

Video Message by Michael Roth

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Online Event of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe: “Covid-19: Local and Regional Authorities at the Frontline”

7 December 2020

Dear Secretary-General,

dear President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities,

dear Minister,

I am honoured to address you on the occasion of your meeting on the role of local and regional authorities in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, due to obligations linked to the German EU Presidency, I am not able to join you in person.

Today's discussion is of utmost importance. This unprecedented public health crisis poses a big challenge not only to our health care systems but also to democracy and our democratic institutions. There is no one who has not been affected by this pandemic.

Since the beginning of the pandemic the Council of Europe has closely monitored the situation in member states. As early as April, the Secretary General issued a toolkit for governments across Europe on respecting human rights, democracy and the rule of law during the Covid-19 crisis. The baseline is that restrictive measures must be necessary, in accordance with the law, limited in scope and duration and be reversible. They must also pay special attention to the needs of particularly vulnerable groups.

The Greek Presidency of the Committee of Ministers has been – so to say – the first “e-presidency” of the Council of Europe and has secured the proper functioning and the new *modus operandi* of the Council of Europe. The Athens Declaration issued on the 4th of November, the day of the 70th anniversary of the European Convention on Human Rights, reinforced the importance of safeguarding human rights, rule of law and democracy under exceptional circumstances such as states of emergency.

Local and regional authorities are at the forefront when it comes to decision-making on how to deal with the pandemic. They have to strike the right balance between public health needs, social and economic consequences and restrictions to fundamental rights. This comes with a great deal of responsibility and only works if decisions find acceptance among the public. Citizens across Europe take active part in discussing measures that limit their fundamental rights. Are these measures necessary? Are they likely to achieve their objectives? Are they

applied only for as long as necessary and ended once the situation normalises? Are they proportionate? The public demands information. And governments are held accountable.

And yet, there is no black and white when it comes to decision-making. Restrictive measures will affect citizens' private and public lives and many sectors of the economy negatively, as we all know. But they can save lives! For this purpose the toolkit of the Secretary General was drafted to help ensure that measures taken by member states during the current crisis remain proportional to the threat posed by the spread of the virus and are limited in time.

Local and regional authorities, especially in Germany's federal system, enjoy a great deal of autonomy when it comes to deciding which measures are appropriate in order to protect those particularly at risk of a life-threatening course of Covid-19 and maintaining the functioning of the health care system. They implement these measures. They deal with those affected by the pandemic. While this can be very challenging in areas where infection rates have increased, it has proven to be effective. And so has cooperation among regions in treating Covid-19 patients that need to be hospitalised.

On the one hand, our citizens want uniform, consistent rules – as opposed to a patchwork of different regional sets of rules. On the other hand, they want the specific dynamics of the spread of the virus in different areas to be taken into account when it comes to restrictive measures. These are contradicting demands! Therefore, it is essential to reach an optimal balance between measures at the federal, the regional and the local level.

Consultation between, cooperation among and inclusion of relevant stakeholders and decision-makers is key to tackling Covid-19 effectively and safeguarding human rights. We have to learn from each other, not only nationally but also across Europe. And we have to find acceptance among the public. We can only be successful if our citizens understand the reasons for our decisions and support our joint endeavours!

This conference is a fantastic opportunity to exchange experiences. I wish you very productive discussions! Stay safe. Stay healthy.