

THE CONGRESS OF
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Congress Presidency 2012-2014: activities and achievements

Presented by Herwig van Staa, President of the Congress
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The Congress

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Communication of Herwig van Staa, outgoing President of the Congress

Activities and achievements 2012-2014

Dear colleagues,

I have had the honour of being the President of this Assembly over the past two years. Let me say how exciting and rewarding it was to guide and accompany the work and the achievements of the Congress.

I would like to thank all of you, dear colleagues, vice-presidents, presidents of committee, dear members of the Congress, for your good co-operation, support and contribution during this mandate and I wish the next presidency much success. I would also like to thank the Congress Secretariat and especially its Secretary General, for their commitment and professionalism.

When I took over the presidency two years ago, I was firmly determined to consolidate and expand further the Congress' operational capacity as well as its statutory role. I was convinced of the necessity to pursue its reform which I see as a permanent process.

This was the spirit of the priorities we adopted in October 2012 for 2013-2016: They were intended to ensure maximum contribution to the Council of Europe's core objectives of promoting democracy, human rights and the rule of law. I built on the work of my predecessors to perpetuate and further develop the Congress as a reliable and operational partner to enhance the local and regional dimension of the Council of Europe work.

The core mission of the Congress is the effective monitoring of the situation of local and regional democracy in member states by assessing the application of this unique treaty that is the European Charter of Local Self-Government.

When the Charter was ratified by San Marino in October 2013, we reached one of our biggest achievements: the Charter's provisions now cover effectively a huge pan-european area, namely all 47 member states of the Council of Europe. This last ratification was a historical moment which occurred 25 years after the entry into force of the Charter.

During the March 2014 session, the Congress celebrated its 20th anniversary. This gave our Assembly the opportunity to evaluate its achievements and work, together with some of its former presidents and representatives from its major institutional partners.

Today, national governments increasingly recognise local and regional authorities as major stakeholders and actors in responding to the challenges faced by European societies. The current economic crisis has shown the need for joint, coherent action of all parts of government, and this is an opportunity that cannot be missed. This gave the Congress a truly historic opportunity to engage in concrete action.

And we seized this opportunity. Through more targeted action, through reinforced monitoring of the Charter, through stronger dialogue with national governments and closer partnerships across the continent, the Congress has significantly reinforced its unique role and position in the European political architecture. It has further developed the "virtuous circle" of its monitoring – post-monitoring – co-operation activities to advance democracy and human rights on the continent. It has worked to

strengthen the capacity of cities and regions, to promote good governance and ethics, to foster greater respect of fundamental rights, to fight discrimination and intolerance and help to build citizen's participation in the democratic process.

The European Alliance of Cities and Regions for Roma Inclusion and the ROMACT project, the Pact of cities and Regions against sexual abuse of children as well as the cooperation programmes implemented in Albania and Armenia are some examples of concrete achievements the Congress has reached. In Ukraine, where the situation has been of major concern since end 2013, the Congress has enhanced a comprehensive programme including a post-monitoring dialogue with the authorities to help implementing its recommendations and undertake the necessary reforms at local and regional levels.

Dear colleagues, the conditions for realising our mission have however become increasingly difficult, because of budgetary and human resources constraints in the context of a worsening budgetary situation. The Congress has been called upon to make important cuts and their impact was seriously felt.

Any additional cuts would endanger the work of the Congress and we need to continue to drive through the message. To succeed in our mission, we need adequate resources and a competent and sufficient secretariat to fulfil the tasks conferred to us.

In our member states also, the economic crisis and austerity measures must not be used as an excuse to further centralise or devolve powers without providing corresponding financial resources. We must convince national governments that it is dangerous and short-sighted to roll back democracy and participation, by seeking to make short-term financial savings on a pretext of greater efficiency.

Greater decentralisation and more democracy at the grassroots is what Europe needs today. To regain citizens' trust, we must work to embed in European governance a culture of strong and sound local democracy, with real responsibility and political accountability.

Never before has there been so much recognition of the importance of grassroots action, giving us a truly historic opportunity to engage in concrete dialogue with national governments and other European institutions.

Looking back on the past twenty four months, I can say with confidence that we have a firm grip on this opportunity. Let us make sure that this advance of the Congress continues firmly and steadily in the coming years.

Dear colleagues, let me once again wish you – wish us, I will remain a faithful and committed member of this Assembly – all the best for our future work.

Table of contents

Introduction: A priority-led mandate	8
New Presidency and adoption of priorities	8
The European Charter of Local Self-Government	8
20 years of activities to promote local and regional democracy	9
Budgetary and human resources constraints	9
The future of local and regional democracy	10
Implementing the priorities 2013-2016 and increasing political dialogue	11
1. The political environment	11
2. Statutory activities: the sessions in 2013 and 2014	11
• 2013: "Europe in crisis – the challenges for local and regional democracy"	12
• 2014 : "Empowering youth: a shared responsibility for cities and regions"	12
3. Improving the quality of territorial democracy	13
• Monitoring the European Charter of Local Self-government.....	13
• Observation of local elections.....	14
• The post-monitoring dialogue	14
4. Co-operation activities and contribution to Council of Europe action plans	14
5. Thematic priorities: three concrete examples	15
• Launch of the European Alliance of Cities and Regions for Roma Inclusion.....	15
• The Pact of Cities and Regions against Sexual Abuse of Children	16
• The European Local Democracy Week.....	16
6. Institutional dialogue with member States	17
7. Multilevel Governance and trans-frontier cooperation	18
8. Co-operation with institutional partners	19
• The Committee of the Regions of the European Union	19
• The Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR).....	20
• The Assembly of the Regions (AER).....	20
• The Conference of European Regional Legislative Assemblies (CALRE).....	21

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Introduction: A priority-led mandate

New Presidency and adoption of priorities

When I took over the presidency of the Congress two years ago, I was firmly determined to continue to set the Congress on the track of a targeted, practical approach to its activities, leading to concrete action on the ground. From the moment I was elected President, I remained committed to pursuing the reform of the Congress which I see as a permanent and on-going process. My overall objective was to contribute to consolidating and expanding further the operational capacity of the Congress, as a complement to its statutory role.

