

2018-2021

COMPENDIUM OF SPEECHES BY ANDERS KNAPE, PRESIDENT OF THE CONGRESS



Congress of Local and Regional Authorities

Serving local and regional democracy

Compendium of speeches and statements of Anders KNAPE

President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities

November 2018 – May 2021

Layout: Congress of Local and Regional Authorities
Print: Council of Europe
Edition: October 2021

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On 6 November 2018, Anders Knappe was elected President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe. This was the culmination of his long personal commitment to the institution. Anders Knappe became a member when the Congress was created in 1994. Later, he acted as thematic rapporteur on the consultation of local authorities, on local and regional democracy in Turkey, and on the credentials of national delegations to the Congress. In 2014 he was elected President of the Chamber of Local Authorities and always defended the ideals of the Congress.

Anders Knappe's term of office as President of the Congress was particularly challenging. He arrived in the context of a decreasing budget which led to reforms, which he actively pursued, always bearing in mind the legitimacy and necessity of each Congress activity. The COVID-19 pandemic began in the middle of his mandate. While local and regional authorities found themselves at the frontline of an event which no one expected nor knew how to deal with, the Congress adapted its activities to the new restrictions. Monitoring activities, electoral observation missions, and fact-finding visits all were forced to change in their way of working - if they weren't forced to cancel their projects entirely. Under his presidency, the Congress was the first Council of Europe body to organise meetings online.

Speeches and statements of the Congress President illustrate the quality and diversity of the Congress' activities and the Congress' position as a watchdog for local self-autonomy. They contribute to the political dialogue at multiple levels: with the Committee of Ministers and different organs of the Council of Europe, with governments, with NGOs, with and within the European Committee of the Regions, with European and national associations of local and regional authorities, and of course with the politicians in cities and regions themselves.

The key message Anders Knappe always wanted to share was the crucial role of communities in the defence of the common values of the Council of Europe: human rights, democracy, the rule of law. In every speech, he put forward the priorities of his mandate: good governance, through the reinforcement of trust and ethics in democratic institutions and the fight against corruption, and a promotion of human and social rights, notably youth participation and gender equality.

He always saw in the Congress a pioneer in the promotion of a new way of governing: shared governance. Throughout this challenging and enriching mandate, he tried to show that the dialogue between levels of governance is the only way to build a democratic and respectful Europe. This spirit is reflected in the publication with selected speeches.

The Congress is grateful for all the opportunities – sessions, conferences, events – in which Anders Knappe made the voice of the Congress heard.

Summary of the Mandate

Mandate of the President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, Anders Knappe November 2018 – March 2021

Biography

Member of the Conservative party (EPP)

Born 1955, lives in Karlstad, Sweden

Married, two children

Education and profession: Economist

President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe between November 2018 and March 2021 (member since 1994, President of the Chamber of Local Authorities between 2014 and 2018 and thematic rapporteur on the consultation of local authorities, on Local and regional democracy in Turkey, on Credentials of delegations to the Congress)

President of the Swedish Association of Local and Regional Authorities (SALAR) since March 2019

Lord Mayor, City of Karlstad since 2014

Member of the Bureau of the Committee of the Regions since 2007

Executive President of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions since 2010

Member Executive Bureau and World Council of the United Cities and Local Government

Highlights of the mandate

COVID-19 crisis

The year 2020 was marked by the cancellation of the Congress' plenary sessions, of official visits, of participation in events and the general impossibility of conducting in presence activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak.

The Congress adapted its activities and working methods to the situation through online and IT means and moved many activities to a remote fashion. In particular it pioneered in continuing its statutory activities and missions by remote procedures for monitoring, election observation and fact-finding missions (Remote monitoring of Bulgaria, the Netherlands and Azerbaijan, election observation in Ukraine, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Mostar)

One remote fact-finding mission was led on the situation of LGBTI+ people in Poland to investigate the situation of sexual orientation had become a polarising issue in Polish society, increasingly reflected at the local and regional level, by the adoption of so-called "anti-LGBT ideology" resolutions and declarations, and family charters. The findings served in the preparation of a report on "the role and responsibilities of local authorities in the protection of LGBTI+ people" to be considered by the Congress in one of its sessions in 2021.

Regular contacts were maintained with national associations, local elected representatives and national and European associations and networks.

The Congress committees held remote thematic debates on various aspects of multi-governance and co-operation in management of the pandemic in cities and regions and functioning of local and regional democracy in times of crisis.

In October 2020, the 35th anniversary of the opening for signature of the European Charter of Local Self-Government) could not be celebrated but a statement was published.

The Congress contributed to the ceremony in Athens to mark 70th anniversary of the European Convention on Human Rights in November 2020 by a video message commending the Council of Europe and the political leaders of the time for having had the vision and courage to adopt and commit themselves to this binding treaty. The message also stressed that the role of local and regional authorities is evidenced by the case law of the European Court of Human Rights, where numerous judgments include a territorial dimension, dealing with freedom of assembly, policing, the right to vote, freedom of expression, the environment and minority rights.

Over the year, the Congress held remote meetings of its Bureau and its Statutory Forum to take decisions and adopt reports in the absence of plenary sessions.

It continued also the implementation of its cooperation projects, and four new projects were launched in time of the pandemic.

In December 2020, it organised an online event on the Athens declaration and the functioning of local and regional democracy in times of crisis with the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, the German Minister of State on behalf of the German Presidency of the Committee of Ministers, the Mayor of Athens and Congress members. The event welcomed the Athens Declaration as a milestone and a practical guide on how to meet current challenges without compromising the pillars of democratic societies. The capacity and competences of local and regional authorities to provide sustainable and democratic solutions in this regard was highlighted and calls for better coordination between different levels of government in major crisis situations were launched.

Congress reform

Several steps in reforming the Congress Charter and its Rules and Procedures to take into account the budgetary constraints and the political developments within the Council of Europe and its Member States have been taken. They aimed at maintaining a high level of achievement of results and increasing efficiency.

The last revision of Rules and Procedures was implemented in December 2020 to strengthen the ethics regime of the Congress with a new Code of Conduct and declaration of interests to be signed by the members of the Congress.

Congress budget and resources

Several statements have been issued by the President and the Bureau and recommendations to member States were adopted recalling successive budget cuts the Congress has sustained. The last one adopted during the March remote renewal session invites member States to acknowledge the risks that further budget cuts would entail for the Congress' statutory activities, post-monitoring, thematic and co-operation activities. It reiterates the Congress' requests to be granted a share of Council of Europe budget increased again towards 3% to be in line with the requirements of the Congress' institutional and statutory tasks.

Political dialogue with the Committee of Ministers

The political dialogue of the Congress with the main Council of Europe institutions in particular the Committee of Ministers is essential part of its work. In this regard, the Congress participates in priority activities of the Presidencies of the Committee of Ministers whenever they are of particular relevance to local and regional democracy.

The Congress President holds annual exchanges of views with the Ministers' Deputies (In November 2018 and February 2020 for this mandate) and participates in the handover meetings and Sessions of the Committee of Ministers (in May 2019 and May 2020 for the mandate).

In May 2019, **the Congress** provided a written contribution to the **reflection on “the future of the Council of Europe”** at the Committee of Ministers session in Helsinki under Finnish Presidency. It underlined that local and regional democracy is an essential pillar of European democracy and, confronted with democratic crises, local institutions hold a strategic place to rebuild the link between citizens and the institutions. It invited the Ministers of Foreign Affairs to take into account the Congress proposal to rethink the organisational model Europe's territories and to develop a new socio-territorial pact.

In its written contribution to the reflection on **“effectively responding to a public health crisis in full respect for Democracy, Rule of Law and Human Rights”** at the Committee of Ministers session in Athens in November 2020 under Greek Presidency, the Congress stressed the essential role played in emergency situations by local and regional authorities which are on the frontline to deliver basic and emergency services and mitigate the social and sanitary consequences of the crisis for their communities. It called for their full involvement in the decision-taking process as key players in the field. Emergency situations require more multilateral co-operation and multi-level governance as flexibility of responses which are better suited to specific needs of the communities and the Congress continuously

promotes constructive multilateral co-operation and multi-level governance to bring the quality and effectiveness of decisions and policies.

Political dialogue with Member States

Belarus

The Congress undertook negotiations with the authorities of Belarus on the need to improve the local self-government system in the country, in line with the European Charter of Local Self-Government and significant progress was made in 2018 and 2019. Round table discussions were organised in Minsk (November 2018 and April 2019), on prospects for improving local self-government and the role of national associations of local and regional authorities, in preparation of a project proposed under the new Council of Europe Action Plan for the country. A bilateral meeting also took place between the Congress President and the President of the Republic of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko (April 2019)

An agreement was reached on the Congress' support in establishing a national association of local and regional authorities in Belarus.

But this co-operation was put on hold following the presidential elections in August 2020. The President issued a statement on the events following the Presidential election which have brought to the fore the people's desire for democratic change. The President underlined that the Congress was convinced that democratic reforms must necessarily involve decentralisation of power to the local and regional level and greater citizens' participation in governance of their communities.

The Congress remains ready to contribute to the local self-government reform in Belarus in the context of possible broader constitutional changes.

Turkey

The Congress repeatedly expressed its concern about continued arrests of democratically elected Mayors (representatives from the opposition in Turkey) and their replacement by state-appointed trustees (statements, fact-finding visits and adoption of report in 2017).

It observed the local elections in the country (March 2019) and the re-run of mayoral election in Istanbul (June 2019).

The report prepared after these observation missions identified serious concerns regarding the situation of local elected representatives and the Congress asked for a legal Opinion by the Council of Europe Commission for democracy through law (the Venice Commission). This Legal Opinion adopted in June 2020 found violations of Turkey's international commitments. It stressed that the denial of mandate and the dismissal of mayors and candidates should be annulled and repealed, so that the fundamental principle of the free will of the electorate is fully recognised.

The Congress is determined to pursue its dialogue with the Turkish authorities and offer advice and assistance – a medium-term strategy must be developed with the Turkish authorities, in order to reconcile the working conditions of local elected representatives in the south-east with the provisions of the European Charter of Local Self-Government.

Mostar

In October 2017 the Congress set up a Reflection Group on Mostar, in association with the European Union's Committee of the Regions. Since then, the Congress has been working tirelessly to address the political impasse and restore local democracy in the city. Three major meetings were held in Mostar to help facilitate the necessary dialogue and pave the way for local elections while ensuring fundamental rights.

In December 2020, local election were held in Mostar for the first time in 12 years which the Congress observed by remote procedure.

The inaugural session of the City Council of Mostar took place in February 2021 with the participation of the Congress Spokesperson on the Observation of Local and Regional Elections.

An online event on deliberative democracy was organised by Congress with newly elected Mayor and local councillors in March 2021. This meeting was part of the project "Building democratic participation in the City of Mostar" implemented by the Congress within the Council of Europe Action Plan for Bosnia and Herzegovina 2018-2021.

Others

During the mandate, the President of the Congress held bilateral meetings with heads of States and governments, including the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign and European Affairs of **Croatia**, Marija Pejčinović BURIĆ (November 2018), te President of the **Hellenic Republic**, Prokopis Pavlopoulos (December 2018) and the Prime Minister of **Spain** Pedro Sanchez (February 2019) to discuss the role of local and regional authorities in Europe and challenges these authorities are facing.

A bilateral meeting took place also with Deputy Prime-Minister and newly appointed Minister of the Interior of **Moldova**, Andrei NASTASE (June 2019) to provide information on the latest political developments in the Republic of Moldova, including the holding of local elections in October 2019, which the Congress was invited to observe. The Congress has continuously strengthened its cooperation with the Moldovan authorities, notably in the framework of the post-monitoring dialogue, to support the implementation of the recommendations and the signing of a roadmap with the Moldovan authorities for the implementation of the recommendations of the last Congress monitoring report has finally been scheduled for April 2021.

In February a high- level visit took place to **Albania** to look into the situation of local democracy in the country, in particular against the backdrop of the local elections held on 30 June 2019. The Congress continues to support Albania in efforts to consolidate territorial self-government by means of benchmarking and targeted co-operation.

An official visit of the Congress President to **Georgia** was conducted in February 2020 where the President welcomed the continued commitment of Georgia to decentralisation, in line with the post-monitoring dialogue of 2014 and the signature of the road map with the Congress in 2015 as well as the recent adoption of the decentralisation strategy by the Georgian government in line with the Congress' recommendations following its monitoring visit of 2018.

The President visited the Administrative border line with South Ossetia and exchanged with local people about difficulties in their everyday live due to the political and the security situation in the region.

European Charter of Local Self-Government

The Congress adopts regular reports on recurring issues in monitoring and elections observation. These reports act as a warning system (whistle-blower) which points out recurrent shortcomings in member States to which special attention should be given by the Congress and the national authorities. The latest report was adopted in February 2011.

A Contemporary commentary to the explanatory report of the European Charter of Local Self-Government was adopted in December 2020 to provide a common, modern and detailed understanding of what local self-government means under the provisions of the Charter.

Cooperation programmes

Over the past years, the Congress' presence in the field has substantially expanded through its cooperation programmes. This work with national and local authorities to strengthen local self-government is in line with and complements the Congress recommendations and political dialogue.

Currently the Congress implements eight active projects to improve local governance – in Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo*, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, as well as in Morocco and Tunisia

The Status of Partner for Local Democracy, established by the Congress in 2014, has become active when granted in 2019 to Morocco (in April) and Tunisia (in October), in the framework of the Congress South-Med Partnership in support of decentralisation reforms in those countries.

Institutional cooperation: European Committee of the Regions

The Co-operation between the two institutions has become more synergetic, with the signing of the revised Co-operation Agreement in March 2018 and regular meetings of the High-Level Group and exchanges between the two secretariats to coordinate priorities and action are taking place.

The Congress and the European Committee of the Regions organised joint event in Brussels to celebrate their 25th anniversary (June 2019) including a conference on "The Added Value of Local and Regional Authorities in the Unification of Europe". Participants highlighted the synergies between the work of the two institutions in strengthening local self-government and regional democracy.

The Congress President shared the Congress' findings and recommendations on the impact of the COVID-19 to the European Committee of the Regions during its debate on the state of cities and regions (Local and Regional Barometer) in September 2020.

United Nations 2030 Agenda

The Congress President participated in the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in July 2019 and had a meeting with the UN Secretary General António Guterres. He also participated in the UN Summit of Heads of State and Government and the 2nd High-level Forum for Local and Regional Authorities in September 2019. He passed the message that achieving the Sustainable Development Goals of the UN 2030 Agenda is a shared responsibility of all levels of government. In particular, the localisation of the SDGs at local and regional level is crucial for the successful implementation of the Agenda by the Member States.

The Congress is working on 12 of the 17 objectives set out in the Agenda and considers that the concept of sustainability is to be taken in a broad sense of the democratic, social and economic sustainability based on key principles. Local and regional authorities must have proper competences and financial autonomy to implement the SDGs successfully.

The President delivered a message to the Ministerial Segment of the High-Level Policy Forum for Sustainable Development and to the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in July 2020 to stress that in situation of crisis, it is all the more essential that national, European and international authorities take into account the local and regional dimension and that strategies are defined in a multi-level approach.

Fight against corruption

In 2019, the Congress launched a series of "*Public Ethics*" booklets compiling six practical guides as part of a strategic plan to fight corruption (conflicts of interest, transparent public procurement, transparency and open government, administrative resources and fair elections, fighting nepotism and the protection of whistleblowers).

Human Rights at local level

In February 2019, it launched also a series of Handbooks on Human Rights at the local level. The first volume is devoted to the rights of three categories requiring special attention: refugees, asylum seekers, migrants and internally displaced persons (IDPs); Roma and Travellers; LGBTI+ persons. The second volume, adopted in December 2020, concentrates on social rights.

I. 2018

35th Session of the Congress – Strasbourg, France, 6 November 2018

(Only news)

Congress members have elected Anders KNAPE (Sweden, EPP/CCE) president of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, on 6 November 2018, for a two-year term.

"Our Congress is a political body tasked with protecting local democracy. We represent not governments but rather citizens in our towns and regions," said the new president, emphasising the major role played by the Congress in promoting and safeguarding local and regional democracy. "That is why the process of consulting local and regional authorities is crucial and why we must continue to engage in regular dialogue with governments," he added.

Mr KNAPE stressed the need to provide the Congress with resources to enable it to perform its tasks and maintain the quality of its work in support of local democracy. "The Congress is the only organisation responsible for monitoring implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government. This monitoring work, along with the post-monitoring and election observation activities, is essential," he explained. "We are an important part of the Council of Europe and of the system of safeguarding democracy in Europe."

Among the key themes, he mentioned youth participation in political life, the fight against corruption, and also the pressure and threats facing local and regional elected representatives. The new President

also praised the work done by the outgoing president Gudrun MOSLER-TÖRNSTRÖM, the first woman to be elected to the head of the Congress, and expressed the hope that gender equality would continue, in future, to be a priority for action for the Congress.

