

LARS O. MOLIN

CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

Ladies and Gentleman,

It is a pleasure to address to you today.

I am the chairman of the city council of Orebro in Sweden, and today I speak in my capacity of Thematic Rapporteur on human rights of the Congress of the Council of Europe.

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe is a pan-European political assembly, the 636 members of which hold elective office (they may be regional or municipal councillors, mayors or presidents of regional authorities) representing over 200,000 authorities in 47 European states.

Its role is to promote local and regional democracy, improve local and regional governance and strengthen territorial self-government throughout Europe.

The themes of this working session are quite broad, but I know that I have to be brief. So, I will limit my presentation to a quick overview of the Congress action in the field of democracy at local and regional level, where our current priorities are to enhance citizen participation, improve local integration and cohesion, foster intercultural dialogue in our increasingly diverse communities, and ensure human rights implementation at local level.

One concrete example of our action for citizen participation is the European Local Democracy Week – a pan-European annual event organised since 2007 in mid-October, with municipalities from more than 30 countries participating last year alone. During the Week, local authorities meet local citizens to discuss with them local problems and priorities, hear their concerns and receive the feedback on authorities' action, and agree future plans. The Local Democracy Week helps to

better involve citizens in public life and the affairs of a community, to improve their interaction with local authorities, as well as to get to know and build respect for others in their community – migrants and minorities in particular – taking part in joint activities.

In the field of Roma integration, the Congress organised in 2011 a Summit of Mayors on Roma, which led to the establishment of the European Alliance of Cities and Regions for Roma Inclusion. The Alliance was launched in March this year, with 120 participating municipalities and regions, and prompted a new Joint Programme with the European Commission, ROMACT, which has just been signed. Pursuing action in this field, the Congress is currently finalising a report on the situation of young Roma at local and regional levels.

I could also mention another joint programme called Intercultural Cities, or our recommendation to promote women's participation in local and regional political life – but this list can go on, and my time is short. I would like to raise briefly just two more issues related to what I have said. One is the participation of non-citizens in local public life in Latvia. Several years ago, the Congress adopted a recommendation for Latvian authorities to allow this category of the population to vote in local elections, stand as candidates and apply for employment in the State apparatus. The Congress rapporteurs on Latvia have been following this issue with the national authorities at a very high level, working to make sure that one day the category of “non-citizens” disappears.

Our action to promote the participation of migrants and non-EU foreign residents, along with their integration, is linked to the Council of Europe's 1992 Convention on the Participation of Foreigners in Public Life at Local Level. The Convention provides for the establishment of consultative councils of foreign residents under the authority of municipal or regional councils – this practice is becoming increasingly widespread across Europe. The Congress has been advocating and supporting the creation of such representative political structures, and helped to set up a first-ever network of French municipalities with councils of foreign residents, in April 2011.

The Convention also provides for giving foreigners the right to vote in local elections and to stand as candidates, after five years of residence. Although this Convention has received only 8 ratifications and 5 signatures, in practice more than 20 countries in Europe today give the right to a local vote to non-EU foreigners – some of them on a bilateral basis. This is one example when the practice is ahead of the legal basis, but still much remains to be done to convince our governments to better involve foreigners in public life.

Another instrument is the Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Municipal and Regional Life of 2003. Drawn up at the Congress' instigation, this Charter is a tool to support young people, youth workers, youth organisations and local authorities in promoting and



enhancing meaningful youth participation and integration at local and regional level across Europe – among other things, also through local and regional youth councils and parliaments.

As concrete examples of our action, I could also mention the European Alliance of Cities and Regions for Roma Inclusion, launched by the Congress and now a Joint Programme with the European Commission, or another joint programme called Intercultural Cities, or our recommendation to promote women's participation in local and regional political life – but this list can go on, and my time is short.

Very last point: as Thematic Rapporteur on human rights, I am often asked why the Congress should deal with this issue. It is because local and regional authorities have increasing responsibilities in dealing with human rights on a daily basis, I reply. For instance, when a mayor deals with a Roma issue, or has to decide to allow or ban a demonstration in his municipality, balancing between the freedom of expression and assembly and the protection of public order. Constant promotion of human rights at local level is key to better governance and better democracy at all levels. International organisations have the advantage of covering many countries in their field of action, and can facilitate an exchange of good practices in this respect. For its part, the Council of Europe and its Congress will continue to embed these values at local and regional levels.

Thank you for your attention.

