

50th Session of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities

Russian Federation's war of aggression against Ukraine: A Strategic Approach to Supporting the Recovery and Reconstruction of Ukraine at Local and Regional Levels

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President

Members of Congress

At the outset allow me to congratulate you, President, on your election. I offer you every best wish as you commence your term of office.

I also join in welcoming new members of Congress.

It is my task to support the Council of Europe Member States to better embed respect for human rights across all their operations. In that regard I look forward to ever deepened engagement and cooperation with you. I should add that for me it is personal – I am the son and the grandson of mayors of my home city and I have a deep appreciation of the role and importance of local government.

I acknowledge that today I address you on what is a shared high priority. Indeed, support for the human rights of the people of Ukraine is my top priority and I have visited the country on a number of occasions since the full-scale invasion commenced.

- I deplore every aspect of the Russian aggression, including;
- the sustained attacks on children and adults.
- the abduction of civilians, including children.
- the horrific mistreatment of people in the temporarily occupied territories.
- the wholesale destruction of property and utilities and damage done to the environment.
- the displacement of millions of people both within the country and to other countries.
- the campaigns of disinformation

I join all the Council of Europe and other voices in condemning the violations of international law and in demanding accountability on the part of Russia and its leaders.

At the same time, I express my deepest respect for those efforts of Ukraine and its people to defend human rights and to uphold human dignity.

Today my focus is on local and regional initiatives. In this regard, I have had the good fortune to appreciate work done at these levels during visits to Kyiv, Bucha and Lviv, meetings with the Lviv-based community of people displaced from Mariupol and with the Kyiv-based President's Representative in Crimea.

Repeatedly I encountered passion, courage and resilience. I also observed innovation and highly competent service-delivery, such as in Lviv's multi-dimensional 'Unbroken' project. I am also aware of the heroism of such local leaders as the mayors of Kherson and Irpin. And I have learned of the groundbreaking community recovery efforts in Izium, Kharkiv and elsewhere.

I have also grown ever more aware of the extensive programme of support to Ukrainian local and regional administrations on the part of you in Congress. Your steadfast attention since 2022 is commendable. I appreciate the governance-related project you run under the Council of Europe Action Plan for Ukraine as well as your promotion of partnerships between Ukrainian and other authorities across Europe. And I encourage you to continue to build awareness among displaced Ukrainians of the possibility to register claims at the Register of Damage.

Dear friends,

The attention paid by Congress to issues of recovery and reconstruction is especially important and I welcome the strategic report under discussion today. I commend the co-rapporteurs for the analysis and for the draft resolution.

The focus of attention of the strategic report parallels my own current work regarding Ukraine, which is about the embedding of attention to human beings – to human welfare and dignity - in the path to peace. I do that by advocating for the application of a human-rights based approach along that pathway.

Last July, I delivered to the government, a memorandum on the issue. I drew attention to ten areas in need of particular attention. While one of these is explicitly concerning reconstruction and recovery, almost all the others are also of direct relevance to the topic.

Drawing on my memorandum and on good practice across the world, I strongly encourage you also to embed attention to human rights across your efforts for reconstruction and recovery.

A starting point in this regard would be to frame your efforts drawing on five foundational human rights principles. These are:

- First, participation. This is the recognition that our peoples should be at the heart of efforts to support them or, in other words, 'nothing for us without us.'
- Second, accountability. Here the focus is not on Russia but on those actors responsible for reconstruction. It is about transparency, proper procedures, and the possibility for aggrieved persons to access justice.
- Third, non-discrimination and equality. This principle concerns ensuring that no one is left behind, that there be no unfair preferences to certain groups or communities and that close attention be paid to such matters as gender parity.
- Fourth, empowerment. This recall that all efforts should aim to empower our communities to shape their own destinies.
- The final principle is that of legality. This recalls how it is essential for reconstruction and recovery to be in full compliance with relevant human rights law, including the European Convention on Human Rights and the European Social Charter. It also includes numerous United Nations texts, including Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security.

Applying these principles in practice in the context of Ukraine throws up some especially important areas of attention. Time is short today – but allow me to share a few examples.

Take for instance how multiple principles require us to pay close attention to conflict-affected victims in all their diversity. We need to identify and address the situations of such groups as, those rendered homeless, returning refugees and IDPs, the injured, persons with disabilities, veterans, families with children, and older people. At every moment attention is needed to the distinct experiences of women and men.

The principles no less remind us of how core reconstruction goals should include social inclusion, social cohesion and the integration of diverse communities. Considering recent human rights developments,

they also focus on the importance of protecting the environment. Across all of these and many other sectors, civil society must be allowed and resourced to play its indispensable roles.

And the principle of accountability recalls the importance of human rights compliance and proper practice of all actors, including authorities and the national and international private sector.

Dear members of Congress,

I strongly believe that the explicit operationalising of human rights in your work for recovery and reconstruction in Ukraine would enrich it still further. I hope today that I have at least in part demonstrated to you the value of such an approach. I encourage you also to review my memorandum for a more developed sense of what the approach could look like in practice.

In so saying, I am of course, aware that the devastating aggression continues. I am no less aware of the great power politics that remain in play.

But, as I am sure you agree, these are no reason to hesitate. Already much can be achieved, and we must rigorously plan and prepare for the end of hostilities.

Our goal is indeed to 'build back better' – and that can be achieved if, through attention to human rights, we put the humanity and dignity of every person in Ukraine at the very centre of our efforts.

Thank you