Building on the work of my predecessors, supported by committed Bureau members and a highly skilled secretariat, I worked in this spirit to realise my vision of the Congress as a reliable and operational partner of other sectors of the Council of Europe in enhancing the local and regional dimension of the Council of Europe's work, and in helping these sectors to accomplish their objectives at local and regional level.

The 23rd Session of the Congress in October 2012 saw not only the renewal of the Congress membership for the first time for a four years and the election of the new Congress leadership, including my election as President, but also the adoption of its priorities for 2013-2016:

These new priorities were intended to ensure maximum contribution to the Council of Europe's core objectives of promoting democracy, human rights and the rule of law. They were grouped into three key fields of action:

- raising the quality of local and regional democracy and governance, human rights and the rule of law in Council of Europe member states;
- addressing the problems faced by cities and regions because of the economic and financial crisis which represents currently – and will continue to represent in the next years - the main challenges to them;
- and developing the operational capacity of the Congress, through partnerships and co-operation, to achieve concrete results in the field.

These three fields of action had as a common goal the strengthening of the capacity of cities and regions, promoting good governance and ethics, fostering greater respect of fundamental rights, fighting discrimination and intolerance and helping to build citizen's participation in the democratic process.

The European Charter of Local Self-Government

The core mission of the Congress is the effective monitoring of the situation of local and regional democracy in member States by assessing the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government which provides fundamental principles governing the basic rights of local and regional authorities.

With its ratification by San Marino in October 2013, the Charter's provisions now cover all 47 member states of the Council of Europe. This last ratification, which follows outstanding efforts of the successive Presidents of the Chamber of local authorities, was a historical moment which, 25 years on from the entry into force of the Charter, clearly confirmed the recognition by all European governments of local democracy as the cornerstone of the democratic system.

The Charter is a unique international treaty, which provides fundamental principles governing the basic rights of local and regional authorities, and which now covers effectively a huge pan-European area. And it also has influence beyond the frontiers of the member States, being a reference text in neighbouring regions such as the southern Mediterranean or in Central Asia.

20 years of activities to promote local and regional democracy

In March 2014, during the 26th session, the Congress celebrated its 20th anniversary. Twenty years was the perfect milestone to pay tribute to the pioneers of the first years as well as to the former presidents of the Congress since 1994 and six of them were able to participate in the ceremony. It was also the opportunity to hear from the Congress' most important institutional partners who took part in the ceremony including the Committee of the Regions of the European Union, how they see the future for co-operation and interaction at local and regional level.

Twenty years gave the Congress the opportunity to evaluate its achievements and work. Building a genuine democracy from the bottom up in the cities and regions of Europe has been, for more than 50 years, the main goal of the Congress and its predecessor *the European Conference of Local Authorities*. And this is what the Congress has striven to pursue when reforming itself between 2010 and 2012, retargeting its priorities and adapting its structures and working methods, and when adopting its priorities for the next two mandates of its presidency - namely 2013-2014 and 2015-2016.

Through more targeted action, through reinforced regular and systematic monitoring of the European Charter of Local Self-government, through stronger dialogue with national governments and closer partnerships across the continent, the Congress has significantly strengthened its unique role and position in the European political architecture. In promoting a "virtuous circle" of monitoring, post-monitoring and co-operation activities, the Congress aims at contributing, at territorial level, to the overall objectives of the Council of Europe, which are to advance democracy and human rights on the continent

Today, national governments increasingly recognise local and regional authorities as much more than mere service providers but rather as major stakeholders and actors in responding to the challenges faced by European societies in almost all political, economic and social areas. They are making a crucial contribution to shaping national and European policies. The current economic crisis, with its harsh impact on municipalities and regions and thus on their citizens, has placed their role in both staving off social disaster and in launching the economic revival in the spotlight. But, most importantly, the crisis has brought to the fore the need for joint, coherent action of all tiers of government, and this is an opportunity that cannot be missed. This has given the Congress a truly historic opportunity to engage in concrete action together with national governments.

Budgetary and human resources constraints

However, the conditions for realising its mission to the full have become increasingly difficult, due to the budgetary and human resources constraints. I would not be honest if I did not point out that the accomplishments made in the last years have taken place against the background of a worsening budgetary situation. The Congress has been called upon, along with other bodies of the Council of Europe, to make sacrifices in these trying economic times for member States. Our budget has been tangibly reduced as we were asked to contribute our share to the rest of the Organisation and to do more and better with fewer resources. Proportionally, the Congress has made an even bigger contribution than other entities, and the impact of these budget cuts was seriously felt. For example, monitoring missions had to be reduced by 27 per cent in 2013, and election observation had to be limited to three per year, meaning that we had to decline some invitations.

Any additional cuts would endanger the work of the Congress and undermine its unique capacity to advance local and regional democracy in Europe. We remain in constant dialogue with the Committee of Ministers and with the Council of Europe Secretary General to drive through the message that to succeed in our mission we need adequate resources and a competent and sufficiently large secretariat working under the political authority of the Congress leadership. This is the very understanding of the European Charter of Local Self-Government. The Congress needs greater support from the member States to be able to support better their action and to support the common goals of the Council of Europe.

