

Press Release

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Congress Autumn Session: Consequences of the Georgian-Russian conflict and local democracy in Armenia, Belgium and Latvia among the highlights

Strasbourg, 24.11.2008 – Local consequences of the Georgian-Russian conflict, non-appointment of three mayors (bourgmestres) in Belgium, the situation of non-Latvian speaking minorities in Latvia and local democracy in Armenia will be among the highlights of the Congress' Autumn Session in Strasbourg from 1 to 3 December 2008.

On Tuesday 2 December, in the morning, the Congress will hold a debate on the consequences for local authorities of the conflict between Georgia and Russia. The debate will include statements from Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights Thomas Hammarberg, President of the Parliament of North Ossetia-Alania (Russia) Larissa Khabitsova, Mayor of Tbilisi Gigi Ugulava, and a representative of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, as well as from Mamuka Abuladze and Svetlana Orlova, respectively Heads of the Georgian and Russian delegations to the Congress. Congress Vice-President Dubravca Suica (Croatia, L, EPP/CD) will present a draft resolution calling on local and regional authorities of European countries to provide aid to their counterparts directly or indirectly affected by the conflict, including both immediate and long-term assistance.

Congress members will also have an exchange of views on local democracy in Armenia with Deputy Prime Minister Armen Gevorgyan. Lluís Maria de Puig, President of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, will address the session, which will also include the signing of the Cooperation Agreement between the Congress and the Council of Europe North-South Centre.

On 2 December in the afternoon, the Chamber of Local Authorities will debate a report by Michel Guégan (France, NR) and Dobrica Milovanovic (Serbia, NR) on local democracy in Belgium, following their fact-finding mission prompted by the non-appointment of three mayors (bourgmestres) in municipalities in the Flemish region. On 31 October, the Congress' Institutional Committee called for general monitoring of the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in Belgium. The three non-appointed mayors will participate in the debate. Flemish Minister of the Interior Marino Keulen has also been invited.

An exchange of views will also be held on the situation of non-Latvian-speaking minorities in Latvia, with Latvian Special Assignments Minister for Social Integration Oskars Kastens. Jean-Claude Frécon (France, SOC) will make a report on the observation of municipal elections in Israel on 11 November; Israeli Minister of the Interior Meir Sheetrit expressed his interest in participating in the discussion.

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The Congress has two chambers, the Chamber of Local Authorities and the Chamber of Regions.

It brings together 318 full and 318 substitute members representing more than 200 000 European territorial communities.

President of the Congress : Yavuz Milden (Turkey, EPP/CD), President of the Chamber of Regions: Ludmila Sfirloaga (Romania, SOC),

President of the Chamber of Local Authorities : Ian Micallef (Malta, EPP/CD).

Political Groups : Socialist Group (**SOC**), Group of the European People's Party – Christian Democrats (**EPP/CD**),

Independent and Liberal Democrat Group (**ILDG**).

The Chamber of Regions, also meeting on 2 December in the afternoon, will hold a round table on special statutes of regional autonomy in Europe, with the participation of representatives of European autonomous regions and regions with special status, including Sándor Egeresi, President of the Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina (Serbia), Anatoliy Grytsenko, Chairman of Verkhovna Rada of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea (Ukraine), Alberto Joao Jardim, Head of Government of the Autonomous Region of Madeira (Portugal), and Valentin Guznac, Minister of Local Public Administration of Moldova, who will speak about regional autonomy in his country.

During the session, the new Congress' Prize of the Regions will be awarded for the first time to five regions from Germany, Poland, Serbia, Turkey and the United Kingdom. Two special awards will go to regions from Greece and Romania.

On Wednesday 3 December, the Congress' Standing Committee will adopt recommendations on the observation of local and provincial elections in Serbia (11 and 25 May 2008), local elections in Armenia (28 September 2008) and local elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina (5 October 2008), as well as a resolution on the Congress' policy in observing local and regional elections, presented by Veronique Moreira (France, R, NR). Jean-Claude Colliard, member of the Venice Commission and of the Council of Europe's Council for Democratic Elections, will take part in the debate.

These meetings are open to the press. The debates of 2 December will also be broadcast live on the Congress' website (www.coe.int/congress).