



News from the Independent and Liberal Democrat Group

CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES – COUNCIL OF EUROPE

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GOOD GOVERNANCE

by Marc Cools, President of the ILDG



Good governance and the functioning of local and regional democracy, the finances of local authorities, the fight against all forms of corruption and for transparency in administration, the participation of citizens at a local and regional level, e-democracy, the cross-border and interregional cooperation are some of the topics that have been addressed by reports and specific activities of the Congress recently.

Too often, throughout Europe, we have limited or reduced the competences of local and regional authorities in the name of good governance and of savings and efficiency. It must be noted that there are both advantages and disadvantages to a cost-based approach. That is why the European Charter of Local Self-Government poses the principle that competences should be

delegated to a level of power as close to the citizens as possible unless it has been shown that another level can exercise this power more efficiently. As indicated in the preamble of the Charter, “the existence of local authorities with real responsibilities can provide an administration which is both effective and close to the citizen”.

Democracy stands for being able to directly question elected representatives, instead of facing impersonal and cumbersome administrative structure. Local representatives are in a position to listen to and serve the citizens. They are an essential cog in the democratic process and its guarantor. Democracy is not the vertical flow of power. **Good governance means taking into account the needs of your fellow citizens and involving them in the decision-making process as much as is possible.** During the last session of the Congress, I presented a report of the monitoring of local democracy in Switzerland, a model that can serve as inspiration for participation of citizens and efficiency of administration. The citizens are not just voters, they are the engine of the machinery of power.

There is no need to oppose participatory and representative democracy. The first is there to complete and support the second. Each reflection on governance must be accompanied with a reflection on how citizen participation can be improved. In highly urbanised areas and at the regional level new technologies can facilitate this participation.

Good governance cannot be created by a decree. It is the result of continuous and professional work by elected representatives and civil servants who advise them and who implement political decisions. The continuous professional development of elected representatives as well as civil servants is essential.

The day-to-day and short-term administration keeps politicians terribly busy, especially at a local level. We must be able to stand back and **think and act for the long term.** There is no good governance without a vision of what we want our area or region to become.

To manage a local authority is fascinating. It is also a constant challenge, one which we must tackle with good governance.

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*The ILDG wishes you and your loved ones a happy holiday season,
a Merry Christmas and a successful New Year!
Looking forward to seeing you in Strasbourg in 2018!*



BRUSSELS: WORKING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

by *Carla Dejonghe, President of the Assembly of the Flemish Community Commission, Brussels*

The Assembly of the Flemish Community Commission is the Parliament of Flemish-speaking Brussels (or 'the parliament of the Flemish of Brussels'). The Flemish Community Commission (VGC, for « Vlaamse Gemeenschapscommissie ») is the political centre for Flemish-speaking services in Brussels concerning culture, education, social affairs and health. The VGC is focused on the Flemish-speaking population of Brussels but its services are open to others, be they from Brussels or not, who apply to the Flemish Community Commission to avail of its services.

The Assembly of the Flemish Community Commission, the « political » organ of the VGC, has developed a series of education programmes which directly influence the life of Brussels city dwellers. Yet, the VGC is not well known to the public. The young people of Brussels are able to learn not just what the VGC does but also how the democratic process functions and what the complicated structure of the Belgian state looks like. The different

programmes are free and adapted to the age of the participants.

For primary education, the « Children's Parliament » and the « Detectives in the Parliament » programs have been developed. With the Children's Parliament, the young children of Brussels have the opportunity to sit in the Parliament and have a parliamentary discussion. With the Detectives in the Parliament programme, students in their fifth and sixth year of primary education receive a guided tour of the Brussels Parliament and literally walk the path taken by bills. This is followed by an interactive quiz.

The programme is more extensive for secondary school students. It ranges from a more practical programme for vocational students where the students can explore the parliament, to theatrical productions focusing on social themes. Workshops on health and wellbeing are also organised. « Download Brussel » is a wider programme where the students become familiar, by way of a quiz, with the structure of the Belgian state.



This is followed by a debate in the hemicycle. The participants then discover the voting system itself. Students aged 17 years and above receive a quick explanation as to how to vote in elections. They then have the opportunity to cast a vote in an actual voting booth for a fictive list of candidates. A quick meet-and-greet with Brussel's politicians in the hemicycle brings the programme to an end.

While our education service is largely aimed at primary and secondary school pupils, it is also inclusive of university students. The programme « Brussel in Breedbeeld » (A panorama view of Brussels) aims to connect the youth with political life. It focuses on different aspects depending on the area of study of the students.