The future of local and regional democracy

Governments are using economic arguments to recentralise and to claw back competences, squeezing local budgets and restricting the freedom of local authorities to raise income through taxation and to decide how to allocate and spend their resources. Corruption and lack of transparency remain serious impediments to good governance.

In our view, the economic crisis and austerity measures cannot be used as an excuse to further centralise or devolve powers without providing corresponding financial resources. Indeed, further decentralisation not matched by corresponding financial resources cannot be used as an argument for centralisation. These problems are set against the background of growing cultural diversity of Europe and integration pressures compel us to work towards building a truly intercultural and inclusive society, to change people's perceptions and attitudes and to promote diversity advantages through intercultural education and community action.

Local and regional authorities are at the forefront of responding to these challenges, and our future depends on the ability and capacity to lead in this action. We must convince national governments that it is dangerous and short-sighted to roll back democracy and participation, by seeking to make short-term financial savings on a pretext of greater efficiency.

We must explore better governance models in our communities, seizing opportunities provided by new information technologies and e-democracy, and citizens' calls for direct democracy and greater involvement. The Congress is convinced that greater decentralisation and more democracy at the grassroots is what Europe needs today. To regain citizens' trust, we must work to embed in European governance a culture of strong and sound local democracy, with real responsibility and political accountability. The advance of local and regional democracy through decentralisation and greater autonomy for local authorities and regions has become a landmark of European democratic development.

Despite the current multiple crises, the future of local and regional democracy can be bright. We are witnessing new participatory models, new partnerships, new forms of dialogue and consultation. New technologies are giving us unprecedented possibilities for involving our citizens directly in the processes of local government. Never before has there been so much recognition of the importance of grassroots action, giving us a truly historic opportunity to engage in concrete dialogue with national governments and other European institutions.

Looking back on the past twenty-four months, I can say with confidence that we have a firm grip on this opportunity. It has been a highly productive and successful mandate, full of concrete results, and the Congress has become an institution that commands interest as a co-operation partner. Let us make sure that this advance of the Congress continues firmly and steadily in the coming years.

Implementing the priorities 2013-2016 and increasing political dialogue

1. The political environment

Over the past years the Congress has boosted its role as a pan-European assembly of local and regional elected representatives and increased its credibility with its work. It has also given prominence to the role of local and regional democracy as a crucial element of any democratic system, indeed its foundation, a fact which has been widely recognised by all member States. Indeed, it is cities and regions that act as a crucible of popular expression and a catalyst for change, and local and regional authorities cannot remain on the side-lines of these changes. The Congress needed to be an integral part of this process.

By drafting reports and opinions, adopting recommendations, developing institutional dialogue, organising debates, seminars, hearings and training sessions, undertaking missions and promoting concrete actions in the field, supporting campaigns and thematic initiatives, contributing to and implementing action plans and co-operation programmes, the Congress has expanded its action to promote quality of local and regional democracy, respect of human rights and participation of citizens at local and regional level. It has worked to identify ways of responding to threats to local and regional budgets and to contribute to discussion of territorial reforms affecting local and regional authorities. It has proposed measures to improve the governance and social inclusion in local and regional communities, and to strengthen the commitment of elected representatives to ethical conduct and the fight against corruption.

However, its accomplishments have also been marred by several crises, an economical and financial crisis that struck local and regional communities with great severity as well as a crisis of democracy which led to a growing loss of confidence among citizens in the institutions of governance. The Congress has addressed the causes for the impending crisis – a disconnect between politicians and citizens, lack of access to decision making, lack of participation, spreading corruption and other signs of a malfunctioning system, insufficient and inequitable distribution of resources – and will continue to do so as responses to the crisis require long-term and sustained efforts as well as more concrete action with tangible results reaching all levels of governance and reaching citizens at the grassroots.

Over the last months Europe has been challenged by the war in the south-east of Ukraine. The uprising of the Ukrainian people and the establishment of a new government by the Ukrainian Parliament have set off momentous transformations in this country. But the referendum organised on 16 March, without the minimal democratic guarantees that should be in place for any vote as well as the subsequent annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation halted this momentum.

During its session in March 2014, the Congress adopted a declaration following an urgent debate in which it condemned Russia's annexation of Crimea and Sebastopol, in line with the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers and Parliamentary Assembly and stated that this action should on no account pave the way for a change of borders between Russia and Ukraine.

Since then, the situation in the south-east of Ukraine has worsened and the Congress must continue to express its solidarity with the people and authorities of Ukraine in the face of the crisis. It is committed to continuing a search for peaceful solutions, working in closely with the rest of the Council of Europe.

2. Statutory activities: the sessions in 2013 and 2014

The Congress implemented its activities through its two Chambers – Chamber of Local Authorities and Chamber of Regions, its three committees (Monitoring, Governance and Current Affairs committees, its field missions, its co-operation activities and its two annual sessions which are the culmination of its political work.

- **2013: “Europe in crisis – the challenges for local and regional democracy”**

There has been an increasing recognition of the importance of local and regional democracy and grassroots action in response to challenges faced by European societies. While the regions of Europe intend to prove that they are capable of meeting the challenges thrown up by the economic crisis and preparing their citizens' future, they are also seeing their own resources, and even their powers, whittled away by the financial and social difficulties weakening the continent.

To generate exchanges between European local and regional elected representatives on ways of addressing the crisis, the Congress decided to dedicate its two annual sessions in 2013 to “Europe in Crisis – Challenges to Local and Regional Democracy”.

A debate held during the March session on “Regionalisation and devolution in Europe in a context of economic crisis”, discussed the risks that the current crisis entailed for Europe's social, economic and political cohesion. Other debates focused on fostering active citizenship, combating social exclusion, promoting ethics and preventing corruption. A report on responses by local and regional authorities to the economic crisis which called in particular for these authorities to be recognised as fully-fledged stakeholders in dealing with the consequences of the economic downturn was adopted at the October session.

