

HIGHLIGHTS

Congress of Local and Regional Authorities



May - December 2025

THE CONGRESS



LE CONGRÈS

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

French edition:

Actualités du Congrès des pouvoirs locaux et régionaux

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Cover design and layout: Documents and Publications
Production Department (SPDP), Council of Europe
Photos: Shutterstock and Congress

This publication has not been copy-edited by the SPDP Editorial Unit to correct typographical and grammatical errors.

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Printed at the Council of Europe

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Summary

Between May and December 2025, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe pursued its action in line with the priorities set by the Reykjavik Summit in 2023. The Congress continued its support for Ukraine and its associations of local and regional authorities for the country's recovery and decentralisation, its assistance to other member states in strengthening multilevel governance, as well as its monitoring, post-monitoring and election observation activities to assess the situation of local and regional democracy and self-government across the continent.

The Congress has launched a series of activities as its contribution to the New Democratic Pact for Europe – the Council of Europe's initiative aimed at the continent's democratic renewal – including consultations with partner European associations of local and regional authorities, a joint event with the Group of States against Corruption and a conference focused on promoting deliberative democracy in European municipalities and regions as a way forward with democratic innovation. In June, a Congress delegation took an active part in the Council of Europe's Hackathon for the Pact, aimed at countering disinformation.

The Congress stepped up its action to uphold human rights and the rule of law at local and regional level, and its dialogue with local authorities on the implementation of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights. Several visits of the Congress Standing Rapporteurs on Human Rights were organised, including study visits to human rights institutions and international human rights bodies in France, Austria, Switzerland and Sweden, as well as the adoption of a Congress Strategy on the Rule of Law at Local and Regional Level in October 2025.

Engaging young people also remained a Congress priority, with the adoption in October of a new version of the European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Public Life at Local and Regional Level, drawn up jointly with the Council of Europe Youth Department. The youth delegates' programme of the Congress, allowing young people to participate in its sessions and its committees' meetings throughout the year, saw a record number of 830 applications for 2026 – up from the previous record of 445 applications for 2025 – as proof of the programme's continued success and importance.

In September 2025, Congress President Marc Cools held an exchange of views with the Committee of Ministers, highlighting Congress action with regard to Türkiye, Ukraine, Georgia, youth participation and contribution to the New Democratic Pact for Europe. Congress Secretary General Mathieu Mori further presented the work of the Congress to the Committee of Ministers in November.

Congress contributes to the New Democratic Pact for Europe

Since June 2025, the Congress has carried out a series of activities as its [contribution to the New Democratic Pact for Europe](#) which is being elaborated by the Council of Europe with the aim of boosting the continent's democratic renewal. In June, a Congress delegation took an active part in the Council of Europe's Hackathon for the Pact. In October and November, the Congress held consultations with, respectively, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) and the Conference of Maritime Peripheral Regions (CPMR). Also in November, the Congress held a joint event with the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) and organised a major conference on deliberative democracy in Strasbourg. Congress Vice-President Konstantinos Koukas (Greece, EPP/CCE) was appointed Rapporteur for the Pact.

HACKATHON FOR THE PACT

A Congress delegation took an active part in the Council of Europe's Hackathon in Strasbourg on 20 June 2025. The objective of the event held under the theme "Outsmart Disinformation, Protect Free Speech" was to provide an input for the New Democratic Pact for Europe.



Congress Spokesperson on Ethics and Corruption Prevention Danela Arsovska (North Macedonia, EPP/CCE)

Speaking at the opening, Congress Spokesperson on Ethics and Corruption Prevention Danela Arsovska (North Macedonia, EPP/CCE) underlined that disinformation and hate speech were key challenges which corrupted democracy as they misled people into believing in false narratives. Disinformation about gender issues distorts reality, discredits women and prevents their democratic participation; disinformation, hate speech and foreign interference in electoral processes erode trust in the integrity of elections and in democratic institutions; and disinformation also uses culture to undermine democratic values, she said.

A member of the Irish delegation to the Congress, Góibnait Ní Mhuimneacain (ILDG), contributed to the debate on disinformation and elections, highlighting broader trends in democratic backsliding and political polarisation fuelled by disinformation that people are less inclined to question and more inclined to accept. She sounded the alarm about electoral corruption, especially at local and regional level which needed the same level of legal protection by the European Convention on Human Rights as provided for legislative elections. According to her, education systems are needed that teach people the values of democracy, critical thinking to recognise when democracy is under attack, and skills to defend it. "We need a collective commitment to upholding the truth and the confidence to recognise the scale of this threat to our democratic elections, so we could take the tailored, measured steps needed to shine a light on it and then act against it," stressed Ms Ní Mhuimneacain.

The Congress delegation also included members of its Ad hoc Working Group on follow-up to the Reykjavik Principles for Democracy: Vice-President Konstantinos Koukas (Greece, EPP/CCE), Standing Rapporteur on Human Rights Gudrun Mosler-Törnström (Austria, SOC/G/PD) and Spokesperson on Youth Véronique Bertholle (France, SOC/G/PD).

Following the Hackathon, the Congress launched a series of consultations on the Pact with leading European networks of cities and regions, and organised an event on deliberative democracy. Joint hearings with the Parliamentary Assembly and the Venice Commission on democratic resilience and election integrity as well as on the rights of election observers were also planned for 2026 to feed into the New Democratic Pact for Europe.

CEMR AND THE CONGRESS CALL FOR STRONGER DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE IN THE DIGITAL AGE



40 years of the European Charter of Local Self-Government

To mark 40 years of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, the CEMR and the Congress convened in Brussels to hold a consultation on the [New Democratic Pact for Europe](#) and to explore how local governments can defend democratic norms amid mis/disinformation and declining public trust. On this occasion, CEMR launched its study “[Local Truth, Shared Trust](#)” which maps out how municipalities across Europe are tackling mis- and disinformation at the local level.

Opening the event, Congress President Marc Cools pointed out that the Pact had a vision of Europe – one where democracy is participatory and resilient – and that this vision may only be realised if local and regional authorities are recognised as key to this effort. CEMR President Gunn Marit Helgesen added that disinformation did not just mislead but derailed local decision-making and eroded trust. “Local governments must be equipped to defend democratic dialogue,” she said.

By engaging governments, civil society, and citizens in a broad consultation process through 2026, the Pact seeks to renew Europe’s democratic foundations, to strengthen democratic resilience, rebuild public trust, and provide tools to protect democratic dialogue and citizen engagement.

During the event, the CEMR also announced the launch of the European Observatory for the Defence of Democracy at the Local Level (ODAL), a collaborative initiative co-ordinated by the CEMR with Bocconi University, Bilbao and EUDEL (association of Basque local authorities), and the Basque Country Government (Spain) to monitor and address threats against mayors and local leaders.

INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR “STRONGER DEMOCRACY THROUGH MULTILEVEL GOVERNANCE”

On 19 November 2025, the Congress together with the CPMR and the Catalanian authorities (*Generalitat de Catalunya*) of Spain organised a consultation event on the [Council of Europe’s New Democratic Pact for Europe](#). The event was held in Barcelona on the margins of the CPMR’s [53rd General Assembly](#).

It brought together regional policymakers, youth representatives, academics, and experts to explore how multilevel governance can strengthen democratic resilience in Europe and beyond and gathered valuable input to the Pact.



“As regional authorities, we carry the responsibility to ensure that democracy principles are not only respected but strengthened at every level of governance. It must be nurtured, protected, and renewed through dialogue, participation, and trust. As Regions, it is essential for us to uphold democracy where it truly lives: close to the people,” stated CPMR President and Regional Councillor in Region Gotland (Sweden) Filip Reinthag opening the event.

“We are not in a time for self-complacency; it is a time for clarity, commitment, and courage. Europe needs its regions to speak with honesty about what is working, and what is clearly not. Initiatives such as the Council of Europe New Democratic Pact for Europe – with its pillars of Learning, Protecting, and Innovating for Democracy – offer an important path forward”, noted Minister for European Union and Foreign Action, Generalitat de Catalunya, Jaume Duch.

“The world is changing fast and adapting around increasingly expanding and growing technologies, and our democratic systems must adapt as well. This is the idea behind the Council of Europe’s New Democratic Pact for Europe”, pointed out Congress Vice-President and Rapporteur on New Democratic Pact for Europe Konstantinos Koukas.

During the sessions, the debates explored how digitalisation, participatory tools, innovation, and education can contribute to a more inclusive and transparent democratic model. A special focus was given to youth engagement and media transparency, highlighting the role of education and critical thinking in building democratic resilience.

On 20 November 2025, Konstantinos Koukas presented the seminar’s key conclusions during the 53rd General Assembly of the CPMR.

LOCAL ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES ON THE FRONTLINE OF THE FIGHT AGAINST CORRUPTION

“Corruption is a terrible scourge that destroys the most precious asset: trust, which is the foundation of any democratic society. At a time when the entire Council of Europe is working to establish a new democratic pact for Europe, our shared role as guarantors of this trust is vital,” emphasised Mathieu Mori, Secretary General of the Congress, at the opening of a joint event between the Congress and the Council of Europe’s Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) on 20 November 2025 in Strasbourg.