Finally, a programme is also offered to adults. « Wegwijs in Brussel » (Find your path in Brussels) gives to visitors a clear outline of Brussels institutions and a guide to the Parliament. The programme is adapted to the needs of the group: from cultural organisations to Flemish-language learners.

In short, the educational projects of the Assembly of the Flemish Community Commission are a good example of a successful way to educate children, young people and adults about democratic political structure of their country. The majority of Flemish speaking inhabitants of Brussels benefit on a regular basis from the Assembly's offer. Around 5,000 people take part in these projects every year, and their number is growing.

REPORTS PRESENTED BY ILDG MEMBERS DURING THE 33RD SESSION, 18-20 OCTOBER 2017:

Marc COOLS (L, Belgium)

- Local and regional democracy in Switzerland (co-rapporteur)
- 10 years of the European Local Democracy Week (presentation on behalf of the Congress Spokesperson on the ELDW)

Stewart DICKSON (R, United Kingdom)

- Local and regional democracy in Italy (co-rapporteur)

Philippe LEUBA (R, Switzerland)

- A better future for Europe's rural areas (rapporteur)

Amelie TARSCHYS INGRE (L, Sweden)

- From reception to integration: the role of local and regional authorities facing migration (rapporteur)

Presentation by Laurent WEHRLI (R, Switzerland)

- A better future for Europe's rural areas (presentation of the report)

All texts adopted during the 33rd session: <https://rm.coe.int/adopted-texts-33rd-session/1680762abc>

THE JURA QUESTION: A SWISS CONFLICT RESOLVED THROUGH DIALOGUE

by David Eray, Canton of Jura, President of the Department of the Environment

An explosive situation

1815 and the fall of Napoléon: Jura, a Swiss canton with a French-speaking population found itself at the heart of the negotiations at the Congress of Vienna. The region was assigned to one of the German-speaking cantons of Switzerland, Bern. It would not take long for the first signs of tension to appear. Linguistically, culturally and economically this tension would leave its mark on the end of the 19th century and the major part of the 20th century. During the 1960s the violence permeated the debate forcing the authorities to find a political solution to the conflict. In a referendum on 23 June 1974, the French-speaking part of the canton of Bern created the canton of Jura. A second vote held the following year divided this region in two: the south decided to remain with Bern. This was viewed as an act depriving Jura of a part of its territory. The violence resumed and lasted a decade until it reached its peak in 1993 with the death of an activist from Jura who was attempting to detonate a home-made bomb.

Democracy in action

The Swiss authorities decided to involve itself in the conflict as a mediator. On 25 March 1994, an agreement was signed between the Confederation and the cantons of Bern and Jura. The agreement envisaged the creation of an assembly with 12 representatives from each side presided by a neutral figure. It was a democratic institution previously unseen in the country. It would not have the decision-making power, but it would prepare proposals for the governments of the two cantons. Quickly, the inter-canton Assembly came to re-establish dialogue between the two cantons. Prudently, it first proposed collaborations between the two on specific issues such as the common agricultural training schemes for the French speakers of both cantons. In