Other reports dealt with the promotion of migrant entrepreneurship at local level, better access of migrants to regional labour markets, prospects for effective transfrontier co-operation in Europe, regions and territories with special status, as well as regionalisation and devolution in a context of economic crisis. A debate was organised on extremism at the local and regional level which showed that political extremism feeds on perceived threats to the national identity which the traditional parties often have difficulty countering.

A joint declaration was signed by the presidents of the Congress and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on “Facing the economic crisis: recovery requires reinforced co-operation between all levels of government”. It called upon the national and regional governments and parliaments of all Council of Europe member states to make the issue of healthy and sustainable local and regional budgets a matter of national priority. This declaration also confirmed the commitment of both bodies to co-operate “so as to ensure that the voice of “Greater Europe” be heard when it comes to preserving the capacity of action of local and regional authorities, which are the democratic institutions closest to the citizens and thus represent the foundations of European democracy.”

- **2014 : “Empowering youth: a shared responsibility for cities and regions”**

Considering the lack of citizen participation in democratic governance and the growing cultural diversity of European societies to be the main challenges to the European democratic model, the Congress focused its action in 2014 on bringing local and regional authorities and citizens closer together, engaging local residents in community building and improving their participation and social inclusion; and on changing perceptions of cultural diversity among the local population, overcoming prejudice and fostering active citizenship.

Its two sessions in 2014 were placed under the theme of empowering young people and engaging them in democracy building. The aim was to generate exchanges between European local and regional elected representatives on this issue. This gave rise to a number of targeted debates on issues relating to youth and democracy during the March 2014 session, especially on “Is there a real place for young people in local and regional democracy?”, on “Fostering youth employment through education and training: role and best practices within regions in Europe”, as well as on “Empowering Roma youth participation: effective policy design at local and regional levels” as well as a debate on “Youth participation - Voting at 16?”. It also adopted a report focusing on designing effective local and regional policies for youth participation.

This focus on young people continued with conferences on youth participation in June in Strasbourg (France) and Baku (Azerbaijan). During the October session, the Congress is taking the unprecedented step of having youth delegates from member states and from partner associations participating in the session and taking the floor in the debates. A special programme has been

prepared for these young delegates, prepared in close co-operation with the Council of Europe's Youth Department.

3. Improving the quality of territorial democracy

- **Monitoring the European Charter of Local Self-government**

The Congress' assessment of the situation of local and regional democracy in the member States is based on this unique international treaty, the European Charter of Local Self-government, which covers effectively a huge pan-European area and represents, for all 47 Council of Europe member States, a sound legal framework for the development of local and regional democracy.

Over the past years, the Congress has continuously developed the procedures and quality of its monitoring of the Charter. It has striven to make sure that it leads to a concrete follow-up action, that the results of these activities – assessments, recommendations and proposals – have been translated into concrete operations on the ground in member states, targeting specific problems. It took its procedures to the next level, when adopting, in March and October 2013, resolutions on post-monitoring and post-election observation dialogue, with the principle aim of establishing a sounder procedural basis for follow-up of the impact of its work together with the governments of the member States concerned. With these new rules, the Congress further deepened its goal of creating a “virtuous circle” of monitoring, post-monitoring, and co-operation activities.

In the course of its monitoring of the application of the Charter, the Congress noted that the treaty has increasingly become a landmark convention in the field of local democracy. Domestic jurisdictions all over the European continent refer to it. This has been a positive outcome and a sign of change of culture and mentality and today more and more authorities in member States think and act “local democracy”.

However, there is still much to be done to implement its provisions fully. In the course of its regular assessment of the situation in member States, the Congress was able to identify recurrent issues that it has undertaken to discuss with the member States concerned and the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe.

The “deepening” of the work, which means ensuring “100% Charter across 100% of the European territory” still needs to be carried out. The Charter is, by definition, an “à la carte” instrument. The Congress' task now will be to encourage national governments, through political dialogue with the member States, to ratify all the provisions where they have not already done so. For some States, it will simply be a case of accepting the non-ratified articles. For others, the dialogue will centre on the changes under way in their local democracy and necessary adjustments.

This is the way forward that the Congress has followed in the last years and that it has also mapped out for the coming years and which it is willing to achieve through its monitoring and post-monitoring activities and post-election observation recommendations, in short, through a meaningful political dialogue with the governments of its member States.

The Congress has expanded its monitoring in order to cover national situations approximately every five years (in 2013 13 monitoring, post-monitoring and fact finding visits were organised in 12 member States: Spain, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Ireland, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Portugal, Sweden, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Armenia). In 2014 (as of October) 10 such visits were organised in 10 countries: Belgium, Portugal, Poland, Moldova, Ukraine, Norway, Greece, Georgia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Armenia)

- **Observation of local elections**

In complementarity to the political monitoring process, the Congress designed a policy aimed at improving the quality of its election observation and increasing its impact.

Steps have been taken to widen the scope of the observation missions in which it invites the EU Committee of Regions to participate. The election observation now includes assessments on the political system, the legal conditions and the media landscape as well as information collected at the pre-electoral stage, in particular concerning the electoral campaign and its financing.

The Congress is also focusing more intensely on the concrete follow-up to its recommendations resulting from election observation missions. In this respect, it participates – in co-operation with other Council of Europe entities – in post-electoral events (e.g. the conference “The 2014 Local Elections: Lessons Learned and Steps Ahead” held in September in Tbilisi/Georgia) and has established intensified working relations with the Venice Commission/Council for Democratic Elections in order to address recurring issues identified during election observation missions (e.g. the report on “Electoral lists and voters de facto residing abroad”).