The event was part of the cooperation between GRECO and the Congress on the occasion of the 6th evaluation cycle, dedicated to the prevention of corruption and the promotion of integrity at the sub-national level. Entitled ‘Strengthening good governance: Consolidating Integrity and Accountability at the Sub-National Level’, the joint event served as a contribution to the Council of Europe’s New Democratic Pact for Europe. Participants examined how anti-corruption mechanisms, ethical frameworks, transparency and democratic accountability can be strengthened at local level, drawing on lessons learned from GRECO’s sixth evaluation round.

The Congress Secretary General pointed out that local elected representatives were directly confronted with the consequences of corruption but, despite all the dangers, stood up to money laundering networks, organised crime and intimidation. In this regard, he referred to the example of the Congress Spokesperson for Ethics and Prevention of Corruption, Danela Arsovska, who had been the victim of assaults for her commitment to fighting corruption while inspecting an illegal construction site in her city of Skopje. “There is no doubt that these attacks are also intended to have a deterrent effect on other elected officials and an impact on political engagement. Put simply, they aim to set back our democracies. But that is without counting on the resilience of our elected officials and our institutions,” concluded Mr Mori.

The Congress delegation to this event included Vice-President Bernd Vöhringer (Germany, EPP/CCE); Danela Arsovska (North Macedonia, EPP/CCE) and Jimmy Moloney (Ireland, ILDG), respectively Congress Spokesperson and Deputy Spokesperson for Ethics and Prevention of Corruption; as well as Jorge Grech, Mayor of Zabbar (Malta) and member of the Congress, Maria Lertxundi Vaquero (Spain), Youth Delegate of the Congress, and Christina Binder (Austria), member of the Congress’ Group of Independent Experts.

PROMOTING DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY AT LOCAL LEVEL

On 6 October, in a Congress-led event organised in Vitoria-Gasteiz (Spain) on the eve of the Open Government Partnership (OGP) [Global Summit](#), the participants discussed local open government initiatives, highlighting deliberative forms of citizen participation and good democratic governance, as a contribution to the [New Democratic Pact for Europe](#) at local and regional levels.

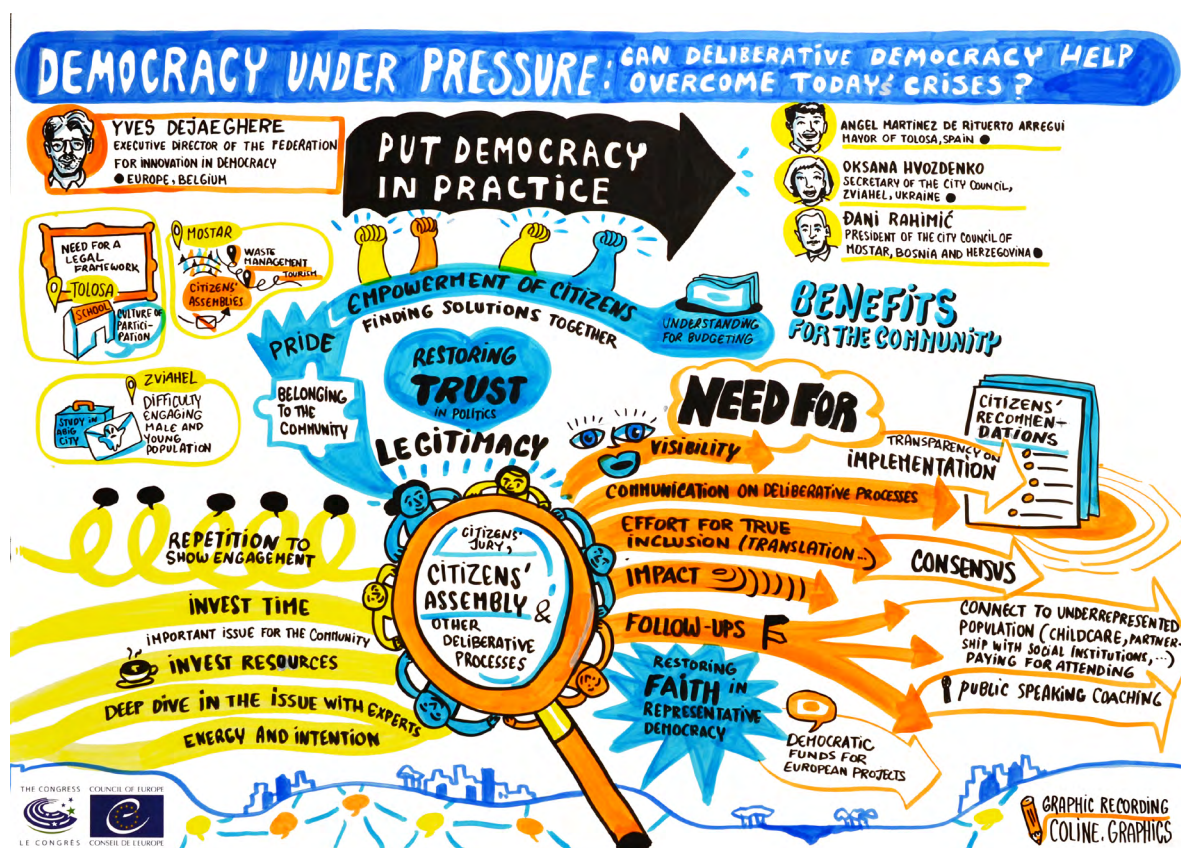
Local leaders from the cities of Donostia-San Sebastián (Basque Country, Spain), Pazin (Croatia) and Strasbourg (France) shared their experiences of using the [European Label of Governance Excellence \(ELoGE\)](#) benchmarking process to foster democratic participation, transparency and accountability. In a second event organised with the regional government of Catalonia (Spain), the Congress drew attention to the experiences of Mostar and Banja Luka (Bosnia and Herzegovina) as well as Slavutych and Zviahel (Ukraine) in organising citizens’ assemblies focused on concrete improvements to local service delivery, public spaces and local development. In the discussion, participants highlighted the strong potential of citizen deliberations to offer new insights and solutions for public decision making, in particular for situations where important trade-offs or budget constraints are concerned.

CITIES AND REGIONS IN ACTION FOR A NEW DEMOCRATIC PACT: CONFERENCE ON DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

Today's democracy requires institutions able to cultivate the conditions in which democratic innovation can take root, stressed the participants of the conference "Resilient Europe through deliberative democracy: cities and regions in action!", organised by the Council of Europe Congress in Strasbourg on 26 November 2025 as a contribution to the [New Democratic Pact for Europe](#).

The event brought together 130 representatives of local, regional and national authorities, academia and civil society from 22 Council of Europe member States. Based on presentations of good practices in Ukraine, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Lithuania and Spain, participants exchanged views on how deliberative approaches can help foster democratic resilience, notably by promoting mutual respect and constructive dialogue. Deliberative democracy, by design, encourages listening and shared understanding, offering a pathway to counter polarisation and rebuild trust in public institutions.

"When people start believing that their needs are not addressed, that democracy does not bring an added value for them and their communities, they step away. This is a risk none of us local politicians can afford," stated Congress Vice-President and Rapporteur on the New Democratic Pact for Europe Konstantinos Koukas (Greece, EPP/CCE) opening the conference. "The resilience of our democratic institutions, freedoms and values is essential if we are to withstand the threats before us. Today, we will reflect together on how deliberative democracy can complement representative democracy and civic participation in our local communities," he said.



Citizens' deliberations have gained prominence in European cities and regions and are becoming an increasingly widespread governance practice. Citizens' assemblies and their recommendations serve to better address today's multiple crises and build citizens' trust in democratic institutions. Looking forward, what are the future developments in public deliberation, the potential benefits for local and regional authorities and the challenges ahead? How can the Council of Europe strengthen deliberative democracy for greater democratic resilience in Europe?

Capable of restoring citizens' trust in their institutions, deliberative democracy strengthens representative democracy, but does not replace it. In 2022, the Congress adopted a Recommendation aimed at promoting deliberative democracy at local and regional level, which led to the drafting of a guide for local and regional authorities. This work made it clear from the outset that deliberative democracy cannot be improvised and that its organisation requires precise rules and genuine consideration of the decisions that result from it.

From citizens' assemblies held during the war in Ukraine to deliberations on mental health in Spain and urban planning in Lithuania, mayors and local leaders shared their experiences on engaging residents in local policy making. The debates that followed the presentations focused on the means and methods for launching a deliberative democracy experiment, but also on the importance of sustaining this type of assembly, either by 'institutionalising' them or by giving them a legal framework. A functioning deliberative democracy can advance a city or region, but also an entire country, as Sean O'Brien, city councillor of Tullamore (Ireland), pointed out: it was deliberative assemblies across the country that called for a constitutional amendment to allow a vote on the decriminalisation of abortion in Ireland, which was finally achieved in 2019.

