



# News from the Independent and Liberal Democrat Group

We stand with **UKRAINE**  
#SlavaUkraini

CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES – COUNCIL OF EUROPE

JUNE 2023

## MAKING DEMOCRACY STRONGER

*Marc Cools, ILDG President*

### IN THIS ISSUE:

**MAKING  
DEMOCRACY  
STRONGER**

**MARC COOLS: OUR  
CANDIDATE FOR  
PRESIDENT OF  
CONGRESS**

**ELECTIONS IN TIMES  
OF CRISIS,  
CONFERENCE IN  
BERN**

**LOCAL  
DEMOCRACY IN THE  
REPUBLIC OF  
MOLDOVA**

**-CHALLENGES  
-REFORM**

**LETTER FROM  
BRUSSELS**

**ILDG REPORTS AT  
THE 44<sup>TH</sup> SESSION**

**NEXT MEETINGS**



The rise of populism, exacerbated nationalism and extremism of all kinds, Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the collapse of the rule of law in Russia show more than ever how essential are the three pillars on which the Council of Europe's work is based: democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Faced with the attitude of certain European leaders who advocate an illiberal society and reject liberal democracy, we must campaign to strengthen these three pillars and breathe new life into the Council of Europe. This was the key issue at stake at the 4th Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe on 16 and 17 May in Reykjavik.

A summit at which the heads of state and government stressed the need for a united front against Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine. A summit where they underlined that we have "a shared responsibility to fight autocratic tendencies and growing threats to human rights, democracy and the rule of law". This summit is encouraging for freedom, peace and security in Europe.

The European leaders were also keen to "support the essential role of multilevel governance in delivering the Organisation's vision, including through the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities' role to implement the European Charter of Local Self-Government". Better anchoring democracy at local level within the Council of Europe and its priorities was the main recommendation for the Reykjavik Summit adopted almost unanimously by the Congress at our plenary session last March. A message that seems to have been heard.

"Democracy and freedoms are not an optional luxury" wrote Jean-François Revel in *Tentation totalitaire*. This living democracy to which we all aspire is best developed at local level, where the link between elected representatives and citizens is the closest. It is also at this level that young people can most easily be involved in our democratic life.

As liberals, we believe in freedom. We want freedom of conscience, freedom of expression, freedom for everyone to build their own lives as they wish and to decide for themselves what they consider to be their happiness. We place the individual at the centre of society, with respect for their personality, their culture and their political, philosophical and intellectual freedom. We campaign for social justice. For us, this does not mean egalitarianism, but equality of opportunity, solidarity and fairness.

"No man loses his freedom except through his own weakness." We must never lose sight of this thought by Gandhi. Democracy and the freedoms that go with it can never be taken for granted. These values require the commitment of all of us if they are to be preserved and strengthened.

## REYKJAVIK SUMMIT, 16-17 MAY 2023

[About summit](#) - [Final declaration](#)

[Register of Damage for Ukraine](#)



REYKJAVÍK | SOMMET DE  
SUMMIT | REYKJAVÍK  
Council of Europe | Conseil de l'Europe

## MARC COOLS: OUR CANDIDATE FOR PRESIDENT OF THE CONGRESS



At its October session, the Congress will renew the composition of its governing bodies and elect its president. At its meeting on 20 March 2023, our group unanimously decided to put forward Marc Cools as our candidate for President of the Congress.

Member of the Congress since December 2005, Marc Cools has extensive knowledge and experience of the organisation. He has been rapporteur on local democracy in Austria, Spain, Ukraine, Switzerland, Latvia, Hungary, Cyprus, Moldova and Romania. He observed local elections in Denmark, Ukraine and Moldova.

Marc Cools's priorities for presidency of the Congress are to:

- **Strengthen the position of the Congress** as the second political chamber of the Council of Europe;
- **Reinforce the role of the two elected assemblies** – the Parliamentary Assembly and the Congress – in the decision-making process at the Council of Europe;
- Ensure that the **Congress is at the centre of Council of Europe's initiatives aimed at local democracy**;
- **Strengthen synergies with all the components of the Council of Europe**, in particular with the European Court of Human Rights, as well as with all the other organisations representing local and regional authorities (the EU Committee of the Regions, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions, the Assembly of European Regions, etc.);
- Give **new impetus and responsibilities to the bureaux of committees** and **simplify the rules and procedures** of the Congress;
- Ensure **regular follow-up of adopted recommendations**;
- Broaden the **participation of youth delegates** in the work of the Congress.

Any other ideas? Other proposals to make the work of the Congress even more efficient? Share them with Marc Cools at [marc.cools@brutele.be](mailto:marc.cools@brutele.be).

## ILDG VICE PRESIDENT STEWART DICKSON ATTENDS MAJOR CONFERENCE IN BERN. PARLIAMENTARY CONFERENCE – ELECTIONS IN TIMES OF CRISIS (BERN, 9-10 MAY 2023)

The two-day Conference, which took place from 9 to 10 May in Bern, Switzerland, was co-organised by the Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) and the Swiss Parliament to honour the 60th anniversary of the accession of Switzerland to the Council of Europe and to shed light on the challenges that major crisis situations present to all stages of the electoral cycle.

