



News from the Independent and Liberal Democrat Group

CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES – COUNCIL OF EUROPE

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CITY DIPLOMACY

by Marc Cools, President of the ILDG



National interests often prevail in inter-state relations. And even when it is not the case, we may suspect that they do. The situation is very different in what is called "city diplomacy", i.e. in relations between local authorities, between decentralised territorial entities of different states. That is why city diplomacy is so important to promote peace, human rights, social cohesion, democracy and the rule of law. Local authorities, because of their knowledge of citizens' every-day life, are the most relevant actors to build confidence and cooperation between the people.

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe is by definition the place where such

diplomacy unfolds. It is very important that local elected politicians, be they Russian or Ukrainian, Armenian or Azerbaijani, Greek Cypriot or Turkish... meet, listen to each other and work together. The resolution of conflicts starts from respecting each other and from listening to the other's point of view.

The follow up of the implementation of the Charter of Local Self-Government through monitoring and post-monitoring missions is also very important. It allows, as do the election observation missions, to have dialogue between politicians from different countries. When the Congress adopts reports on trans-border cooperation, it contributes to the cooperation between territories situated closely but in different states. The exchanges of views and of experience between elected representatives of countries sometimes situated very far from each other may sometimes be very useful, as for example when the Congress makes recommendations on intercultural cooperation.

The work of the Congress, through the debates it organizes and the reports it adopts, is part of its efforts to promote democracy on the local level, democracy directly emanating from the citizens. The local democracy agencies created by the Congress are part of this work. The first ones were created in the 1990s in the Balkans to help find solutions to the humanitarian crisis in the aftermath of the conflict in former Yugoslavia. Later in this and other regions, the agencies helped support and reinforce local democracy. They coordinate concrete actions developed by 216 partners, half of which are local authorities and a quarter are NGOs.

The Congress also has a role to play in countries like Morocco and Tunisia who move towards decentralisation. That shows how important partnership for democracy is.

The Congress must still reinforce its role in promoting city diplomacy and could for example take more initiatives to enable dialogue between territories situated in conflict zones.

In the 2008 report and resolution prepared by our former group member Onno van Veldhuisen, Netherlands, the Congress spoke about the "need to offer a European structure to facilitate dialogue between communities of very different cultural, ethnic, social and religious traditions, and of the positive role that City Diplomacy can play in this respect". Recommendation 234 (2008) asked to "include the support and promotion of City Diplomacy in the Council of Europe's priority activities".

Each one of us, through our work in the Congress, should contribute to making this priority a reality.

WHAT IS ILDG?

The Independent and Liberal Democrat Group (ILDG) brings together 94 elected representatives of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities coming from 35 European countries. It is the 3rd largest group of the Congress. Politically it represents the centre, between the conservatives (EPP and ECR) and the Socialist group.

We stand for humanist values, for democracy, freedom, solidarity, responsibility and progress. We fight for the effective application of the principles contained in the European Charter of Local Self-Government everywhere in Europe.

2016 CONGRESS ELECTIONS

CHAMBERS OF THE CONGRESS



Vice-Chair of the Chamber of Local Authorities
Liisa Ansala, Finland



Vice-Chair of the Chamber of Regions
Yuliya Svitlychna, Ukraine

CURRENT AFFAIRS COMMITTEE



Chair
Gabriele Neff, Germany



Vice-Chair
Oleksandr Sienkevich, Ukraine



Vice-Chair
Ilsur Metshin, Russian Federation

MONITORING COMMITTEE



Vice-Chair
Stewart Dickson, UK



Vice-Chair
Beat Hirs, Switzerland



Vice-Chair
Harald Bergmann,
Netherlands

GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE



Vice-Chair
Amelie Tarschys Ingre,
Sweden

REPORTS PRESENTED BY ILDG MEMBERS DURING THE OCTOBER SESSION:

Bert BOUWMEESTER
(L, Netherlands), co-rapporteur on
“Joint reflection document on follow-up
to the Congress Strategy to combat
radicalisation at grass-roots level”

Stewart DICKSON
(R, United Kingdom), rapporteur on
“The misuse of administrative
resources during electoral processes:
the role of local and regional elected
representatives and public officials”

Liisa ANSALA
(L, Finland), rapporteur on
“Information report on the observation
of local by-elections in Armenia (18
September 2016)”

Randi MONDORF
(R, Denmark), co-rapporteur on “Local
democracy in Cyprus”

Marc COOLS
(L, Belgium), co-rapporteur on
“Revision of the Rules and Procedures
of the Congress”

In my position as Congress Thematic Spokesperson on Human Rights, I presented in February a proposal for the Congress Human Rights Action Plan, and I would like to thank you once again for your feedback. This Action Plan, which has been adopted by the Monitoring Committee, consists of several items. To start with, an expert group on human rights at the local level was set up during the last months. I am happy to inform you that we could secure the participation of some highly renowned experts in the field, including Morten Kjaerum, former Director of the EU Fundamental Rights Agency. The expert group is now in process of drafting the Congress Human Rights Manual, which is a straight-forward handbook addressed to local authorities to raise their awareness on human rights and provide them with a clear method for their implementation inspired from the best practices and exchanges of initiatives. Also, and this is the third element of the Action Plan, we will organise an International Colloquium on the Challenges in the Implementation of Human Rights that will take place in September 2017 in my city, Middelburg, the Netherlands. The colloquium will consist of interactive workshop-sessions in

HUMAN RIGHTS AT LOCAL AND REGIONAL LEVEL



by Harald M. Bergmann

which all Congress members and other relevant actors will be invited to take part.