Statement on the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, 25 November 2018

"We are all concerned about violence against women and each of us can take action against this scourge," said Anders KNAPE, President of the Congress on the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, on 25 November 2018. "As citizens, we must dare to talk about it. And as local and regional elected representatives, we have an increased responsibility because we stand closest to the citizens to intervene," he added.

The President of the Congress stressed the need for specific actions at territorial level involving all stakeholders and the importance of an adequate legal framework. The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence - the so-called [Istanbul Convention](#) - has so far been ratified by 33 member countries. "Freedom from violence is a right enshrined in the Convention. We must make it a daily reality in all our territories," he concluded by calling on local and regional authorities to encourage their governments that have not yet done so to ratify this Convention.

The Congress has been working for several years to promote women's rights. Most recently, it sponsored two "lab" sessions as part of its contribution to the World Forum for Democracy, whose 2018 edition focused on women's public, political and economic participation and on combating violence against women in the wake of the #MeToo movement.

During the last decade, the Congress adopted a recommendation and resolution on combating domestic violence, called for the development of strategies and measures at the local level (2009) and actively participated in the Council of Europe campaign "Stop domestic violence against women" (2006-2008). It launched, in this context, a poster campaign in the streets and subways of many European cities under the slogan "Cities and regions take a stand to fight violence against women". Congress' work to promote women's rights also focuses on women's political participation and representation (2016), the gender perspective in budgetary processes (2016) and the fight against the feminisation of poverty (2015).

1330th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies – Strasbourg, France, 28 November 2018

Dear Ambassadors, Dear Secretary General, Dear Deputy Secretary General

Excellencies,

This is my first exchange of views with you and also my first official presentation as President of the Congress since my election on 6 November. I am delighted that this first official engagement is with you, the representatives of the member States and the executive body of the Council of Europe.

Dear Ambassador MATTILA-BUDICH, let me express the Congress' full support to the Chairmanship of Finland. The Congress intends to actively contribute to it as we did with the previous chairmanships. We are pleased that your local authorities have invited us to hold our Bureau meeting in Helsinki in March next year and we look forward to welcoming a representative of your government during our session in April.

Dear Ministers' Deputies,

My predecessors have had the opportunity to tell you how much we value our political dialogue with the member States and I want to reiterate this here today: the constructive political dialogue we have with the governments here in the Committee of Ministers and in the capitals is what allows us to successfully carry out our missions and in particular our monitoring missions.

The Congress is the second political assembly of the Council of Europe and, as such, it brings to this Organisation the second political dimension of democracy, which is that of shared governance. Without this dimension, democracy cannot be complete. We believe that shared governance embodies

modernity. It represents the new world and the new societies that are developing before our eyes and in which governance is shared both horizontally AND vertically.

The European Charter of Local Self-government is an extraordinary tool intended to enable member States to develop this shared governance. It provides a framework of fundamental principles for strengthening local democracy and is sufficiently flexible to allow all member States to apply it in accordance with their specificities.

With its monitoring of the Charter, the Congress is part of the general monitoring mechanism of democracy put in place by the Council of Europe. We help governments to apply the Charter as best as possible for the benefit of their citizens.

I am convinced that promoting the quality of local and regional democracy is more important than ever at a time when our democratic societies are being challenged in many countries. It is at the grassroots that we can rebuild the trust and participation of citizens, which are the prerequisite for our societies to function fully in a democratic manner and in accordance with our shared values.

[Thematic priorities of the mandate: Fight against corruption, Gender equality end Youth participation]

Too often, elected representatives have lost the confidence of their citizens, partly because ethical behaviour was somewhat of a grey area. Today we can observe within European societies a new wave of calls for transparency and heightened public expectations of ethical conduct and we must find answers to these requirements. Trust must be regained.

Corruption, in particular, continues to pose a major threat to local and regional governance and democracy in Europe, and governments and parliaments at all levels urgently need to address it effectively. The Congress will continue to focus its action on prevention - promoting higher ethical standards and better protection mechanisms at local and regional level, as well as transparency. It will be one of the top priorities of my mandate.

In this regard, I am happy to inform you that, during its 35th Session, the Congress adopted a Code of Conduct for its members. The recent experience of the Parliamentary Assembly - where the unethical behaviour of a few members affected the reputation of the whole institution - convinced us to take this initiative in order to prevent a similar situation within the Congress.

At the opening of the 35th Session my predecessor, Ms Mosler-Törnström, the first woman to be elected to the Presidency of the Congress, expressed the wish that the Congress continue in the future to raise the profile of gender equality and the place of women in politics, within our communities and within international organisations. I assured her and I assure you today that I fully intend to do so. I am convinced that we need to engage even more in this priority fight if we want democracy to be as real and complete as possible.

The goal is the same with the participation of citizens and of youth in particular. We need to encourage young people to become more involved and take a greater share in the development of our societies and in particular in their decision-making processes.

In this regard, I am proud that, since 2014, we have invited youth delegates to participate in the work of our sessions and, for the last few years, we have supported their development of specific, grassroots projects at home between our two annual sessions. I must say that the projects that were presented to us at the 35th session by the youth delegates and their contributions to the debates were incredibly rich and pertinent. During my mandate I intend to continue to promote the participation of young people in the work of the Congress.

[The reform of the Congress]

The current political and financial situation of the Council of Europe is a cause for concern to all of us. We very much hope that a political solution to the problem with the Russian delegation in the Parliamentary Assembly will be found. We are convinced that Russia's place is in the Council of Europe, alongside all European States.

Given this uncertainty, the Congress decided, at the start of 2018, to launch a reform process aimed at protecting its functioning in spite of the difficulties encountered. In particular, we wanted to preserve the capacity of the Congress to fulfill its statutory missions. The intention was to streamline its functioning, to strengthen its institutional autonomy and to assert its specificity. It was also considered essential to

enhance the Congress' flexibility, in other words: giving the Congress the basic tools with which to react in the future as rapidly and autonomously as possible.

To that end, we undertook the revision of our Charter; which is our statutory and indeed our founding text. Its revised version was approved by the 35th Session two weeks ago and is being submitted to you for adoption. We count on your support in this regard.

The Congress is aware of the need to make further savings. We have already had to adapt to the situation after the sudden change of status of Turkey and in responding to the zero nominal growth policy. And the staff of the Congress secretariat was seriously cut since 2010, which has a significant impact on the quantity of the work – while the political leadership, of course, fully supports the Secretary General of the Congress in maintaining high quality in what is delivered!

The reform proposals you have received from us have an immediate qualitative dimension – like simplifying the composition of the Chambers and pushing back the renewal procedures for one year – and a potential savings dimension which have to be addressed in 2019 and can be effective with the renewal of the Congress for the new mandate in the second semester of 2010.

Mr. Kiefer has presented this timeline to you in July and recently in October 2018.

The Congress members are ready to continue the path of reform and are realistic enough to see difficult times coming up, which will require further savings. In view of the 30th anniversary of the ECLSG in September and the crucial role of local democracy for democracy in our member states, I would like to reiterate the request to endow the Congress with the necessary means in order that it can deliver: We are convinced that 3% of the Council of Europe budget for the Congress is a justified share for this important and successful work the Congress is delivering within the Council of Europe.

[The Congress' contribution to Ministerial in Helsinki]

Next May, in Helsinki, your Foreign Ministers will discuss the future of the Council of Europe. The Congress has been invited by the outgoing Croatian Chairperson of the Committee of Ministers, [Minister PEJČINOVIĆ BURIĆ] to contribute to the reflection to be held by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs in Helsinki in May 2019 and I would like to inform you that the Bureau of the Congress has appointed the two Chamber Presidents as rapporteurs.

I can assure you that the Congress will continue its work to improve the quality of democracy and governance at local and regional level and to develop its role and delivery further.

We intend to remain a dynamic force within the Council of Europe. The Congress is and shall continue to be the political body implementing the local and regional dimension of the missions and priorities of this Organisation.

Dear Ambassadors,

Two weeks ago, during our session, we welcomed the Vice-Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Croatia Ms PEJČINOVIĆ BURIĆ, speaking on behalf of the Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers and I would like to thank Ambassador PAPA for having helped to organise the Minister's participation.

We also had the pleasure of exchanging views with the Vice-Minister of Interior of Lithuania and the Minister of Regional Development and Infrastructure of Georgia who took part in the debates on the situation of local and regional democracy in their respective countries. Thank you also to the Ambassadors of Lithuania and Georgia for their precious support.

Thank you for your attention.

Annual Conference of the Central Union of Municipalities of Greece (KEDE) - Athens, Greece, 3 December 2018

Dear President (George PATOULIS, President of the Association of Municipalities of Greece).

Dear Minister (Alexis CHARITSIS, Greek Minister of the Interior)

Dear colleagues,

Dear friends from Cyprus,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It's a great pleasure to attend the opening of the Annual Conference of the Association of Municipalities of Greece. I would like to express my special thanks to President PATOULIS for inviting me to Athens on this occasion.

My predecessors in the Congress have participated in your annual conference and in other KEDE events and we have had the opportunity to organise joint thematic activities, as for example, in April this year, a conference on Roma inclusion and refugees rights held in Athens.

The Congress has a longstanding and fruitful cooperation with Greek local and regional authorities and their associations since the ratification of the Charter of Local and Regional Authorities by Greece in 1989 and I am happy to pursue this cooperation and dialogue.

Local and regional democracy is an essential dimension of democracy. Democracy cannot work without the contribution of local and regional authorities. I am convinced that national associations, such as yours, are essential to ensure that the voice of local and regional authorities is heard at national but also at European level. The Congress is the only Pan European Assembly which enables you to express your voice at the European level. We offer local and regional authorities from all over Europe a platform to exchange on needs, difficulties and examples of good practices. In this respect, our respective roles are complementary.

Indeed, national associations are very important for the functioning of the Congress. They are consulted not only to determine the policies and objectives of the Congress, but they also participate in the designation of members of national delegations and support them in their work. They constitute a direct and solid link between the Congress and the Member States, relaying the work of our institution on the ground and giving it more visibility. This is especially true in areas of direct interest of the Member States, such as, for example, the challenges of migration and the integration of migrants and refugees.

National Associations also alert us on specific situations, acting as "whistle-blowers" whenever necessary. In this respect they are also the key partners of the Congress in the preparation and the follow-up of missions to monitor the application of the European Charter of Local Self Government.

Moreover, national associations help us establish and develop dialogue with the national authorities. In this regard, I would like to thank KEDE and its President for facilitating our relations with the Greek authorities at all levels. Tonight I will meet with the President of Greece who, I understand, is a close friend and supporter of your association.

The Congress on the other hand provides national associations with advice and support. It helps them to be heard by the national authorities and to enter into dialogue with them. We offer the legal framework in which you can best exercise your duties and responsibilities. This win-win relation makes you and us essential and unavoidable partners.

The legal framework that we provide is the European Charter of Local Self-Government. The Charter is one of the major Council of Europe treaties which enshrines fundamental principles for the good functioning of local governments. It lays, for example, the right to adequate financial resources, to have clear rights, powers and responsibilities, the right to associate and the conditions of office of local elected representatives.

The Congress' primary role is to ensure the implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in its Member States. To that end it regularly organises visits to member states aimed at monitoring the implementation of the Charter.

In September and November 2014, the Congress organised its third visit to Greece. During the Congress Session of March 2015, the then Rapporteur Gudrun MOSLER-TÖRNSTRÖM, presented the report on local and regional democracy in Greece drafted after the visits.

It underlined that important progress had been made towards decentralisation in Greece. The Kallikratis programme had increased the local competences, transparency and accountability of local authorities. However, concerns had also been expressed. The Congress noted the weak fiscal autonomy of local authorities and recommended to ensure adequate concomitant financial resources to the transfer of competences to local authorities.

The Congress recommendation had also invited the national Government to extend the scope of the Charter to the regions. This recommendation seems to have been followed with the adoption of the law

of 18 July 2018 containing a specific provision allowing this extension. I would like to thank KEDE for having pushed this concrete and positive outcome.

We will be able to assess all such developments during the next monitoring mission of the Congress planned for 2020.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Europe is currently facing serious difficulties. From the economic crisis to the migrant crisis, many events have shaken our continent and your country in particular. In recent years, we have witnessed a loss of confidence in our institutions. Democracy and fundamental rights are endangered in many countries.

I am convinced that local and regional authorities have an essential role to play in responding to this situation. They are as close as possible to their citizens and know best about their needs and difficulties. Only they can defend their interests and restore their confidence in democratic institutions.

The Congress therefore strongly advocates the establishment of a system of shared governance, in which central authorities recognise local and regional authorities as their partners in dialogue and consultation. Central authorities must realise that they can learn and benefit from the assets of local and regional authorities and their national associations. It is especially essential for the proper functioning of democracy that central authorities consult local and regional authorities on every subject affecting them.

The Congress recently recalled these principles when adopting the "Guidelines on the right of local authorities to be consulted" during the Session in November 2018. I was the Rapporteur on this subject which is of particular importance to me. The guidelines reaffirm, for example, the need for Member States to have an appropriate institutional framework, to organise consultation with local authorities. It also reiterates the need for local authorities to have institutions capable of representing them at national level, such as your association.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would not like to close my presentation without commending the commitment of the Greek delegation in the work of the Congress and I thank in particular the Chairman of the delegation and Vice-President of the Congress, Michalis ANGELOPOULOS, in this regard. Apart from being an active member of the Bureau, Mr Angelopoulos has, among others, been very active also on Roma and migration issues and as rapporteur on the verification of new members' credential and on the monitoring of local democracy in Georgia and Monaco. Thank you, Michalis, for your active and constructive work with us.

I would like also to thank Eirini DOUROU, for her work within the Congress, particularly on the issue of migration. Not only, she participated in the reflection group on migration in 2016 when the Congress prepared its first report on the role of local authorities facing migration. But she also organised visits of refugee reception sites and logistic centers in the Attica region and she was rapporteur for the Congress report on "Border Regions facing migration phenomena", unanimously adopted by the Congress in November 2018.

Let me thank also, the President of the Regional Union of Municipalities of Attica and member of the Greek delegation George IOAKEIMIDIS.

It is the work of the national delegations and, above them, of the national associations that make the Congress a lively, efficient and useful assembly. We are conscious of the tremendous work which you carry out and which only you can do in discussing and working with the national governments and the national parliaments.

You are the best channel to improve the lives of citizens, make their difficulties known and defend their interests.

Let me ensure you that the Congress will continue to deepen its collaboration with Greece and with KEDE in particular. You – and all interested stakeholders, who want to change Greece from a very centralistic state to a modern, decentralised state with services delivered to the citizens by elected representatives close and accountable to the population can count on the Congress!

I thank you for your attention.

Statement by the President of the Congress following the Strasbourg attack, 12 December 2018

"I am terribly shocked by the shooting that occurred yesterday in the centre of Strasbourg at the Christmas Market.

My thoughts are with the victims and their families. On behalf of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, I would like to express our deepest condolences and support to all those who face this tragedy.

I also wish to express my support and that of the Congress to the French authorities and their representatives. I think, especially of the Mayor of Strasbourg, Mr Roland Ries, who makes every effort to make Strasbourg the city we know and love. We are all from Strasbourg today and we stand together with the community and in solidarity with both local and national authorities"

Statement on the occasion of International Migrants Day, 18 December 2018

On the occasion of International Migrants Day and following the adoption of the United Nations Global Migration Pact, better known as the Marrakech Pact, Congress President Anders KNAPE said:

"The issue of migration is more than ever at the heart of public policies, particularly at local and regional level. Local and regional authorities have a key role in organising the reception of migrants and their integration. This is the perspective in which we have been working for several years, with a particular focus on co-operation at all levels of governance."

Early integration is a crucial step to facilitate the long-term inclusion of migrants and refugees. With regard to border regions, to which the Congress pays particular attention, it is necessary to clarify the legal framework to better distribute competences between the different levels of governance".

The Congress also addressed participation in local elections and the enhanced protection of refugee children with its adoption of various recommendations.

II. 2019

Statement by the President of the Congress following the assassination of Paweł ADAMOWICZ, mayor of the city of Gdańsk, 14 January 2019

"I have been shaken and deeply shocked by the assassination of Paweł ADAMOWICZ, the mayor of the city of Gdańsk, who was stabbed on Sunday night in front of thousands at a charity concert and who has just succumbed to his injuries. On behalf of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and all its members I convey our sincere condolences to his family, to his loved ones and to the citizens of Gdańsk.

The assassination of a mayor who was so close to his fellow citizens, devoted to his city and to his country is tragic. Unfortunately, this crime is but an extreme example of the difficulties faced by an increasing number of local elected representatives in Europe today. (1)

I would like to reaffirm the Congress' support for all local and regional elected representatives who exercise their mandates in the service of their communities and citizens. Violence and crime cannot be tolerated in a real democracy. It is our collective life that is targeted. Tonight, all European Democrats are in mourning.