Furthermore, emphasis is placed on regular training sessions for Congress members. This training is usually carried out in co-operation with the Congress’s strategic partners in the field of election observation, notably with the EU Committee of the Regions, but also with national associations of local self-government.

In 2013, the Congress observed local elections in “The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia ” and Armenia and in 2014 in the Netherlands, in Ukraine and Georgia.

- **The post-monitoring dialogue**

An essential part of the “virtuous circle”, the post monitoring process is developed at the request of the government concerned. This dialogue is led by rapporteurs – who receive technical assistance by experts – and identifies the priorities to be implemented.

The post-monitoring dialogue is a process based on a Post-Monitoring Programme (PMP), which contains Post-Monitoring Units (PMU) that focus respectively on the most important issues raised in the recommendations adopted by the Congress after its monitoring visits. The rapporteurs then work on the drawing up of a roadmap setting out specific deadlines. This document is officially submitted to national authorities of the state concerned. If necessary, this may lead to an action plan or assistance programme.

In 2013-2014 the Congress started the post-monitoring dialogue with the authorities of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Portugal and Ukraine (see 6. Institutional dialogue with member States for further details on post-monitoring in Ukraine).

4. Co-operation activities and contribution to Council of Europe action plans

Over the past years, the Congress has systematically submitted proposals for contributing to Council of Europe Action Plans and co-operation programmes in order to strengthen the pillar of democracy with a local and regional dimension.

These proposals, which are in compliance with the Congress’ priorities, aim at promoting local governance and strengthening local elected representatives’ role in political decision making. They caught the attention of donor States, Denmark and Switzerland, which agreed to give further support. Thanks to their voluntary contributions the Congress was able to reinforce its concrete presence and activities on the ground. In partnership with the Council of Europe Directorate General for Democracy, it is implementing specific projects in Albania, in Armenia and in Ukraine in the framework of the Action Plans that the Organisation has set up for those countries. Other Congress contributions are

included in the Council of Europe Action Plans for Azerbaijan, Georgia and Moldova as well as in the Programmatic co-operation framework for the Eastern Partnership funded by the European Union.

The projects in Albania, Armenia and Ukraine, focus on enhancing co-operation among local and regional authorities, reinforcing the role of their associations, and fostering the dialogue between local and national levels. Activities also include workshops for mayors as leaders for change as well as regional seminars for young local leaders aimed at spreading a culture of democracy by raising awareness on local and regional democracy principles and developing the participants' capacities to engage locally in an active and qualified manner, including in future local elections.

The Congress has also pursued its co-operation with the south Mediterranean countries, in particular with Morocco and Tunisia where it has been contributing to the reform processes. It participated in several consultation meetings between the representatives of the National Constitutional Assembly (ANC) of Tunisia and the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), on Chapter VII of the Tunisian Constitution concerning local powers. In this regard, the Congress' comments were included within the official comments of the Venice Commission, released in July 2013 and taken up in the new Constitution adopted in January 2014.

Furthermore, in order to increase the co-operation with these countries, the Congress has prepared a "partner for local democracy" status to be granted to delegations from neighbouring countries. The status will be presented for adoption at the October 2014 session and should be implemented in 2015.

In all programmes, the Congress has been working closely with the Directorate General for Democracy, the Office of the Directorate General for Programmes and relevant Council of Europe field offices.

5. Thematic priorities: three concrete examples

- **Launch of the European Alliance of Cities and Regions for Roma Inclusion**

The Congress' efforts for improving the situation of Roma led to the launch of the European Alliance of Cities and Regions for Roma Inclusion in March 2013, with 122 participating municipalities and regional entities from 27 countries so far.

The initial idea of creating the Alliance was first mooted during the Summit of Mayors on Roma, co-organised by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and the Special Representatives of the Secretary General for Roma Issues in September 2011.

It is not surprising that the initiative of the Alliance was first presented and later developed by local and regional authorities as it is at the grassroots where the problems occur and where the most practical solutions are found. It is at this level where direct interaction between Roma and non-Roma communities takes place, and it is in towns and regions where national strategies and measures are being implemented in particular to create good conditions for integration of Roma and to change people's perceptions and attitudes towards them. The Alliance project, built on numerous examples of local and regional initiatives and networks, is intended to bring these efforts together. It is also an excellent example of close co-operation between municipalities and regions and the Council of Europe.

The Alliance has opened new perspectives of concrete co-operation with the European Union, and an agreement was signed in September 2013 between the Council of Europe and the European Commission for a new Joint Programme, ROMACT, which is implemented in close connection with the Alliance. This Joint Programme represents a significant support for the Congress activities in favour of Roma in Europe and it complements an existing programme of training of Roma mediators (ROMED), which has been implemented since 2011.

Another important step was made in September 2014, when the Congress Bureau endorsed a strategic paper which outlines the Alliance's objectives and priorities for the period 2014-2020. The challenge is now to ensure adequate funding and sustainability, possibly through a new

comprehensive joint programme with the European Union which may bring together the Alliance and related programmes such as ROMACT and ROMED.

- **The Pact of Cities and Regions against Sexual Abuse of Children**

The Congress has taken an active part in the Council of Europe's "One in Five" Campaign to stop sexual violence against children, which is an excellent example of inter-institutional co-operation with the intergovernmental sector and the Parliamentary Assembly. Introduced in 2012, the Pact encourages cities and regions to mobilise around the "four Ps" of prevention, protection, prosecution and participation. It promotes the implementation of the Lanzarote Convention intended to fight sexual violence against children. The Congress also launched a new online tool, complementary to the Pact, which allows participating communities to share their experiences and initiatives in this area in order to establish the most appropriate strategies.

