

## **GME, 9-11 December 2024**

(Strasbourg, Agora building, G03)

10 December 2024

Speaking notes for Ms Meropi-Spyridoula YDRAIOU,  
Congress Thematic Spokesperson on Environment and Climate  
Change

*(10 minutes)*

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased to be able to address you today and to represent the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, one of the 2 political assemblies of the Council of Europe which gathers 130 000 local and regional authorities in Europe. I am municipal councillor of central Corfu, after having been Mayor of the Central Corfu for 4 years. I have been appointed thematic spokesperson on Environment and Climate Change by the Congress. My main objectives today are:

- to briefly explain to you our work in the field of environmental protection;
- to show that local and regional elected representatives are strong allies for governments in the common fight against the triple planetary crisis of pollution, climate change and loss of biodiversity;
- and to present our proposals for the future Council of Europe's Strategy and Action Plan on Environment.

The core mission of the Congress is to promote local democracy, strengthen local self-government and guarantee the rights of local and regional authorities in Europe. This is notably done by developing policies and recommendations on local governance issues and through the monitoring of the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government which establishes the benchmark principles of local democracy across Europe.

More than ever, environmental emergency reminds us that **everyone, at all levels of government**, has a role to play to preserve our common and only planet, for the present and future generations. As local elected representatives we are part of it. **Every day** we take decisions in our municipality or village that affect the environment, whether on the management of water or waste, air quality, or urban planification. **Every day**, we take decisions having an impact on environment for good or bad.

### **What is Congress doing to contribute to the protection of the environment?**

As the voice of Europe's local and regional elected representatives, we strive to provide answers to the challenges faced by municipalities and regions of Europe, both in urban and rural areas. To do so, the Congress has elaborated relevant reports, on **natural disasters** (last March) or on **circular economy** (last October), as you may have seen in the compendium of activities. Other reports are currently being prepared to address others concerns such as **water resources** and the **coastal erosion**.

In 2022, our Assembly has also published a Human Rights Handbook of good practices for local and regional elected representatives on the environment and sustainable development, to share valuable experiences at subnational level, which

shows what is possible to do at local level to protect the environment and which could be replicated in other municipalities or regions of Europe. You may be surprised to see how innovative and affordable initiatives have been put in place by some municipalities in all your countries!

In the Reykjavik Declaration, the heads of State and Government remind us that **a good co-operation between the different levels of government is indispensable** to tackle the triple environmental planetary crisis.

Just to give you some examples:

- Municipalities and regions have power to reduce **pollution** of water, improve air quality, and to prevent soil degradation;
- On **biodiversity** conservation and ecosystem protection; as subnational stakeholders, we have the competences to protect natural habitats, create green or blue corridors for instance;
- We are also crucial to build resilient communities to prevent the impact of **climate change**, such as extreme weather. If you look at the recent events: floods in Spain, local and regional authorities were at the frontline, or to take a more personal example, during summer 2023, on my island of Corfu, where 2 500 people have been evacuated due to the devastating fires;
- As daily decision-makers, we also have the possibility to foster circular economy in encouraging nature-based solutions with waste reduction, recycling, and sustainable consumption and to implement innovation ways of thinking.

Your Group (GME) has been mandated, among other things, to draft the Council of Europe Strategy and Action Plan on Environment, and at the Congress, we are confident that local and regional authorities will be strong partners to implement these Strategy and Action Plan. **It's only if all stakeholders are going in the same direction that things will get better.**

To contribute to this major task that you have, the Congress proposes the **elaboration of an Additional Protocol to the European Charter of Local Self-Government dedicated to environmental protection**, which would have for main objectives:

- to **increase awareness of local and regional authorities** on the protection of environment in the framework of their existing competences and resources;
- to **establish a legal and institutional framework** allowing local authorities to integrate environmental protection in the stages of the planning and implementing of their daily action.

We truly think that this protocol would be an adequate tool to enhance and mainstream the action of local and regional authorities **towards a common goal**: ensuring a healthy and sustainable environment for present and future generations.

At the time being, **the European Charter of Local Self-Government does not contain any specific environmental provisions, which represents a significant gap**. This new commitment would strengthen local governance by considering environmental issues as an essential aspect of good governance at local level. This protocol could also clarify the responsibilities of local and regional authorities in implementing environmental solutions adapted to the specificities of each territory. This protocol is not aiming to qualify the right to healthy environment as a human right

**but to make sure that the protection of the environment is an integral part of local governance.**

Additionally, this protocol would create a framework that encourages local authorities to develop resilience and adaptation strategies to environmental crises. For instance, by strengthening their capacity to manage climate risks and supporting local initiatives to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. According to UN Habitat data, 70% of global greenhouse gas emissions come from the cities, not from the ministries, they come from the territories, meaning that local and regional authorities may act on it.

This protocol could also promote training initiatives for local administrative staff to strengthen knowledge on environmental protection. The use of new technologies could also be part of this document, but it should be up to the representatives of governments to decide what will fall under this additional protocol.

#### **What are the added values of such instrument?**

- This text could also create some concrete benefits for member states, such as demonstrating their commitment to an inclusive and multilevel governance approach, as indicated in the Reykjavik Declaration, in **mobilising all public actors to address environmental challenges**;
- It is also important to note that this Additional Protocol would be relatively **quick to draft**. The Congress has notably tasked a group of experts to work on a draft text which would be an interesting basis;
- The **monitoring process of this text** could build on the existing one, thus **minimising costs and time for implementation**. The Monitoring

Committee of the Congress is already regularly monitoring the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in all the 46 member States of the Council of Europe, which have all ratified the Charter, and also provide some recommendations;

- This instrument would act **as an early warning mechanism in a preventive manner**, without imposing complex additional obligations on member states or local authorities.
- Finally, this proposal does not include the other relevant proposals. The Congress would also be in capacity to draft resolutions to support other relevant proposals to bring additional political strength.

**You could ask me: why do not simply elaborate some guidelines and why are we addressing member states?**

We believe that this initiative should come from member states because this common fight for the planet, for the environment requires a binding text to target the right persons, to ensure that subnational stakeholders use their strengths and competences for the environment. To do so, they need the governments to take the right decisions and to accompany them.

Before concluding my presentation, I would just like to make a short metaphor, showing the complementary of the different levels of government. Like Sisyphus pushing his stone uphill, **protecting the environment is a challenging task that no single level of government can handle alone**. Local and regional authorities are essential partners for national governments in this fight. As local politicians, we are at the front lines, closest to the environmental challenges, and we can implement

practical solutions that fit local needs. At the same time, national governments are critical to set the frameworks, resources, guiding and supporting policies and raising-awareness. Without this co-operation, we cannot go in the right direction. To tackle climate change, protect nature, and build a sustainable future, local and regional authorities and governments must work side by sides, combining their strengths to achieve this urgent and shared objective. To put it graphically, we are links of the same chain embracing our environment from different levels of government, if a link breaks then the chain doesn't function, so we need to work hand by hand, with discrete roles and competences to meet our commitments and goals for a Sustainable environment, for the benefit of present and future generations.

Allow me to close my presentation with a phrase of the famous Greek author Nikos Kazantzakis, who wrote: "Love the responsibility. Say: I alone have the duty to save earth, if she doesn't get saved it's my fault!"

Now I will be please to discuss with you, bringing you additional elements of the reality of the daily work of local and regional authorities and how it would help your precious mission.

Thank you for your attention.