



# News from the Independent and Liberal Democrat Group

CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES – COUNCIL OF EUROPE

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## WHAT IS A LIBERAL TOWN?

### INSIDE THIS ISSUE

### WHAT IS A LIBERAL TOWN?

### ILDG REPORTS

### “WE HAD TO VOTE ON OUR OWN REMUNERATION”

### HANDBOOK ON HUMAN RIGHTS AT LOCAL LEVEL

### NEXT MEETINGS

### AN INTENSE SIX WEEKS OF WORK ON BEHALF OF CONGRESS

### IS THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE FIT FOR PURPOSE?



*by Marc Cools, President of the ILDG*

Our group has in its name the word “liberal”. What is a liberal city, liberal town or municipality? First of all, it is a territorial entity that respects the principles of liberal democracy. It means free and fair elections of local representatives and genuine autonomy of decision making in the management of their local community in accordance with the European Charter of Local Self-Government.

A liberal town or municipality is nonetheless a lot more than free elections and management autonomy. It is also cultural and social policies, urban development, environmental and mobility planning, economy and employment, housing and security which put the individual at the centre, which create framework allowing each

individual's personal development according to his or her choice.

Here is an example in the social sphere. According to the liberal thought, solidarity is not only or primarily conceived as redistribution policy, but privileges measures allowing citizens who get social assistance to find jobs and financial independence. That is what has led my municipality Uccle (one of 19 municipalities that form the Brussels-capital region in Belgium) to be the first one in our country to launch socio-professional reintegration programmes. The first such programmes were introduced about twenty years ago. The Public Social Action Centre (institution in charge of social policy) regularly contacts local employers to convince them to hire persons dependant on social assistance by covering during a period of time a part of salary costs. Two out of three persons employed under such scheme do not come back to social welfare once the period of support of part of their salary cost is over.

This policy has been generalised in Belgium and is financed by the state. Another local initiative unique to Brussels is a social service meant to give back confidence to people facing “accidents of life”. Without self-confidence, there is no chance for such a person to find a job or accept and undergo professional training. This programme may even help desperate widows and divorced women to take care of their looks again. Psychological assistance is also provided during several months.

I chose this social policy example to illustrate what a liberal local policy can be. But liberal policies can also be crucial in many other spheres. In my municipality I am responsible for urban development. The choices that we make in this field determine how the city will look, how user-friendly it will be and if the public and living space will correspond to the needs of its dwellers.

Liberal management also stands for rigorous finances avoiding unnecessary luxury projects and aiming at financial balance. This balance is necessary for sustainability of our projects and for maintaining our management autonomy.

## REPORTS PRESENTED BY ILDG MEMBERS DURING THE 34<sup>TH</sup> SESSION, 27-28 MARCH 2018:

**Harald BERGMANN (L, Netherlands):** Promoting human rights at local and regional level; Local democracy in San Marino (co-rapporteur)

**Marc COOLS (L, Belgium):** Revision of the Rules and Procedures of the Congress (co-rapporteur); Fact-finding mission on the situation of local elected representatives in the Republic of Moldova (co-rapporteur); Local and regional democracy in Latvia (co-rapporteur)

**Marianne HOLLINGER (L, Switzerland):** Local democracy in Monaco (co-rapporteur)

All texts adopted during the 34th session: <https://rm.coe.int/adopted-texts-34th-session-en/16807b59c2>

# “WE HAD TO VOTE ON OUR OWN REMUNERATION”

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

There was debate about local autonomy in setting remuneration for councillors and Mayors at the last IDLG meeting. Elected representatives suggested that the government should not be in control. But what about the local implications?

In 2016 the 70 Councillors in Bristol held a vote on whether or not to increase their own remuneration. Of course there was a fuss in the press about this. It got politically very messy. Did we agree how much we are worth, or create a storm around us by those angry we can take more money while staff are sacked due to government austerity cuts....?

In the end we voted against proposals to increase our allowances. Some parties used a ‘whipped’ (group) vote against the motion to agree our own Independent Remuneration Panel’s recommendations (for a rise), and many of the rest of us abstained. And it wasn’t the first time: we had already received the report from our independent body and we had already sent it away the year before.