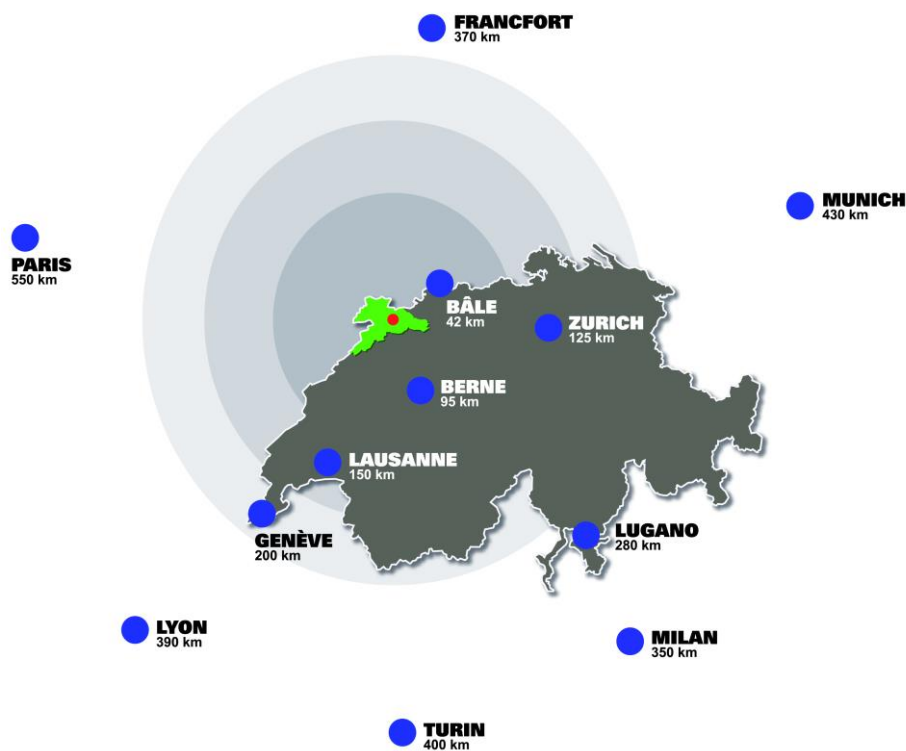


Illustration provided by David Eray

the early 2000s, the territorial question came to the fore once again. The Assembly proposed two solutions to resolve the problem. The first was that there would be no change in borders but a greater autonomy for the French speakers of Bern. The second solution put forward was the creation of a new French-speaking canton.

The resolution of the territorial conflict

In 2012 the governments of the cantons decided to tackle the issue. They organised a referendum on both sides of the border. The question asked was simple: do you think that a new canton should be created. Jura voted yes, Bern voted no. The idea was abandoned. However, a town in Bern voted differently to the rest of its canton. Moutier, 7600 inhabitants, expressed a desire to join Jura. As foreseen by the agreement between

the two cantons, another vote was to be held to decide whether or not it could join Jura. Two other small villages close to the town also decided to vote again on the possibility. On 18 June 2017 Moutier decided to change canton by a narrow majority while the villages decided to stay in Bern. The territorial conflict was brought to an end and the two governments agreed to turn the page. The local and regional democracy, alive and inventive in this region of Switzerland, allowed for the resolution of a territorial conflict in a convincing way with widespread public support. The different referenda saw voting turn-outs at almost 90% of citizens. Several international observers have come to witness this type of resolution "à la Suisse": a decentralised model which has sufficient qualities to serve as inspiration for similar conflicts throughout the world.

> ILDG PROPOSES:

Following a discussion at the group meeting on 17 October, Marc Cools addressed the Bureau of the Congress with the following proposals:

- To reinforce the follow up of adopted texts, including Monitoring Reports
- To reintroduce a seminar for new members of the Congress

> NEXT MEETINGS:

ILDG group and bureau meetings:

26 March 2018
5 November 2018

Plenary sessions of the Congress:

34th Session: 27-29 March 2018
35th Session: 6-8 November 2018

As a member of the UK delegation, and a councillor from the city of Bristol, I value European Local Democracy Week.

Our democracy is fragile, and far from perfect. In my experience I'd say we have a long way to go before our representative system reflects the priorities and policies wanted by many voters in my city of Bristol. Many don't vote, as they think the Council does not change anything, or does not do good. Some think the Council is an impediment to progress and the changes we need, not the enabling force it should be.

As a Green Party politician I want to see our electoral system better reflect the things people want to vote for. Turnout is still too low, and the results do not reflect the actual votes, due to the 'first past the post' system we

WHY I VALUE EUROPEAN LOCAL DEMOCRACY WEEK

by *Martin Fodor, Redland ward Green Party Councillor, City Hall, Bristol*



have (for UK parliament and English local government) where the winner gets all the places, whether he or she has one or hundreds of votes more in a seat than the next contender. This means many votes are completely wasted as they do not change the result in many seats due to a safe incumbent being re-elected time after time. Other votes are wasted as they are above the majority of one needed to get elected. This means the most votes often do not elect the winning party; the party with most can come second. A party with fewer votes can stay or win power depending on which street they are cast in. We also have falling voter registration.

After my speech to Congress here last March I encouraged my colleagues to arrange events in Bristol for the ELDW.

We organised a public meeting in our City Hall Council Chamber on how to make the voting system more representative and how to make all votes matter.

In addition I took part in two other events during the week. One was inspiring for dozens of local school pupils, teenagers who came to find out more about what goes on in our City Hall, and who had a great many political demands and issues we could empower them to get active about. They worked out their issues and

politicians from two of our four elected parties answered their questions. I was very encouraged they had so much to say about education funding, mental health, and why young people should get to vote. As a Green I of course support the chance for them to vote from 16. A group of pupils went away determined to get a petition of 100,000 signatures to force a debate on education funding by politicians in the UK parliament.

Later the same day we had a "meet the councillors" session for staff where I answered questions from our own Council employees about what councillors do. They wanted to know what we spend our time on and how much of the week we deal with Council business and residents, and why we find ourselves as the people who sort out things when the machinery of the Council goes working. Most councillors also have sympathy for their tough time now: so many staff have been cut by austerity policies, ending many of the services we used to provide.

It was a very valuable week, and I'd like to thank colleagues for continuing to support the ELDW. Please all make sure your own authority and country colleagues make things happen to promote local democracy next time.

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