



T +33(0)390214895

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More emphasis on citizen participation at grassroots level through Congress monitoring and exchange of good practice

Strasbourg, 18 October 2011. – A report on direct involvement of citizens in decision-making processes at grassroots level in Council of Europe member states was adopted today, at the 21st Congress. The report, presented by Marjan Haak-Griffioen, Netherlands, assesses direct democracy procedures at local and regional level and current trends in citizen participation.

Participatory democracy – which is complementary to representative democracy and the influence on decision-making through universal suffrage – is to be seen as an essential element of the good democratic functioning of society and has to be further developed, according to the report. In addition to existing procedures of direct democracy, such as local referendums or popular initiatives, the report advocates to encourage local and regional authorities to also make use of new information and communication technologies, to set up citizen networks and to promote the implementation of pro-active mechanisms such as online publication of raw government information and participatory budgeting. “The Congress believes that, in times of increasing cuts to local and regional authority allocations and disenchantment of citizens with the political process, it is more important than ever that citizens actively participate at the level closest to them”, says Marjan Haak.

In terms of concrete action, the report asks the Congress Governance Committee to facilitate regular exchanges of innovative and successful practice amongst member states through the organisation of specific meetings. The Congress Monitoring Committee is invited to continue taking the rights of citizens to participate in the conduct of local and public affairs into account during its assessment of member states’ compliance with the European Charter of Local Self-Government.

In view of the great differences between Council of Europe member states in the way in which citizens may directly participate, the Congress report advocates to use a variety of instruments and methods. At the same time it makes clear that in those countries where traditional procedures are used only exceptionally, these forms should be promoted by local and regional authorities themselves. According to the report, the use of “alternative” instruments like sample voting or citizens’ panels is not a substitute for those forms of citizen participation which provide institutionalised procedures. Although, over-complex conditions imposed on citizens’ initiatives may even deter the most active people. “The way forward is through innovation and encouragement of application of new institutions of citizen participation at grassroots level”, concludes Rapporteur Haak.

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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: Keith Whitmore (United Kingdom, ILDG), President of the Chamber of Regions: Herwig van Staa (Austria, EPP/CD), President of the Chamber of Local Authorities: Jean-Claude Frécon (France, SOC)

Political Groups: Socialist Group (SOC), Group of the European People’s Party – Christian Democrats (EPP/CD), Independent and Liberal Democrat Group (ILDG).