The Congress Thematic Spokesperson on Children presented the Pact at several conferences and visits, intended to inform local elected representatives on the Pact and have it signed by their cities and regions. Pilot projects to report such sexual abuse and to break the silence around them were also presented during these visits. On each occasion the Congress recalled that support services to victims of violence and abuse are deployed mainly at local level, that is to say where the preventive measures and awareness are likely to be most effective. The cities and regions that have signed the Pact (some 20 so far) are committing themselves to taking concrete measures to fight this pledge.

The Congress has invited other structures and networks to join the Campaign and the Pact, in particular the network "Cities for Children". It has stressed the need to implement the measures recommended by the Pact in some more specific frameworks, including the fight against violence in sport and to prevent abuses against children and youth with disabilities.

- **The European Local Democracy Week**

In order to promote and foster democratic participation at a local level, the Congress launched, in 2007, the "European Local Democracy Week" (ELDW), an annual European event where local authorities from all 47 member States of the Council of Europe organise public events to meet and engage with their citizens on issues of current interest. The week around 15 October has been chosen for holding this event as a tribute to the European Charter of Local Self-government, opened for signature on that date in 1985.

In 2013 the Congress associated the annual edition of the European Week of Local Democracy with the topic of citizen participation, under the general theme "Active Citizenship: vote, share, participate". The Week was held from 14 to 20 October 2013 across Europe. Municipalities and associations that wished to join this initiative and organise activities and events to promote democratic participation were invited to find out about the Week and to register online, using the participatory platform developed for this purpose. The 2013 edition comprised some 200 activities organised by 100 partners, including 18 '12-Star cities, 44 communities and 34 associations, representing some 11,500,000 citizens. In addition, for the first time, ELDW welcomed as a partner the No Hate Speech Movement of the Council of Europe, which was also holding an Action Week to highlight the threat of hate speech to local democracy.

In 2014 it was decided to dedicate the annual edition of the European Local Democracy Week (ELDW) to participatory democracy under the slogan: "Participatory democracy: sharing, proposing, deciding". The Week will be launched on 13 October. A special emphasis will be given to youth participation, which also links up the ELDW and the Congress sessions as well as the World Forum for Democracy (3-5 November 2014) which will also focus on youth.

6. Institutional dialogue with member States

The Congress is convinced of the necessity to pursue and strengthen dialogue with national governments in its own, distinctive sphere of competence.

In the various situations of crisis over Europe, the Congress has made its efforts in maintaining the dialogue with all parties involved. In the declaration adopted in March 2014 on the situation in Ukraine, it reaffirmed its willingness to maintain a dialogue with Russia and considered that in the current situation, only Congress meetings designed to further the political dialogue to resolve the crisis in the Crimea and the restoration of the territorial integrity of Ukraine could be held in Russia. It also declared its readiness to send a delegation to Ukraine, including to the region of Crimea, to examine the situation.

In view of this crisis, the Congress decided to speed up the existing dialogue with the Ukrainian authorities with a view to contributing to the local and regional reforms to be undertaken. On 22 May 2014, a Congress delegation met in Kyiv with First Deputy Minister Viacheslav Nehoda to launch a post-monitoring procedure. They discussed and prepared the post-monitoring activities with a view to implementing the Congress recommendations adopted during the 24th Session in October 2013 following the monitoring visits held in May 2012 and April 2013. The Minister expressed the government's strong support to the ost-monitoring programme (PMP) which was agreed.

In July 2014, a Congress high-level delegation went to Ukraine and held a large number of interviews in Kyiv and Odessa to get a complete picture of the current situation in Ukraine and of the major difficulties this country is going through.

The next steps will be to submit to the Ukrainian authorities a schedule for three Post-monitoring Units to be held between end 2014 and beginning 2015 - on transfer of competences to elected representatives, on financial autonomy and on the merger of territorial units and inter-municipal co-operation. A consensus conference will be organised in 2015 to address the issues raised by each Post-monitoring Unit and achieve the setting-up of a road map, which will be officially presented to the authorities for implementation.

In the Chisinau declaration adopted in June 2014, the Monitoring Committee of the Congress expressed its profound concern at the situation of countries of the region faced with dangerous separatist tensions. The statement noted that the annexation of the Crimea by the Russian Federation has unfortunately opened the way to regional destabilisation which threatens the territorial integrity of states. It recalled that the Congress defends local and regional government all over Europe through implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-government but local and regional self-government cannot truly develop unless countries are stable and societies are at peace. As follow up to the Declaration, the Congress will be holding an urgent debate on this issue during its October 2014 session.

The Congress' action today is more and more in line with that of the Committee of Ministers and of the whole Council of Europe, addressing political issues that are also on the Organisation's agenda. It has developed its action in close co-operation and dialogue with its partners within the Council of Europe – the Committee of Ministers and the intergovernmental sector, the Parliamentary Assembly, the Commissioner for Human Rights, the Venice Commission – be it through Council of Europe Action Plans, transversal thematic projects, or bilateral co-operation programmes with member states as part of the post-monitoring process.

The dialogue with the Committee of Ministers in particular was pursued and deepened over the course of the past years. It has become stronger, more regular and more structured, focusing on specific problems and challenges for local and regional democracy. The Congress has been invited to all meetings of the Ministers' Deputies and their subsidiary bodies, at which – depending on the issues discussed – it was represented either by selected members or by its Secretary General.

The President and Secretary General of the Congress also attended the annual ministerial sessions, and ministerial conferences relevant to its work. They have had regular exchanges of views with the representatives of the member States.

