

1375bis meeting of the Ministers' Deputies – 15 May 2020

Speech by Anders Knape, President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe

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1375bis meeting of the Ministers' Deputies - Handover of the Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers from Georgia to Greece

Dear President,
Ministers,

For several months now, the world has been experiencing the COVID 19 pandemic which has put at risk human lives and the functioning of our democratic societies. It has tested our ability to respond to emergencies and to protect citizens while respecting human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

In this regard, the Congress fully supports the Council of Europe Secretary General's guidance for governments during the COVID-19 crisis, stressing the need to ensure that the measures taken do not undermine Europe's founding values and standards.

Local and regional authorities are at the frontline of the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. They are providing emergency services in their communities and taking measures to contain the spread of disease. They are co-ordinating their action with other levels of government and other partners to mitigate the impact of the outbreak. They have cooperated across borders with their counterparts in other territories and countries to ensure care for those affected. Not just the operational share but also a large part of the financial share of the burden lies on their shoulders. Local and regional authorities will also be key actors in bolstering economic recovery of our countries in the aftermath of the crisis.

The Congress, as the representative body of more than 150,000 local and regional authorities, has adapted its working methods to respond to this unique situation. The first decision we took, as you know, was the cancellation of our session in March to avoid the spreading of the virus. Since then, we have implemented video conferencing and we are collecting good and bad examples from municipalities and regions which we are publishing on a special webpage.

We will also have thematic debates in the Bureau, in the committees and in the autumn session, on questions related to the functioning of local and regional democracy in times of crisis such as

- Postponing local elections,
- Protecting vulnerable groups and minorities
- Safeguarding the European Charter of Local Self-Government in extreme crisis situations
- Managing (temporary) changes of distribution of competences

to mention but a few.

This will be the basis for the contribution of the Congress to the work of the Council of Europe on the lessons learned and to helping to build resilient societies in the post-COVID-19 period. The Congress stands ready to actively participate in the upcoming work of the Committee of Ministers in this respect and to bring its contribution to the Ministerial Session in Athens in November.

The priority in the coming months for all levels of government is to join forces in order to overcome the crisis, help the people and prepare for the COVID-19 aftermath. In this regard, more than ever since 1949, Europe needs the Council of Europe as watchdog for democracy, human rights and the rule of law. And these are implemented and delivered in concrete terms to the citizens by the municipalities, cities and regions.

To conclude, I would like to thank Minister Zalkaliani and Ambassador Giviashvili for their work as Chairs of the Committee of Ministers and the Committee of Ministers' Deputies and for the hospitality I experienced during my official visit to Georgia in February. We regretted very much that the Congress members did not have an opportunity to discuss with Minister Zalkaliani, in March.

Greece is facing big challenges during its chairmanship and I welcome its priorities. The Congress will contribute its share to make the presidency successful. I invite the Minister to come to the Session of the Congress in October and discuss – on behalf of the Greek chairmanship - with the mayors and regional politicians of Europe. I wish the Minister and Ambassador Beglitis all the best for their chairmanship!

Thank you