

Webinar on consultation mechanisms between national and territorial authorities – Remote meeting, Morocco/Tunisia, 24 November 2020 - Introductory Session

Speech by Gunn-Marit HELGESEN, First Vice-President of the Congress

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Dear participants,

Welcome and thank you for your presence at this webinar dedicated to consultation and consultation mechanisms between central and local authorities.

A warm welcome to the speakers from Europe, Morocco and Tunisia who will contribute to fruitful exchanges – we have a great diversity of countries represented today, which will make the dialogue very interesting (Austria, France, Italy, Georgia, Latvia, North Macedonia; Norway)

I am happy to contribute to this exchange today, and not only in my capacity of Vice-President of the Congress and President of the Chamber of Regions. In my country, Norway, I am a County councillor of Telemark, and also the First Vice-President of the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS). I will be pleased to share today both my personal and the Association's experience of consultations with national authorities.

A word on the Congress

The Congress is the voice of the local and regional authorities of from the 47 member states of the Council of Europe. Our assembly brings together 648 members, elected in more than 150,000 communities whose diversity and complementarity are the richness of the Congress' expertise: rural, urban, villages and capital cities.

Created in 1994 in recognition of the growing role of local and regional authorities in the management of public affairs, our Congress has since worked to strengthen territorial democracy, to support communities in the implementation of their competences, but also to ensure that their voices and interests are taken into account by other levels of governance.

Our key instrument for this is the European Charter of Local Self-Government, a founding treaty that sets common standards to protect and develop the rights and freedoms of local authorities and commits the 47 European States that have ratified it to respect its provisions.

Our work thus takes the form of developing standards and recommendations aimed at more local autonomy and more consultation, for the benefit of citizens.

But the Congress is also a forum for discussion, a platform for a very large-scale exchange between-elected men and-women, who are working together to improve the living conditions of their citizens in their communities.

Indeed, although the national, cultural and historical contexts are different among the 47 member states of the Council of Europe, the concerns of elected officials are very similar. Thanks to these contacts, good practices can be promoted and mistakes can be avoided.

Introducing consultation

The Congress also aims to be an intermediate between local authorities and central government, as we work closely with both levels.

Fostering dialogue and consultation between central governments and local and regional authorities is one of our priorities and one of the key requirements of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, since it stands as a pillar of the multi-governance system.

As mentioned again very recently by the Congress President Anders Knappe during the 130th Session of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, only constructive multilateral cooperation and multi-level governance together can ensure the quality and effectiveness of public policies responses, and this includes consultation of local authorities by higher levels of government.

This is particularly true in the context of the current pandemic, as we have seen a significant commitment of local and regional elected representatives, at the frontline, trying to cope with the current situation, to provide basic and emergency services, and mitigate the social, economic and sanitary consequences of the crisis.

As the closest representatives to the citizens, territorial elected representatives are the ones maintaining the social fabric and cohesion, hence contributing to keep trust in public institutions in these difficult times. They should hence be involved at all stages of public policy making: not only in their implementation, but rather associated and consulted in the design of the decisions.

We believe that all governments, in our 47 member States and beyond, should take advantage of the capacity and competence of the mayors and councillors, their networks, their national associations and their experience of what works on the ground in territorial communities.

South-Med

The need for regular dialogue, consultations and experience sharing is not limited to Europe. The Congress, like the Council of Europe as a whole, is convinced that the Mediterranean region is a rich, fruitful and necessary pool of exchanges, given the challenges we share.

It is in this context that long-standing cooperation with Morocco and Tunisia was developed as part of the Congress South-Med Partnership programme, which represents the framework of our political dialogue and technical cooperation. This cooperation is demand driven and can consist of legal assistance, peer-to-peer exchange, expert support, capacity-building for national associations of local authorities and their members, and the promotion of participatory democracy.

Moreover, as most of you know, Morocco and Tunisia now enjoy the status of Partner for Local Democracy with the Congress, respectively since April and October 2019, which enables delegations from both your countries to contribute to our work.

Conclusion

Dear participants,

The immense difficulties we are facing today because of the pandemic and its consequences, from the economic crisis, to the increase in social inequalities, to the general crisis of confidence of citizens, both in science, in the media and in political representatives, must lead us to think about new avenues, revived partnerships and adjusted behaviours.

That is why I am particularly pleased that we can hold this exchange today, on issues of crucial importance for the future and for the sustainability of the representative democratic system, based on inclusiveness of all actors, dialogue and transparency.

Dear participants, the Congress is and will remain by your side! Thank you for your attention and I look forward to our discussions.