

**Speech of Mr Ivan Malenica,
Minister of Public Administration of Croatia,
at the 37th sitting of the
Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe
Strasbourg, France
29 – 31 October 2019**

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me personally and in my capacity as Minister of Public Administration of Croatia to be able to greet all members of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and other esteemed participants.

I am deeply honoured to have the opportunity to address you after Croatia's Presidency of the Committee of Ministers, from May to November last year, and in the light of the fact that the Council of Europe, the oldest pan-European organisation which performs a major role in the protection of freedoms, human rights and the rule of law, is now headed by a Croat, Ms Marija Pejčinović Burić, who assumed the office of Secretary General last month.

As a full-fledged member of the Council of Europe since 1996, Croatia gradually adopted the required standards. It ratified 93 instruments of the Council of Europe and achieved significant results in the field of protection of national minority rights, fight against all types of discrimination, fight against human trafficking and fight against terrorism. Today, Croatia enjoys the status of an active member state, applying the adopted standards and participating constructively in programmes and all activities of the Council.

A prominent place among the documents Croatia has ratified is reserved for the European Charter of Local Self-Government, which it has implemented in full.

The last monitoring cycle with respect to the application of the Charter was completed in 2016, when Croatia was commended for introducing direct election of mayors and county executives.

Croatia was also commended for introducing the institute of voluntary mergers of local self-government units, introduced in 2015. Although voluntary mergers have not taken root in practice so far, legal regulation of the possibility is definitely a good precondition for its implementation in the future.

Croatian Presidency of the Committee of Ministers further contributed to the promotion of the highest standards of respect for human rights, rule of law and democracy in Europe. The priorities of Croatia's Presidency included fight against corruption, efficient protection of national minorities and vulnerable groups, decentralisation in the context of strengthening local self-government and protection of cultural heritage and cultural routes.

Local self-government seeks to ensure harmony between the citizen as an individual and institutions, as well as between local communities and the state.

The Croatian Government policy is oriented towards building an efficient public administration, depoliticisation and efficient human resource management in the public sector, as well as digitalisation of public services.

There is no doubt that public administration should adjust to the digital times we live in by integrating new technologies. This was precisely the rationale behind the establishment of the **e-Citizens** system in Croatia – to modernise, simplify and speed up communication between citizens and the public sector as well as to increase transparency in public services provision.

e-Citizens comprises several components and is continuously upgraded by integrating new e-services.

The Central Government Portal is a unique point of access to public information, its main purpose being to consolidate the information of government institutions.

The Personal Mailbox enables every citizen to receive personal official messages related to public services, proceedings and civil status as well as to view, manage and store them.

The National Identification and Authentication System enables secure and reliable identification and authentication of users accessing public e-services by using adequate credentials.

An example of a complex electronic service is **e-Newborn**, a service which allows parents to register their newborn in the birth and citizenship registers, to register the child's permanent residence and regulate the child's health insurance from the comfort of their home.

The **e-Fees project** will enable electronic payment of administrative fees and charges, whereas the establishment of the **e-Business** system will enable central access to public e-services for business entities through the Personal Mailbox, which will facilitate business operations.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Reform is an ongoing process, and, in all spheres of the public sector, there is always room for further upgrades and enhancements, and for the improvement of service provision to citizens. Therefore, the reform process is also permanently present in the system of local and regional self-government as one of the constituent elements of public administration.

The goal of the Croatian Government policy is to reorganise processes so that functions are performed on the level which can respond efficiently to the demands of businesses and citizens. This implies a redistribution of competences and elimination of overlapping, along with the stimulation of excellence, good performance and success in satisfying the needs of local population.

The Government of Croatia has estimated that counties (that is, regional self-government units in Croatia), as the drivers of the economic development of their respective territories, and consequently of Croatia as a whole, are capable of providing more services to citizens than those currently included in their self-government scope.

When the new territorial organisation of the autonomous Republic of Croatia was established in 1992, counties used to perform both functions from their self-government scope and state administration functions. Considering that fact, there is no reason for them not to perform a part of state administration functions today as well.

Therefore, we are now in the process of delegating state administration functions to the counties, so that a large number state administration functions will be performed by county offices, while the number of state administration bodies will be reduced.

This reform aims to simplify the procedure of obtaining necessary documents in different administrative areas or spheres of life.

Furthermore, in public discussions about the size, number and efficiency of local self-government units in Croatia, their scope, number and capacities are generally questioned in the public without proper consideration of objective facts, that is, the approach to the issue is largely fractional and never comprehensive.

For that purpose, the Ministry of Public Administration is currently implementing a project entitled "Optimisation of the local and regional self-government system".

The intention of this reform of the local and regional self-government system is to strengthen administrative and financial capacities and autonomy of local units as well as to extend the self-government scope and increase the autonomy of self-government units in the areas of planning, finance and provision of services.

Please allow me to inform you about another activity aimed at strengthening the democratic principles promoted by the Council of Europe, in particular, the introduction of preferential voting in local elections for the members of representative bodies.

Preferential voting has already been introduced in elections for members of the Croatian Parliament and elections for Croatian members of the European Parliament.

Dear friends,

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities is the voice of over 150 000 territorial communities in Europe. Member states of the Council of Europe have established the Congress in order to give additional force to the local and regional dimension of European democracy.

I believe that, together, we can all contribute to implementing and respecting the highest values and principles promoted by the Council of Europe.

I would like to end my presentation by expressing hope for a continued protection of these values and of the European spirit, and for the extension of the scope of our cooperation through new innovative projects in the areas of democracy and the rule of law, aimed at supporting peace and stability in this and all other parts of the world.

Thank you.