The participants highlighted the need to build civic infrastructure for citizens' deliberation that includes skills development, provision of region/country-wide deliberative services, dedicated funds and access to knowledge resources to support and organise deliberation in a more systemic way, connecting experts and platforms for mutual learning. They also underlined the importance of creating platforms for peer learning to support public authorities wishing to implement deliberative practices, and noted the emerging need for possible labelling of deliberative processes, in line with Council of Europe standards, to ensure that such initiatives are meaningful, inclusive and effective.

Closing the conference, Damir Kapidzic, professor of political science in Sarajevo and international consultant to the Council of Europe on innovative democracy and democratic processes, highlighted the benefits of deliberative democracy, whether in terms of citizen participation, inclusiveness or strengthening citizens' trust in their institutions. 'Now we need to build civic infrastructure for deliberation that includes skills development, provision of region/country-wide deliberative services, funds and access to knowledge resources to support and organise deliberation in a more systemic way, connecting experts and platforms for mutual learning. Invest in deliberation-ready citizens!' he concluded.



Support to Ukraine

The Congress continued supporting Ukrainian municipalities and regions in their efforts to resist the aggression of the Russian Federation, protect citizens and provide public services in wartime. The Congress has assisted Ukraine with revising the concept of decentralisation reform, initially launched in 2014, which was finalised following three public regional consultations in 2025. The Centre of Expertise of Expertise for Multilevel Governance at the Congress has been one of the main advisors to Ukraine's National Agency on Civil Service on elaborating the new Law on local public service and preparation for its implementation. The Centre also pursued its support to the development of metropolitan areas and functional territories, and promotion of good metropolitan governance in Ukraine.

Through grants, expertise and peer-to-peer experience sharing, the Congress has been working with Ukrainian associations of local and regional authorities to strengthen resilience of municipalities and regions as well as their capacities to respond to citizens' needs, and help them to better engage civil society and citizens in decision making.

The Congress also assisted 16 Ukrainian municipalities to launch a programme in support of inclusive school participatory budgeting (School PB) in 2025–2026 – whereby teachers, students and their parents decide together how to spend part of the school's budget. School PB is seen as an effective tool for civic and youth participation that gives the school community a say in the budget, engaging everyone in democratic decision making. Activities were also pursued to promote open government at local level, based on the principles of transparency, accountability and citizen participation.

In May and June 2025, the Congress organised a series of online capacity development webinars on "Deliberative democracy and citizens' assemblies: innovations for civic participation", intended for Ukrainian public authorities as well as local experts and representatives of civil society. This was part of ongoing efforts to strengthen local capacities for the organisation of three citizens' assemblies in Ukraine in 2025–2026.

In October 2025, on the sidelines of the [49th session](#) in Strasbourg, the Congress signed bilateral memorandums of understanding with the Ukrainian cities of Kyiv, Lviv and Rivne for the organisation of citizens' assemblies in 2025 and 2026. Opening the signing ceremony, Congress President Marc Cools stressed that the decision of the three cities to organise [citizens' assemblies](#) demonstrated extraordinary leadership and courage, as it showed that even under the most difficult circumstances, the voices of citizens must continue to be heard.



After the signature of bilateral memorandums of understanding

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In their successive speeches, Mayor of Kyiv Vitaliy Klitschko, Mayor of Lviv Andriy Sadovyi as well as Acting Mayor of Rivne and Secretary of the City Council Viktor Shakyrzian underlined that [deliberative democracy](#) will enable local residents to have a say in important decisions for their cities. They stressed that enabling local decision making is even more important during wartime, where local elections cannot be held.

New Congress project and the Register of Damage for Ukraine

On 4 June 2025 in Kyiv, the Congress launched its new project, *Strengthening Multilevel Governance and Local Democracy to Support Ukraine's Recovery*, followed by a high-level round table with national associations of local and regional authorities on the [Register of Damage Caused by the Aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine](#).

The new project seeks to strengthen Ukraine's multilevel governance and local democracy during the war and post-war period by improving legal frameworks, enhancing the quality of local and regional governance, and promoting democratic innovations based on human rights and open government principles.

Congress President Marc Cools underlined that the project's long-term objective "is not to rebuild what was there before, but to build back better: more inclusive, more transparent, more democratic."

The launch of the new Congress project was followed by a discussion with local authorities and national associations on the progress and outreach of the Register of Damage, a mechanism created to document and support claims for compensation. "Local authorities are key to ensuring the Register reaches every community affected by the war," said on this occasion Mélanie Lepoutier (France, ILDG), Deputy Standing Rapporteur on Human Rights of the Congress.

INTERNATIONAL CLAIMS COMMISSION FOR UKRAINE

On 16 December 2025, Congress President Marc Cools welcomed the opening for signature of a new convention establishing an International Claims Commission for Ukraine as a concrete fulfilment of the commitments made at the Reykjavik Summit in 2023. Addressing a diplomatic conference organised by the Council of Europe and the Netherlands in The Hague, he stressed that the Congress remained on the front line of implementing the commitments made to Ukraine, together with local authorities and Ukrainian communities, mindful of their vital role in resistance, resilience and the establishment of truth.

"We are working closely with more than 1,600 Ukrainian local authorities and their representative associations. They provide a critical network for disseminating information about the Register of Damage for Ukraine, making it known and raising awareness of its practical and historical importance. This is an essential prerequisite for the Claims Commission to rule on claims and to establish the connection with breaches of international law. Building this process from the local to the international level is the only way to guarantee that victims will one day be able to access justice and reparation," he said.

HIGH-LEVEL VISITS TO UKRAINE

A high-level Congress delegation led by President Marc Cools met President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy, in Kyiv on 6 June. President Cools reaffirmed that the Congress was proud to be helping Ukraine to preserve local democracy during Russia's war of aggression against the country. "Showing democratic resilience by improving citizens' daily lives and strengthening their trust in public institutions, having strong and vibrant communities is the best answer to those who want to destroy Ukraine," stressed the Congress President on this occasion, adding that the work done at local level, democratic innovation and active citizenship showed the world that the European democratic spirit, values and identity are thriving in Ukraine and that despite the war and destruction the Ukrainian spirit and identity remained strong.

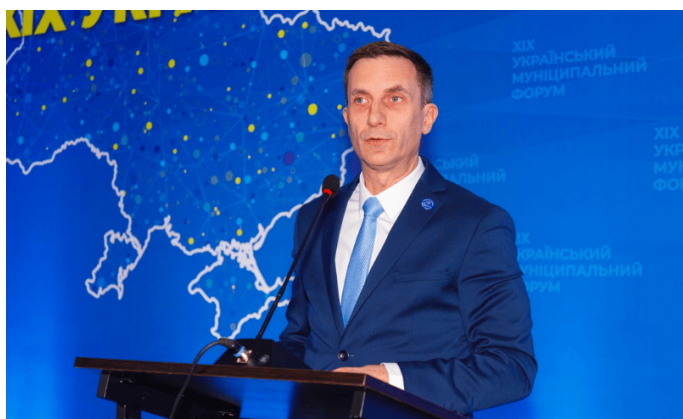


Volodymyr Zelenskyy handing an award to Congress President Marc Cools

On the same day, President Zelenskyy and President Cools opened the 3rd International Summit of Cities and Regions in Kyiv. Organised under the patronage of the President of Ukraine, the Summit brought together local, regional, national and international leaders to discuss Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction, with a focus on the role of local self-government in building democratic, inclusive and resilient communities. The Congress President praised the commitment of local leaders to transparency, service delivery and community

engagement despite the ongoing Russian aggression. In the framework of the Summit, the delegation held meetings with key Ukrainian stakeholders to exchange on multilevel governance, the protection of human rights at local level, and priorities for decentralisation and public administration reform in the context of Ukraine's EU accession process and post-war recovery.

Cecilia Dalman Eek, Congress Vice-President and President of its Chamber of Regions, participated in Ukraine's National Forum on Resilience and Good Governance in Kyiv on 20 November 2025. In her address, she highlighted the Congress's continued support for Ukraine's reforms in multilevel governance and for strengthening the resilience of local and regional authorities, and outlined the current priorities of co-operation in Ukraine for policy development. The Forum brought together more than 800 participants representing Ukraine's local communities, central, regional and subregional authorities, international organisations, civil society organisations and expert community. During her visit, Vice-President Dalman Eek held meetings to discuss the role of regional and subregional levels in completing the decentralisation reform with leaders of the Ukrainian Association of Rayon and Oblast Councils – including its President, Tetiana Yehorova-Lutsenko – as well as with Oleksiy Riabkyn, Deputy Minister for Communities and Territories Development.



Mathieu Mori, Congress Secretary General, at the AUC Municipal Forum

On 9 December 2025 in Kyiv, Congress Secretary General Mathieu Mori addressed the Municipal Forum organised by the Association of Ukrainian Cities (AUC), highlighting the importance of rooting local autonomy in good democratic governance based on transparency, accountability, clear ethical standards and inclusive participatory processes. "Today, the Congress and Ukraine are no longer just partners in reform – we are partners in recovery and reconstruction. A strong Ukraine requires strong municipalities, and years of decentralisation reform is exactly what saved your country in the early days of the invasion.