(1) Several debates on the subject of "mayors under pressure" have been organised by the Congress in its Chamber of Local Authorities.

36th Session of the Congress – Strasbourg, France, 2 April 2019

(Elements for the Communication)

The Congress is celebrating this year the 25th anniversary of its establishment within the Council of Europe. The first session of the Congress took place from 31 May to 3 June 1994.

There are four of us in the Congress today who witnessed that first plenary Session: Michel GUEGUAN (France), Jean-Pierre KLEIN (Luxembourg), Gaye DOGANOGLU (Turkey) and myself.

A joint celebration of this 25th anniversary will be held with the Committee of the Regions in Brussels on 27 June 2019 including a debate on the “development of democracy and good governance in Europe: monitoring devolution and regionalisation”.

The main objective of this celebration will be to demonstrate the possible synergies between the work of the Committee of the Regions and the Congress to further strengthen local democracy, to maintain the social fabric of societies and safeguard democracy, in a context where Euroscepticism and populism are on the rise, and where local and regional authorities are facing serious challenges.

The Council of Europe was a forerunner in integrating the local dimension very early on into its activities (first session of the Conference of Local Authorities in 1957).

Today, the Congress is the second political assembly of the Council of Europe and brings to the Organisation the second political dimension of democracy, which is democratic local self-government and regional democracy in a system of shared governance.

The position of the Council of Europe - and of the Congress within the Organisation - is in danger because of the political and financial crisis it faces .

Inauguration of the stand and exhibition of the Covasna County, Strasbourg, France, 2 April 2019

Dear colleagues, dear friends,

It is a pleasure for me to conclude the first day of our busy Spring Session with such a joyful event! I would like to take this opportunity to thank the organisers, in particular Mr Sándor TAMÁS, President of the Covasna County Council and Mr Iuliu WINKLER, Member of the European Parliament, for gathering us tonight.

I had myself the chance to visit Covasna county, on the occasion of a meeting organised by the Congress last year, and I can testify of the beauty of this region, characterised by preserved natural landscapes and the richness of its multiple cultural and ethnic traditions. I am therefore pleased to find a bit of its spirit here tonight.

Once again, thank you for organising a very interesting and inspiring exhibition and I look forward to seeing the dance performance!

Thank you

In the presence of:

- **Mr Sándor TAMÁS**, President of Covasna County Council
- **Mr Iuliu WINKLER**, Member of the European Parliament
- **Mr Robert GRÜMAN**, Vice-President of Covasna County Council
- **Ms Csilla PÁSZTOR**, Foreign relation officer, Covasna County Council

Reception offered by the City of Strasbourg, Strasbourg, 3 April 2019

Dear colleagues, dear friends,

This year once again, we have the pleasure of gathering in these wonderful salons of the Town Hall at the kind invitation of the Mayor of Strasbourg Mr Roland Ries and in the presence of our fellow Congress member Nawel Rafik-Elmrini who is Deputy Mayor in charge of European and international relations. Thank you, Nawel, for the invitation of the City. And our best wishes to you dear Nawel, for the forthcoming elections in the European Parliament!

At the opening of our 36th Session this morning, I reminded that Strasbourg and its Christmas market suffered a deadly terrorist attack on 11 December 2018. I invited our colleagues to observe a minute of silence. Let me reiterate our sincere condolences to the families of the victims and their relatives, to your city and to its people. The Congress - like your city – will always stay on the side of democracy

and tolerance against hatred and violence. Terrorism is a scourge that we need to fight together, in solidarity.

The Congress has placed its two sessions this year under the umbrella theme “Mayors safeguarding democracy”. By choosing this theme, we wanted to highlight the essential role that Mayors play in our societies, in our democracies which are sometimes heavily challenged.

I would like to express the wish that our societies despite the misfortunes and difficulties they face don't lose their cohesion and their link, that they continue to evolve towards more justice and cohesion.

Allow me to raise my glass to the daily work and commitment of local and regional elected representatives who make grassroots democracy real and lively.

Reception in the framework of the Finnish Presidency with a concert by the artist IDA ELINA and a photo exhibition on Roma, Strasbourg, 3 April 2019

State Secretary,

Dear Vice-President, dear Liisa,

Dear colleagues,

I would like to thank the Finnish Chairmanship for offering us this this moment of sharing and discovery of the Finnish culture, and in particular of a piece of Finnish music as I understand that we will have the pleasure to hear the musician Ida ELINA, we will also discover a very interesting photo exhibition of Roma women.

The Congress attaches great importance to its relations and dialogue with the chairmanships of the Committee of Ministers. The political dialogue will take place in the hemicycle this afternoon, the cultural dialogue is now during this event and I invite you all to enjoy it!

In the presence of:

- **Mr Jari PARTANEN**, State Secretary, Ministry of Transport and Communications of Finland
- **Ms Liisa ANSALA**, deputy-Head of the Finnish delegation
- **Ms Henna KOSONEN**, Deputy Permanent representative

Signature of the Memorandum of Understanding with the Kingdom of Morocco, Strasbourg, 2 April 2019

I am pleased to be speaking here today on this special occasion: the signature of the Memorandum of Understanding between the Congress and the Kingdom of Morocco. It symbolises a new step in our mutual commitment to pursue and expand dialogue and cooperation.

As you know, the Congress has just granted Morocco the status of Partner for Local Democracy, giving a new dynamism to the partnership with Morocco.

And I take this opportunity to reaffirm the Congress's support in the process of advanced regionalisation and strengthening of local and regional governance in Morocco, in the framework of our South-Med Partnership.

I would like to welcome the Head of the Moroccan delegation, President LAENSER, and Governor EL JABRI, from the Ministry of the Interior, with whom I will be signing the memorandum of understanding today.

I also would like to thank the Consulate General of Morocco for organising a very interesting exhibition and the reception that awaits us after the signature.

Thank you

In the presence off:

- **Mr Mohand LAENSER**, President of the Fes-Meknes Region and President of the Association of Regions of Morocco (ARM), Head of Delegation, Morocco

- **Mr Abdelouahhab EL JABRI**, Governor, Head of Co-operation and Documentation at the General Directorate of Local Authorities of the Ministry of Interior, Morocco
- **Mr Mohamed BOUDRA**, President of the Moroccan Association of Presidents of Communal Councils
- **Mr Saâd BEN MBAREK**, President of the Prefectoral Council of Rabat and President of the AMPCPP
- **Mr Khalid AFKIR**, Consul General of the Kingdom of Morocco

Round table on Improving the legislation of the Republic of Belarus on self-government issues – Minsk, Belarus, 29 April 2019

Dear Mr POPKOV,

Dear participants,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure for me to participate today in this round table, which presents an excellent opportunity to take stock of the legal framework on local self-government in Belarus.

This round table is also a good occasion to have an exchange of views on the Belarusian legislation in comparison with the European Charter of Local Self-Government and laws in other countries. It is in fact a follow-up to the round table on the Charter which the Congress organised with the Council of the Republic here in Minsk in September last year.

I would like to thank for this opportunity the organisers – the Council of the Republic, the Council on Cooperation of Local Self-Government Authorities, and the Minsk City Hall which is hosting this meeting.

For us in the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, such exchanges are crucial for improving the laws and practice of local self-government across the European continent – indeed, improving the governance of local communities for the benefit of our citizens. Such exchanges are important because they allow us to share our experiences and to learn from one another.

This is why I welcome today the participants from different levels of governance and academic institutions of Belarus – the Council of the Republic, councils of deputies, research centres, and the Council on Co-operation of Local Self-Government Authorities which has an observer status with the Congress, together with the Lev Sapieha Foundation.

I also welcome of course my fellow Congress members and experts from national associations of local and regional authorities of other European countries.

In the Congress, we are convinced that improving local self-government is a shared responsibility – shared not only between the national, regional and local level of governance, but also between authorities and citizens, residents of local communities themselves. They all are stakeholders in the local self-government system, and not least the citizens who must be in the centre of our public action and are the end beneficiaries of what we do as politicians.

We are convinced that open dialogue between these different stakeholders is essential to achieve real improvement of self-government – not only in law, but also in practice. In fact, it is not only a matter of conviction: the European Charter of Local Self-Government requires consultations between local authorities and higher levels of government as a key principle of the functioning of the self-government system. The Charter's Additional Protocol on citizen participation extends this principle to consultations with citizens.

Associations of local and regional authorities play a special role in this process, including in improving the legal framework on local self-government. I know this first-hand because I am also President of the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions. Tomorrow, at the meeting of the Council on Co-operation of Local Self-Government Authorities, we will have a more in-depth discussion about associations, but I welcome already today the participation of representatives of some associations – from Slovenia, Ukraine and Poland. Of course, I will also contribute to the discussions with the experience of the Swedish Association, which is one of the most powerful associations in Europe.

This round table today could be seen indeed as a form of consultation on the perspectives of the evolution of local self-government and legislation on local self-government in Belarus.

Of course, consultation is not the only principle of local self-government established by the European Charter. The foundation of local self-government is indeed the principle of subsidiarity, which was formulated for the first time in history in the European Charter. This principle provides

that public responsibilities should be exercised at the level closest to citizens – for example, the provision of public services, design of social policies or delivery of human rights in our communities. In practice, this means a transfer of competences from the national level to regional and local authorities, which allows for the decentralisation of power towards the level closest to the citizen.

The Charter also holds that together with competences, local and regional authorities must have sufficient funding – local financing – in order to implement their tasks. In addition, they must have their own administrations to implement those tasks, and must be able to do so without unnecessary interference from higher levels of government.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

These are just some of the key provisions of the European Charter of Local Self-Government I wanted to mention at the opening today. Why these?

First, because these are the issues that create most challenges for self-government in European countries. As you might know, the Congress is responsible for monitoring the implementation of the European Charter in the 47 member States of the Council of Europe. During our monitoring, we most often come across these recurrent issues which we call the Three Cs: competences, consultations and cash – meaning local financing. So, it is interesting for us to see the situation in Belarus from this viewpoint.

Secondly, these are the issues that show the most variety in their practical application in different countries. For example, competences can be exclusive, shared or delegated, and we find various configurations across Europe. Local financing can be ensured through government transfers, local taxation, issue of licences and permits, borrowing from domestic markets – here, too, a great variety of practices. Consultation mechanisms can be formal and informal, enshrined in laws – even in the Constitution – or based on special agreements; they can be bilateral or multilateral, with the participation of different ministries and other stakeholders.

Finally, these are the issues that cannot be resolved at the local level – they must be addressed at the national level as part of legislation on local self-government. This is again why this round table is interesting to us – and in particular because the Congress stands ready to share its experience and expertise in improving the legislation on local self-government in Belarus as part of our cooperation with the authorities of this country.

Our participation today is in fact another step in this process of co-operation between the Congress and the Belarusian authorities, in particular with the Council of the Republic. This process was given a new momentum last year, with the organisation of a round table on the European Charter of Local Self-Government in Minsk in September 2018, which I mentioned at the beginning. This co-operation is now included in the proposed Council of Europe Action Plan for Belarus, which is being discussed.

The Congress will be pleased to work with our Belarusian partners on local self-government issues and to contribute to improving legislation on local self-government, establishing a national association of local and regional authorities and increasing citizen participation at local level.

We very much look forward to our exchanges today. I wish all of us fruitful and constructive discussions.

Thank you.

Meeting of the Council on Cooperation of local self-government authorities on Improving the legislation of the Republic of Belarus on self-government issues – Minsk, Belarus, 30 April 2019

Dear Mr MYASNIKOVICH,

Dear Mr POPKOV,

Dear participants,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to be here today and participate in this meeting, together with my fellow Congress members and experts.

On behalf of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, I would like to thank the organisers for this opportunity – first and foremost, the Council on Cooperation of Local Self-Government Authorities in Belarus.

The Congress participation in this meeting is another proof of our mutual interest and commitment to develop a closer and more productive co-operation for the benefit of local self-government in Belarus and its end beneficiaries – the citizens of this country.

The Congress and the Council on Co-operation of Local Self-Government Authorities enjoy a long-standing relationship that dates back to 2008 when the Council received an observer status with the Congress. Today, the Council and the Lev Sapieha Foundation – which I also welcome here – are the two organisations from Belarus that have this status.

Our co-operation was given a new momentum last year, with the organisation of a round table on the European Charter of Local Self-Government here in Minsk in September 2018. It was followed by proposals to include co-operation on local self-government in the future Council of Europe Action Plan for Belarus, which is currently being discussed.

In this regard, I am pleased to reaffirm that the Congress stands ready to offer its expertise and share its experience in improving the legislative framework for local self-government in this country, establishing a national association of local and regional authorities, and setting up mechanisms to increase citizen participation at local level.

This is why we welcome the opportunity to contribute to the discussions today, to learn more about the current situation of local self-government in Belarus and to exchange views on possible ways of improving it.

As you might know, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities is an assembly of elected politicians representing more than 150,000 territorial communities in the 47 member States of the Council of Europe. The national governments of these 47 countries have charged the Congress with monitoring the implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government and the practical application of its provisions in different national settings.

As we are discussing improvements to the laws on local self-government, it is important to keep in mind that the application of the European Charter is not uniform. Europe is proud of its diversity. The diversity of our cultures and ways of doing business is a strength and a source of creative development, and the same is true for local self-government.

At the same time, what is uniform across the European continent are the principles and standards based on shared values that the Council of Europe, which marks 70 years next month, has developed since 1949.

So, as we speak about the European Charter of Local Self-Government, what is important to us is the application of the principles established by the Charter in the national legislation and in administrative practice of member States.

One of these principles is the requirement of constant dialogue between national, regional and local authorities on the matters concerning regions and local communities. Such dialogue, in the form of consultations, is a key principle of the Charter. It is relevant to all major provisions of the Charter and underpins all the other principles. The Charter refers to requirement of consultation in three of its articles: Article 4.6 on the Scope of local self-government, Article 5 of the Charter, on the Protection of local authority boundaries, and Article 9 on the financial resources of local authorities. This principle is indeed the “spinal cord” of the Charter.

This dialogue helps national authorities to learn from the experience at the local level and to develop national policies better, making them more targeted and more effective. Regional and local authorities have a better knowledge of the terrain, of what works and what does not work in their communities. After all, it comes down to them to put into practice the laws, policies and measures that are adopted at the national level.

I speak from personal knowledge: as President of the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, SALAR, I meet regularly with central authorities of my country to discuss the design of national policies. And as President of SALAR, I know that is not always easy for national governments to consult local authorities. It takes a political will and takes trust that such consultations represent an honest dialogue that will lead to solutions.

But such consultations are essential for finding solutions together, and they must be not only formal but also practical in order to be effective. Better decisions are made in joint discussions. Engaging local and regional authorities in national policy making also gives them a sense of ownership and a feeling of greater responsibility for implementing those policies.

Later today, I will have an opportunity to present the experience of my Association in greater detail.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We in the Congress are convinced that the input from local and regional authorities to improving the legislation on local self-government should be coordinated through their associations.

Given that most European countries have a large number of local authorities, it is difficult to hold effective consultations with all of them if they have no institution to represent their general interests in relations either with central authorities or with regions.

It is therefore essential for local authorities to have their own national association whose role is to be recognised by the State as required by the European Charter. Moreover, the position of local authorities is obviously much stronger if they can speak with a single voice.

Article 10 of the Charter requires that member States recognise the right of local authorities to belong to a national or international association of local authorities for the protection and promotion of their common interests.

Indeed, associations play a special role in the system of local self-government. Their mission is not only to represent the interests of local and regional communities and engage in consultations with central authorities, but also to help improve the capacity of their members to provide better services to citizens. In this regard, training and experience-sharing within associations are very important.

The Congress is ready to work with the Belarusian authorities in establishing a national association, which is provided for by the Law on Local Self-Government in Belarus. I look forward to contributions from representatives of associations from several European countries that are here with us today, as well as from some regional associations of Belarus.

Of course, consultation is not the only principle of local self-government established by the European Charter. The foundation of local self-government is indeed the principle of subsidiarity. In a round table yesterday, I had the opportunity to touch upon the formal aspects of this principle of the exercise of public responsibilities at the level closest to citizens.

Today, I would like to underline the importance of mutual trust between the national and subnational levels in the exercise of public responsibilities. Trust is truly a corner-stone for the effective functioning of local self-government. From our monitoring, we in the Congress often observe that without a relationship of trust, there is no compliance with the Charter, and no implementation of the Charter's principles is possible.

In conclusion, I would like to add that improving local self-government is a responsibility shared not only between the national, regional and local level, but also between authorities and citizens. Dialogue with citizens to better understand their concerns is just as important as dialogue with central authorities to define national legislation and policies.

I believe that these issues should be reflected in the co-operation between the Congress and the Belarusian authorities, and that they will be part of our exchanges today.

I look forward to our discussions.

Thank you.

Statement by the President of the Congress following the decision by the Supreme Election Council of Turkey to call for repeat elections in Istanbul on 23 June 2019

Following the decision by the Supreme Election Council of Turkey to call for repeat elections in Istanbul on 23 June 2019, Anders Knape, the President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, has stressed the need to restore the safeguards of the electoral process for preventing a deep crisis of confidence of the Turkish voters in the State authorities.