Since May 2011, the chairmanships of the Committee of Ministers – Ukraine, the United Kingdom, Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria and Azerbaijan – have made promoting local and regional democracy their common priority. The Congress has made an active contribution to the activities of these chairmanships, among others by organising conferences on integration policy, on citizen participation, on education and youth, on European democracy and on fighting corruption. The priorities included in particular the fostering of democratic societies through the development and consolidation of local democracy, as well as the promotion of intercultural dialogue, which are also among the core objectives of the Congress' work.

The Congress' co-operation with the intergovernmental sector has also become stronger and as the sign of this trend the Congress nominated, at the end of 2013, a thematic spokesperson on co-operation with the intergovernmental sector of the Council of Europe. In September 2014 this spokesperson held an exchange of views with the Rapporteur Group on Democracy. In particular, they discussed the document Recurring problems identified during monitoring missions, submitted to the Committee of Ministers in December 2013, which analyses the issues encountered in member States in the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government. such as a lack of local competences or of clarity in attributing responsibilities, insufficiency of financial resources and disproportional allocation of financial burdens to local governments, a lack of systematic and meaningful consultations with local authorities, excessive supervision by higher levels, ineffective co-ordination mechanisms in central/local government relations and a lack of citizen participation in local public affairs.

This excellent dialogue had already started earlier with exchanges of views between the successive Chairs of the Group and the Congress Bureau in March 2012 and November 2013. The current Chair also agreed to meet in the near future with the Congress Bureau.

The Congress is also represented in other Committee of Ministers' Rapporteur groups, such as the GR-EXT, the GR-H and the GR-SOC by its Secretary General or Secretariat. It is represented in Council of Europe Steering Committees and Committees of Experts – including the Steering Committee on Human Rights (CDDH), the European Steering Committee on Youth (CDEJ) and the Ad hoc Committee of Experts on Roma Issues (CAHROM) through its thematic rapporteurs or its Secretariat

7. Multilevel Governance and trans-frontier cooperation

Local and regional authorities today make a crucial contribution, from their experience on the ground, to shaping national and European policies. They act as equal partners of national governments and parliaments in an emergent system of multi-level governance, based on both exclusive and shared responsibilities as well as clearly defined competences and roles for each of them. The EU Committee of the Regions has adopted end 2013 a non-binding European Charter of Multi-level Governance which the Congress has supported and is encouraging local and regional authorities to sign.

During its March session, the Congress adopted a strategy on the right of local authorities to be consulted by other levels of government. This strategy is based on several activities, namely the preparation of guidelines for national associations of local and regional authorities, the extension of the application of the relevant articles of the European Charter of Local Self-Government to all member states, an evaluation of national consultation processes and the collection of data from member states at the end of 2015 with a view to preparing a report in 2016

Multi-level governance is also crucial for making cross-border co-operation in Europe more effective, for implementing macro-regional strategies between European Groupings of Territorial Co-operation, which can now belong to both EU and non-EU member states. Cultural, economic and social competences on each side of the border may belong to different levels of governance, and the system of multi-level governance allows for the necessary coordination between them.

The Council of Europe played a pioneering role in transfrontier cooperation when adopting already in 1980, the Madrid Convention which determines the modalities for such co-operation between communities, allowing them to enter into specific agreements.

Today, interregional and inter-municipal co-operation across national borders is a major contributing factor to improving territorial cohesion in Europe. It also fuels innovation in communities, through experience-sharing, economies of scale and cross-investment in innovative projects. The Congress has taken an active part in the setting up of platforms for local and regional co-operation regardless of borders or the EU membership such as the Black Sea Euroregion. Furthermore, a report on "Prospects for effective transfrontier co-operation in Europe" was adopted during the October 2013 session, which forwarded innovative proposals for tackling obstacles to transfrontier co-operation. A report on "Inter-regional cooperation in Europe - Trends and prospects" is on the agenda of the October 2014 session.

8. Co-operation with institutional partners

The Congress has had regular exchanges with the Parliamentary Assembly in order to develop synergies and increase co-operation with the respective secretariats and rapporteurs, notably in the area of monitoring and the implementation of the ONE in FIVE Campaign;

The Congress President and the President of the Parliamentary Assembly have held bilateral meetings where they discussed areas of common interest or concern and reaffirmed their willingness to enhance institutional co-operation between the two bodies. This determination resulted in particular in the adoption of a joint declaration on "Facing the economic crisis: recovery requires reinforced co-operation between all levels of government" signed by the two Presidents during the October 2013 session.

Concrete Co-operation with the Parliamentary Assembly and the European Commission for Democracy Through Law (Venice Commission) occurs also within the frame of the Council for Democratic Elections (CDE) where electoral matters are being discussed. The Congress has also strengthened its co-operation with the Venice Commission on issues of local and regional democracy. The Congress has a regular institutional representation and participation in these bodies.

The Commissioner for Human Rights follows the work of the Congress on the implementation of human rights at the local level and awareness raising of local and regional authorities in this regard. He contributed to the third report of the Monitoring Committee on best practices in the Council of Europe and other continents by communicating an opinion on the draft report which was formally adopted during the 26th session. During a debate, the Commissioner stressed that shared human rights duties between the authorities at national, regional and local level necessitate close co-operation and co-ordination. He underlined the fact that local and regional authorities can ensure that residents' human rights are not only respected but also fulfilled.

• The Committee of the Regions of the European Union

The European Union's Committee of the Regions is a special partner for the Congress. They both started work in their current form in 1994, 20 years ago, to give a voice to local and regional representatives in the European construction. They are both united by the common cause of strengthening local and regional democracy in Europe, pursuing decentralisation and defending local and regional self-government vis-à-vis national governments.