Because you had the autonomy to act, you could react fast. For nearly four years, you have been the first line of defence. You have proven to the world that local self-government is not just a system of administration: it is the backbone of national resilience," he said, adding that reconstruction was about rebuilding communities with their citizens, not only for them.

Speaking on 10 December at the International Human Rights Conference "Lessons from Ukraine for the World: New Challenges in the Field of Human Rights", organised in Kyiv by Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights Dmytro Lubinets, the Congress Secretary General called for operationalising a human rights-based approach at the municipal level, ensuring that vulnerable groups were systematically included in planning and design, and that accountability mechanisms, such as the Register of Damage, were accessible and non-discriminatory. "When we talk about the right to housing, health, education, or water and sanitation, we are speaking of services managed and delivered by local and regional authorities. As Ukraine moves forward, reconstruction, anti-corruption, and the alignment with European environmental and social standards represent the new frontiers for human rights implementation in the process of EU accession. The Congress aims to support you in this endeavour," he said.

ASSISTANCE WITH DECENTRALISATION REFORM

From 1 September 2024 to 1 September 2025 – despite new challenges and volatile situation due to the Russian Federation's war of aggression – the Council of Europe and its Congress, through its [Centre of Expertise for Multilevel Governance](#) (CEMG), has helped Ukraine achieve progress in the following areas:

- ▶ **Concept of the decentralisation reform** as a central element of Ukraine's efforts to fulfil the requirements of EU accession: following the Council of Europe [analysis](#), the Ministry for Development of Communities elaborated proposals for updating this umbrella Concept and carried out [public consultations](#) on the draft in September-October 2025;
- ▶ **Division of competences** between the state and local self-government and amongst their tiers: in June 2025 the CEMG facilitated "Strasbourg format" in-camera negotiations among the Ukrainian stakeholders that led to a consensual conclusions document on principles (concept) of the division of competences;

- **Local democracy and public consultations:** three key laws were adopted or signed or came into force, thus broadening opportunities for citizens' meaningful and direct engagement in policy and decision-making processes even under martial law. The CEMG provided its legal and policy advice on the matter, for example, [contributed](#) to elaboration of the law on local democracy since 2021.



In August 2025, Ukraine's Ministry for Development of Communities [published](#) the draft revised Decentralisation Reform Concept and launched a included three regional public consultations (in Odesa and in Poltava in September and in Lviv in October), organised with Congress support. The final draft report on the conducted consultations was presented in Kyiv on 10 October 2025.

In December, Congress President Marc Cools welcomed Ukraine's government new resolution to revamp the Decentralisation

Reform Concept, reflecting on the [decision](#) taken by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine on 12 December 2025. The new resolution complemented the basic reform document – the Concept of 2014 – by adapting its implementation in view of the progress achieved by 2022, the current EU integration process, and wartime challenges. In response to a request from the government, the Centre of Expertise will further assist in 2026 in designing an Action Plan to implement the updated Concept, defining specific actions, deadlines and responsible parties.

HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL DIALOGUE FOR POST-WAR RECOVERY AND RECONSTRUCTION

The fourth session of the High-Level Dialogue on Good Democratic Governance in Ukraine took place on 3–4 July 2025 in Lviv to discuss progress and agree on further actions to improve the legal framework on multilevel governance and elections.

Organised with the Congress' lead, the event brought together key Ukrainian stakeholders and the Council of Europe. The Ukrainian delegation headed by First Deputy Speaker of the Ukrainian Parliament Oleksandr Korniyenko included Parliament members representing different political parties and factions/groups, including members of the Parliamentary Committee on State Building, Local Governance, Regional and Urban Development; senior officials from the Ministry for Communities and Territorial Development, including Deputy Minister Oleksiy Riabykin; representatives of the Central Election Commission led by its Chair Oleh Didenko; representatives of the four associations of local authorities, including Tetiana Yehorova-Lutsenko, President of the Ukrainian Association of Rayon and Oblast Councils, and Oleksandr Korinnyi, Chair of the Association of Amalgamated Territorial Communities, as well as senior representatives of the Association of Ukrainian Cities and All-Ukrainian Association of Communities.

Participants highlighted the progress made in respect of strengthening the multilevel governance system in Ukraine, focusing on the update of the Decentralisation Reform Concept in light of wartime realities and EU integration, division of competences between the different levels of government, recovery of local self-government in de-occupied and frontline territories – including the transition from military to civilian administration – and the issue of the term of office of mandates of local elected representatives under martial law. They also underlined the importance of consulting local and regional authorities, their associations and civil society, insofar as possible, in policy and decision-making process.

The Dialogue provided a platform for a forward-looking and inclusive exchange on the legal and institutional preconditions for conducting democratic post-war elections in Ukraine. Ukrainian legislators, the Central Election Commission, and representatives of civil society and expert community engaged in constructive discussions on constitutional and legal preconditions for future elections, including related to the transitional period, necessary for calling, organising and conducting post-war elections. Participants explored further possible steps to improve the current electoral legislation in light of possible legal mechanisms and practical measures to ensure the integrity, inclusiveness, and security of the post-war electoral process.

UKRAINE RECOVERY CONFERENCE 2025: CONGRESS CONTRIBUTION

A high-level Congress delegation led by President Marc Cools took part in the Ukraine Recovery Conference (URC 2025) in Rome on 10-11 July 2025. Addressing the conference, President Cools pointed out that strategic recovery demanded a multilevel governance model where local authorities are not merely service providers, but co-architects of policy and reconstruction. He underlined that Ukraine's recovery was not just about rebuilding cities, but about reaffirming a democratic European identity and that local governance was the foundation upon which that identity is built, adding that the values of the European Charter of Local Self-Government must be embedded in reconstruction laws and decentralisation reform, and that recovery must also be rooted in social cohesion – in the ability of communities to heal, rebuild trust, and forge inclusive futures.

In October, the Congress' Governance Committee approved a Strategy for the recovery and reconstruction of Ukraine at local and regional levels. The Strategy outlines the main challenges and priorities of the reconstruction process, taking account of decentralisation reform and of the differing realities and capacities of Ukraine's regions. It points the way to rebuilding Ukraine from the local level up and advocates the highest democratic standards, underpinned by effective multilevel governance, as the country moves forward in its EU accession process. The Strategy will be submitted for adoption at the Congress session in March 2026.

On 27 November in Lviv, Congress Co-rapporteur on Recovery and Reconstruction in Ukraine Amelie Tarschys-Ingre (Sweden, ILDG) presented the Strategy at the Conference dedicated to the follow-up to URC 2025 and planning of the next Conference, to take place in Poland in 2026. "The Ukraine Recovery Conference 2025 sent a clear message: recovery is not only a national endeavour, but a shared European project rooted in partnership, subsidiarity and trust. The unprecedented participation of local and regional leaders demonstrated that reconstruction cannot be driven solely by national governments but must be shaped by those who know their territories and their citizens best," she said.

49TH SESSION: DEBATE AND DECLARATION ON A LASTING PEACE IN UKRAINE

On 28 October 2025, at its [49th session](#), the Congress underlined that Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction cannot wait for the end of the war. In a debate marked by powerful interventions from Ukrainian leaders, the Congress reaffirmed its solidarity with the people of Ukraine and its commitment to supporting local authorities who continue to deliver services, rebuild communities, and defend European values in the face of the ongoing Russian aggression.

In a Declaration entitled "Ukraine: Towards a Just Peace", presented by Martine Dieschburg-Nickels (Luxembourg, L, ILDG) and Gunn-Marit Helgesen (Norway, R, EPP/CCE), the Congress reaffirmed its unwavering commitment to the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine within its internationally recognised borders. The Congress condemned once again the fact that the Russian Federation's war of aggression against Ukraine continued to cause the mass loss of innocent lives and human suffering, as well as the targeted destruction of cultural heritage and of vital infrastructure, which represented human rights violations unprecedented in recent European history.

The Declaration commended the work of Ukraine's local and regional authorities to ensure the provision of emergency support and the functioning of public services, as well as the support provided by subnational authorities from other member states. Recognising that accountability will be required for a just peace, the Congress reaffirmed its commitment to supporting local and regional authorities in Ukraine to contribute to the work of the Register of Damage. The Congress also emphasised that a Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine will be an important element of justice.

The Congress underlined that work on the recovery and reconstruction of Ukraine must not wait for the agreement of a just peace but is already underway now and should continue to be implemented at local and regional levels – including the work done by local and regional authorities to ensure the ongoing provision of vital public services such as housing, transport and the supply of water and energy. In this regard, the Declaration reiterated that the further decentralisation of power in Ukraine will underpin more efficient recovery and reconstruction, welcoming the process on decentralisation reform currently underway with Congress support. The Declaration also underlined the importance of "rebuilding better" by establishing long-term and predictable funding mechanisms to support local and regional authorities in Ukraine as they lead recovery and reconstruction efforts.

