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REBUILD CITIZENS' TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS

by Marc Cools, President of the ILDG



In Europe and elsewhere in the world citizens more and more often lose trust in their political institutions. Electoral successes of populist movements, be they extreme right or extreme left, are a symptom of this lack of trust which has multiple causes. Among them the feeling of some citizens that they are not heard or understood by political leaders; or else their lack of confidence in the future and in the ability of political leaders to have an impact in a world where economic constraints are more and more globalised and where everything changes faster and faster, too fast for them.

Political scandals, unrealistic promises, or sometimes clientelist networks do not serve to improve the image of politics. Growing individualism of our societies is another factor that may often undermine public action. Individualism is often accompanied by the NIMBY – not in my back yard – attitude. I experience it as a local politician. People want to have a school or a nursery, but not in their street; they want a bus, but the bus stop should not be situated in front of their building, etc. Confronted with such an attitude, a politician should take responsibility and act for the public good.

How to cope with this situation? **How to re-enchant politics? First and foremost, by transparency. Transparency of remuneration of elected politicians, as well as transparency of decisions taken and their motivation.** It is by explaining again and again that we may overcome NIMBY attitudes.

But transparency alone is not sufficient. **One should also be in direct contact with citizens to know how they live.** Some politicians who do not have a local mandate are sometimes disconnected from this reality and live in a bubble. Professionalisation of politics sometimes has to do with this situation. That is why the re-enchantment of politics should start at the local level allowing a direct connection between elected politicians and citizens. With the help of new technologies and participative instruments, citizens regain interest in public management, provide opinions and make suggestions. Here is an example from my town. We had to give names to new streets in a new neighbourhood. So we called on the people to make suggestions.

For the citizen to get involved in public affairs, political education must be provided starting at the school-level. Obviously, such education should be non-partisan. It should provide information on our institutions, their role, functioning and mission, and help develop critical thinking.

A politician cannot do everything, but if his or her political action is part of a political vision of the future he or she wants to build for the citizens and together with them, and if he or she makes good choices, a politician can achieve a lot. **What should be avoided is short-sighted politics and announcements which will not be followed by concrete action.** That is how a politician may regain or maintain citizens' trust.

*The ILDG wishes you and your loved ones a happy holiday season,
a Merry Christmas and a successful New Year!
Looking forward to meeting again in 2020!*

2019 WORLD FORUM FOR DEMOCRACY IN STRASBOURG

From 6 to 8 November, ILDG President **Marc Cools** took part in the **World Forum for Democracy**. This year the Forum in Strasbourg was dedicated to the link between democracy and information and asked the question if “democracy was in danger in the information age”. Marc Cools contributed to Lab 2 of the Forum “Rebuilding trust in institutions”. The discussion focused on transparency as one of the fundamental principles of good governance defining the level of public trust in the government.

One of the initiatives presented in Lab 2 called “Follow the money” was attributed the “Democracy Innovation Award”. The project is built by a group of activists in Nigeria and tracks and advocates for proper utilisation of government and international aid funds in local communities.

THE PRINCIPLES ON THE PROTECTION AND PROMOTION OF THE OMBUDSMAN INSTITUTION – “THE VENICE PRINCIPLES”

by Harald Bergmann, Congress Spokesperson on Human Rights at Local and Regional Level, Middelburg, Netherlands

Dear colleagues, at the 37th session of our Congress, I presented in cooperation with the President of the Venice Commission, Mr Gianni Buquicchio, the Principles on the Protection and Promotion of the Ombudsman Institution, or “the Venice Principles”.

The Venice Principles are the result of a consultation with the preeminent international institutions active in the field. Among these are the International Ombudsman Institute, a global network of associations of ombudsmen from more than 100 countries, and the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Nowadays more than 140 States worldwide have ombudsman institutions at national, regional or local level, each with different competences. This institution is an important element of a state based on democracy, the rule of law, the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and good governance. With these principles we will help to consolidate and empower the Ombudsman institution.