In 2015, at a lively debate, the councillors rejected the Independent Review Panel’s recommendations for a raising of the basic Councillor allowance (received by all elected members) and for a new formula to cover additional “Special Responsibility Allowances” (SRA) for all the extra posts that exist, like Lord Mayor, Cabinet Members, and committee chairs, plus the elected Mayor. We said come back with something else. They did, and the report was again postponed for another year: were we ever going to be happy?

Allowances were adjusted in 2011 and are now out of line with other comparable cities. In Bristol an elected Councillor currently gets just over £11,500 for being a local ward Councillor – no extra expenses, just a large iPad for each member to use. Some of the similar cities get £13000 basic allowance.

There is also no pension for anyone since 2014. So from this basic allowance, minus National Insurance, we get a monthly income but nothing

more unless we have an extra responsibility. This is for an assumed 18 hour working week, and when surveyed Bristol members said they typically worked about 30 hours.

## Supporting diversity

Our councillors feel that the basic ward member’s allowance is overdue for review if we are to attract a new, more diverse, and widely drawn group of local government politicians. The Green Group I’m part of has included everyone from single parent, retired, young and those who have no other means of income. Most work a full week on being a councillor. Until I became a committee chair with an extra SRA I was using savings to pay basic living costs. I know a colleague complained of being driven into debt each time they had to move or pay landlord fees each 6 months (like many others in our expensive city). There’s no pension so the allowance is hardly an invitation to take part in local decision making which is little of a stepping stone to national politics, even though that would be valuable experience of public service management.

But politically, how could a bunch of councillors be expected to vote themselves a raise while the Mayor cuts almost 1000 jobs, and while there are cuts to very basic services across the city?

The independent review body should sort it out – but they report to us and recommend the changes.

## A storm about the cuts

Politically it reads: “will councillors vote their ‘pay’”- not “should we value local politicians more?” Personally I think there are strong arguments on



both sides. In 2016 I refused to vote myself a rise. In 2017 I abstained as we can’t take more funds from the council. And yet it is ridiculous: we have to make a decision (and again did not) and yet we are required officially, to receive the report. The council is now recruiting more independent members to refresh the same Panel – in wonder how they will succeed next time.

We need a more diverse mix of people on this vital political frontline where cuts are faced. But by refusing to agree a higher allowance we are making it even more likely that the people deciding vital changes to our essential services and responding to government cuts are not the diverse mix of residents typical of our city, but a select group who can afford to spend time in local politics. Typically characterised as ‘stale, pale (white) and male,’ and certainly not changing very fast in makeup, despite the increased diversity we’ve helped foster in recent years.

It’s clearly “to be continued...”

# HANDBOOK ON HUMAN RIGHTS AT LOCAL LEVEL

by Harald Bergmann, Mayor of Middelburg, Vice-Chair of the Governance Committee, Congress Spokesperson on Human Rights at Local and Regional Level



On 27 March at our 34th Congress session, as rapporteur and Congress Spokesperson on Human Rights, I presented the first of a series of handbooks on human rights, which contains some fine examples of local human rights policy throughout Europe. The aim of this handbook is to raise awareness on human rights and use examples of good practices to respond to challenges in our daily work when implementing human rights. The common thread that runs through this manual is non-discrimination. The focus is on three specific groups. The first: refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. The second: Roma and Travellers. And the third: LGBTI people.

On the choice of the first two groups there was relatively little discussion. With regard to the LGBTI people the debate was more intense. Their

situation becomes more and more alarming even in mature democracies against the backdrop of political extremism, belligerent far-right populism and its extreme conservatism.

Each chapter of this handbook covers a specific legal framework and different integration policies. It ends with a number of useful recommendations which derive from 65 best practices collected at local level in more than 25 countries. In my speech at the plenary session I emphasised that there was a consensus in Europe that we, local and regional authorities, have an important role to play in safeguarding human rights.

