



# News from the Independent and Liberal Democrat Group

CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES – COUNCIL OF EUROPE

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## THE PANDEMIC AND TERRORISM: TWO SCOURGES TO FIGHT AGAINST

by Marc Cools, President of the ILDG

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Six months ago, I dedicated the editorial of our Newsletter to the pandemic. It is still there today. So much that several European countries have introduced a new lockdown. The pandemic heavily affects our people, our healthcare workers whose commitment cannot be stressed enough, and our local authorities and their functioning. It also affects the Congress. The March plenary session was cancelled, so was the October session. In their place, it is the Statutory Forum (a small assembly made up solely of members of the Congress Bureau and the Presidents of national delegations) that approves by videoconference the reports that should have normally been

adopted in plenary session. This is a provisional measure that cannot become a permanent solution. We hope that the March session of the Congress can be held in person and, if not, that the Council of Europe can resolve technical problems so that it can at least be held through videoconference with interpretation.

Until a vaccine becomes available our responsibility as elected representatives is to call on our fellow citizens to respect safety measures (social distancing, wearing a mask, hand hygiene...) and the decisions taken by the authorities to slow down the circulation of the virus.

Unfortunately, the pandemic is not the only scourge we have to fight against. France and Austria have been hit by deadly Islamist terrorist attacks. None of our European countries is safe from such attacks committed by fanatics. It is the very values that the Council of Europe stands for - the rule of law, democracy and human rights - that the terrorists are targeting through these attacks. Now more than ever we must wage a relentless fight against terrorists and hate-mongers. All European countries must work together to combat terrorism.

## THE CONGRESS DURING THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN

**Statutory Forum: 7 December 2020, 9.30-12.00 CET**

The Statutory Forum acts on behalf of the Congress between sessions. It adopts reports and organises debates and hearings in accordance with the objectives of the Congress. The Statutory Forum is composed of the Chairpersons of all national delegations and the members of the Bureau. The Presidents of the Political Groups and the Chairpersons of Committees take part in the Forum without the right to vote. Since the beginning of the sanitary crisis, it is the second Statutory Forum meeting to be organised in a remote mode. [Agenda](#)

**Covid-19: local and regional authorities at the frontline: 7 December 2020, 14.30-17.00 CET**

This seminar will be open to the public. [Programme](#) and information on [participation](#) will be available soon

## REMOTE ELECTION OBSERVATION

*Stewart Dickson, Vice-President GILD, 1st Vice-President Monitoring Committee, Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly*

**On 13 November, Stewart Dickson addressed the 17<sup>th</sup> European Conference of electoral management bodies to report about challenges for local elections under the Covid-19 crisis and about the adjustments introduced by the Congress in its election observation procedures. Both topics were discussed in the recent report co-authored by Stewart Dickson on Local and regional elections in major crisis situations.**

The Congress has decided to maintain election monitoring albeit with remote procedures. The Congress has so far conducted two remote missions in Ukraine and in Bosnia and Herzegovina, another one is planned in respect of Mostar. Both remote observation missions went well in the limited circumstances of not being in the country for election day. We had some technical difficulties in a few of our meetings, but most went well. This format is no substitute for the ground election observation; however, it does allow us to speak to Electoral Commissions, political parties, local NGOs and other key players. Following both elections, we also held de-briefing meetings with Congress staff. The two missions were time-consuming but it was necessary for us to hold them. We look forward for better days ahead

when we can return to in-person missions.

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed democracies to considerable challenges in maintaining the normal functioning of democratic institutions, including free and fair periodic elections. While countries and local authorities had to adapt, so did international observers.

In my own country, local elections in England were postponed for one year. Serbia organised parliamentary and local elections this spring despite the spreading of pandemic. Likewise, local elections in countries such as Ukraine or Bosnia and Herzegovina have been held recently against the backdrop of a resurgence of coronavirus cases which is now swiping across Europe.

As we all know, holding elections under such circumstances has implications for campaigning, voter registration and, one could say most importantly, on the polling procedures and the practical organisation of the Election Day.



While the report adopted by the Congress discusses in detail the challenges, the risks and the solutions found by local authorities in terms of organisation of polls, it also highlights the role of election observers and the need to establish alternative observation strategies for such exceptional conditions. Paradoxically, when they are needed most, just like now during the pandemic, observers face unprecedented challenges to their work.