This solid common basis has allowed the two organisations to develop a broad and close co-operation on issues of mutual concern, to set joint priorities and objectives, and to work together in the pursuit of these goals. This co-operation has been consolidated in the bilateral agreement between the two assemblies, first signed in 2005 and further revised in 2009, aimed at building synergies in respective activities and at better targeting their action.

Presidents and Secretaries-General of the two assemblies hold regular meetings to agree on co-operation priorities and are currently discussing ways to further increase this co-operation. A joint Contact Group has been set up to map out specific activities in the pursuit of these priorities. Members of the Committee of the Regions are participating in Congress missions to observe local and regional elections in European countries. Congress rapporteurs on respective countries of the Eastern

Partnership have met in the past to co-ordinate their positions, and are co-operating closely within the Conference of Regional and Local Authorities of the Eastern Partnership, CORLEAP. The Congress shared with CORLEAP its experience gathered during its monitoring exercises and organised, with the Committee of the Regions, hearings on: “Local and Regional Democracy in Ukraine”, on “Fiscal Decentralisation in the Eastern Partnership”; on “Devolution and Reforms in the EaP Countries” and on “Local and Regional Democracy in Armenia”.

The Congress has often supported the Committee of the Regions’ initiatives, such as the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly, ARLEM – in which the Congress has observer status – or the proposal to draft a European Charter of Multi-level Governance for the European Union area.

In 2014, both Organisations celebrated their 20th anniversary which led to joint events. In February, the Land of Tyrol and the City of Innsbruck organised, under the Austrian Chairmanship, a Conference on “20 years of the Congress and the Committee of the Regions – representation of regions and local communities in the Council of Europe and the European Union”. In June, the Congress President took part in the Commemorative Event “20 years of the Committee of the Regions” organised in Brussels. In November, the CIVEX Committee of the Committee of the Regions and the Congress Governance Committee will hold a joint meeting.

Decentralisation – local and regional democracy – has reached a crossroads, challenged by the many, and increasing, threats to the European democratic model. The multiple crises shaking the continent are threatening the social cohesion of European societies and the very foundations of democracy. The Congress and the Committee of the Regions are aware that they can no longer confine themselves to setting standards and giving opinions but must pursue their practical application which will yield tangible results for all levels of governance and for the citizens at the grassroots.

- **The Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR)**

In November 2013, the Congress and the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) addressed these changes in a conference entitled '1953–1988–2013: Decentralisation at a crossroads' in Strasbourg. In order to mark the 60th anniversary of the adoption by the CEMR of the European Charter of Municipal Liberties (1953) and the 25th anniversary of the entry into force of the European Charter of Local Self-Government of the Council of Europe (1988), the conference aimed to review the progress achieved over the last 60 years with respect to local democracy and self-government, notably through the implementation of the two charters. It also focused on recent administrative and territorial reforms in Europe, examined the concerns of local governments on recentralisation trends and looked at the future prospects for strengthening local democracy in Europe.

- **The Assembly of the Regions (AER)**

A co-operation agreement was signed in March this year with the Assembly of the Regions (AER) by the Congress President and the President of the AER. The agreement contained a joint action plan detailing the thematic areas of co-operation (regionalisation, devolution, subsidiarity, responses to the economic crises, support to young generations, neighbourhood policies, regional or minority languages) and the commitment to reciprocal participations in events organised either by the Congress or by the AER. The Congress took in particular an active role in: the 3rd Summit on “Regions and the Economic crisis” and General Assembly of the AER, held in Paris on 18 May 2013 (where the Congress was represented by the Chair of the Chamber of Regions and the 4th AER Black Sea Summit, held in Rize (Turkey) in 4 October 2013 and the 5th AER Black Sea Regional Summit, held in October 2014 in Bucharest (Romania), which showed how interregional cooperation can contribute to economic and social development, peace and stability in the area and the importance of a real local and regional good governance in the Black Sea countries.

This agreement has brought the Congress’ co-operation agreements with its institutional partners up to five (the Committee of the Regions, the Assembly of European Border Regions (AEBR), the Conference of European Regional Legislative Assemblies (CALRE), the Conference of European Regions with Legislative Powers (REGLEG) and AER).

- **The Conference of European Regional Legislative Assemblies (CALRE)**

The Congress and the Conference of European Regional Legislative Assemblies (CALRE) hold regular exchanges, including at level of their presidents. In March 2014, the Congress President met in Athens with the President of the CALRE to discuss common priorities, notably “digital inclusion” and citizen participation at regional level. They specifically focused on the use of new technologies to facilitate the involvement of citizens in the work of regional Parliaments and how these parliaments respond to popular initiatives. The President of the Congress invited regions with legislative powers to make full use of the opportunities offered by the Congress to exchange good practices beyond the borders of the European Union. The President of the CALRE also took part in the Congress Bureau in September 2014 where she addressed subsidiarity, cohesion policy, e-democracy, human rights and good governance and intelligent borders as priority areas for action for the regional Parliaments. She will take part in the Congress session of October 2014.

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe

The voice of Cities and Regions in Europe

- The Congress is a political assembly composed of 636 elected officials – mayors, governors, councillors, etc. – representing the 200 000 local and regional authorities of the 47 Council of Europe member states.

It speaks for Europe's local and regional elected representatives.

- The Congress promotes devolution through transfer of political powers and financial resources to the municipalities and regions.

It ensures that policy decisions are made at a level closest to the citizens.

- The Congress guarantees civic participation and fosters a positive perception of local identities.

It strives for living grassroots democracy in an ever more globalised world.

- The Congress reinforces local and regional democracy by permanently monitoring the due application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, observing local and regional elections, and issuing recommendations to the governments of the 47 Council of Europe member states.

It upholds local self-government, together with democracy and human rights at local level.



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