

Monitoring Committee Meeting, 39th Session of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities – Remote meeting, 17 September 2020

Speech by Leendert VERBEEK (Netherlands, SOC/G/PD), Chair of the Monitoring Committee

Check against delivery - Seul le prononcé fait foi

Dear members,

You are already used to hearing from me that I will be brief. But today I will be even briefer since we are in a remote meeting. So, time constraints are even stricter.

Our today's agenda includes two monitoring reports for adoption, on Austria and Ukraine.

We will also discuss the issue of local elections in times of coronavirus which will give rise to the adoption of the draft report to be presented by Stewart DICKSON and Jos WIENEN, Congress spokespersons on electoral matters.

Another debate will be dedicated to the protection of the Charter during crises.

Both discussions are very topical, and I look forward to them. This will be a great opportunity for us to exchange experiences on dealing with the pandemic and its consequences.

The COVID has tested our capacity, as local and regional authorities, to ensure good local governance, deliver services and meet citizens expectations against the background of the extreme crisis.

The Charter has also been put to a test on how effectively it can be applied in the extreme crisis situations. And the results of this test are yet to be evaluated during the monitoring visits.

In this respect, unfortunately, various travelling and other restrictive measures linked to the COVID that most countries have introduced make it impossible for us to carry out traditional monitoring visits for now.

Today's reality is that the virus continues to circulate in Europe and I highly doubt that we can expect the immediate end of the pandemic in the next coming months.

That's why two weeks ago I proposed to the three Congress Presidents to consider different alternatives to conducting in-person monitoring visits, including monitoring some countries remotely. This, of course, would be an exceptional and temporary measure, subject to technical conditions, until the situation gets better to permit resuming regular monitoring activities.

When I had this idea, I thought that it was important to innovate to adapt our statutory activities to a changing environment and of course, to explore different ways of continuing monitoring despite the challenges posed by the pandemic.

Monitoring is essence of the Congress work and the pandemic should not become an obstacle to defend the noble cause of maintaining and promoting local and regional democracy in Europe.

Certainly, there are pros and cons of remote monitoring. Obstacles to it may be of political, legal and simply technical nature. Some other formats of monitoring activities may be explored as well, for instance, through preparing information notes or launching a remote political dialogue with national authorities or civil society, without issuing a report or recommendation at this stage. This would pave the way to future monitoring visits when we will be in the capacity to travel again.

Also, should the idea of remote monitoring receive your support in principle, other underlying questions will arise regarding the countries to be selected and the choice of selection criteria.

In my view, not all the country situations can be equally suited for this kind of monitoring. I think for instance, that those member states which are implementing local self-government and decentralisation reforms deserve our presence on the ground. On the other hand, it appears much easier to organise remote monitoring in the countries having strong local self-government associations with good technical capacity to assist with the technical organisation of online exchanges.

So, as you see, the question of finding an alternative to our standard monitoring procedure is open and contains many elements. That's why I think an open debate is needed here today before an in-depth reflection will continue in the Bureau and with the Presidents.

I would like to have this very important discussion with you and hear from you on this matter.

Thank you.