The Ombudsmen is not a novelty for us the Congress. We already have been working for several years with the institution of Ombudsman at all levels of governance. We have already adopted several recommendations and resolutions on the role of Ombudsmen at the local

and regional level as a means to strengthen the protection of citizens’ rights (major documents adopted in 1999, 2004 and 2011). We see the Ombudsmen as important interlocutors of our Congress when we monitor the implementation of the [European Charter of Local Self-Government](#) and promote human rights at local and regional level.

The document we presented in October contains 25 principles that have been drawn from a diversity of existing models of Ombudsmen around the world. It covers the whole range of conditions to be met to ensure the proper functioning, legitimacy and independence of the institution of ombudsman, including the protection from abusive removal, fair appointment and financial and material guarantees of work. In line with the Venice Commission we emphasise that Ombudsmen are very important for our democracy as they act independently against maladministration and violations of human rights. They also play a crucial role regarding governments and parliaments who must accept criticism. Further they serve as



interface between the administration and the citizens, being sometimes the first or even the last resort to address a human rights violation. Ombudsmen can also play a key role in the relations between local authorities and the higher-level government and serve as an additional tool available to subnational authorities to protect local autonomy, together with judicial means of protection in line with Article 11 of the European Charter of Local Self-Government.

The Venice Principles were endorsed by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe in May 2019 and by the Parliamentary Assembly last October. Both bodies see these Principles as an important international reference text for the establishment and proper functioning of the Ombudsman institution in a democratic society at all levels. The national authorities of the Council of Europe member states should make sure that the Venice Principles are applied to already functioning

REPORTS PRESENTED BY ILDG MEMBERS DURING THE 37TH SESSION, 29-31 OCTOBER 2019:

Thomas ANDERSSON (R, Sweden)

- Revised Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision-Making Process

Liisa ANSALA (L, Finland)

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

Harald BERGMANN (L, Netherlands)

- Principles on the Protection and Promotion of the Ombudsman Institution ("The Venice Principles")

Carla DEJONGHE (R, Belgium)

- Local and regional democracy in Bosnia and Herzegovina (co-rapporteur)

Stewart DICKSON, (R, United Kingdom)

- Local and regional democracy in the Russian Federation (co-rapporteur)

Marianne HOLLINGER (L, Switzerland)

Oleksandr SIENKEVICH (L, Ukraine)

- The role of local and regional governments in protecting internally displaced persons (IDPs) (co-rapporteurs)

ADOPTED TEXTS:

<https://rm.coe.int/37th-session-collection-of-adopted-texts/168098b454>

Ombudsman Institutions at all levels or in the situations where such institutions are being set up.

In 2016 our Congress also endorsed the rule of law checklist drawn up by the Venice Commission as the first reference document on the rule of law and a tool to assess the degree of respect of this principle in a country. The Congress extended its support and promoted this document as guidelines to all levels of governance, notably to local and regional authorities, to help them to ensure the respect of the rule of law. This checklist has also been useful for the Monitoring Committee to assess the legal and political background of functioning of local and regional democracy in the Council of Europe member states when monitoring the implementation of the Charter.

In the same vein and following the line of support that the Congress has always extended to Ombudsmen activities as well as to the co-operation with the Venice Commission, our Congress adopted the [resolution on the Venice Principles](#).

A STRING OF PEARLS THROUGH EUROPE: 12 VILLAGES WITH A SPECIAL CONNECTION

by Brigitte van den Berg, Alderman of Beverwijk and Wijk aan Zee, Netherlands

Twelve small villages in Europe have a special connection. Twenty years ago they started building a network to strengthen rural life in Europe. They state that the real culture of a country is more easily found on the school yard of a small town, than on the central square of the capital city.

As an alderman of the municipality of Beverwijk, I'm proud that our village Wijk aan Zee was at the origin of this initiative 20 years ago. Up to this day, our citizens are active contributors to the Cultural Villages of Europe project.