Oleksii Kuleba, Ukraine's Deputy Prime Minister for the Restoration and Minister for Development of Communities and Territories, participating in the debate online, thanked the Congress and its members for their steadfast solidarity. "Russia is trying to push us into darkness before the winter comes," he warned, noting that over 100 attacks on energy infrastructure had occurred since the start of the year. He highlighted the crucial role of co-operation between local and central authorities, and the support of international partners, to overcome war-related challenges. He further stressed that frozen Russian assets must be used for the reconstruction of Ukraine.



Vitaliy Klitschko, Mayor of Kyiv, at the 49th Congress Session

Vitaliy Klitschko, Mayor of Kyiv and President of the Association of Ukrainian Cities, called for unity and continued European support. The mayor described the severe impact of the war on municipalities, recalling that 55 mayors had been kidnapped since the invasion, and called for continued co-operation between European cities to rebuild infrastructure and strengthen democracy. "Peace and stability in Europe depend on Ukraine's strength. Inside our country we must remain united and do everything in our hands to defend our shared European values and achieve a just peace. But we need your help," he underlined.

Mayor of Lviv Andriy Sadovyi focused on the resilience of Ukraine's local communities and the central role of education in rebuilding the nation. He highlighted initiatives such as the [UNBROKEN University](#) and the [Ukrainian Leadership Academy](#), created to train the new generation of specialists for Ukraine's recovery. "Education is key for the development of Ukraine after the war," Sadovyi affirmed. "We must build our victory together," he added.

Assisting member states to develop good governance

From May to December 2025, the Centre of Expertise for Multilevel Governance at the Congress (CEMG) supported reforms, promoted Council of Europe standards, and helped develop capacities of local government actors across more than 15 member States.

Under the Maltese Presidency of the Committee of Ministers, a high-level conference addressed questions of multilevel environmental governance and recommended that the Congress pursue preparation of a draft additional protocol to the European Charter of Local Self-Government on environmental protection at the local level.

The Centre contributed directly to high-level policy and legislative processes. In the Republic of Moldova, a study on decentralised public services informed public administration reform, and a report on human rights at the local level prepared by the CEMG was presented at the national Human Rights Forum in Bălți. The Centre also supported the development of the first Open Government Action Plan with civil society making public participation in decision-making an integral part of this initiative. In addition, eight local authorities in the Republic of Moldova formalised their commitment to strengthening inclusive and participatory local governance, by signing Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) with the Congress in December 2025.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the CEMG supported cooperation between the associations of local authorities from the Federation and Republika Srpska, enabling them to deliver joint recommendations on legislative proposals. In Serbia, in collaboration with the Ministry of Public Administration, the CEMG is helping strengthen local governance by creating a nationwide performance appraisal framework for municipal staff.

In Armenia, local stakeholders have actively contributed to the development of a new draft law on local self-government. CEMG support to municipalities hosting refugees from the Karabakh region enabled them to adopt crisis-preparedness strategies. Upskilling courses organised for women to facilitate their economic empowerment and social integration, helped transform refugees from beneficiaries of assistance to actors of local economic development.

New accreditations to implement the European Label of Governance Excellence (ELOGE) were given to five associations of local authorities, and CEMG grants help launch or revitalise processes in Armenia, Romania, Malta, Hungary, Türkiye, Italy and Spain, while Cyprus held its first ELOGE award ceremony.

The CEMG also used the Open Government Partnership (OGP) Global Summit in Vitoria-Gasteiz (Spain) as a platform to share positive experiences of open government and citizen participation through CEMG support in Croatia, France, the Republic of Moldova and Bosnia and Herzegovina, helping to connect local experience with pan-European agendas. In an event organised on 10 October as part of the Summit, elected representatives of Armenian, Moldovan and Ukrainian local authorities shared good practices on transparency, accountability, and citizen participation with peers and civil society of Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans. The mayor of Leova (Republic of Moldova), the mayors of Orzhytsia and Chuhuiv and the deputy mayors of Zviahel, Khmelnytskyi and Vinnytsia (Ukraine) presented key processes and results that have nurtured a democratic culture in their communities, including through digitalisation of municipal services, participatory budgeting, citizens' assemblies, youth engagement, and inclusion of displaced persons in decision making. They highlighted that co-creating local initiatives and reforms with citizens increased the ownership of locally-led processes, boosted participation and ultimately raised trust in the public authority, helping to bolster democracy and fight mis- and disinformation.

Monitoring local and regional democracy

Between May and December 2025, the Congress carried out monitoring missions to assess the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in Lithuania and Monaco, and observed local elections in [Kosovo](#)^{*1}, [Estonia](#), [North Macedonia](#) and [San Marino](#), as well as regional elections in [Republika Srpska](#) (Bosnia and Herzegovina).

At its October session, the Congress adopted recommendations following its monitoring of the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in [Greece](#), the [Republic of Moldova](#), [Poland](#) and [Slovenia](#). The Congress also adopted recommendations following its observation of county and municipal elections in [Finland](#) and State elections in [Hamburg, Germany](#).



Further to its recommendation and resolution on the [situation of local and regional democracy in Georgia](#), adopted in March 2025, the Congress continued to follow with great concern political developments in the country.

On 1 July, the Congress President deplored deteriorating political climate in Georgia, with the arrests of opposition leaders which seriously hindered the possibility of dialogue between the country's political forces, and the decision by eight opposition parties to boycott local elections in October 2025. The President regretted that the conditions for meaningful participation in the local elections in a trust-based environment had still not been met, and urged Georgian authorities to stop persecution of the opposition and enter into political dialogue at all levels of government.

A Congress delegation carried out a fact-finding visit to Georgia on 24 and 25 September to assess the impact of the current political situation on local authorities, with particular attention to the upcoming local elections scheduled for 4 October 2025. The delegation met the Chairperson of the Central Election Commission, the First-Deputy Public Defender and the First Deputy Chairperson of the Parliamentary Committee on Regional Policy and Self-Government, as well as representatives of media, NGOs and political parties. It also exchanged views with members of the national delegation of Georgia to the Congress and representatives of the National Association of Local Authorities of Georgia.

Following the visit, in their statements of 6 October and 30 October, Congress Rapporteurs on the situation of local democracy in Georgia Bernd Vöhringer (Germany, EPP/CCE) and Stewart Dickson (United Kingdom, ILDG) deplored the fact that for the first time in decades, the Congress was not invited to observe local elections in Georgia, held on 4 October 2025, and regretted that the Georgian authorities had ignored repeated calls to return to democratic election standards and restore the conditions necessary for holding free and fair elections. They also condemned the decision by members of the Georgian Parliament to appeal to the Constitutional Court to ban three key opposition forces in the country, stressing that democracy at all levels of government could not exist without political pluralism and effective opposition. "We are alarmed that the foundations of Georgian democracy are being progressively dismantled," the Rapporteurs said.

In an earlier statement, on 29 August, Stewart Dickson in his capacity as Chair of the Council for Democratic Elections deplored the decision of the Georgian authorities to freeze the accounts of several leading non-governmental organisations in Georgia – including the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) – accusing them of "sabotage" and aiding hostile foreign activity.

1. **All reference to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.*

The Congress continued to follow closely the situation of local democracy in Türkiye marked by the dismissals and arrests of mayors and their replacement by appointed government trustees, which was repeatedly condemned by the Congress since November 2024, and in particular in its Declaration adopted in March 2025.



On 23-25 June 2025, the Congress carried out a second fact-finding visit to Türkiye. Congress President Marc Cools and co-rapporteur on local democracy in this country Bryony Rudkin (UK, SOC/G/PD) met dismissed or suspended local elected representatives of the opposition – in particular Abdullah Zeydan, co-mayor of Van, and Hasan Akgün, mayor of the Istanbul district of Büyükçekmece – both Congress members who were placed in detention – as well as the co-Chair and representatives of the Dem Party in Ankara, and the chair of the Republican People’s Party (CHP) branch of the Youth association in Istanbul, who was under investigation for posting a public video on his social networks. These local elected representatives were calling for an international support in the face of the continuing waves of arrests, dismissals or suspensions of mayors and local councillors; the delegation reaffirmed its support to them on behalf of the Congress, calling the situation “a confiscation of the will of the people”.

Meeting in Strasbourg on 3 July, the Congress’ Monitoring Committee deplored the sharply increased pattern of arrests, dismissals and suspensions targeting opposition mayors and councillors in Türkiye, which now included former Congress Vice-President and former Mayor of Izmir Tunç Soyer who was also detained. The Committee expressed its deep concern about the continued judicial harassment of local elected politicians from the opposition, including through prolonged pre-trial detention, and called for the immediate release of all local leaders who had been incarcerated.

In an 11 July statement, the Congress President deplored the continued purge of opposition mayors in Türkiye, with the suspension from office of 15 more mayors – adding to almost 150 mayors dismissed and, in many cases, detained since 2016. “This action undermines democracy and denies millions of people a democratic voice in Türkiye. In March, the Congress called on the Turkish authorities to stop prosecuting and detaining elected representatives from opposition parties; release current detainees, including Mayor of the country’s largest city, Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu; guarantee the rights of the defence and refrain from making extensive use of pre-trial detention when clear evidence of reasonable suspicion is missing. I reiterate this call and urge the Turkish authorities to abide by the principles of the European Charter of Local Self-Government which Türkiye ratified in 1992,” he said.

