

Speaking notes of Andreas Kiefer, Secretary General of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities

Thematic debate on “Are our towns and regions equipped to respond to the multiple crisis they are facing?”

9 March 2022 - 14.35 -15.30

As I mentioned at the opening, the war in Ukraine is at the center of our thoughts and concerns.

The President of the Congress and its Bureau have issued statements that condemn in the strongest terms, the armed attack on Ukraine by the Russian Federation, which constitutes a blatant breach of international law and the Statute of the Council of Europe and urge the Russian Federation to immediately and unconditionally cease its military operations in Ukraine and withdraw its troops.

I would like to convey the support of the President of the Congress to the Ukrainian people and the Ukrainian authorities, who we know very well in the Congress, who we have been working with very closely since years to advance and consolidate democracy and who have shown an incredible courage and unwavering determination to defend their country, their freedom and their democracy.

Dear colleagues,

Over the past two years we have been confronted with the COVID-19 pandemic and its serious consequences on the functioning of our societies, on public health, delivery of social services and economic activities

The Congress has been working on the impact of this sanitary crisis as well as other crisis situations on the functioning of local and regional democracy and President Leen Verbeek prepared a report on “Ensuring respect of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in major crisis situations”, which you can find in your files.

The report identifies the most acute issues subnational authorities are being confronted with during the sanitary crisis that has put local democracy under unprecedented pressure and constraints.

What were the main recommendation?

- the principles and standards of local democracy enshrined in the European Charter of Local Self-Government ratified by all 47 Council of Europe member States must be upheld at all times of crisis to safeguard local democracy and ensure local self-government resilience and sustainability.
- The decisions on crisis-related centralisation should be measured against the principles of necessity, proportionality, and limitation in time;
- Recovery and crisis prevention plans should be (re)designed in effective consultation with local authorities. This will ensure local ownership of policies needed for their successful implementation at grassroots' level;
- Central governments are asked to continue to support local authorities in their efforts to tackle the public health, societal and economic challenges posed by COVID-19. This can be

achieved through ... refraining from excessive supervision, ensuring coordination and systematic information on national and regional measures, exchanging good and bad practices in crisis management both within and across national borders, supporting intermunicipal cooperation

The world is facing multiple challenges: climate change and energy, migration, handling social media, digitalisation and artificial intelligence, environmental degradation and the need for better integration and cohesion within our communities.

All these challenges will compel local and regional authorities to act. And they can only be successful if they act if the framework is determined at international and national level with inclusion of local and regional authorities. We need ownership at all levels.

This is why we are proud in the Council of Europe that the Committee of ministers in their Ministerial Session on 4 November 202 clearly stated that *"We recognise that the current crisis has also clearly revealed the need for more effective multilateral co-operation and multi-level governance. We need to be better prepared for future public health crises and other emergencies, including natural and technological disasters."*

An important part of the management of the war in Ukraine and its aftermath is and will be for a long time the responsibility of the cities and regions affected by the conflict or by the arrival of the millions of refugees it has generated. On the other hand, the citizens remaining within the country will need to be provided with the basic services such as food, water, heating, health care, child care, schools.

Resilience and sustainability of cities and regions are at stake in the face of major crisis and responses need to be found at all levels of governance.

Being closest to citizens, local and regional authorities act as "first responders" in the challenges to their communities. They are on the frontline to ensure the fundamental rights and needs of their citizens.

Are they equipped with the necessary autonomy and resources to respond to these crises? Are they sufficiently included in the policy shaping or just considered as implementing structures?

What is the role of national associations, European associations and networks, and of organs and institutions like the Congress and the Committee of the Regions?

This is the central question of our debate today and I welcome our panelists for this discussion. I will then invite participants to contribute with reactions of appr. 3 min max, to enable as many as possible to speak.

BACKGROUND:

The moderator asks each panellist a question to be answered in 5 mn

Panellists are:

- Xavier CADORET, France (L, SOC/G/PD)
- Sevdia UGREKHELIDZE, Georgia (L, EPP/CCE)
- Belinda GOTTARDI, Italy (L, SOC/G/PD)
- Cecilia DALMAN EEK, Sweden (R, SOC/G/PD) *tbc*

The presentations by the panellists will be followed by a discussion with the audience (PLATFORMA Political Council members) until 15.20

Replies / reactions by the panelists

The moderator draws the conclusions and closes at ca 15.30h