The first meeting of the expert group was held on 21 September 2016 in Paris and provided the opportunity for very interesting discussions. Above all, the experts agreed on a working plan, format and structure of the Human Rights Manual. Many of us know about the challenges and also opportunities that a human rights approach to policy making entails. If we want to effectively raise awareness, promote best practices and therewith provide incentives to local authorities, we need a tool that is practical and easily accessible to everyone. Following our meeting in Paris last month, I am confident that the Congress Human Rights Manual will be such a tool, particularly thanks to its format.

The experts agreed that the Manual should start with a brief introduction underlining the importance and the legal context of human rights at the local level. Grasping the legal context and understanding what it means in practice will allow us to embrace human rights in our work and strengthen our position with regard to national authorities.

The central part of the Manual will be an analysis of the situation on the local political agenda regarding relevant human rights issues which show regular patterns throughout various member states. We do not aim at drawing up an exhaustive list of human rights issues dealt with by local authorities, which would as a matter of fact be impossible. Rather, our experts will group subjects that have repeatedly been brought forward during the various activities of the Congress under three headings: the *reception and integration of refugees and asylum seekers*, *freedom of expression* and the *right to non-discrimination*.

Harald M. Bergmann (L, ILDG) is a Dutch politician of the VVD. Since 27 August 2012 he has been Mayor of Middelburg, capital of the province of Zeeland. Before that, he served as Mayor of the municipality of Albrandswaard since 2005.

Each part will include sub-sections that exemplify the various dimensions and implications that a respective human rights issue can have on the work of local authorities. The format of the manual will thus provide guidance on fundamental questions. Why is there a human rights notion entailed in this topic and what does this mean for my municipality in practice? How can I approach this issue, which best practices exist and which local authorities can I liaise with for gaining further inspiration? Each section will include links to resources, background material and contact details of relevant local authorities. The paper version of the manual will be accompanied by an online platform, allowing local authorities to directly access best practice examples and get in contact with other authorities.

In essence, the Human Rights Manual will be a collection of best practices, evolving from one edition to another and echoing currently pertinent human rights issues as part of the work of local authorities. I therefore kindly invite you again to reflect on your daily work and that of your colleagues and to forward any information you have regarding human rights initiatives, projects and activities launched in your country to the secretariat of the Monitoring Committee.

Promoting a human rights perspective on our daily work is a political opportunity to strengthen social cohesion, the feeling of inclusion of our citizens, and in that sense, reinforce the effectiveness of our policies.

Our Congress is a unique forum for exchange and I am confident that with the Congress Human Rights Manual we will succeed in facilitating the exchange of know-hows and best practices on this vital topic.

I am looking forward to receiving your contributions!

LOCAL BY-ELECTIONS IN ARMENIA

by Liisa Ansala

On 18 September 2016, the Congress carried out a mission to monitor the local by-elections held in Armenia. Invited by the Armenian authorities, the Congress decided to deploy an Electoral Assessment Mission of limited scope - in total, the delegation comprised 15 members representing 11 European countries. As Vice-Chair of the ILDG, I was honoured to be the head of the mission. The delegation also included members from the EU Committee of the Regions.

Local elections in Armenia are held throughout the year, with four regular Election Days (the elections on 18 September being one of them) and further six extraordinary Election Days. One important recommendation for Armenian authorities is to revise the electoral calendar and hold the local elections on one day. Improving public awareness about local elections is very important and one common Election Day could improve the visibility of the political process. Prior to the Election Day our delegation conducted meetings with Armenian authorities, election officials, candidates and representatives of political parties. The elections were held during a period of electoral reform in Armenia entailing some uncertainties with regard to the legal framework having inevitable repercussions on the general atmosphere in which these elections took place. The Government, civil society and the Council of Europe Venice Commission have agreed about a new Electoral Code which establishes measures to prevent electoral fraud. Among these measures are the publication of lists of voters having participated in



Liisa Ansala (L, Finland) is a local councillor in Rovaniemi, Finland, hometown of Santa Claus. She is a Vice-President of the Chamber of Local Authorities and a Vice-Chair of the ILDG. On 18 September 2016 she headed the Election Observation mission to Armenia

elections in order to make this information accessible to different stakeholders and the introduction of new technologies, such as the verification of voters' fingerprints. The local by-elections held on 18 September were still governed by the existing 2011 Electoral Code and consequently did not allow our teams to assess the effectiveness of the new measures.

On 18 September, polling was organised in more than 300 Armenian communities and voters were invited to cast a ballot for both mayoral and councillor seats. In total, the Congress deployed seven teams who visited approximately 100 polling stations in the regions of Aragatsotn, Armavir, Ararat and Tavush.

In general, our teams found that the elections were technically well-prepared and overall in line with international standards. With the exception of a few incidents, the Election Day was calm and orderly. For the following elections we recommend to organise voting in places which are accessible for

elderly people and persons with disabilities. Mobile ballot boxes might improve the possibilities for voting too. There is also the recurring issue of the citizens who *de facto* reside abroad but remain on the Armenian Voter Register and thus on the voters' lists. In this situation there were claims that their identities could be usurped by other people to vote several times. In order to avoid potential misuse and strengthen democracy at the grassroots level, local issues should be decided by individuals who actually reside in a given municipality, having their centre of vital interest in this place. Armenia is currently in a transitional phase where these issues can be genuinely addressed. We invite the Armenian authorities to take the findings of our Report into account seriously, in order to build trust in the voting process and in the political system so as to ensure a genuinely democratic future for Armenia.

[Click to read the report.](#)

NEXT MEETINGS:

ILDG meeting and bureau elections: 27 March 2016

32nd Session of the Congress: 28-30 March 2017

33rd Session of the Congress: 18-20 October 2017

CONTACT:

Tel: +33388412682; **Email:** maria.bigday@coe.int