On 6 August, the President condemned the arrest and detention in Ankara of the Congress youth delegate in respect of Türkiye, Enes Hocoğulları. “The arrest and charges in question, based on words spoken by a Congress youth delegate during a plenary sitting of the Congress, flout the fundamental right to free

expression – a cornerstone of democracy in Europe and one of the core rights protected by the European Convention on Human Rights which Türkiye is committed to respect as a member state of the Council of Europe. They also amount to unacceptable, direct reprisals against an individual for their legitimate participation in the work of the Council of Europe,” he said, urging the Turkish authorities to drop all charges against Enes Hocaoğulları and to release him immediately.

A Congress delegation visited the youth delegate in detention on 5 September, as part of a fact-finding mission to Ankara. In a statement made at the end of the visit, the Congress President, Congress Spokesperson on Youth Véronique Bertholle (France, SOC/G/PD) and Deputy Standing Rapporteur on Human Rights Peter Drenth (Netherlands, EPP/CCE) stressed that the charges against him – for “publicly disseminating misleading information” – related specifically to a speech he made during a plenary debate held by the Congress in Strasbourg on 27 March 2025, on dismissals of mayors in Türkiye.



Enes Hocaoğulları

“As a Congress youth delegate and a human rights defender, he spoke in the context of a pluralistic debate in which members of all the major political parties in Türkiye also took the floor. We wish to stress that the activities of Enes Hocaoğulları as a human rights defender and as a Congress youth delegate are protected by international human rights law, including the European Convention on Human Rights,” the delegation pointed out, adding that according to the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights, criminalising the legitimate exercise of free speech had a chilling effect as it weakened democracy and affected

society as a whole. “Silencing youth is silencing democracy itself. We hope that justice will prevail, that all charges will be dropped, and that Enes Hocaoğulları will be immediately released,” the statement said. The delegation also expressed its appreciation for the exchanges with the authorities, political parties and representatives of civil society during the visit, including the open discussion with Deputy Minister of Justice Hurşit Yıldırım.

Following the trial’s first hearing on 8 September, the Congress President welcomed the court’s decision to end the youth delegate’s detention and release him under judicial control until the end of the trial. President Cools reiterated the call on the Turkish authorities to drop all charges against Enes.

Upholding human rights and the rule of law in municipalities and regions

Congress Standing Rapporteur on Human Rights Gudrun Mosler-Törnström (Austria, SOC/G/PD) and Deputy Standing Rapporteurs Mélanie Lepoutier (France, ILDG) and Peter Drenth (Netherlands, EPP/CCE) carried out four study visits to international and national human rights institutions in France, Austria, Switzerland and Sweden.

The aim of the visits was to gain a better understanding of the work and activities of the organisations and institutions visited, and to impulse synergies, multilevel cooperation, and political dialogue to encourage the promotion and protection of human rights at local and regional levels, as mandated by the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe member States at their 4th Summit in Reykjavik in May 2023.

The latest study visit, to Lund and Stockholm (Sweden) in November 2025, included exchange of views with human rights authorities, experts and stakeholders from the Raoul Wallenberg Institute, the Civil Rights Defenders, Human Rights Watch, the city of Stockholm and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR). The Rapporteurs presented the Congress human rights strategy, adopted in 2024, which aims to:

- ▶ Integrate and mainstream human rights in all Congress work;
- ▶ Promote a culture of human rights at local and regional level, and
- ▶ Facilitate greater cooperation between local, regional, national and international authorities, to achieve better compliance with the European Convention on Human Rights.

From left to right: Standing Rapporteur on Human Rights Gudrun Mosler-Törnström (Austria, SOC/G/PD) and Deputy Standing Rapporteurs Peter Drenth (Netherlands, EPP/CCE) and Mélanie Lepoutier (France, ILDG) during their visit at the Raoul Wallenberg Institute



From left to right: Standing Rapporteur on Human Rights Gudrun Mosler-Törnström (Austria, SOC/G/PD) and Deputy Standing Rapporteurs Peter Drenth (Netherlands, EPP/CCE) and Mélanie Lepoutier (France, ILDG) during their visit at the Raoul Wallenberg Institute

In their statement on the occasion of Human Rights Day (10 December), the Rapporteurs reaffirmed the Congress' determination to confront any attempt to erode the essential rights on which Europe is built. "Protecting human rights is our shared duty, to every citizen, in every municipality and region, every day", they said, stressing that the rights protected by the European Convention on Human Rights and the European Social Charter were non-negotiable and formed the foundation of peace and stability on our continent and are our everyday essentials.

"Safeguarding "our everyday essentials" requires an unwavering commitment to human rights that define Europe, and a determination to defend these rights wherever they are under threat, particularly at local and regional levels. Defending human rights is inseparable from defending democracy. The Council of Europe's New Democratic Pact for Europe rightly places human rights at the heart of democratic renewal, reminding us that democratic institutions cannot exist without the rights that give them meaning," stated the Congress Rapporteurs.

Also on 10 December, Gudrun Mosler-Törnström took part in the Human Rights and Equality Forum in Bălți, Republic of Moldova, organised by the People's Advocate (Ombudsperson), the Council for Preventing and Eliminating Discrimination and Ensuring Equality, the Council of Europe and international partners. She pointed out that many human rights' violations could be prevented early if local and regional authorities were involved, drawing attention to their still underestimated role in protecting human rights. The Forum served to promote a new Congress report "Human Rights at the Local Level in the Republic of Moldova", focused on the localisation of human rights and strengthening human rights-based governance at the local level in the country.

FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY AND ASSOCIATION

Ahead of the organisation of Budapest Pride, Congress Standing Rapporteur on Human Rights Gudrun Mosler-Törnström (Austria, SOC/G/PD) visited the Hungarian capital to express Congress support to Mayor of Budapest Gergely Karácsony for city's decision to allow Budapest Pride on 28 June 2025, despite the national ban on Pride and similar events in Hungary. Meeting with the Mayor on 27 June, she welcomed his firm stance against restricting the human rights of LGBTIQ+ persons.

"Budapest is a city that chooses to respect the rights and fundamental freedoms of its citizens," underlined the Standing Rapporteur, adding that national constitutions and legislation cannot be used to force local authorities to violate human rights. She pointed out that cities which implement LGBTIQ-inclusive policies benefit from a higher degree of trust and better relationships between communities. "All local and regional authorities need to recognise that LGBTIQ+ persons are an integral part of the community the authorities serve," stressed the Standing Rapporteur.



On 28 October 2025, during its 49th session, the Congress held a debate on freedom of peaceful assembly, with Mayor of Budapest Gergely Karacsony and United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of peaceful assembly and association Gina Romero as guest speakers.

The Mayor of Budapest denounced the recentralisation in Hungary since 2010, marked by a reduction in the autonomy of local authorities and increased financial pressure in a context of restrictions on the activities of NGOs. He cited Pride 2025, organised by the municipality despite bans, as ‘an act of civic resistance’. This initiative showed that local authorities, allied with civil society, can protect the ‘small circles of freedom’ referred to by Hungarian thinker István Bibó in 1956.

The UN Special Rapporteur alerted the Congress to the growing repression of peaceful demonstrations in several Council of Europe member states, often justified on security grounds or based on anti-terrorism laws. She referred to the criminalisation of environmental, pro-Palestinian and LGBTQI movements, as well as increased digital surveillance of activists. She emphasised the active role of local authorities in protecting this fundamental right, facilitating dialogue with citizens and ensuring transparency and democratic trust.

The debate also highlighted the diversity of situations in Europe: the adoption of laws restricting assemblies, as well as measures limiting foreign funding of NGOs and threatening freedom of expression and assembly. Some speakers pointed out that freedom of assembly must be protected even for those with differing opinions, and warned against the shrinking of public space and the difficulty citizens face in accessing places of assembly.

These discussions emphasised that freedom of peaceful assembly is the cornerstone of local and European democracy and that local authorities are key players, acting as a link between citizens and institutions that preserves the vitality and democratic resilience of the continent.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

In a [Declaration](#) adopted on 28 October 2025, during its [49th session](#), the Congress expressed its deep concern at the increasing numbers of local and regional elected representatives who had been placed in detention in Council of Europe member States in recent years, most of whom belonging to parties that are not in the majority at national level.

Presenting the Declaration, Véronique Bertholle (France, SOC/G/PD) and Peter Drenth (Netherlands, EPP/CCE) emphasised the particular importance of guaranteeing pluralism and the right to freedom of expression in democratic societies. They welcomed the commitment expressed by the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe member States at their 4th Summit, in Reykjavik in May 2023, to strengthening democracy and good governance at all levels throughout Europe, and to protecting the rule of law and human rights as enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights.