Observation of elections has become next to impossible during this year because of travel restrictions, quarantine measures and health risks. At the same time, practical difficulties in deploying delegations in the usual Congress format became almost insurmountable. It was for these reasons that our election observation mission to Serbia this spring had to be cancelled.

### ILDG MEMBERS' REPORTS AT THE STATUTORY FORUM ON 7 DECEMBER 2020 (DOCUMENTS)

#### **Marc COOLS (Belgium)**

- Fact-finding report on territorial reform in Latvia (co-rapporteur)

#### **Harald BERGMANN (the Netherlands)**

- Human Rights Handbook for local and regional authorities Volume II (rapporteur)

#### **Wilma DELISSEN VAN TONGERLO (the Netherlands)**

- Developing urban-rural interplay (co-rapporteur)

### ILDG MEMBERS' REPORTS AT THE STATUTORY FORUM ON 28 SEPTEMBER 2020 (DOCUMENTS)

#### **Liisa ANSALA (Finland)**

- Revision of the Congress Rules and Procedures (co-rapporteur)

#### **Marc COOLS (Belgium)**

- Monitoring of the European Charter of Local Self-government: Austria (co-rapporteur)

#### **Stewart DICKSON (United Kingdom)**

- Local and regional elections in major crisis situations (co-rapporteur)

#### **David ERAY (Switzerland)**

- Monitoring of the European Charter of Local Self-government: Portugal (co-rapporteur)

Our report recognises all the obstacles to election observation in times of pandemic or similar exceptional situations. At the same time, it points out that certain activities may be necessary for the sake of the integrity of elections.

Therefore, the report identifies several alternative strategies to overcome safety and feasibility concerns while

implementing meaningful observation activities and maintaining dialogue with interlocutors. This includes remote meetings with stakeholders and co-operation with domestic NGOs and international partners. This cannot replace the fully-fledged election observation missions, but at least allows for continued dialogue with important domestic stakeholders and a certain degree of observation.

[17th European Conference of Electoral Management Bodies](#)

[Local and regional elections in major crisis situations](#)

## DEFENDING SOCIAL RIGHTS ON LOCAL LEVEL

*Harald Bergmann, Thematic Spokesperson of the Congress on Human Rights, Mayor of Middleburg, the Netherlands*



In these times of uncertainty due to Covid-19 where our daily lives are restricted it was a pleasure to see many colleagues through videoconferencing at the Monitoring Committee last September.

At that meeting I presented the 2nd volume of the Human Rights Handbook for Local and Regional Authorities focused on social rights.

This handbook is the continuation of our work on the Human Rights Handbooks series that we started in 2018 when we delivered the first volume dedicated to the fight against discrimination. The first volume was designed to spotlight examples of good practices that illustrated the local authorities' efforts in the protection and integration of the most vulnerable groups in our societies. The second volume meant to take stock of the successful efforts of local and regional authorities from the Council of Europe

member states on securing a social rights-based approach in their policies.

The handbook acknowledges that, by virtue of their competences in the social field, local and regional authorities play a crucial role in facilitating the exercise of social rights by the residents of their communities.

The handbook follows the same template which we have applied for the first volume and which has made it practical and easy

to use. It contains five chapters of which the first one explains why the promotion of social rights is relevant for local authorities. It also underscores this could be a good political opportunity to achieve social cohesion, happier population and render communities attractive and sustainable.

Taking into account the gravity of the impact that the coronavirus outbreak had on social rights, I have dedicated an entire section to how local authorities from different countries have responded in a dynamic way to the growing number of issues amid the unfolding sanitary crisis. The crisis that has gone beyond the direct evident effects on the right to health.

The second chapter presents the scope of social rights. In addition to the right to health, they also englobe the right to education, work, housing, social security and welfare, and social

inclusion and integration. This chapter focuses on the role of local authorities in upholding every mentioned category of social rights. For example, when we speak about the right to housing, it may imply the responsibility of local and regional authorities to respond to the growth of informal settlements, to prevent socio-spatial segregation and to make sure that local urban planning schemes are sustainable and respect the environment.

Chapter three presents the key challenges that local authorities face in their efforts to promote social rights, such as rapid changes in technology, demographic ageing or climate change and limited local budgets.

The fourth chapter demonstrates through almost sixty-five examples from our member states how local and regional authorities across Europe successfully implement social rights. To facilitate the use, best practices are grouped into six sections for each category of social rights that I have defined before.