“Repeating elections is an extraordinary measure and must be well-founded and substantiated in a transparent and impartial process, bearing in mind that all the necessary conditions for free and fair elections must be verified prior to the Election Day, as stipulated by international principles, – and not afterwards”, the President stated.

“Regarding the main argument brought forward by the AK Party on ineligible voters, the Turkish Election Law has clear deadlines for lodging appeals against the voter registration process. The objections made by the ruling party against the voters’ lists of certain Istanbul districts, on the ground of alleged irregularities, came after the legal deadline. This is contrary to our understanding of a democratic fair play in elections”, he underlined.

“The fact that these late objections eventually have led to the decision by the Supreme Election Council to repeat the elections in Istanbul runs counter the international principle of ensuring a reliable and stable legal framework for elections and has the potential to severely damage the trust of the Turkish voters in the electoral authorities. This is the real concern that we from the Congress associate with the forthcoming repeat elections”, Knape made clear.

“This situation is aggravated by reports we have received about pressure exerted by the Government on the Supreme Election Council to rule in favour of a rerun of the local elections in Istanbul. All the developments after the 31 March elections taken together, we face the repeat elections in Istanbul with great concern and urge the Turkish authorities to do their utmost to restore the safeguards of the electoral process”, concluded the President of the Congress.

129th Session of the Committee of Ministers - Helsinki, Finland, 17 May 2019

Dear President,

Ministers,

Ambassadors,

Secretary General,

The core mission of the Congress is to monitor local and regional democracy in Europe. Our monitoring, as has been acknowledged in the decisions of this meeting, is based on an international treaty, ratified by all 47 member States, the European Charter of Local Self-Government. And we are pleased that Belarus is very interested in developing local democracy on these principles. This may open the door to further complete the family of the European countries in the Council of Europe.

We, in the Congress, are fulfilling this mission with determination, constantly improving our procedures and making our recommendations ever more useful for the member States. The regular political dialogue and co-operation that we have with national governments, be it in Strasbourg or in your respective countries, is an essential aspect of this work.

Within the Council of Europe, the Congress, as political assembly and monitoring body, represents the local and regional political level that complements the action of national governments and parliaments in their efforts to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

In its contribution to the reflection on the future of the Council of Europe adopted during the April 2019 session and distributed to you, Ministers, the Congress reaffirms its conviction that in order to preserve European democracy, today we need, more than ever, a stronger and widespread grassroots democracy.

We firmly believe that local democracy is a central pillar of European democracy. In the current challenging situation faced by member States and by European institutions, the Congress can

contribute, through its experience and that of the municipalities and regions it represents, to the development of comprehensive strategies aimed at revitalising democracy and strengthening our democratic space.

I am very pleased that both the outgoing and the incoming chairmanships attach great importance to local self-government and regional democracy: Finland having implemented a substantial reform of the regions and France, whose President Macron just a few days ago announced an initiative for more decentralisation, after having held several meetings of the “Grand débat” with mayors.

Mayors, Councillors, regional governments and parliaments, local and regional elected representatives from 150 000 local and regional authorities, are working every day in the field, for and with citizens all over the continent. They are committed to deliver, in all the areas of life of our societies and of our fellow citizens. They are a cement holding our societies together.

These millions of people, that we work to represent in the Congress, at European level, within an intergovernmental Organisation, are the essence of democracy itself. They can help significantly to restore confidence in democracy, in its processes, its actors and its institutions.

We are at a crossroads and central governments must rethink the organisational model of our territories. The key to the future democratic health of Europe lies in our collective ability to imagine a new “socio-territorial pact”. This is what the Congress proposes that governments should incorporate into their reflection. Thank you!

135th European Committee of the Regions Plenary Session – Brussels, Belgium, 27 June 2019

25th Anniversary Ceremony of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and the European Committee of the Regions

Mr President,

Members,

Dear friends and colleagues,

On behalf of the Congress, I would first of all like to say how happy we are to celebrate this 25th anniversary with you here today.

On a more personal note, as both President of the Congress and Vice-President of the Committee of the Regions, I am very proud to see our two institutions brought together for this occasion.

It is no accident that the European Committee of the Regions and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities are celebrating this anniversary together. It is because there is an undeniable complementarity between our two institutions and an intense co-operation that we have constantly bettered over the years. And if our two institutions have the same age - 25 years already! – it is not entirely coincidental either. This corresponds to the birth of an awareness, the awareness of the role and importance of local authorities.

Initially, the governments had conceived Europe and European co-operation solely in intergovernmental terms but, fairly rapidly, the need to involve the local dimension in the process of European co-operation and integration was felt.

Within the Council of Europe and its Parliamentary Assembly in particular, leading politicians of the day committed to a local and regional dimension. By as early as 1953, the Parliamentary Assembly had set up a "Special Committee on Municipal and Regional Affairs" and it was on 12 January 1957, that the first sitting of the Conference of Local Authorities was held under the chairmanship of Jacques Chaban Delmas, French Prime Minister and Speaker of the National Assembly. However, it was really the Summit of Heads of State and Government, meeting in Vienna in 1993, which approved the "creation of a consultative organ genuinely representing both local and regional authorities in Europe". Between that first sitting in 1957 and the adoption in 1994 by the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers of the resolution instituting the Congress in its present form, there was a lengthy process of persuasion aimed at the central governments and European organisations.

Along similar lines, it was thanks to pressure from the regional authorities in the European Union to have more of a voice in European affairs that the Treaty of Maastricht set up the European Committee of the Regions and allowed the member States to be represented on the Council of the European Union by ministers of their regional governments.

As our two institutions mark an important anniversary, the Council of Europe also celebrates 70 years since its creation. Now, seven decades later, the role of local and regional authorities in the institutional architecture of the member States is more crucial than ever. The importance of local democracy in our States is beyond all doubt, as it enables each and every citizen to feel concerned, involved and able to subscribe to shared values and the institutions representing them.

The effort to win people over to our cause launched a few decades ago has yielded very tangible results as our assemblies perfectly illustrate – you, the European Committee of the Regions, and we, the Congress. One decisive step forward was the adoption of an obligatory text, the European Charter of Local Self-Government, now ratified by all 47 member States of the Council of Europe. In its preamble, the national governments defined local democracy as one of the main foundations of any democratic regime.

There is still some way to go though, before people fully realise the key role played by local and regional elected representatives in our democracies. In its work to monitor the situation of local democracy, the Congress observes here and there recurrent signs of central authorities resorting to certain forms of authoritarianism, seen for example in attempts to recentralise, a lack of consultation or reluctance to grant local authorities the necessary resources to fulfil their tasks.

We must therefore carry on our struggle and continue to ardently champion municipalities and regions and those who embody them. It is this struggle that brings us together. We share the same challenge of championing local democracy and public policy in Europe. We fight under the same banner, even though our operational capacities are not the same. Your means are those of the European Union, and those of the Council of Europe are, obviously, distinctly more modest.

In the Congress our vocation is to build local democracy from the bottom up. Our statutory role comprises missions on the ground, whereas your role is to advise the member States and also the institutions making up the European Union. Two distinct and equally important roles, each of us occupying our own niche with our own prerogatives and resources to work towards the same end: what the governments call *subsidiarity* and I prefer to call *shared democracy*.

This sharing of roles and prerogatives between central governments and intermediate levels, which we uphold on a daily basis, will be decisive for the democratic future of Europe. We know that, today, there is a whole host of threats to the cohesion of our continent. You know them well, they are called populism, the rise of extremism, insubordination shown to politicians and institutions and abstentionism in elections, and they constitute the most substantial challenges faced by Europe since the end of the Second World War and the development of multilateralism. The 2018 indices of Eurobarometer are conclusive: only 36 to 38% of citizens still trust their national governments and parliaments, while local authorities enjoy a level of confidence of 50%. It is in this context of disruption and doubt, at a time when our citizens' trust of public institutions seems to be crumbling, that local and regional authorities remain a solid anchoring point, which needs to be used to cement our societies more strongly.

We are convinced that the problems and challenges we face today can no longer be dealt with at just one level; they highlight the need for consultation, for concerted efforts and complementarity, the need for a continuum between the different levels of authority. Democracy must be shared between the different levels of governance and, to that end, it is indispensable to recognise local and regional democracy once and for all as an essential pillar of our democratic system.

Mayors and municipal councillors, as local elected representatives, are the representatives of public authorities who are the closest to citizens. We say to central governments: make use of this closeness, capitalise on the community's trust in their local authorities and use their networks and the institutions that represent them to revive and reinforce democracy.

Through their experience and that of the municipalities and regions they represent, our two institutions are well placed to continue to contribute to this long-term endeavour, as they have done for 25 years. Our anniversary is an opportunity to remind us that we, like governments, are responsible for advancing the project of a democratic, open Europe that listens to its citizens.

Thank you

“State of Local and Regional Democracy in Europe” – Joint celebration of the 25th Anniversary of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and the European Committee of the Regions – Brussels, Belgium, 27 June 2019

President Lambertz,

Dear colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The objective of our meeting today is not only to take stock of the achievements in advancing local and regional democracy over the past 25 years. It is rather to look at what is still to be done, and whether we have enough authority and tools to do it.

The importance of the territorial dimension of European democracy has been formally recognised by national governments. But the reality is not in line with this recognition. In practice, we are witnessing all across Europe attempts at recentralisation and greater control over local and regional authorities, and less finances for them to do their job.

Our message that decentralisation has a genuine added value for democratic development does not seem to come across everywhere. Congress monitoring reports show recurrent problems in implementing the European Charter of Local Self-Government – similar problems in most European countries.

Yet decentralisation is indeed an element of modernity, an indispensable requirement of modern democracy. Decentralisation is all about bringing democracy as close to the citizens as possible.

It is at the level of our communities where citizens have the most direct access to public authorities and can hold them accountable. It is at this level where citizens feel the concrete results of their participation, and of the implementation of national policies.

This is why decentralisation of responsibilities for “a substantial share of public affairs” – to quote the Charter – represents a guarantee of **both technocratic efficiency** in the optimal use of local resources adapted to the needs of communities, and of **democratic legitimacy** of policies and decisions developed through citizens’ engagement and enjoying public support.

Local and regional self-government is indeed a school of democracy for our populations, the space of political democratic learning and gaining the first democratic experience – everywhere in our communities, in our territories. Without this space, without this school, education for democracy and democratic citizenship would be a much, much harder task for central authorities.

Local and regional authorities also bear a lion’s share of responsibility for dealing with – and responding to – global challenges and problems, all of which have implications for our communities.

From climate change to radicalisation and terrorism, from migration and protection of minorities to conflict prevention and managing diversity – local and regional authorities are the true ‘first responders’ in tackling the direct consequences of these challenges for our citizens. They must have the power and resources to do their job – because this is another great added value of decentralisation

Yet decentralisation itself is not a uniform process. The existing decentralised governance on our continent is as diverse as Europe itself. The European landscape in the field of local and regional democracy is characterised by this impressive diversity in the exercise of the principles of the Charter. This diversity gives the necessary flexibility for adapting to the local needs. Through this diversity, through decentralisation we must be moving European democracy forward.

To sum up, decentralisation is an indispensable element modern democracy because of its great added value – both of democratic legitimacy and technocratic efficiency – in responding to today’s problems and challenges.

Let us reflect today on how we can better drive this message across to both national authorities and European institutions.

Thank you.

19th edition of the Economic Forum of Aix-en-Provence: Renewing trust! – Aix-en-Provence, France, 5 – 7 July 2019

- In recent years, profound transformations of the territories, marked in particular by rural exodus, desertification of countryside and progressive urbanisation
- Europe, as rest of the world, gradually divided between metropolitan and peripheral areas, which include peri-urban and rural areas
- Metropolitan areas = intense activity and permanently connected to the rest of the world
Peripheral areas = economic growth and technological development less or nonexistent.
- Peripheral areas in particular impacted by problems of employment, mobility, transport, services and access to digital infrastructure.
- Distance or even schism between center and periphery = one of the most important current issue to solve because real danger for democracy and democratic functioning of societies.
- Sentiment of marginalisation, abandonment or downgrading → mistrust of elected officials, rejection of institutions and recourse to protectionism.
- In recent votes (Brexit, European elections...) populist and extreme right-wing votes mostly correspond to peripheral areas → Electoral maps show division between urban and periphery
- Mayors and local elected officials on the front line - first line of response to citizens' concerns and last bastion against a wider rejection of political representation.
- Local elected representatives must be fully involved in the reflection and development of policies that determine the functioning of territories.
- Policies must foster interaction and interdependence between different areas - strengthen territorial cohesion and sustainable local development - take into account different zones and their specificities and assets
- Same technological, economic and human means for all → improved transport offer, diversification of local economy, digital development, development of local services, reflection on the occupation of rural areas etc
- A flexible approach adapted to the environment - highlighting the specific strengths of each zone and their contribution to the development of the territory as a whole.
- Reflection and concertation at all levels of governance and all actors of public life for development of policies - active participation of citizens.
- Text (contribution to the Helsinki Ministerial meeting) sent by Congress to governments of Member States → call for more involvement and consultation of local and regional authorities by central governments - New "socio-territorial pact"
- Central powers must rely more and trust more elected representatives on the ground - Use proximity to revive confidence, link and cohesion.
- Local and Regional authorities at the forefront of finding innovative solutions adapted to specific environment - at the forefront of the efforts to maintain job-creating economic activity, high quality public services and strategies to ensure the development of their municipality, town or area - at the forefront of implementing national or European policies at the local level.
- Local and regional governments crucial to maintain strong social fabric in communities → a chance for democracy
- Local and regional governments can contribute to overall reflections but also find solutions to specific problems of a territory → Need to re-evaluate their role in developing national policies and building European democracy
- Otherwise, risk of aggravation of differences and tensions on territories and risk for the democratic equilibrium of societies and the continent - risk for security of the continent.

Conclusions:

- Need to build more cohesive territories where urban and peripheric areas are interconnected, interdependent and work together for the development of the territory as a whole
- Involve local and regional authorities in the analysis and the assessment of the needs, in the policy shaping and in the implementation of policies, as well as in their evaluation
- Involve national associations of local and regional authorities
- At European level, involve European Committee of the Regions and Congress of Local and Regional Authorities

Statement by the President of the Congress following the suspension of mayors in Turkey – 20 August 2019

Anders KNAPE, President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, made the following statement:

"I express my grave concern about the decision of the Turkish authorities to suspend the elected mayors of three metropolitan cities in the south-east of the country, namely Diyarbakir, Mardin and Van, and to replace them with governors.

These mayors were elected as a result of the free and fair expression of the will of the Turkish people during the local elections held on 31 March 2019, which were observed by the Congress.

In the past, the Congress expressed its concern about the excessive use of legal proceedings against local elected representatives in Turkey and their replacement by appointed officials. This practice seriously undermines the proper functioning of local democracy.

I also refer to the Congress Recommendation on the situation of local elected representatives in Turkey, adopted in 2017, and I call on the Turkish authorities to address this issue without delay and in particular to restore the capacity of municipal councils to choose a replacement mayor.

The Congress Bureau will continue to follow this situation closely, in particular at its next meeting in Strasbourg on 11 September 2019. This situation will also be addressed during the monitoring mission planned from 1 to 4 October 2019 which aims to assess the implementation of the principles of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in Turkey."

Conference of Regional and Local Authorities of the Eastern Partnership - Annual Conference - Turku, Finland, 12 September 2019

Dear Karl-Heinz,

Dear Emin,

Dear Rapporteur Branda,

Dear CORLEAP members,

I am very pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to this debate.

The promotion of direct co-operation between local and regional communities across borders has been on the agenda of the Council of Europe Congress since it was established.

Direct contacts and exchanges between people, residents of these communities, are of course a very important part of such co-operation. First and foremost, such contacts lead to better understanding of one another; they help to reduce tensions and promote mutual respect and better cohesion.

But people-to-people contacts also represent an important economic aspect. They contribute to spreading innovative business initiatives and ventures, promoting entrepreneurship and helping with cross-border economic integration in the long run.

We in the Congress are convinced that decentralised cross-border co-operation in general is a crucial factor for territorial development and territorial cohesion on our continent. The unification of Europe has opened excellent opportunities for establishing direct economic, social and cultural links across borders,

leading to more efficient management of communities, better services for citizens and reduced disparities between territories.

This co-operation represents a great potential for joint infrastructural projects, cross-border investment, labour mobility and employment, opportunities for business, sharing of services and joint administration – this list is long indeed. Many communities have already benefitted from these opportunities, in the form of European Territorial Cooperation Groupings (ETCGs) – there are 72 of them in Europe today. I should also mention the municipal cross-border Euro-districts.

Over the past almost 40 years, the Congress has dealt extensively with the issue of territorial co-operation and adopted a number of recommendations in this field. More recently, in 2013, the Congress adopted a resolution on prospects for effective transfrontier co-operation in Europe.