Preparations for the 2nd volume, that will include other groups and thematic issues, are on its way and we should

cooperate with relevant instances of the Council of Europe. I sincerely hope that these handbooks will continue and be enriched with new ideas and benefits. As local authorities we

should all take pride in what we do for human rights and share our experience in this area, so it can serve as a source of inspiration for other politicians.

We also plan to create an Internet platform that will allow all interested sub-national authorities to add further examples of good and innovative practices of human rights implementation in their communities, cities or regions. The printed edition of the handbook will be ready later this year.

I would like to end with a quote of Eleanor Roosevelt which is suitable for all of us:

“Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home - so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighbourhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm, or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.”

Let us make human rights work!

## >NEXT MEETINGS:

### ILDG group and bureau meetings:

5 November 2018

### Plenary session of the Congress:

35th Session: 6-8 November 2018

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# AN INTENSE SIX WEEKS OF WORK ON BEHALF OF CONGRESS

by Stewart Dickson MLA, Vice-President of the Monitoring Committee, one of the two Thematic Spokespersons of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities on Local and Regional Elections, appointed by the Congress Bureau to follow the activities of other bodies or other organisations on specific subjects. Stewart represents the constituency of East Antrim in the Northern Ireland Assembly, and is a member of the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland.



I have had the honour to travel across Europe for six weeks in February, March and April representing Congress in my capacity as either Co-Rapporteur on Elections, or as Vice-President of the Monitoring Committee. Here is my short activity report:

## Week 1

Valentine's Day 14 February was spent at the Monitoring Committee in Strasbourg delivering a report on the Georgian Local Elections in October 2017. The vote followed a mainly peaceful and competitive electoral campaign during which democratic values and freedoms were generally respected and candidates were able to campaign freely.

However, there were also cases of pressure on voters and on candidates withdrawing their candidature reported to the delegation. In addition, there is room for improvement and more consistency with regard to regulations on campaign and party financing. The general context of the elections was shaped by the dominance of the ruling party. Overall, the Congress was satisfied with a calm, uneventful and well-administered Election Day in most of the polling stations visited by the delegation.

## Week 2

15 March was spent attending the 61st Meeting of the Council for Democratic Elections of the Venice Commission. We covered topics as diverse as terms limits, election irregularities and the misuse of resources in elections.

## Week 3

On 21 March I led an observation mission to the Netherlands observing local elections. We noted location of many polling stations was conducive to citizen participation, since voters could cast their ballot in any polling station within their constituency including train stations, retirement homes, busses, boats or museums.

However, the lack of regulations for campaign financing at the local level has the potential to affect the level playing field between candidates in a negative way. Nonetheless, Congress

welcomed the good organisation of the Election Day, the transparency of the process and the atmosphere of trust in which these elections took place.

## Week 4

I attended and spoke at the Congress Plenary Session in Strasbourg, where Congress approved the Report into the Georgian Local Elections.

## Week 5

In Tirana, Albania, I was the keynote speaker at the Conference on the Misuse of Public Funds in Elections, where we also launched a CoE guide into the Administrative Resources and Fair Elections.

## Week 6

In mid-April, as Co-Rapporteur I undertook a monitoring visit to Tbilisi, Georgia. The delegation examined the situation of local and regional democracy in the light of the provisions of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, ratified by the country in 2004.

I am passionate about the work we do on behalf of Congress to further transparency and fairness in elections, and value the opportunity to share my experience with those I come in contact with. I look forward to undertaking Co-Rapporteur functions for Tunisian Local Elections, and on a monitoring mission to Russia.



# IS THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE FIT FOR PURPOSE?

by Dr Helen Carr, Vice-President of the ILDG, Leader of the Independent Group of the London Borough of Brent and Councillor for Mapesbury, Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute, Freeman of the City of London

As international organisations and NGOs such as the UN, Red Cross and of course Oxfam, lose the legitimacy they might have once had, what of we, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the CoE? The CoE needs to be refined and reformed if it is to serve any purpose, let alone be fit for purpose. Before the values and morals upon which we were founded can be cynically dismissed by those who retreat into totalitarianism and authoritarianism once more in the name of safety, stability, security and certainty.