The Declaration drew attention to the established case-law of the European Court of Human Rights, according to which the promotion of free political debate is an important feature of a democratic society, and which recognises that freedom of expression is of the highest importance in this context. The Congress urged all Council of Europe member states to respect fully the standards of the European Convention on Human Rights, including those concerning freedom of expression, and emphasised in particular that criminal proceedings should never be used as reprisals against persons expressing views contrary to those of the authorities.

On the eve of the session, on 27 October 2025, Congress Rapporteur on the freedom of expression and assembly of LGBTI persons Helen Belcher (United Kingdom, ILDG) spoke at the launch of the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers’ recommendation on equal rights for intersex persons and the kick-off of the #EuropeGoesPurple campaign, in Strasbourg.



“This is an historic recommendation, the first international instrument to comprehensively address the human rights of intersex people, a group whose rights and needs are regularly overlooked,” she said, adding that the recommendation marked a turning point, not only for national governments, but also for local and regional authorities, who are on the front-line when it comes to implementing policies in relevant areas such as healthcare and education.

“Subnational authorities can provide training for local health professionals, or ensure pathways for psychological and peer support for intersex youth and their families. They can work with schools to embed inclusive curricula and establish anti-bullying policies while also promoting training for teachers and school staff to recognise and address bias or exclusion,” Ms Belcher explained, adding that intersex people often lacked visibility in public life, policy-making and human rights protection in many communities across Europe, while regularly facing considerable challenges.

<p>Freedom of expression was also the subject of a new Congress publication issued at the end of 2025 and entitled “Freedom of expression: What can local and regional politicians do?”.</p>	
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CITIES AND REGIONS AS GUARANTORS OF THE RULE OF LAW

On 30 October 2025, the Congress adopted a resolution to strengthen the application of the rule of law at local and regional level. The resolution, which refers, among other things, to the European Charter of Local Self-Government and the Reykjavik Declaration, as well as to previous Congress resolutions and strategies on human rights, marks an important turning point with the adoption of a Strategy on the Rule of Law at Local and Regional Level (2025-2028).

According to rapporteur Stewart Dickson (United Kingdom, ILDG), this presented a comprehensive approach to guide the Congress in promoting the rule of law at local and regional level based on two reciprocal axes: strengthening the role of local authorities as guarantors of the rule of law and promoting the rule of law as a guarantor of local autonomy. In concrete terms, this means respecting the decisions of national courts, but also those of the European Court of Human Rights, establishing transparent procedures for public procurement, anti-corruption tools, citizen consultations and educational programmes on citizens’ rights and duties. The resolution called for updating the Venice Commission’s List of Criteria for the Rule of Law, incorporating a local and regional perspective.

The debate highlighted a series of serious problems related to the violation of the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary, while raising the question of the application of the rule of law at local level in a country at war such as Ukraine.

Co-operation with Belarusian democratic forces

The Congress, as an active member of the Council of Europe's Contact Group on Cooperation with Belarusian Democratic Forces and Civil Society, has been entrusted to implement **activities focusing on political support to the Belarusian democratic forces** and on the **provision of capacity development and expertise to support the preparation of reforms and related legislation on local democracy, good governance and decentralisation of power**, based on the principles enshrined in the European Charter of Local Self-Government.



On 29 October 2025, on the sidelines of its [49th session](#), the Congress organised a side event *"When passports become weapons: Local authorities' response to transnational repression against Belarusians abroad"*. The objective was to initiate a process towards the localisation of the landmark [Resolution 2499 \(2023\)](#) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) on "Addressing the specific challenges faced by the Belarusians in exile (known as the "Luxembourg Solutions")".

The panel discussion addressed the growing challenge for local and regional authorities across Europe since 2023 when dealing with Belarusians in exile, after the authoritarian regime in Belarus ceased key consular services for its citizens abroad – thus transforming passports into weapons of transnational repression. This policy forces Belarusians who stand for democracy into an impossible choice: return to Belarus and face credible threats of imprisonment, or remain in exile and be stripped of their legal identity.

Opening the event, Cecilia Dalman-Eek (Sweden, SOC/G/PD), Congress Vice-President and Rapporteur for a Democratic Belarus, highlighted that "Belarusians in exile are not economic migrants but political exiles seeking safety from an authoritarian regime". She was joined by Iryna Khalopitsa, Head of the delegation of the Belarusian Democratic Forces to the Congress, who underlined the urgent need for multilevel co-operation between local, regional and national authorities, as well as with Belarusian democratic forces' institutions, Belarusian diaspora, and human rights organisations to protect local residents.

The discussion featured Alana Gebremariam, Belarusian pro-democracy activist and former political prisoner; Alexandra Mamaeva, Head of the delegation of the Belarusian Democratic Forces to PACE and Co-ordinator at the People's Embassies of Belarus, and Tatiana Termacic, Head of Secretariat of the PACE Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons. They shared personal testimonies and practical examples of how municipalities can support Belarusian residents facing translational repression in Council of Europe member states.

“When passports become weapons, local and regional authorities have the responsibility to act as shields to protect human rights,” concluded Congress Director Claudia Luciani who moderated the event.

On 8-10 December 2025, Cecilia Dalman Eek carried out a study visit in Poland to assess the situation of Belarusian democratic forces (BDF) and civil society in exile and their co-operation with local and regional authorities. The mission focused on the challenges faced by Belarusians forced to leave their country, the role of the diaspora, and the impact of transnational repression.

In Gdańsk, the Rapporteur met with city authorities to learn about inclusive local policies, including the Model for Equal Treatment and the Immigrant Integration Model. Visits to the Dolna Brama Centre, the Immigrants Support Centre and the European Solidarity Centre highlighted participatory practices and local support mechanisms for migrants and refugees, including members of the Belarusian diaspora. Ms Dalman Eek also met with representatives of local Belarusian NGOs.

In Warsaw, the Rapporteur had a meeting with Tomasz Cytrynowicz, Head of the Office for Foreigners of Poland, to discuss legalisation aspects of Belarusians in Poland. She also met with representatives of the Belarusian democratic forces, including Pavel Latushka, Deputy Head of the United Transitional Cabinet of Belarus; Arstiom Brukhan, Speaker of the Coordination Council; Iryna Khalopitsa, Head of the BDF deputation to the Congress; Yury Hubarevich, Head of the Personnel Reserve; and Anatol Liabedzka, Advisor to BDF Leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya on Constitutional Reform and Parliamentary Cooperation and member of the Association of Local Council Deputies.

The Rapporteur held a series of meetings with the Belarusian civil society, including the Belarusian Association of Political Prisoners “Da Voli”, the Free Belarus Centre, the “with Belarus Beehive” Association, the Institute for Development and Social Market in Belarus and Eastern Europe, and the Belarusian National Youth Council.

Discussions addressed political prisoners in Belarus, legalisation procedures for Belarusians in Poland, and documentation of human rights violations committed by the Lukashenka regime. The mission concluded with a Roundtable on Local Self-Government and Democratic Transition to a New Belarus, which brought together BDF experts and representatives to discuss legislative aspects of decentralisation, local democracy and a future roadmap for democratic transition, including the future local self-government system. The Roundtable served to present the findings of expert analyses on the Local Self-Government Concept for a New Belarus, the draft Law on Local Self-Government, and relevant provisions of the draft Constitution, prepared by the Centre of Expertise for Multilevel Governance at the Congress, as well as to initiate work on a roadmap for reform.

Also in December, the Congress organised a second series of three online thematic workshops designed to support BDF and civil society in their efforts to transform the local self-government system for a future democratic Belarus. The training programme was specifically dedicated to the Personnel Reserve for a New Belarus – a group of professionals intended to play a key role in the country’s future public administration system – and focused on providing the necessary tools and conceptual frameworks to implement multilevel governance, local democracy, and human rights.

The series opened on 2 December 2025 with a session on “Concepts and models of local self-government and pathways for transitioning to a democratic system” which defined the key principles enshrined in the European Charter of Local Self-Government and explored various transition stages. The second workshop, held on 17 December, delved into “Democratic participation and use of e-democracy tools”; recognising the specific needs of Belarusians living in exile, it served to present models of democratic participation with a specific focus on e-democracy and the use of deliberative democracy mechanisms to decide on complex issues. The final session on 18 December focused on “The 12 Principles of Good Democratic Governance of the Council of Europe”, introducing practical toolkits – including the European Label of Governance Excellence (ELoGE) – offering practical insights into how the Centre of Expertise for Multilevel Governance could support institutional development and democratic reforms.

Promoting youth democratic engagement

In line with the Reykjavik declaration and principles for democracy, the Congress continued to promote youth participation in democratic decision-making processes.

NEW CHARTER ON YOUTH PARTICIPATION

On 30 June 2025, the Congress' Committee on Social Inclusion and Human Dignity approved the new European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life. This new revision of the Charter, initially adopted in 1992 and revised for the first time in 2003, was the result of the work by Congress rapporteurs Aida Karimli (Sweden, ILDG) and Roberto Pella (Italy, EPP/CCE), in partnership with the Council of Europe's Joint Council on Youth (CMJ) and many young Europeans, following extensive consultations with European youth organisations and Council of Europe bodies involved with young people.