In this text, the Congress underlined that the very concept of the border had changed, with its focus shifting from that of a barrier to a perception of an integrated transfrontier territory with lots of unexploited potential. The concept of the border as a dividing line, as Rapporteur Branda mentions in his report, is increasingly giving way to the perception of borders as the “scars of history”.

This is why the Congress recommended developing legal provisions for horizontal subsidiarity, transferring competences and resources to transfrontier co-operation bodies, increased use of shared services across borders, as well as training and capacity-building of relevant actors.

At the next Congress session in October this year, we will debate a report on the fair distribution of taxes in transfrontier areas, which addresses for the first time ever the subject of fiscal benefits from cross-border employment – benefits for the State, community, employer and worker. The Rapporteur is Karl-Heinz Lambertz, I would like to use this occasion to congratulate him on the excellent quality of the report and the work done. Transfrontier taxation is an integral part of current efforts for better financial equalisation and more equitable financial burden-sharing between the States, territories and communities in Europe – so thank you, Karl-Heinz, for steering this work.

Also in October, our Chamber of Regions will hold a debate on cross-border cultural development of our territories, which is closely linked to the report debated today. Our continent is truly a quilt made of the fabric of communities, which has been woven over centuries through cultural exchanges and inter-cultural links between people.

Our common cultural heritage has no borders and represents yet another factor of transfrontier co-operation. It is telling that our partner, the Association of European Border Regions, also chose cross-border culture as the theme of its annual conference this year.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Council of Europe laid down a legal basis for cross-border co-operation already back in 1980, when it adopted the so-called Madrid Convention – the Outline Convention on Transfrontier Co-operation between Territorial Communities or Authorities. This Convention and its three Additional Protocols today constitute a legal framework for decentralised co-operation in Europe. They provide for cross-border co-operation agreements between territorial communities of both EU and non-EU countries.

It is encouraging that all CORLEAP countries which are members of the Council of Europe have ratified the Madrid Convention. CORLEAP represents indeed a very practical platform for promoting direct links between communities of the Eastern Partnership.

However, this Convention is open for accession by non-member States as well. This is why I hope that Belarus will also join this framework – especially in the context of its renewed co-operation with the Council of Europe, and the Congress in particular.

We know that cross-border co-operation is of special interest to this country – this was evident, for example, from the conference on such co-operation between Belarus and Ukraine in October last year, in which the former Congress President took part. The Congress stands ready to address this aspect when developing its co-operation with local and regional authorities of Belarus under the new Council of Europe Action Plan, adopted last July.

As I speak about Congress co-operation activities in CORLEAP countries, I should also mention our current projects in Ukraine and Armenia, as well as prospective projects in Georgia and Moldova. All of these projects are aimed at building capacities of local authorities and their associations, which would also enable them to pursue co-operation with their counterparts across borders.

In this regard, the Congress was instrumental in concluding a tri-partite co-operation agreement between associations of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. We are also pleased that the association of Armenia has concluded several such agreements, most recently with the Croatian association.

These agreements represent an important contribution to a larger framework of cross-border co-operation between territorial communities in Europe. As advocated in Pavel Branda's report, this co-operation should provide a greater focus on, and better opportunities for people-to-people contacts as a factor of peace, stability and economic development in Europe.

Rest assured that the Congress will give its full support to CORLEAP initiatives in this regard.

Thank you.

New York Summit on Sustainable Development, 24 September 2019

(only news)

At the New York Summit on Sustainable Development on 24 September 2019, the President of the Congress Anders Knappe participated in the 2nd High-level Forum for Local and Regional Authorities. He also participated in the meeting of the delegation of local and regional elected representatives of the EU institutions to the United Nations General Assembly in the framework of the CEMR General Assembly/Platform. The President of the Congress also met with Åsa Regner, Deputy Executive Director - Intergovernmental Support and Strategic Partnership of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment.

"A more egalitarian society is a prerequisite for achieving the objectives of Agenda 2030. It is absolutely essential to take objective 5 (gender equality) into account in the implementation of the other 16 objectives of Agenda 2030," stressed Anders Knappe.

"But it is also time for representatives of municipalities and regions to be offered a place at the negotiating table, and for the UN and its member States to recognise the central role of the local and regional level in the further implementation of the Agenda," the President added.

As an assembly representing 150,000 local and regional authorities and building on its expertise and proximity to citizens, the Congress is responsible for the [territorial dimension of the SDGs within the Council of Europe](#). The Congress' approach is based on three key principles: achieving SDGs is the shared responsibility of all levels of government; local and regional authorities must have the necessary competences and financial autonomy to achieve the goals in their respective areas; citizens must always remain at the heart of the action. The Congress's work focuses on 12 of the 17 objectives defined in the United Nations Agenda 2030.

37th Session of the Congress – Strasbourg, France, 29 October 2019

The Council of Europe has experienced an unprecedented political and budgetary crisis in the last few years. The institutional stalemate ended in June and we were pleased to see the Russian delegation return to the Parliamentary Assembly, and the payment by Russia of its contributions to the Organisation's budget.

This difficult context combined with the change in Turkey's status in 2018 and the zero nominal growth policy applied by member states also placed the Congress in a very difficult budgetary position and led us to take cost-saving measures. In the focus group which worked on these measures, consideration was given to the possibility of reducing the number of sessions or the size of delegations, but no consensus was reached on these proposals within the Bureau. We therefore had no other choice but to no longer provide interpretation in the working languages during our statutory meetings. I am well aware, as is the Bureau, that the absence of interpretation in the working languages affects the quality of our work. I regret this situation and I would like to return as soon as possible to a normal functioning for our working languages.

Over the last few years, the share of the Council of Europe budget allocated to the Congress has steadily decreased from 2.92% in 2010 to 2.54% in 2018. The members of the Bureau and I have taken measures, individually and as a group, to persuade the member states to allocate 3% of the Organisation's budget to the Congress in the future; this would enable us to reintroduce interpretation

of our proceedings and step up the statutory and thematic activities which we have had to scale back due to the budgetary constraints. During the celebration to mark the 70th anniversary of the Council of Europe here in Strasbourg, former Presidents of the Congress decided to send the new Secretary General of the Organisation a message urging her to give the Congress the political priority that it deserves and the resources that it needs to perform its tasks. I am sure that Ms Marija Pejčinović Burić, whom we will have the pleasure of welcoming shortly, will give us an efficient support in this regard.

The political uncertainties regarding the functioning of the Council of Europe have not entirely disappeared, Ukraine, for example, did not appoint a delegation to the June session of the Parliamentary Assembly. The crisis that the Organisation has just experienced has highlighted its structural weakness. The Council of Europe is neither valued nor treated as it should be by the member states. It is therefore not only the Congress which suffers from a lack of recognition from governments, but actually the Council of Europe as a whole.

And yet, our continent needs Europe even more today than it did in the past. At a time when the United Kingdom might leave the European Union without a deal and worryingly unprepared, the dangers which lie in wait for Europe are only increasing. We have worked so hard to establish and move this Europe forward that to see it unravel is heart-breaking.

The challenges ahead of us are colossal. All actors have a role to play, and the Council of Europe is more necessary than ever. During his speech on 1 October, President Macron said that he sincerely believed that "it is at the Council of Europe that the divisions of our continent can be healed because it is the place where European consciousness is formed and debated". We therefore truly need a strengthened Council of Europe that enjoys political support.

The Congress is an important part of this mechanism. It plays its role as defender of local democracy. Given the enormous challenges before us as well as the crises of confidence in public discourse and in institutions, the Congress can, together with all players at all levels of governance, help to strengthen the democratic stability of our societies.

In this connection, I would like to commend the democratic process taking place in Tunisia, a neighbouring Mediterranean state. This process is still fragile, but it brings us hope, in an Arab world where most countries have been unable to fully make the shift initiated by the Arab Spring. I therefore welcome all the more warmly the Tunisian delegation to which we have just granted Partner for Local Democracy status.

Dear colleagues, it is through continued work and tireless commitment that we will be convince central governments that the Congress is a key part of the Council of Europe and that it accordingly deserves to have the full support of our member states, as does our entire Organisation.

Thank you.

Reception marking the closing of the exhibition "Silent Messages" offered by the Grand Est Region and the French Presidency of the Committee of Ministers Strasbourg - 29 October 2019

Dear President of the Region,

Dear Ambassador,

Dear colleagues,

To conclude the first day of our autumn session, I am delighted to share this artistic interlude with you.

On behalf of the Congress, I would like to thank the "*Région Grand Est*", the French Presidency of the Committee of Ministers and particularly the Permanent Representation of France to the Council of Europe, as well as the three Regional Funds for Contemporary Art of the "*Région Grand Est*", who are offering us this reception today and invite us to this exhibition on the theme of human rights.

This exhibition highlights the fragility of rights and of democracy in a context of growing populism and extremism. It will resonate all the more in the ears of the local and regional elected representatives gathered in our assembly. Local authorities, indeed, are the institutions closest to citizens and local elected representatives are often the last line of defence for safeguarding our fundamental freedoms.

Solidarity and integration within communities are among the solutions to these current threats and it is that which gives the sense to our work within the Congress: strengthening the social bond between citizens, but also between citizens and their local elected representatives.

It is our responsibility, as local elected representatives, to work for the development of a united, integrated and inclusive society, while also fighting for the protection of human rights and against hate speech.

This exhibition is an opportunity for all of us to reflect and exchange further on the challenges that still remain to be overcome through the lens of art and culture.

The political dialogue took place in the Chamber this afternoon. Tonight, during this event, this can be developed into artistic dialogue and I invite you all to enjoy it!

Reception marking the Signature of Bosnia and Herzegovina lady mayors' co-operation agreement, Strasbourg - 29 October 2019

Ladies and gentlemen,

The political participation of women is a crucial issue in all countries, including in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The agreement which is to be signed today is part of a project which encourages and supports women to be candidates in the local elections of 2020. I would like to deeply commend this initiative and congratulate the seven women mayors for their courage and vision.

This agreement sets forth the values to promote the role of women in the public, economic, political and social life in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Its aim is to empower women, youth, children and other marginalised groups. This reflects your commitment to develop a more open, fair, plural and democratic society.

I am convinced that this initiative will lead to tighter cooperation between your cities, and I do hope that it will inspire other cities, other lady mayors to create such networks.

Today, more than ever, we need strong and empowered women to boost political representation at grassroots level. It is the starting point to achieve gender balancing and representation at the national level and peace.

Thank you for your attention, and congratulations again.

Reception marking the adoption of the Revised Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision- Making Process and opening of the photo exhibition on migrant women offered by the Conference of the INGOs of the Council of Europe and the Congress, Strasbourg - 30 October 2019

Madam President of the Conference of INGOs,

Your Excellency, the Ambassador of Switzerland,

Dear Colleagues, Dear Friends,

It is a pleasure for me to see you all at this joint event of the Congress and the Conference of INGOs, as we celebrate our work on the revision of the Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation which began in 2015.

Beyond the satisfaction of getting a good job done, this is a celebration of the long and fruitful collaboration between the Congress and the Conference of INGOs.

I am glad that our event is also an occasion for presenting an interesting exhibition on "Portraits of and by Women on the Run" hosted by the Conference of INGOs and supported by the Permanent Representation of Switzerland and of the Association "Action for Women".

I invite you all to enjoy it!

Reception offered by the Cross-Border Co-operation Programmes of Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Sweden and Norway with the Russian Federation – Strasbourg, 30 October 2019

Dear Madam, Sir,

Dear Colleagues,

On behalf of the Congress, I would like to thank the Cross-Border Co-operation Programs of Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Sweden and Norway with the Russian Federation. They are offering us this reception today and invite us to this exhibition, dedicated to the achievements of the ENI Cross-border cooperation programmes.

We are very much aware of the problems that local communities and local authorities can face in connections with the border. The effective handling of such problems calls for imaginative joint cross-border strategies.

Cross-border cooperation is about being good neighbours. On the map, borders separate countries but in reality, they can also bring people together.

The Council of Europe is the leading European Organization supporting cross-border co-operation as part of its programme to strengthen good governance, build durable democratic institutions and reinforce capacity at the local level. We understand that cross-border co-operation can enable our local authorities to design and implement innovative policies for improving the quality of life of our populations.

We have had a busy morning with some important political dialogue. Now we will continue with some artistic dialogue and I invite you all to enjoy it!

Ceremony to mark the 70th Anniversary of the Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 31 October 2019

The Council of Europe was set up 70 years ago in 1949 after the end of World War II by its founding fathers who vowed “never again”. The defense of peace and reconciliation were the *raison d'être* for its creation as they were for the foundation of the European institutions that followed. The idea of a united Europe made headway because it had become vital to avoid a repetition of the horrors of the two World Wars.

For us politicians be it at local, regional, national or European level, the demand for peace must be permanent to ensure that Europe never again experiences a war that risks plunging all Europeans once more into the abyss.

Last June, the Congress celebrated its 25th anniversary together with the European Committee of the Regions. The Congress as it is now was set up after the Summit of Heads of State and government in Vienna in 1993. But the consideration of the local dimension in the Council of Europe goes back much further than this, almost to the origins of the Organisation itself. The Council of Europe, which is based on intergovernmental co-operation, had the courage and vision to take into account the role and work of local and regional authorities and to create within it an assembly of local and regional elected representatives. We must pay tribute to the Committee of Ministers and to the Parliamentary Assembly for taking this initiative!

For the Congress, as well as for its other partner institutions, in particular within the European Union, the main task is to achieve a better balance between central governments and local and regional authorities within our societies. I am convinced that our work in favour of a sharing of power is essential to make our societies more cohesive and thereby reduce the risk of conflict. We have been entrusted with a certain responsibility by the governments of Europe; we must be able to exercise it with the full support of the Organisation and its member States.

Dear colleagues,

We live in a time of great challenges and we all have a tremendous responsibility. As the President of France, Emmanuel Macron, stated in his speech during the ceremony on 1 October, “these 70 years have been a miracle. Never before has something like this been achieved in Europe. But with these 70 years there also comes responsibility.”

Like President Macron, I sincerely believe that “it is at the Council of Europe that the fractures of our continent can be repaired because it is the place where the European conscious is built and where it is discussed”. Today more than ever, our mission as elected representatives is to maintain our social structures, our European models for every citizen, making sure that we never leave anyone on the side.

Statement by the President on the occasion of the Human Rights Day, 10 December 2019

"Good local and regional governance cannot exist without full respect for fundamental freedoms and human rights," said the Congress President on Human Rights Day, 10 December 2019. "The elected representatives of local and regional authorities are the guarantors of these rights for citizens, with a real responsibility to ensure that they are respected and implemented in the territories.

The essential role of local and regional elected representatives in the protection of human rights is widely recognised, as evidenced by the case law of the European Court of Human Rights, with numerous judgments including a territorial dimension, dealing with freedom of assembly, policing, the right to vote, freedom of expression, the environment and minority rights.

Next year, we will celebrate the 70th anniversary of the signing of the European Convention on Human Rights by the Council of Europe member States. This anniversary reminds us that, 70 years later, it is more necessary than ever to continue our awareness-raising campaign on the specific role of local and regional authorities in ensuring the implementation of human rights as close as possible to citizens.

This has been the Congress' commitment for several years, in particular during its missions to monitor the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government and through the preparation of a series of manuals for local and regional elected representatives on the implementation of human rights.»

30th anniversary of the North-South Centre of the Council of Europe – Strasbourg, 10 December 2019

Mr Chairman, Secretary General, Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour to address you today on behalf of the local and regional dimension of the quadrilogue of the North-South Centre.

I regret that I am not able to be among you in person, for this event that brings us together to celebrate 30 years of the North-South Centre, but I have asked the Congress Secretariat to convey my message to you.

Speaking for the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, I would like, first and foremost, to congratulate the Centre on its achievements. Over 30 years of its existence, the Centre has become an indispensable platform of dialogue for the members of the quadrilogue on both sides of the Mediterranean Sea.

Let me also congratulate the Presidency of the Centre: the Chair in the person of Ambassador Montobbio, and the Vice-Chair, Mr Afkir, Consul General of Morocco, as well as the team in Lisbon, for the remarkable work that they are doing to implement its activities and promote the Council of Europe's values.

Anniversaries are always a very timely moment to take stock of the achievements and look to upcoming developments and challenges to overcome.

30 years ago, the world was going through historical events that have changed the face of Europe: the Berlin Wall fell down heralding the end of division on our continent and indeed in the entire world, and opening the door to a new era. This has presented opportunities to promote common values across to the South and to raise awareness of interdependence of our world regardless of whether we live in its northern or southern part.

This is the very *raison d'être* of this Centre: bringing the message beyond European borders, connecting people and representing the voice of non member states in the Council of Europe.

Let us take a moment to praise the efforts and the vision of those who, back then, established this Centre in the format we know today: a quadrilogue, bringing together representatives of the four pillars, both from the North and the South of the Mediterranean. As a representative of the local and regional part of this quadrilogue, I welcome and value the opportunities provided by the Centre for us to enter into direct dialogue with governments, parliaments and civil society across the Mediterranean Sea.