Founded in the aftermath of the Second World War, the Council of Europe aims to prevent a return to totalitarian regimes and defend fundamental freedoms, human rights, democracy and the rule of law. But given we have no gun power and relatively speaking very little money, what decisions have we made and can we make, are they enforceable and if so, how and what relevance and impact do these decisions have? Can we continue to justify our existence to tax payers and our constituents? There are legally agreed and binding conventions (222 according to this list [https://www.coe.int/en/web/convention\\_s/full-list](https://www.coe.int/en/web/convention_s/full-list)), but do we have the moral authority and legitimacy to pass judgement any more if we ever did? Or are we an anachronism?

At the end of World War I there had been many frontier changes, but relatively little mass population movements compared to the period after World War II, when there were enormous population migrations and expulsions following the Nazi Genocide of Jews and Gypsies, as well as persecution of several other groups and peoples. Populations were further (by force or voluntarily) mobilised as a consequence of Soviet occupation and the development of the Cold War.

History is now being reconstructed to support the arguments and agendas of today's ideologists and politicians. Motives vary. France's Sarkozy was accused of trying to attract the Armenian vote when attempting to criminalise denial of the Armenian genocide. Turkey – with wars within and on its borders – stifles debate not just about its role in the elimination of one and a half million Armenians in

the period at the end of World War I, but also its treatment and continued suppression of its Kurdish populations, as well as the recent imprisonment of elected politicians, journalists and academics. Russia criminalises those who discredit the name of the Red Army and Poland has introduced measures imposing a fine or up to three years in prison for anyone found guilty of blaming the 'Polish nation' for the Holocaust. In the UK, Max Mosley – youngest son of wartime leader of the British Union of Fascists Oswald Mosley – is accused of trying to use data protection laws to gag the press. And so on.

Churchill said it is not for those of us who have not been occupied to condemn and judge those who have. But facts do exist and do matter. It is better to methodically and painstakingly disprove with fact and reason, than fines, force or imprisonment. Ostentatious gestures and actions might seem to make a difference, but quiet conviction in the rule of law has greater pervasive, persuasive and profound influence. January 27 is Holocaust Memorial Day – the day in 1945 the Soviets liberated Auschwitz. The term 'genocide' was first used in 1933 in a paper presented to the League of Nations by Polish lawyer Raphael Lemkin, in response to the murder of the Armenian population by the Ottoman Empire between 1915 and 1918. The term was then adopted by the UN convention in 1948, but continues to be controversial – what constitutes a genocide and who are victims has become a numbers game and a semantic quagmire. Congesting various issues to an existing memorial day undermines the initial intent. Political interests sully the dignity of the event. In 1946, the term 'Crimes Against Humanity' was introduced by Hersch Lauterpacht, at the time resident in my London Ward of Mapesbury. What would he make of us now that Holocaust Memorial Day also includes other 'genocides?' Will Jews stand alongside survivors of the Israeli campaign in Gaza if claims of the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas that Israel has committed genocide are upheld at the International Criminal Court? What of the Poles or the Kurds? The Irish



Famine? Or indeed German minority speakers murdered or transported to Siberia by the Soviets? January 27 is also the day in 1944 identified as the end of the siege of Leningrad where it is estimated more than one million died. What of those victims? And of course, the most recent mass killings in Europe that took place in the Former Yugoslavia. The twentieth century seems to have ended as it began. What have we practically done to prevent atrocity and protect human rights and the rule of law? Concentration camps were not liberated with daisies.

I am sure we are all familiar with journalist, author and intellectual, George Orwell. Everyone is entitled to an opinion, but his was an informed opinion – he fought against Franco's Fascists in the Spanish Civil War. His statue stands in the BBC's New Broadcasting House accompanied by one of his many famous quotes 'If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear'.

But are we listening? In 1986, the Romanian born Holocaust survivor and campaigner Elie Weisel asked the Gypsies for forgiveness for "not listening to your story." Are we too focused on the minutiae and the quotidian? Founded in the aftermath of the Second World War, the Council of Europe aims to prevent a return to totalitarian regimes and defend fundamental freedoms, human rights, democracy and the rule of law. But have we? Can we? Will we?