Finally, chapter five provides recommendations to local and regional authorities on how to take advantage of their proximity to citizens and develop people- and place-based approaches to social rights implementation. For example, local authorities are encouraged to create and maintain social housing facilities. This may be very useful in case of another health emergency. Another recommendation is to promote socially responsible public procurement, using public tenders to create job opportunities, decent work, social and professional inclusion and



better conditions for disabled and disadvantaged people or to use technology to empower the least powerful. All the good practices of social rights promotion identified in this volume can also be a great start for learning, inspiration, and

intercommunal cooperation. This handbook can definitely help all of us in our constant aspiration for better policies.

The second volume was adopted by a large majority. We do our best to have the handbook published this year. In

2020 the Council of Europe celebrates the 70th anniversary of the European Convention on human rights, and our handbook would constitute a relevant Congress contribution to mark this anniversary.

## IDEAS AND RECOMMENDATIONS BY AND FOR BRUSSELEIRS

*Carla Dejonghe, Member of Parliament of the Brussels Capital Region, Belgium*

The Flemish Community Commission (VGC) launched the project "Stadspiratie" to develop its policy for the coming years. The project was launched and took shape between 28 January and 4 July 2020. The word "stadspiratie" comes from the contraction of the word Stad (city) and Inspiratie (inspiration). And that is exactly what we are trying to do. The city of Brussels asked residents, visitors, and community organisations to put forward ideas through our online three-lingual platform. One could also send ideas by regular mail or share them during group meetings or online sessions.

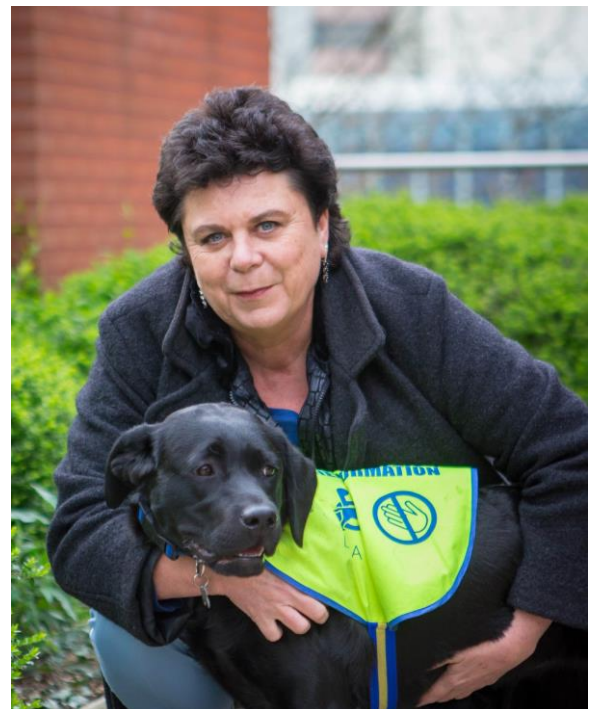
We collected 1130 ideas for Brussels related to six themes (learning, growing up, participating, working together, getting together and healthy lifestyle). Based on these ideas we organised two workshops: one for Brussels residents and another one for Brussels organisations. These discussion groups translated the ideas into concrete policy recommendations.

It became clear that Brusseleirs wish their city to be sustainable and pleasant to live in, a city that would create occasions and places for the residents to meet and interact. There are many ideas concerning education, educational support and extracurricular activities, as well as those concerning the "living together" of different cultures and communities of Brussels. All this requires

multilingual and coordinated communication accessible to all.

Here are some excellent ideas put forward by our residents:

- Plant fruit trees in public spaces so that everyone can enjoy and have a bite of fruit
- Create community gardens around care homes so that families can garden together, and the elderly have more social contacts
- Create stimulating playgrounds that encourage people to meet and interact
- Organise seminars to teach young people to take a critical look at the information in the media
- Instal "public conversation benches" of different colours in the city for people who want to learn languages
- Bilingualism and multilingualism for all by all possible means (school, activities, conversation tables, etc)
- Create a network of bicycle paths that avoid major busy streets (along railways or the canal, cycle routes in parallel streets)
- Create "incubators for ideas" in public spaces: platforms for collective thinking, co-creation and fun that would encourage young people to share their knowledge and thus learn



- Enable people with low income to have access to home ownership through public support - because loan repayments are often cheaper than rent but banks refuse them a loan

- Create intergenerational housing projects

If this inspires you for your region or city, you will find more information on the website: <https://stadspiratie.be/en>

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