Today, our societies are again faced with serious challenges and threats to our very values and our way of living together – living together within and beyond European borders in one world in which it is increasingly difficult to tell where the South ends and the North begins. In a world which is increasingly inter-connected and interdependent, where solidarity between people and countries is needed more than ever before.

This is why the role of the European Centre for Global Interdependence and Solidarity remains crucial today for bringing all actors together and joining their forces in a concerted and consistent action.

I would also like to praise the flagship events of the Centre: the North-South Prize and the Lisbon Forum which allow to highlight exceptional and inspiring people committed to the promotion of solidarity and peace, and to bring forth key issues that matter the most to our societies.

Today, the North-South Centre is also well placed to contribute to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals within the quadrilogue partners on both shores of the Mediterranean – and the Lisbon Forum held two weeks ago, was a great example in this respect.

Of course, the Centre should also continue dedicating its efforts to its core missions: promoting global education, raising awareness of young people and supporting their training, and further empowering women.

As Nelson Mandela said, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”

This is why the work you do is so important.

I would like to thank you for this work and for your commitment, and to reiterate the full support of the Congress.

Happy birthday!

Statement by the President of the Congress following the arrest of the Mayor of Urla District, 18 December 2019

The President of the Congress made the following statement:

"The mayor of Urla district in Izmir District, Burak Oğuz, was elected following the expression of the will of the Turkish people in the local elections of 31 March 2019, which were observed by the Congress. His arrest yesterday by the Turkish authorities revives the concern about such practices, which we expressed last August.

The excessive recourse to judicial proceedings against local elected officials in Turkey and their replacement by appointed officials is seriously undermining the democratic choice of Turkish citizens and the proper functioning of local democracy in Turkey.

The Congress has consistently expressed its concern about this practice and called on the Turkish authorities to restore the capacity of municipal councils to allow them to choose a new mayor.

This issue will be carefully examined in the context of the report currently being prepared following the [visit to Turkey, in October and November 2019, by a Congress delegation](#) to monitor the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government."

Statement by the President of the Congress on the occasion of the end of the year – 19 December 2019

"The year 2019 ends with a number of Congress achievements in favour of local and regional democracy in our 47 member states of which we can be rightly proud," stated Congress President in a message sent to Congress members on 19 December 2019.

“I am thinking in particular of the monitoring of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, the observation of local and regional elections, as well as our thematic and cooperation activities for better territorial governance.

Next year, we will continue our statutory activities and work to meet the challenges facing our cities and regions. In this respect, the 70th anniversary of the European Convention on Human Rights in 2020 will be an opportunity to highlight, through a number of initiatives, the role of local and regional elected representatives as guarantors of these rights for citizens.

All this work forms the basis of the Congress' contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations Agenda 2030, based on three principles:

- Achieving SDGs is the shared responsibility of all levels of government
- Local and regional authorities must have proper competences and financial autonomy
- Citizens must always remain at the heart of the action.

This is the message we have chosen to send on the Congress greetings card that you will find below in e-format.

The Congress' 2020 agenda will also include two key steps: the continuation of our reflection with a view to adopting the 2021-2025 priorities, as well as the renewal of our delegations at the 39th Session (27-29 October 2020).

All these perspectives are part of our ongoing political dialogue with governments, in particular during the Georgian and Greek presidencies of the Committee of Ministers.

At the end of this year, I would especially like to welcome your willingness to engage in dialogue with your national authorities in order to defend the role of the Congress in the architecture of the Council of Europe and the need to provide it with the necessary resources to carry out its tasks and responsibilities successfully.

Together, we will pursue this commitment to make our cities and regions more democratic, inclusive and sustainable.”

III. 2020

Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) policy committee meeting – “Reflection on the future of Europe: how local and regional governments can contribute to revive the European Project?”

(Only news)

Participating in a conference on “Reflection on the future of Europe: how local and regional governments can contribute to revive the European Project?” organised by the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) in Orléans, France, on 23 January 2020. The President of the Congress, Anders Knape underlined the importance of local and regional authorities for the safeguarding of European values and standards.

The President of the Congress underlined the worrying development of certain trends across Europe and beyond which call into question the European model built after the Second World War. "Our common vision and shared values are the foundations of today's Europe. Together we can achieve results that have a real impact on the citizens of Europe and beyond," he said.

"Local democracy is also an essential pillar of European construction and plays a fundamental role in international cooperation. CEMR is a good example of this," added the President. « Local and regional authorities can contribute to reviving the European project first and foremost by engaging citizens in this process, as the public authorities closest to them,” he underlined.

The President of the Congress also stressed the responsibility of national governments to give local and regional authorities the competences, financial resources, tools and autonomy necessary to carry out their missions, for the success of the European project.

Statement by the President of the Congress on the occasion of the appointment of Denys Shmygal to the post of Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Community and Territorial Development of Ukraine

On the occasion of the appointment of Denys Shmygal to the post of Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Community and Territorial Development of Ukraine, Congress President Anders Knappe addressed a letter to the new Minister on 6 February 2020, reaffirming the Congress' support for the ongoing territorial and decentralisation reforms in Ukraine.

“Substantial legislative and constitutional changes are needed in Ukraine to finalise the ongoing decentralisation and reform of local self-government,” the Congress President stated, welcoming the determination of Ukrainian leaders to move the reform process forward. “The Congress stands ready, together with the other Council of Europe partners - the Venice Commission and the intergovernmental sector - to assist the Ukrainian authorities in implementing the reforms”.

The President of the Congress also stressed that, in order to be effective and sustainable, all elements of the reform must be prepared and implemented in consultation with all stakeholders. This process and the results to be achieved must be based on the principles of the [European Charter of Local Self-Government](#) and its [additional Protocol on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority](#), as well as other Council of Europe instruments.

The Congress' next monitoring visit to Ukraine, scheduled for 4-6 March 2020, will assess the application of the Charter's principles as well as the implementation of the road map for the implementation of the Congress' recommendations, signed by the Ukrainian government in 2015.

Ceremony of signature of the Memorandum of Understanding of Cultural Route Programme between NALAG and the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport – Tbilisi, Georgia, 24 February 2020

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to speak at this occasion, a pivotal moment for the future of cultural heritage in Georgia, a country rich in history.

Our cultures, roots and patrimonies are the foundation of our history.

The development of cultural routes is essential to contribute to a European landscape of common values where relations built on trust are the basis of interaction - not only between different countries but also between cities and regions allowing them to rediscover their history and collective memory.

Local authorities play an essential role in upholding cultural territorial identity, tradition and craft, and cultural dialogue is a winning point on many fronts.

It allows for the preservation of historical heritage. It is a significant element of economic development of cities and regions. It provides an opportunity for public authorities to reengage with their citizens and communities.

We discussed this in the Congress in October last year when we had the pleasure of welcoming as guest speaker Mr Levan KHARATISHVILI, Deputy Minister of Education, Science, Culture and Sport of Georgia and Vice-Chair of the Governing Board of the Council of Europe Enlarged Partial Agreement on Cultural Routes.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Memorandum of Understanding you are signing today is an important step in establishing dialogue between the local government association and the government.

We in the Congress strongly support all initiatives by central authorities to take on board local input.

Initiatives such as this which aim to preserve cultural heritage and promote dialogue reflects the values of the Council of Europe: cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue and transfrontier exchanges.

They contribute to UN sustainable development goals on economic growth, on reducing inequalities and on sustainable cities and communities.

But most importantly, they contribute to building peace.

I congratulate both parties for this initiative and reassure you of Congress' support for your work.

Exchange of views with the Committee of Ministers' Deputies – Strasbourg, 26 February 2020

(Bullets)

- Happy to have this exchange of views; is a good opportunity to continue the political dialogue with the member States
- Political dialogue at all levels is a high priority for the Congress – both in Strasbourg and in member states.
- Thank Georgian authorities for excellent organisation of my visit to the country earlier this week; was a very good opportunity to discuss activities of the Georgian chairmanship with senior members of the government, the speaker of the parliament, the public defender, mayors and councillors and the Congress delegation.

Meetings with:

- Maya Tskitishvili – Vice-premier, Minister of Regional Development and Infrastructure of Georgia
- Lasha Darsalia, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia
- Kakha Kaladze – Mayor of Tbilisi, Head of Georgian Delegation to the CoE Congress, President of National Association of Local Authorities of Georgia (NALAG)
- Kakhaber Kuchava – Deputy Chairman of Parliament
- Nino Lomjaria – Public Defender
- Giorgi Khojvanishvili – Governor of Shida Kartli region 2020
- Konstantine Tavzarashvili – Mayor of Gori Municipality
- The Congress fosters this dialogue in all its activities (sessions, monitoring visits and reports, observation of local elections, cooperation programmes in the field...)
- 2020 is an important year for the Congress: election of its SG in March, renewal of the Congress delegations and adoption of its new priorities 2021-2025 in October
- Your Ministries will receive a letter from the SG of the CoE inviting the national governments to consult with the national associations to set up the new delegations to be presented at the October session.
- The Congress priorities 2021-2025, which are currently under preparation, will be in line with the priorities identified by the Council of Europe work to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law, as well as with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. To both, the Congress will contribute the local and regional dimension in order to ensure that the messages are not only heard in the capitals but also heard and understood in the municipalities, towns, cities and regions.
- We have identified 4 major challenges in particular that will require a systemic approach in the near future as well as urgent, joint and coordinated action by all levels of governance:
 - **quality of democracy,**
 - **inequalities in society,**
 - **environmental issues and**
 - **the digital revolution.**
- Using our statutory means and tools – plenary sessions, Chambers' and Committees' work programme, monitoring, election observation – and our cooperation activities on the ground, the Congress will continue to design answers that help local and regional elected representatives face the huge challenges they are confronted with
- Such challenges not only include a growing questioning in European societies of the common values and standards that form the basis of democracy and the increasing pressure exercised on Mayors and Councillors in the field, by the central authorities and by the citizens

- they also comprise profound territorial transformations, such as rural desertification and progressive urbanisation, the divide within the territories, the impact of globalisation, environmental challenges, the transformation of production and administrative tools and the development of new technologies linked to artificial intelligence.
- In this context, Europe needs more democracy, more rule of law, more multi-level cooperation and we also need more subsidiarity, that means more shared democracy between all levels of governance. Democratic citizenship and local and regional self-government are essential pillars of the democratic system and the Congress will contribute its share to the work of the Council of Europe in this respect.
- Challenges and problems that our societies and countries are facing can no longer be resolved at a single level, but they highlight the need for consultation, concertation and complementarity, the need for a continuum between the different levels of governance.
- Through their action on the ground, local and regional authorities can promote territorial cohesion and sustainable local development, as well as interaction and interdependence between the population and the democratic institutions.
- The experience and expertise of the municipalities and regions represented by the Congress can contribute to the development of comprehensive strategies to support and revitalise democracy.
- In this sense the Council of Europe, its Member States and your Committee have been visionary
 - o **when they set up a Conference of local authorities of Europe in 1957,**
 - o **when they declared, in 1985, in the preamble to the European Charter of Local Self-Government, local democracy as one of the main foundations of any democratic system**
 - o **when they established in 1994 the Congress of local and regional authorities which I have the honour to chair today**
- This vision should not be spoiled by temptations and tendencies that we sometimes observe in our monitoring towards recentralisation or by any forms of reluctance to consider local and regional authorities as fully-fledged interlocutors, to grant them responsibilities and above all adequate resources.
- What we need today is not less but more democracy close to the citizen, in the field, more proximity between the institutions and the people. This is what local elected representatives provide for.
- And this is why our continuous message to the member States and to the central authorities is to make best use of the experience and commitments of the local and regional elected representatives. They form a huge network and a distribution chain all over Europe, in order to reach out with the legal instruments and policies of the Council of Europe and promote the respect for Human Rights, defend democracy and fight for the respect of the Rule of Law. The Congress will continue to play this role in the interest of the Organisation.
- Besides our monitoring reports, fact finding visits and thematic work the Congress supports local and regional authorities with practical tools, such as our series of booklets on ethics and transparency. I understand that the Committee of Ministers will soon discuss “guidelines on public ethics”, which will follow our example.
- The Congress Human Rights Handbook contains concrete examples from many of the 47 member states and I am pleased to inform you that we are currently preparing the second volume of the Human Rights Handbook, which will be dedicated to social rights. Many such rights have to be delivered by municipalities and cities and the handbook will make this more visible.
- **Congress Budget and revised Charter**
 - o In its last meeting the Congress Bureau took note of the decisions of the Committee of Ministers on the Budget and on the revised Congress Charter. In addition to my letter of 20 January 2020 to all Ambassadors I would also like to thank the Committee of Ministers and the Secretary General at this occasion today for the decision on the 2020/2021 budget at Zero Real Growth and for the additional attributions to the Congress for enabling interpretation and translation into the working languages. Notably, the statement made by the Secretary General, committing herself to ensuring the necessary level of resources for the working languages, will contribute to re-establishing better working conditions

for the members of the Congress. We highly appreciate the efforts made by the Chairs of the GR-DEM and of the GR-PBA in order to prepare these consensual decisions.

- Let me, however, underline once more that the financial situation of the Congress still is very critical. The Bureau noted that the share of the Congress in the overall CoE budget has not increased. After the substantial cuts as of 2018 many activities had to be reduced or even suspended (Roma; radicalisation, ...). From 2017 to 2018 the Congress lost more than 900.000 €, that is 12,8 percent of its budget and has contributed far more than its share of the CoE budget. I would like to recall the declaration of the Congress Bureau on the 2020-2021 budget of 11 September 2019 and a corresponding table, which is included in the written communication of the Secretary General of the Congress on 23 October 2019. Several Ambassadors then had referred to this. As a consequence of the cuts the Congress has accumulated a significant backlog in our monitoring work programme. As of January 2020, for 19 countries (more than 40% of the member states!) we were not able to maintain a rhythm of monitoring the application of the Charter of Local Self-Government within five years.

On behalf of the Congress, I invite you, Ambassadors and Secretary General, to better enable the Congress to fulfil its mission and to provide it with the necessary political support and financial means.

Thank you, I am happy to hear your comments and answer to your questions

Background information

- High level visit Albania

- Two weeks ago (4 to 6 February 2020) we conducted a mission to Tirana to look into the current situation of local democracy in Albania, in particular against the backdrop of the local elections held on 30 June 2019.

- We held meetings with different stakeholders, including the President of the Republic, the Deputy Minister of Interior, the President of the Central Election Commission, and the Mayor of Tirana, among others.

- We recapitulated the need for Albania to pursue the reform course and reaffirmed that the Congress will continue to support the country in its efforts to consolidate territorial self-government. What is of particular importance for us, Congress, is the strengthening of consultation between the central government and the local level and the fight against corruption

- The next monitoring mission of the Congress will take place in spring with a delegation to evaluate the situation further to the administrative-territorial reform implemented since 2015. The resulting report will be presented at the October plenary session.

- Election of the Secretary General (procedure)

Statement by the President of the Congress In response to the COVID-19 crisis – 17 March 2020

In response to the COVID-19 crisis, the President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe made the following statement:

"The multiple consequences of the unprecedented crisis caused by the exponential spread of COVID-19 call for urgent measures and co-ordinated action by all levels of government.

This crisis not only puts at risk human lives, but also the functioning of our societies and democracies. Cities, regions and entire countries are being "locked down". Several elections that were supposed to be held have been suspended, such as in France for the second round of municipal elections, or in Serbia for parliamentary and local elections.

More than ever, we must act collectively throughout Europe, in a spirit of solidarity which must be expressed at all levels: European, national, local and regional, as well as at the level of citizens in their respective communities.

We must also unite our efforts to support local and regional authorities which, because of their particular responsibilities and their proximity to citizens, are in the front line in responding to this major crisis.

As a political assembly comprising local and regional elected representatives from 47 Council of Europe member states, the Congress has the capacity to pool our respective experiences in order to find responses that can be implemented on the ground in all European communities.

I call on all our national delegations to act in this spirit of solidarity and co-ordination. My wish for all our Congress members is that they are able to properly perform their duties as public authorities and to protect their communities as well as themselves, their families and loved ones.”

1375bis meeting of the Ministers’ Deputies - Handover of the Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers from Georgia to Greece – 15 May 2020

Dear President,

Ministers,

For several months now, the world has been experiencing the COVID 19 pandemic which has put at risk human lives and the functioning of our democratic societies. It has tested our ability to respond to emergencies and to protect citizens while respecting human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

In this regard, the Congress fully supports the Council of Europe Secretary General’s guidance for governments during the COVID-19 crisis, stressing the need to ensure that the measures taken do not undermine Europe’s founding values and standards.