"By implementing the Charter, local and regional authorities will ensure a stronger youth perspective in their work, harnessing the creativity and energy of young people in decision-making processes. This in turn should lead to more inclusive, vibrant and resilient communities. Youth participation is not a tool, it's a core principle of democracy," stated Aida Karimli. She presented the findings of the consultation process at the [10th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth](#), held in Valletta, Malta, on 8-9 October 2025 under the theme "Young people for democracy: youth perspectives in action", as part of the Maltese Presidency of the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers. "Youth participation takes place at local level, because this is where young people interact, learn, and contribute most directly to the life of their community," underlined Congress President Marc Cools addressing the Conference.

Speaking at the [Youth Event](#) organised in Malta on 7 and 8 October in the run-up to the Ministerial Conference, Congress Spokesperson on Youth Véronique Bertholle (France, SOC/G/PD) emphasised that the European Charter on Youth Participation continued to evolve and would serve as a keystone reference wherever politicians at local and regional levels open doors and political agendas for young people.

The Congress adopted the new Charter at its 49th session on 29 October 2025. The revised text and the Congress' resolution and recommendation called on local and regional authorities to promote and apply the principles set out in the Charter by ensuring that young people can participate regularly, meaningfully and safely in decision-making processes. The texts also highlighted the need to create enabling and supportive environments, including by training elected representatives and local and regional staff on how to engage effectively with young people and provide feedback on how youth input shapes policy. National governments were invited to establish legal and policy frameworks that support youth participation across all policy areas of governance, and to ensure the Charter is translated and disseminated widely, including in accessible and youth-friendly formats.



Congress youth delegates, Emina Pasanovic (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and Christos Ntonis (Greece), reading 'Once Upon a Time... the Tale of the Youth Charter'.

“Today’s young people are not satisfied with being consulted once in a while, they want to be active partners in decision making and true game changers,” stressed rapporteur Aida Karimli presenting the new Charter, adding that local and regional authorities had the responsibility to make onward this happen and to give real meaning to the concept of democratic participation from an early age on.

CONGRESS YOUTH DELEGATES: YOUNG PEOPLE DEMAND THEIR PLACE IN LOCAL DEMOCRACY

During its 49th session, on 29 October 2025, the Congress became a living laboratory for the democracy of the future. On the occasion of the adoption of the new European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life, a round table discussion moderated by Belgian youth delegate Reinout Vermaercke highlighted the need for radical change in political life in favour of youth participation. More than forty projects led by youth delegates at the end of their term of office in the Congress were presented, illustrating a proactive generation determined to influence local decisions.

Democracy cannot reinvent itself without including young people. For Alison Zerafa Civelli, Parliamentary Secretary for Local Authorities in Malta, the main obstacle is not young people’s lack of interest, but the lack of spaces where their voices carry real weight. She mentions the example of Malta, where the voting age and eligibility for local elections have been lowered to 16, stimulating civic engagement and political creativity.

Véronique Bertholle, Deputy Mayor of Strasbourg and Congress Spokesperson on Youth, called for a change in political culture: as long as young people are perceived as apprentice citizens, ‘nothing will change’.

The current generation, faced with economic, health and ecological crises, no longer wants to be a spectator. Nina Grmusa, Chair of the Council of Europe’s Youth Advisory Council, urged local authorities to increase the number of consultative spaces, training programmes and integration mechanisms.

The 42 projects presented — ranging from civic workshops to podcasts, educational games and anti-corruption campaigns — mobilised more than 3,500 young people, demonstrating that democracy is not a legacy to be preserved but a living project, where the trust placed in young people is transformed into democratic responsibility and creativity.

The Congress pursued its “Rejuvenating Politics” initiative allowing young people to participate in the Congress work into 2026. By the 15 December 2025 deadline, 830 applications to be a Congress youth delegate had been submitted from 46 member states and one Partner for Local Democracy, almost doubling the number received last year and marking the highest level of interest in the programme since its launch in 2014.

Up to one young person from each of the 46 member states of the Council of Europe is selected each year as a Congress youth delegate. The selected delegates are invited to actively participate in Congress plenary sessions and committee meetings and to develop their own grassroots projects in their home countries.



Protecting social rights and building local resilience

The Congress continued to address the challenges faced by municipalities and regions, to improve governance, build local resilience and strengthen social protection of citizens.

TOWARDS AN INNOVATIVE LOCAL STRATEGY AGAINST DRUG TRAFFICKING



On 29 October, at its 49th session, the Congress' Chamber of Local Authorities turned the spotlight on an epidemic that is ravaging European cities: drug trafficking. Elected representatives and experts came together to share experiences and solutions, showing that this problem now extends beyond large cities to rural areas.

Jean-Paul Vermot, mayor of Morlaix (France) and a leading figure in this fight, described vulnerable neighbourhoods where drugs are infiltrating like an invisible poison, fuelling violence, social divisions and a sense of abandonment. For him, repression alone is not enough: we must rebuild the social fabric, support young people who have dropped out of school and accompany users with concerted and innovative local policies.

Christian Lamouline, mayor of Berchem-Sainte-Agathe (Belgium) and president of the Association of Brussels Municipalities, made an alarming observation: since 2022, 57 shootings and more than 1,200 arrests in Brussels demonstrated the strength and mobility of transnational networks.

The chronic underfunding of law enforcement and the justice system leaves municipalities 'on the front line', often without sufficient resources to fight effectively, according to Lucien Colliander, Swiss representative of the Pompidou Group of the Council of Europe, who emphasised the importance of European cooperation and data sharing. The Swiss example of the Quartiers Programme shows that combining police action, social support and citizen engagement can be effective.

During the debate, Congress members also pointed to the link between drug trafficking and white-collar crime, fraud and money laundering, revealing a more insidious side to trafficking. Sarah Mackel, youth delegate from Luxembourg, reiterated the importance of increasing funding for prevention and appropriate psychosocial support. General consensus: support centres outside the criminal justice system, coordination between municipalities, schools, law enforcement agencies and civil society, and transnational cooperation are essential to tackle this European challenge.

ADDRESSING THE HOUSING CRISIS: CALL FOR INNOVATIVE, NEEDS-BASED SOCIAL HOUSING INVESTMENTS



On 29 October 2025, during its 49th session, the Congress' Chamber of Local Authorities debated a [report](#) outlining practical strategies that Europe's local and regional governments could follow in order to invest more in social rental housing and support vulnerable groups. The report comes at a time when much of Europe is grappling with a cost-of-living crisis, increasing the need for social housing, while supply is not meeting demand.

Presented by rapporteur Jimmy Moloney (Ireland, ILDG), the report highlighted the critical role of local authorities in imple-

menting housing policies within multilevel governance systems. "Today, we are seeing cities where more than 50% of the population has to pay more than 40% of their income for rents, while 30% would normally be recommended. Housing is neither a commodity nor an isolated policy area but must be considered as a fundamental pillar of social inclusion and pre-condition to access employment and social services", said Mr Moloney.

In the adopted resolution and recommendation, the Congress called for local and regional authorities to develop housing strategies based on thorough needs assessments, promote social housing innovations and foster new partnerships to expand both new housing developments and the use of the existing stock. The Congress also urged national governments to provide adequate resources and support, stressing the need to extend housing support schemes to middle-income groups, for whom homes were becoming increasingly unaffordable. It further called for developing national frameworks to address homelessness, and for the continuous monitoring of progress through measurable targets while encouraging the exchange of good practices to tackle housing as a fundamental human right, vital for social justice and democratic cohesion in Europe.

NEW MOMENTUM TO LOCAL ACTION FOR CITIZENS' ENGAGEMENT

On 29 October 2025, during its 49th session in Strasbourg, the Congress adopted the reform of the European Local Democracy Week (ELDW), giving it a new name and a renewed momentum. Launched as a Congress initiative in 2007, ELDW has served as a bridge between citizens and their local and regional authorities, encouraging dialogue, transparency and engagement through thousands of community-based activities across Europe.

Presented by Congress Vice-President Konstantinos Koukas (Greece, EPP/CCE), the reform introduces a new identity to the initiative which becomes the "European Local Democracy Action (ELDA)", and aims to transform it into a continuous and sustainable process of citizen participation at local and regional level throughout the year.

Through a new thematic structure, an ELDA Prize recognising outstanding local initiatives, and stronger partnerships with networks, the European Local Democracy Action will serve as a platform for municipalities and associations to showcase local innovative democratic practices.

This renewal aligns with Council of Europe Secretary General Alain Berset's call for a New Democratic Pact for Europe, inspired by the Reykjavik Principles of Democracy, and reaffirms the Congress's commitment to strengthening trust and participation at the local level. The new format will be implemented in early 2026, opening a new chapter for citizen engagement across Europe.



New logo from January 2026



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The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 46 member States, including all members of the European Union. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities is an institution of the Council of Europe, responsible for strengthening local and regional democracy in its 46 member states. Composed of two chambers – the Chamber of Local Authorities and the Chamber of Regions – and three committees, it brings together 612 elected officials representing more than 130 000 local and regional authorities.

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