Together the cultural villages organize activities for their youngsters, elderly and all the interested residents. They share their culture, help each other achieve concrete goals for their own towns and they discuss issues of everyday life in a small community.

An example is the debate on the reception of migrants in rural areas

that the village of Kilingi-Nõmme in Estonia organized in July 2018. One of the conclusions of the gathered villagers was that a town has the capacity to warmly welcome migrants in their community, which could help migrants integrate in the receiving country.

To help each other strengthen their villages, the Cultural villages initiative has Go & Do projects. Participants travel to the inviting town for a week, they work in the morning and socialize in the afternoon. As a Go & Do project, a collapsed footpath was hewed from



the rocks in the village of Paxos, a small island in Greece.

Lastly, many activities are organized to share culture: folkloric festivals in Mellionec (France), chess and singing lessons in Ströbeck

(Germany), sculpture making in Bystré (Czech Republic), festivities with the famous cheese, bagpipes and drums in Porrúa (Spain) and many more.

To celebrate their 20 years of existence, the Cultural villages of Europe have planned a year of activities and festivities. This summer,

there will be a youth camp for youngsters from all the villages in Wijk aan Zee (the Netherlands). Also, the organization will visit Strasbourg to present their initiative to European politicians. As an Alderman, I support this initiative, because we as politicians should let ourselves be inspired by the cooperation and the achievements of these compact

communities. They are a string of pearls through Europe, just as small as valuable.

www.culturalvillagesofeurope.com

FREE MEALS FOR EVERY SCHOOL PUPIL: REGIONAL AUTHORITIES OF GAGAUZIA, REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA, MAKE A DIFFERENCE

by *Alexandr Tarnavski, Deputy Head of the popular Assembly of the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia, Republic of Moldova*

Gagauzia is an autonomous territory in the southern part of the Republic of Moldova. About 160 thousand people live here, more than 80% of them are Gagauz (Turkic people, mainly of Orthodox Christian confession). In this article, our region shares its experience in organizing meal distribution in schools, as a tool of human development.

45 pre-university institutions of education operate in Gagauzia: primary schools, kindergarten-gymnasium complexes, gymnasiums and lyceums (high schools). Moldovan national legislation stipulates that all pupils of primary education institutions (6-10 years old) are entitled to free meals, and the cost is covered by the state budget.

According to the constitutional order of the Republic of Moldova, the regional National Assembly of Gagauzia can adopt local laws, including those pertaining to education and social security. In 2017, relying on this competence, the National Assembly of Gagauzia voted a local law granting free meals to all pre-university pupils in the autonomous region. It means, that not only primary institutions' pupils (six to ten-year-olds), but also students of middle and high schools (aged 11-18)

get their meals. The additional expenses are entirely covered by the budget of Gagauzia.

The main reason for such a law is that in Gagauzia, besides the state language, Gagauz and Russian languages are in use. Since these languages are studied in schools, the study plan, as well as the time that the pupils spend in schools, is one to two hours longer per day than in other Moldovan regions. If the children and teenagers do not eat for a long period of time, it may have negative consequences for their health and their physical development. For example, high school students of Gagauzia spend at least eight hours in school, the same as a fulltime working day for an adult.

It is a known fact that timely nutrition is crucial for the health of the youth. The main objective of this local law is protecting and improving the health of the next generations.



Among the important tasks of such an initiative are:

- assistance to the families in bringing up kids;
- improving the quality of nutrition of children;
- promoting knowledge and skills of rational nutrition;
- public investment into education.

In this way, thanks to this original legal initiative, Gagauzia became the first region in Moldova to guarantee full free meals to all of its schoolchildren (around 15.000 pupils), regardless of their social origin. This example merits attention in the context of the idea of importance and efficiency of the decentralization based on the principles of democracy and subsidiarity – idea promoted by the EU and the Council of Europe.

>NEXT MEETINGS:

ILDG: 6 March & 26 October 2020

Congress: 38th Session on 17-19 March 2020 & 39th Session on 27-29 October 2020

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