Local and regional authorities are at the frontline of the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. They are providing emergency services in their communities and taking measures to contain the spread of disease. They are co-ordinating their action with other levels of government and other partners to mitigate the impact of the outbreak. They have cooperated across borders with their counterparts in other territories and countries to ensure care for those affected. Not just the operational share but also a large part of the financial share of the burden lies on their shoulders. Local and regional authorities will also be key actors in bolstering economic recovery of our countries in the aftermath of the crisis.

The Congress, as the representative body of more than 150,000 local and regional authorities, has adapted its working methods to respond to this unique situation. The first decision we took, as you know, was the cancellation of our session in March to avoid the spreading of the virus. Since then, we have implemented video conferencing and we are collecting good and bad examples from municipalities and regions which we are publishing on a special webpage.

We will also have thematic debates in the Bureau, in the committees and in the autumn session, on questions related to the functioning of local and regional democracy in times of crisis such as

Postponing local elections,

Protecting vulnerable groups and minorities

Safeguarding the European Charter of Local Self-Government in extreme crisis situations

Managing (temporary) changes of distribution of competences

to mention but a few.

This will be the basis for the contribution of the Congress to the work of the Council of Europe on the lessons learned and to helping to build resilient societies in the post-COVID-19 period. The Congress stands ready to actively participate in the upcoming work of the Committee of Ministers in this respect and to bring its contribution to the Ministerial Session in Athens in November.

The priority in the coming months for all levels of government is to join forces in order to overcome the crisis, help the people and prepare for the COVID-19 aftermath. In this regard, more than ever since 1949, Europe needs the Council of Europe as watchdog for democracy, human rights and the rule of law. And these are implemented and delivered in concrete terms to the citizens by the municipalities, cities and regions.

To conclude, I would like to thank Minister Zalkaliani and Ambassador Giviashvili for their work as Chairs of the Committee of Ministers and the Committee of Ministers’ Deputies and for the hospitality I experienced during my official visit to Georgia in February. We regretted very much that the Congress members did not have an opportunity to discuss with Minister Zalkaliani, in March.

Greece is facing big challenges during its chairmanship and I welcome its priorities. The Congress will contribute its share to make the presidency successful. I invite the Minister to come to the Session of the Congress in October and discuss – on behalf of the Greek chairmanship - with the mayors and regional politicians of Europe. I wish the Minister and Ambassador Beglitis all the best for their chairmanship!

Thank you

Statement by the Congress President on continued suspensions of mayors in the south-east of Turkey – 18 May 2020

In reaction to reports about further suspensions of mayors in the southeast of Turkey, the President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, Anders Knape, expressed his concern regarding the ongoing undermining of local self-government in the country.

“Even during the current COVID-19 pandemic, which has hit Turkey very hard, we have been receiving reports about ongoing suspensions of elected mayors in communities in the south-east of the country and their replacement by state appointed trustees. As a consequence, a significant number of municipalities concerned are currently run by state appointees and not by those who were elected on 31 March 2019. As I have said on similar occasions before, the excessive use of legal proceedings against local elected representatives and their replacement by state appointed officials is not only an affront to those who stand up for free and fair elections, it is also a serious and permanent threat to the proper functioning of local democracy in Turkey.”

“In hindsight of the 2019 local elections, the Congress requested a legal Opinion of the Council of Europe Venice Commission on a number of decisions regarding elected candidates and mayors taken after this vote in the south-east of Turkey and we are waiting with great interest for this opinion to be published”, Mr Knape concluded.

Inter institutional meeting of the Council of Europe – 3 June 2020

The activities of the Congress during the COVID-19 pandemic:

In the beginning of the pandemic, the Congress decided to cancel its session due to take place from 17-19 March

On 16 March, I launched a call for urgent measures and coordinated action to be taken by all levels of government, European, national, local and regional, as well as at the level of citizens in their respective communities, in a spirit of solidarity.

I also expressed the Congress' full support to the Secretary General's guidance for governments during the COVID-19 crisis, stressing the need to ensure that the measures taken do not undermine Europe's founding values and standards.

In the course of the confinement, the Congress and its secretariat have pursued and adapted their work.

As most of the Council of Europe entities, we have experienced videoconferencing and I have been impressed by the technical facilities that the Organisation's services have successfully put at our disposal.

Thanks to these tools, the Congress could hold several important meetings such as:

- a meeting of the secretaries of our national delegations
- a series of webinars for the youth delegates
- the meeting of the Congress Bureau (to come on 9 June).

We have been in regular contact with national delegations and associations, as well as local elected representatives.

We have collected good examples of grassroots action from municipalities and regions and we have also monitored the action of its partner institutions and networks

We have provided assistance to associations of local and regional authorities through our co-operation projects.

At the end of May 2020, we launched a web platform showcasing these activities and good practices.

As to myself I held some video calls with elected representatives such as the Mayor of Istanbul.

In this regard I received quite worrying information from Turkish sources on continued suspensions of mayors in the south-east of Turkey and the ongoing undermining of local self-government in the country during the pandemic and I decided to issue a statement a call for an end of this situation

We also received information from the Latvian Association of local and regional governments regarding worrying developments of the current territorial reform particularly in the light of the continued COVID-19 crisis and the President of the Chamber of Local Authorities issued a statement to call for the suspension of the territorial reform in the country to allow for proper consultation

The Congress' planned activities

In Autumn, the Congress is planning to hold thematic debates in its committees (21 September 2020) and in its autumn session (27-29 October 2020),

Questions related to the functioning of local and regional democracy in times of crisis will be discussed such as

- the postponement of local elections,
- the management of (temporary) changes of distribution of competences,
- the transfer of additional responsibilities to the municipalities without the necessary means,
- the general application of the principles of local and regional self-government, among others.

Our Monitoring, Governance and Current Affairs Committees in particular will respectively discuss

- "Safeguarding the European Charter of Local Self-Government in extreme crisis situations",
- "The COVID-19 pandemic and challenges for multi-level governance"
- "Protecting minorities in cities and regions in times of fundamental crisis".

These debates will also involve the Congress' youth delegates and international experts. The results will be reflected in the Congress priorities for 2021-2026.

They will be the basis for the contribution of the Congress to the work of the Council of Europe on the lessons learned and to helping to build resilient societies in the post-COVID-19 period.

The role of local and regional authorities confronted to a severe crisis like this pandemic

In the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, local and regional authorities found themselves at the frontline

They provided emergency services in their communities, took measures to contain the spread of disease, ensured coordination with other levels of government and other partners, and cooperated across borders with their counterparts in other territories and countries to ensure care for those affected.

In my capacity as President of SALAR I have had daily video meetings with ministers on the role of Local and Regional Authorities in the health sector, social services, public transport, schooling, subsidising enterprises and the non-profit sector, to name a few.

Local and regional authorities are providing this operational share but also a large part of the financial share of the burden. They will also be key actors in bolstering the economic recovery and social revival of the member States.

The priority in the coming months for all levels of government will be to join forces in order to overcome the crisis, help the citizens and prepare for the COVID-19 aftermath.

The Congress and the local and regional authorities it represents are committed to preparing the ground for this

We will contribute to the work of the Council of Europe and the chairmanships of its Committee of Ministers on the lessons learned from the crisis and how to build resilient societies based on democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

We stand ready to actively participate in the upcoming work of the Committee of Ministers in this respect and to bring its contribution to the Ministerial Session in Athens in November.

Message addressed to the Ministerial Segment of the High-Level Policy Forum for Sustainable Development, held at the United Nations – 14 to 16 July

Message addressed to the meeting of the High-Level Political Forum on the Sustainable Development Goals of Agenda 2030, at the United Nations – 17 July

Speech at the meeting on "The path to sustainable and resilient municipalities and regions", organised by the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) – 30 September

Cities and regions defending fundamental rights

Dear colleagues,

First of all, I would like to express my gratitude to the CEMR for choosing this important topic for our retreat, which takes place in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Local and regional authorities have indeed found themselves at the frontline of responding to this health crisis, which has put a great strain also on their capacity to defend and protect the rights of their community residents.

I am also grateful for having the opportunity to present the approach and action of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe with regard to human rights delivery at the grassroots. In the Congress, it is our conviction that ensuring the exercise of human rights is a responsibility shared by all levels of governance, and not the exclusive prerogative of national governments.

Local and regional authorities have the primary responsibility for the well-being of their communities and the welfare of community citizens, and this responsibility is translated into a wide range of obligations that support the exercise of political, economic and social rights – from the freedom of expression and assembly to housing, education, employment and health care, among others.

I should also add the obligation to ensure equal treatment of all community residents, especially vulnerable groups, regardless of their legal status as non-citizens, refugees, migrants or foreign residents, regardless of whether they are women, men, children, elderly or have disabilities, regardless of their religion, ethnic background, political views or sexual orientation.

At the same time, decentralisation of power ensured under the European Charter of Local Self-Government provides grassroots authorities with the necessary competences and – ideally – resources to fulfil their obligations, including in protecting the rights of citizens.

Translating human rights obligations into practice at local level

Dear colleagues,

For us in the Congress, the crucial role of local and regional public authorities in defending human rights is rooted in the simple fact that we all have the same basic rights and freedoms protected by law – simply because we are humans. Human rights are universal and egalitarian. So, they are applicable everywhere and are the same for everyone, at all levels of governance.

Once a State ratifies an international human rights treaty, the treaty's human rights obligations have the same effect as if they were national law. These obligations are binding for the State – including all sub-national authorities – in relation to all people present in their territory.

We all agree in principle on the importance of engaging in human rights. However, almost every local and regional decision-maker, including myself, when drafting local policies, has to reply to the question: What does the obligation to introduce human rights mean for my municipality in practice?

How can you find adequate housing solutions for refugees in your community? How can you improve school attendance rates of Roma children? What rights do gay, lesbian and transgender people have and how should those rights be integrated into a city/town/region's activities? And last, how can successfully living together and social cohesion be promoted by local and regional bodies?

The rights guaranteed by international treaties, constitutions, national legislation and court decisions correspond to specific competences, which are increasingly delegated from the State to local and regional authorities who carry them out in line with the principle of subsidiarity and self-governance.

Human rights are therefore part of our competences as public authorities, and this is how international obligations are translated into practice at the grassroots level.

Human rights protection: Getting involved and sharing good practices

So, where are those human rights' aspects in your and my daily work?

The reply can be found around us as since many cities and regions are already either greatly involved in human rights in practice or have implemented rights-based policies which have already borne fruit by bringing stability, social cohesion and growth to their local communities. General areas could include housing, health care, education, security and public order, or urban planning. This list of topics is endless.

Those practices need to be shared and the exchange of good practices is the answer to challenges in itself. Moreover, many practices have revealed that the promotion of human rights in our daily work does not necessarily require more resources or lead to any legal and technical constraints.

The Congress has been working on collecting good local and regional practices and publishing a set of Handbooks for the use of local and regional elected representatives. These handbooks represent an innovative instrument showcasing creative, game-changing ways used by local authorities to ensure respect for human rights by "thinking outside the box" – for instance, when facing challenges related to integration of refugees, Roma or LGBTI persons.

The practices can include the use of new technologies, such as the online map for language courses in Milan, the mobile app in Espoo, in Finland and the Anti-rumour web app testing citizens' knowledge about immigration in Bilbao. They can include cooperation of authorities with businesses, such as the cooperation with a private housing association to provide more housing opportunities for refugees in Dresden, or the cooperation with SIEMENS to provide internship positions for refugees.

As another example, let me draw your attention to the practice of a Slovakian municipality where the mayor decided to create from scratch a municipal firm for the employment of Roma citizens. This resulted in the city having the lowest rates of Roma unemployment throughout the country.

Defending social rights in the time of Covid-19

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Two weeks ago, the Monitoring committee of the Congress adopted the 2nd volume of the Congress Handbook on human rights at local and regional levels, which will be published within a few months. The second volume will focus on social rights, is especially important now, in the context of the [Covid-19](#) pandemic.

The pandemic is likely to have long-lasting consequences on economic and social rights. It has revealed economic inequalities, especially in countries with [fragile social protection systems](#), where vulnerable groups suffer the most from this crisis.

However, Covid-19 has also highlighted inequalities in economically better-off [countries](#) despite their relatively good social protection systems. [People living in poverty](#) are more likely to have health complications, live in crowded or poor-quality housing or on the street, and lack the resources to stay at home for long periods or follow hygiene recommendations. And also, due to having low-paid jobs, these people are often forced to choose between risking their health or losing their income.

There are plenty of good examples of action by local authorities to protect the rights of vulnerable groups in this situation. For example, the social housing provided by the Etterbeek local administration in Belgium for the most vulnerable in times of the pandemic (we are talking about confinement and quarantine) by requisitioning a hotel based in their municipality.

Another example quoted in the Handbook is from the Stoke-on-Trent city council (in the UK) that has also provided housing pods and other housing solutions to homeless people or community members in need in response to the COVID-19 lockdown restriction.

I can also mention an example related to the right to welfare and social security from the Tbilisi municipal authorities (in Georgia) who were delivering free dinners to socially disadvantaged citizens during the pandemic and were granting tax reduction to local businesses because of the lockdown. I'm sure that you can think of many more examples in your communities and communities around you.

Communicating with citizens: better awareness, better protection

Ladies and gentlemen,

We all have surely already implemented activities that concern human rights. Providing training, streamlining internal communication and exchanging practices with other cities or regional authorities, like today, can be crucial to overcoming problems.

The decision to proceed with human rights-tailored policies can of course also trigger certain political resistance. Clearly, this relates above all to the electorate. Receiving refugees in our cities, designating housing for Roma or organising a yearly gay pride event may not be welcomed by everyone.

So, communicating the “why” and “how” of human rights policies, together with the long-term benefits of such measures is also important.

There is not one universal recipe, but exchanging experience is very often the most effective and least costly way of dealing with new topics or approaches, regarding human rights.

Conclusion

Dear colleagues,

There cannot be genuine democracy without local democracy, and there cannot be local democracy without human rights of citizens, who are local residents, to achieve stability, social cohesion and efficiency of our policies.

It is encouraging to see today the high level of awareness of the importance of human rights delivery at local level. I hope that the set of two Handbooks on human rights at local level published by the Congress will provide additional guidance and inspiration for local and regional authorities across Europe.

Thank you for your attention.

Speech in the debate of the Local and Regional Barometer, during the 140th Plenary Session of the European Committee of the Regions – 12 October

Debate on the annual Local and Regional Barometer

Dear colleagues,

We have heard about the impact of the crisis on local and regional councils and we will hear more about it in the discussion today. In my capacity as President of the Congress of the Council of Europe let me present to you some of the key findings and responses needed to draw the appropriate conclusions and put in place the necessary legal and procedural measures to safeguard the capacity to act of municipalities, cities and regions and to maintain the democratic legitimacy of their action. Multi-level governance is an important key to positively responding to the crisis. When regions and local authorities – via their national associations – were involved in rapid response task forces at national level, the responses were more effective and reality-proof.

Those responses proved that recentralisation is not a “miracle cure” for the crisis. Our recommendations are to make sure that:

- any emergency measures are temporary, proportional and introduced under democratic control;
- better division of competences and means within the multi-level governance system is ensured and maintained even in times of crisis, and better coordination and consultations are established between different levels of governance;
- subnational authorities are involved in decision making within emergency mechanisms as an integral part of national crisis management – including on holding or postponing elections; and
- subnational authorities have access to direct funding during both the crisis management and post-crisis recovery.

Multi-level governance increases the quality of decisions and allows greater flexibility in providing solutions tailored to specific needs. Local democracy itself must be seen as a “service of general interest” to our societies, to be upheld even in crisis – for the core, common value which it represents. We must make sure that the crisis does not lead to the ‘lockdown’ of local democracy.

Speech at the 130th Session of the Committee of Ministers – 4 November

The health crisis caused by COVID-19 has a major sanitary, social, economic impact on societies but also on the role and functioning of institutions of democratic governance, including at the local and regional level.

As we know, elected politicians in cities and regions and the administrations under their authority, are key players in the management of crisis.

More than 100.000 mayors are closest to the citizens and provide basic and emergency services; together with their councils, they mitigate the social, economic and sanitary consequences of the crisis. They are at the frontline of the daily fight against the pandemic and in maintaining the social fabric and cohesion. The rapid response they provide is contributing to keep trust in public institutions in these difficult times.

The people trust that we, the politicians they elected at the different levels, will deliver do their best to protect them and take the necessary decisions, as difficult as they may be, and will be held accountable. We also know that decisions are being challenged on ground of proportionality.

In the Congress, we are convinced that only constructive multilateral co-operation and multi-level governance can bring about the quality and effectiveness of the decisions needed. Successful responses need flexibility in coping with emergencies as they are better suited to provide solutions tailored to specific needs.

In order to protect citizens and rebuild our European model of society of solidarity, we need to join forces at all levels.

The governments of all our 47 member States should take advantage of the capacity and competence of the mayors and councillors, their networks and experience to better manage major crisis of all nature and help providing sustainable and democratic solutions in full respect for Democracy, the Rule of Law and Human Rights.

Let us draw the lessons from the past to find the right responses to the current crisis and work together for safer and more resilient societies.