The conference focused on topics such as the COVID-19 pandemic, natural disasters, armed conflict, digital warfare and artificial intelligence, participants explored the impacts of crisis situations on the electoral cycle and discussed best practices and opportunities to strengthen the resilience of democratic institutions.

**Stewart Dickson** was a speaker on one of the conference panels: Upholding the integrity of elections in

times of major security crisis. Stewart was invited to speak on this subject as he was co-rapporteur for the Congress on "Local and Regional Elections in major crisis situations" in 2020.

In addition to its President, the Congress was represented on three thematic panels by its members with vast experience in the field of elections: Vice-President of the Congress and President of the Chamber of Local Authorities of the



Congress Bernd Vöhringer (Germany, EPP/CCE), Congress thematic spokesperson on Observation of Local and Regional Elections and Vice-President of the Council for Democratic Elections Stewart Dickson (United Kingdom, ILDG), and head of

declaration, in which the participants summarise and bring to the attention of their governments the findings and conclusions of the parliamentary conference on the eve of the 4th Summit of Heads of States and Governments of the Council of

the Swiss delegation to the Congress and member of Congress election observation missions David Eray (Switzerland, EPP/CCE).

The two days of discussion concluded with the adoption of a final

Europe. Stewart was instrumental in amending the text to include this statement in accordance with the recent Congress resolution to ensure that member States invite Congress to observe Local and Regional Elections:

“We call on all governments to extend a standing invitation to all international organisations with an electoral observation mandate to make election observation possible and more systematic in their respective member states at all levels, and thus ensure better implementation of electoral standards and a deeper entrenchment of democracy.”

[Conference webpage](#)  
[Video](#)  
[Final declaration](#)

## LOCAL DEMOCRACY IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA: CURRENT SITUATION AND CHALLENGES

*Viorel Furdui, Directeur exécutif du Congrès des autorités locales de Moldova (CALM), membre de la délégation de la République de Moldova*



### Local democracy in the Republic of Moldova: actual situation and challenges

Until September-October 2022, the general perception regarding the implementation of local public administration reform was rather uncertain, and local democracy did not seem to be a priority for the Government. Approaches to identifying solutions for the systemic problems were almost absent; there was a lack of effective communication

associations.

#### Current situation: relative progress

Positive developments have taken place since September 2022:

**- Dialogue between central and local authorities has improved.**

After five years of inactivity, Parity Commission was reinstated in its new composition, the status of its co-

with central public administration, lack of clarity regarding decentralization; and the elaboration of the public administration reform strategy was initiated without consulting the Congress of Local Authorities from Moldova (CALM). Government paid excessive attention to international experts, practically neglecting the opinion of national stakeholders and representative

president from CALM was accepted and sectorial working groups were created in order to strengthen the dialogue and establish the necessary actions to produce reforms. During these meetings, several important decisions were agreed in the field of fiscal policy, remuneration, public procurement, etc.

#### **- Consolidation of local financial and patrimonial autonomy**

Fiscal policy for 2022-2023 aims at several very important measures of fiscal decentralization and consolidation of local financial autonomy, for a long time advocated by CALM. Among them: liberalization (removal of ceilings) for real estate and land tax, sharing with local authorities of the first tier tax on natural resources, doubling the resources for road maintenance by transferring 100% of the road tax (from 50%) to the first-tier local budgets, changing destination of transfers for the road tax from the one with special destination to the one with general destination, the right for local authorities to increase salaries in local public administration by up to 40% from their own revenues according to their fiscal and

administrative capacity, clarification and strengthening of the role of local authorities in management of natural water resources, etc.

### Some challenges still remain

Despite all the progress mentioned above, there are still important problems to be solved. The strategy of public administration reform is too complex, too long-term (until 2030) beyond the mandate of the current Government and Parliament and it contradicts the conclusions of the last monitoring report on the Republic of Moldova adopted by the Congress in 2019. Positive developments in fiscal policy were jeopardized by putting the

burden of centralized remuneration decisions and costs of extremely high inflation on the shoulders of local authorities. Transfers for local authorities remain at the level of 2020, not adjusted, regardless of the huge inflation (30-35%). Concerns arise at the moment about the lack of certainty, vision and will to advance discussions on financial decentralization. The issue of local authorities' personnel and salaries of employees remains a major problem. Another field where significant gaps persist is the process of registration, delimitation and evaluation of public and private property. Relations between the city of Chisinau and the Government remain extremely politicized. Another important problem

is the control over local authorities' activities and the actions of certain administrative and financial bodies, such as the Agency of integrity, of financial inspection, and the Court of Accounts who interpret and apply the legislation in exaggerated manner, creating impediments and insecurity for local authorities' activities. There are signs of political pressure against local elected officials. Even though such cases are isolated and cannot be compared at the moment with the extent and depth of the pressure during the 2017-2018 period, condemned by the Congress in its resolutions, such attempts are however alarming and their number can increase during this electoral year.

## REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA: LOCAL DEMOCRACY DIMENSION OF THE DRAFT PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION REFORM STRATEGY 2023 – 2030

*Alexandr Tarnavski, member of the People's Assembly of the autonomous territory of Gagauzia*



The Republic of Moldova is discussing the draft Public Administration Reform Strategy 2023-2030, which includes a section on public administration at the local level. A thorough work has been done to develop a strategic vision.

Among positive elements of the strategy it should be mentioned that the possible merger of administrative-territorial units of the first (municipal) level is envisaged only on a voluntary basis. The option of giving back the funding of education institutions (lyceums and gymnasiums) to the municipal budgets is being considered. A significant reduction in the number of local and district councillors is envisaged, which will

improve the quality of democratic debate and decision-making.

At the same time, a number of proposals are controversial and could lead to negative effect. The draft strategy, the implementation term of which is stretched for 7

years, is a cumbersome and academic document of 95 pages. Civil society, represented by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities from Moldova - a body that brings together 90% of municipalities of the country and advocates for the importance of implementing European standards of local democracy, was not involved in the drafting of the strategy. A national context with fragile democracy, lack of consistency in reforms, political instability and permanent changes of government show that long-term policy documents are not viable.

The fragmentation of local public administration in the Republic of Moldova, which the authors of the draft strategy insist on reforming, is a

matter for discussion. At present, the leaders in terms of development among the countries of the former socialist block in Central and Eastern Europe are Slovenia and the Czech Republic, states with a very significant number of municipalities. The Czech Republic, for example, has almost 7,000 municipalities with a total population of almost 10 million (the Republic of Moldova has 896 municipalities, with a population of 2.9 million). That is why the conclusion of the authors of the strategy on the need to merge municipal entities as a solution is quite controversial. On the contrary, disappearance of small municipalities may lead to degradation of local democracy, distancing of quality public services from citizens. Currently, the legitimacy of the local public administration of the first level is the highest among all the public authorities in the Republic of Moldova. That is why the possible merger of municipalities is a process that should be evolutionary and democratic. Decisions on unification should not be taken by a simple majority of votes of local councillors, as proposed in the draft strategy, but through local referenda.

The main priority in public administration reform should be to abolish district governance structures. The district level of local government

in the Republic of Moldova is a political and archaic way of administrative-territorial structure of the state. Insufficient attention is given in the strategy to the liberalization of local public administration employees' salaries. The strategy fails to address the reform of the autonomous regions of the Republic of Moldova - Transnistria and Gagauzia. At the

same time, the functioning of autonomous entities implies not only political interaction between the central power and regions, but also a reform of the public administration system at the central level: this system currently does not take into account specific features of autonomous entities in its approach to the division of competences.

A positive development to improve the quality of the draft Public Administration Reform Strategy could be if the Government of the Republic of Moldova requested the opinion of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe.



## RENEW EUROPE GROUP, COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS – LETTER FROM BRUSSELS ([podcast](#))

Letter from Brussels is a 15-minute podcast by the Renew Europe Group in the European Committee of the Regions, focusing on news from the European level which is relevant to anyone active or interested in subnational politics, and including amazing stories about the city of Brussels itself, the capital of the Union. Recorded in English, it appears after every plenary of the CoR, every 6-8 weeks. Episode 12 The Puppets and the Scandal.

## REPORTS PREPARED BY ILDG MEMBERS FOR THE 44TH PLENARY SESSION, 21-23 MARCH 2023:

### **Marc Cools, co-rapporteur, Monitoring of the European Charter of Local Self-government in Romania**

*This is the 4th report assessing the implementation of the Charter in Romania. The rapporteurs conclude that the country's system of local self-government works well and that the obligations of the Charter are generally fulfilled. However, the report points out a few issues that deserve special attention. In particular, the weakness and fragmentation of the communes, in rural areas; the transfers of competences that are not*

*always accompanied by the necessary financial resources; strengthening the regional level and the currently limited possibility for local authorities to finance investments. There is also a lack of transparency in the allocation of financial resources between the central and local levels. [See report and recommendations](#)*

### **Stewart Dickson, Report on the observation of cantonal elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina**

*Following an invitation by the authorities of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Congress deployed an observation mission to assess the cantonal elections held in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina on 2 October 2022. On the Election Day, nine teams involving nineteen Congress observers visited some 125 polling stations to observe the election procedures, from opening to counting. [See report](#)*

## NEXT MEETINGS:

7th Statutory Forum: 6 July  
45<sup>th</sup> Plenary session: 24-26 October  
**ILDG meeting: 23 October**

Next committee meetings:  
Meeting of the Current Affairs Committee: 28 June  
Meeting of the Monitoring Committee: 4 July

**CONTACT:** Tel: +33 3 8841 2682 **email:** [maria.bigday\[at\]coe.int](mailto:maria.bigday[at]coe.int)  
**Webpage:** <http://www.congress-political-groups.eu/en/5-ildg/>

