily practice, shaped in community centres, schools, towns and neighbourhoods.

Democracy is about trust, dialogue and the way people engage and are engaged. It is about how decisions are made every day. It is about participation, fairness and inclusion.

Democracy is our common asset, and we need to cherish and protect it, while reviving and re-enchanting it.

First round of question:

At the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, which I represent here, we see that democracy starts from the bottom up in the cities, towns and communities.

Our work is consistent with the goal of promoting fairer, stronger, more inclusive and more resilient cities.

We base it on the European Charter of Local Self-Government, a treaty which lays down the principles of local self-government

We monitor local democracy in all countries on the European continent (except Belarus and Russia), we observe local elections, we implement projects in the field, we promote open government, capacity building and citizen engagement and we address societal and environmental issues.

What do we seek to achieve within the villages, cities, regions we represent?

- strengthen local democracy, decentralisation and good governance
- help to set up transparent and accountable local leadership and institutions
- support the implementation of fair and equal policies
- empower the people to participate meaningfully
- nurture a culture where democracy is a lived reality, not just a formal structure

2nd round of question:

I congratulate and thank the Union of Municipalities of Marmara for organising this event and for providing this valuable platform for meeting, exchanging and sharing.

Above all, I want to encourage you to take this opportunity to join forces and ideas, to build networks and cooperation.

I am convinced that civic engagement, collective and supportive action, innovative and transparent governance and steadfast leadership at local level are responses to the many challenges confronting our cities and our planet.

With all levels of governance actively committed and the whole society engaged, we can achieve to make our cities safer, more inclusive, more sustainable and more resilient.