Thank you.

Message to mark the 70th anniversary of the European Convention on Human Rights – 4 November

Celebration of the 70th anniversary of the European Convention of Human Rights

I am proud to celebrate today with the Foreign Ministers of the Council of Europe member States the anniversary of the European Convention on Human Rights, which was opened for signature just 5 years after the atrocities and destruction of the Second World War.

I would like to commend the Council of Europe and the political leaders of the time for having had the vision and courage to adopt and commit themselves to this binding treaty which has since become one of the most important instruments of human rights protection, not just in European, but worldwide.

The respect of fundamental rights is one of the three pillars of the functioning of our democratic societies and institutions. Ensuring that the citizens' fundamental freedoms and human rights are promoted, respected and implemented is a responsibility shared by all levels of governance and the elected representatives at local and regional level have an important share of responsibility in this regard.

Their role is evidenced by the case law of the European Court of Human Rights, where numerous judgments include a territorial dimension, dealing with freedom of assembly, policing, the right to vote, freedom of expression, the environment and minority rights.

As we see on a daily basis, the role of local and regional communities is all the more important in the current crisis, where the fundamental rights of the most vulnerable and marginalised are endangered by the prevailing sanitary, social, and economic emergencies.

There are many practical examples implemented within the 150000 local and regional communities all over Europe that well illustrate how local and regional authorities can take advantage of their proximity with inhabitants in order to find creative and game-changing ways to ensure respect for human rights by "thinking outside the box".

The Congress has created a "*Human rights handbook for local and regional authorities*" to showcase such initiatives and facilitate the exchange of experience between communities. The first volume was published in 2019 and covers the issue of combating discrimination against refugees, asylum seekers, migrants, internally displaced persons, Roma and LGBTI persons.

A second volume features issues with regards to health, education, work, housing, social security, protection, inclusion and integration, with a particular focus on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Congress will continue to raise awareness on the specific role of local and regional authorities in promoting and implementing fundamental rights, including within its monitoring of the European Charter of Local Self Government. This work is due to complement the work of the European Court of Human Rights and the other Council of Europe entities to ensure the implementation of the fundamental human rights all over Europe.

Thank you.

Message to the International Town Twinning Summit - TWINT Online - 12 November

Video message at the opening session of the International Town Twinning Summit

Dear participants,

Dear colleagues,

I would have liked to participate personally in this International Town Twinning Summit, but unfortunately previous commitments are preventing me from joining you.

When looking for new ways to contribute to the sustainability of cities, one can identify different ways of achieving it: town twinning is one of them. For me and for the Congress of local and regional authorities I represent, town twinning means exchange, dialogue, cooperation and solidarity.

Cooperation and exchange are at the heart of the work of the Congress. We are a political assembly made up of local and regional elected representatives from 47 European member states. We provide within the Council of Europe local and regional communities from all European countries, including Turkey, a political platform to reflect on the role of local and regional authorities and to exchange and compare experience, practice and action with regard to the major challenges of modern society.

Cooperation, exchange and solidarity have shown particularly important in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic when local and regional authorities were – and still are - at the frontline to overcome the sanitary, social, economic et political challenges related. In this context, since March, the Congress has been in regular contact with its members, with its national delegations, with the national associations and with the European partners and networks. We are pooling the experience of the various players on

the ground and the concrete responses implemented by them. We have started to showcase these experiences in a dedicated hub on our website. I invite you to consult this hub and even to publish your own experience and solutions on it.

The sustainability of cities, and their ability to carry out governance functions effectively, in situation of crisis but also in the daily life, is dependent upon a range of factors. These include their resources as well as their capacity to act independently, to elect their local bodies and representatives and to have their own structures and financial resources. They include also the extent to which there is consultation and coordination between the local, subnational, and national levels of government.

These principles are contained in the European Charter of local Self-government of the Council of Europe, which has been ratified by all Council of Europe member States, including Turkey.

In the Congress we are convinced that resilient, sustainable and effective local communities, managed by democratically elected representatives which have the ability to deal with daily life and challenges effectively, can play a key role in building more inclusive, sustainable and peaceful societies.

The first step for successful twinning is understanding that we all have common problems and common interests, stemming from our responsibilities towards citizens. We can only be stronger in carrying out our duties if we exchange and cooperate with our peers facing the same difficulties and challenges. Twinning and networking between cities provide the opportunity for finding solutions to shared problems and challenges and we, in the Congress fully support such cooperation between cities and regions all over Europe.

I wish great success to your Summit and look forward to the outcome of your discussions today.

Thank you.

Speech at the handover ceremony of the Presidency of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe from Greece to Germany - 18 November

Transfer of the Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers between Greece and Germany

Mr President,

Dear Ministers,

Dear Secretary General,

Dear Ambassadors,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me first of all thank the Greek authorities on how they have conducted their presidency and how they have successfully adapted to the difficult circumstances. I think we could even say it was the first e-presidency of the Committee of Ministers and it illustrated well how in these times, we all have to find ways to adapt and to pursue our action and work.

Since the beginning of this pandemic, the Congress has been developing new working methods and tools to be able to continue to support local and regional authorities facing the crisis and to interact with the national level. More than ever, we need active vertical and horizontal cooperation, coordination and consultation between all levels of government, to prevent the risk of fragmented or inadequate responses. Multi-level governance allows for the necessary flexibility and precision in coping with emergencies and big crises.

We have collected inspiring examples of grassroots action from municipalities, regions and our institutional partners and have brought them together on our website and we will further showcase them in our future work. In this respect we are organising an online event on 7 December bringing together the Secretary General, the two successive presidencies of the Committee of Ministers and local and regional authorities throughout the continent to share experiences and best practices. I take this opportunity to invite you all cordially.

The Council of Europe is the international platform for exchange based on our values. In this spirit, multilateralism and multi-level governance complement each other in the interest of the people, which we elected politicians represent and to whom we are accountable.

What is important now is to join forces in order to overcome the crisis, help the people in our countries and prepare for the COVID-19 aftermath. The Athens declaration will guide all the actors within the Council of Europe on this way.

The Congress will bring the full support of the municipalities, cities and regions from our 47 member states to the implementation of the priorities of the German presidency.

We welcome Germany's intention to bring the Council of Europe closer to the people and to strengthen youth participation and gender equality in political life. We also welcome and will actively support Germany's priority to contribute to global efforts to address the current environmental challenges. There is a lot of Council of Europe standards and values in the policies implemented at local and level - and in the cities and regions these values can be made visible!

Minister Maas, the Congress with its network of mayors and councillors, serves the values of the Council of Europe. We wish the German presidency good luck and great success.

Thank you.

Article for For Europa Kommunal by Anders Knape, President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, President of the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) and Lord Mayor of the Swedish municipality of Karlstad – 18 November

In March 2020, following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Congress of Local and Regional authorities decided for the first time to cancel one of its sessions planned to take place in the headquarters of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg.

Since 1994, the Congress' plenary sessions are held twice a year, gathering mayors, councillors, presidents of the cities, municipalities and regions from 47 European states to discuss, exchange ideas, experiences and practices and adopt reports and recommendations to their counterparts and to the national governments.

We did not know yet that the pandemic would take on such a scale that this cancellation would be followed by the cancellation of the second session which was to take place in October, as well as all many other meetings and activities that do the day-to-day work of the Congress and its partners.

In autumn, indeed, a second wave of the pandemic stroke many countries, mostly in Europe, threatening again their health and hospital systems as well as their economies already largely weakened by the slowdown in activities and the successive lockdowns which had to be decided in the first period.

The crisis caused by this pandemic has and will continue to have a major impact on our societies. Not only is it causing death, immense suffering and increased hardship all over the world, but it generates also a social, economic and political crisis, at different levels, in many countries.

Local and regional authorities at the frontline

In the fight against the pandemic, we have seen that local and regional authorities have been taking up an increasing share of operational but also financial responsibilities together with national governments and that they find themselves at the frontline to mitigate the social and sanitary consequences of the crisis for their citizens.

Mayors and councillors are indeed acting to guarantee basic as well as emergency services, protecting health and supporting the local economy, communicating with citizens on measures to stop the spreading of the virus, relaying and implementing national policies and coordinating their action with other levels of government and other partners across all sectors of society. They are reaching out across borders to their counterparts in other territories and other countries to ensure care and protection for all.

The pandemic has revealed a strong need for solidarity, to safeguard social and economic rights such as equal access to health care, housing and education, in particular for the most vulnerable and marginalized and to preserve businesses and jobs. The first players in the field of implementing this solidarity are the elected representatives in local and regional authorities and the civil servants under their authority.

According to opinion polls, local and regional authorities enjoy the highest level of trust within the political landscapes. This trust is essential to efficiently fight the pandemic and overcome its consequences. Citizens indeed look to their mayors and councilors to implement measures to mitigate the impacts of the crisis, provide a source of guidance and support, and ultimately protect the community from the worst effects of the emergency.

The policy responses to this crisis need to be adapted to the local realities, to the needs and opportunities of the communities. Local and Regional authorities are the level of governance closest to the citizens and have a good understanding of the challenges facing their communities and how the specific dynamics of a crisis are impacting upon them. This makes their role essential, not only now in time of huge crisis but also in the everyday life of our communities.

COVID-19 pandemic, a threat to both public health and democratic institutions

While this pandemic is putting at risk human lives and the welfare of citizens, it represents also a risk to the functioning of institutions of democratic governance at all levels.

The functioning of local and regional democracy in particular is suffering of what, in many cases, could be described as a temporary “lockdown” of democracy. To varying degrees depending on the country, we witnessed a strengthening of centralization and the enactment of states of emergency as well as postponement of local and regional elections, reduction of council meetings, increased financial difficulties and shrinking of space for public debate and consultations with citizens.

In June 2020, our Congress adopted a declaration expressing its concern about the democratic self-governance and financial autonomy of local and regional authorities in Council of Europe member States, in particular in view of recovery plans in the aftermath of the crisis. It urged national authorities to remove restrictions and restore democratic functioning at the local level, considering that extraordinary measures must always be temporary, proportional and under democratic control. Moreover, it called on national governments to ensure the necessary funding and support for local and regional authorities in the frame of recovery plans, as well as their involvement in setting up mechanisms and procedures for future emergency situations.

In the wake of the pandemic, local and regional elections had to be postponed in some countries as holding them seemed incompatible with the conditions at hand. Certain restrictive measures have led to the shrinking of space for public debate, consultations with citizens and organising deliberations on decisions to be taken.

However, concerning this aspect in particular, I must say that the increased use of digital technologies has also enabled the development of new capacities in service delivery to citizens as well as greater opportunities for online participation overall and for decision making in assemblies and executives. This is something that will have to be looked into more closely after the crisis, as a lesson learned for the future.

Multi-level governance, a more flexible and efficient response to emergency situations

And indeed, when this major crisis is behind us, we will have to learn from it. But what it has already brought to the fore is the need for more effective co-operation and coordinated action both among and within countries, this means the need for multilateral co-operation and multi-level governance.

The effectiveness of responses to overcome the current crisis and to better prepare for future public health crises and other emergencies depends on the right balance and interaction between centralised and decentralised capacities that must be present within the system of multi-level governance.

We can see from many examples that a stronger and more efficient system of multi-level governance in which every level is equipped with proper competences, means, resources and a climate of trust and interaction enables a nation as a whole to better respond to an emergency situation.

Today more than ever we need active vertical and horizontal cooperation, coordination and consultation between all levels of government, to prevent the risk of overlapping activities as well as fragmented or inadequate responses. Multi-level governance systems are a response to these challenges. They increase the quality of decisions taken and allow greater flexibility in coping with emergencies as they are better suited to providing solutions tailored to specific needs.

In those examples where Cities and Regions have been included from the first day in the national inter-ministerial task forces and emergency response structures, when pragmatic, inclusive and capacity-oriented approaches are applied, there is no doubt that they are delivering in the best possible ways for the benefit of the people.

In the Congress, we are convinced that resilient and effective local governance, which has the ability to manage and deal with crises effectively, can play a key role in rebuilding more equal and peaceful societies, thus contributing to the democratic security of our countries.

Taking advantage of the territorial democracy

Over the past 40 years, local and regional elected representatives have become key players in national and European policies. They represent the most direct point of contact between governments and citizens. In times of crisis, we can see that they act as intermediaries that can help ensure that people in their communities understand and participate in measures and policies designed to protect their own health or security.

The 47 European countries of the Council of Europe are made of some 150 000 local and regional authorities. Altogether with their national associations and the European networks and associations of cities and regions, they form a vast network and distribution chain all over Europe, able to actively promote and help implementing national and European policies.

The Congress is giving them a voice at the European level, within the Council of Europe. We are not only representing them, but we are also providing them with the opportunity and means to exchange experiences and practices, to acquire new skills and know - how, and to strengthen their institutional capacities.

The cooperation programmes that we implement in member States aim among others at helping them to defend their interests vis-à-vis the national authorities, in close coordination with their associations, as well as coordinating action between themselves within a same country.

We help facilitating the collaboration, the consultation and the political dialogue between national governments and local and regional authorities.

The national associations of local authorities are our natural partners in this work. They are essential in the local governance system because they play a key role in the coordination and cooperation across levels of government and in safeguarding the right of the local and regional authorities to be consulted on matters that concern and/or involves them.

Consultation and involvement of local elected representatives and their institutions by central governments are central features of efficient local self-government and a vital process which serves to ensure that multi-level governance system functions effectively.

The Congress, a political Assembly supporting more than 150 000 local and regional authorities

The work of the Congress in favour of a genuine democracy close to citizens, local and self-government and renewed attention to the role of local and regional authorities, is based on the European Charter of Local Self-Government, a binding Council of Europe convention. This Charter commits all Council of Europe member states to respect the rights and responsibilities of local authorities and to work towards the implementation of the principle of *subsidiarity* or *shared democracy*.

Through its monitoring mechanism, the Congress assesses the application of the Charter in member States and works to improve compliance with the Charter's provisions, thus advancing local and regional democratic self-government and decentralization - the core mission of the Congress.

In these challenging times, our support to local and regional authorities is all the more vital. Since the beginning of this pandemic, the Congress has been adapting to the situation, developing new working methods and relying on digital tools to be able to continue to work alongside local authorities in the crisis.

Above all, it has maintained regular contact with its national delegations, local elected representatives as well as national and European associations and networks and has fostered dialogue between them and with the central governments.

In my capacity as President of Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions I have since the beginning of the pandemic regular video meetings with ministers on the role of Local and Regional Authorities in the health sector, social services, public transport, schooling, subsidising enterprises and the non-profit sector, to name a few.

Throughout the crisis, we have collected inspiring examples of grassroots action from municipalities, regions and our institutional partners and have showcased them on our website.

We have also prepared a report on local and regional elections in major crisis situations, organised remote exchanges of views on the management of the pandemic in Europe's cities and regions and will continue to organise debates related to the functioning of local and regional democracy in times of crisis. Based on this work and the collected information, the Congress will draw an overall report on the COVID-19 and the challenges ahead.

What is important now is to join forces in order to overcome the crisis, help the citizens and prepare for the COVID-19 aftermath. In this regard, Municipalities, cities and regions will have a crucial role to play in the post-crisis recovery, having to ensure the economic and social revival of their communities which will underpin national recovery.

The work of our Congress, and of the local and regional authorities it represents, will contribute to the action of the Council of Europe, its member States and all the institutional actors, to help our democratic societies and our citizens face the current and future sanitary, social and economic challenges.

Anders Knapé was elected President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe in November 2018.

He started his political career in 1976 when he was elected as a councillor of Karlstad Municipality and since 1988 he has been a Chair of the City Council of Karlstad.

The year 1994 marked the start of his commitment at European level, first as a member of the Congress and then, in 1995, as the member of the Committee of the Regions. Since 2010 he has been the Executive President of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions. During the period of 2014-2017 he was also the President of Committee for Financial and Administrative Affairs at the Committee of Regions.

In 2014, he was elected as the President of the Chamber of Local Authorities of the Congress and the Lord Mayor of the City of Karlstad, followed by his appointment to the post of the President of the Swedish Association of Local and Regional Authorities (SALAR) in March 2019.

The year 2020 was marked by the COVID-19 Pandemic, during which the Congress had to cancel two Plenary Sessions, official visits and participations in many events. The Congress successfully adapted its activities and working methods to the situation through online and IT means and moved many of its activities to a remote fashion.

Throughout 45 years of political commitment at the regional level and 27 years at European level, including two years as President of the Congress, Anders Knapé has strongly supported local and regional democracy as an essential part of sustainable development.

The compilation of speeches he delivered as President of the Congress between 2018 and 2021 gives an overview of his commitment and activities.



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The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 47 member States, including all the members of the European Union. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities is an institution of the Council of Europe, responsible for strengthening local and regional democracy in its 47 member states. Composed of two chambers – the Chamber of Local Authorities and the Chamber of Regions – and three committees, it brings together 648 elected officials representing more than 150 000 local and regional authorities.

