



News from the Independent and Liberal Democrat Group

CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES – COUNCIL OF EUROPE

NOVEMBER 2024

UPHOLDING DEMOCRACY

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This newsletter highlights two very significant dates. The first is the **25th anniversary of the establishment of the post of Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights**, celebrated on 21 November 2024. It is particularly gratifying to note that on October 14th, the ILDG had the honour of welcoming Commissioner O'Flaherty for an exchange of views. This marked the first time the Commissioner addressed our political group, underscoring the vital role of local and regional authorities in fostering human rights. Human rights have a clear local dimension, particularly when it comes to their implementation—whether in the reception and integration of migrants, combating discrimination or protecting minorities and vulnerable groups.

The second date is a profoundly painful one. **November 19th marked 1000 days of the war in Ukraine**, instigated by Russia. 1000 days of suffering and extraordinary resilience and courage of the Ukrainian people. Remarkably, and without prior coordination, five of this newsletter's contributions focus on Ukraine. This reflects how prominently Ukraine continues to feature on our agenda—as it rightly should.

I want to take this opportunity to thank Marc Cools, liberal President of the Congress. Through your efforts to promote youth participation, your engagement with leaders of national local associations, and your unwavering commitment to positioning the Congress as a robust political Assembly, you consistently reinforce the role of our organisation. We appreciate your continued active membership in our group and thank you for maintaining great cooperation.

I also extend my heartfelt gratitude to all our office-holders and group members, especially those who contributed to this newsletter by sharing their ideas and the outcomes of their efforts. We are immensely proud of the work you do.

Once again, I warmly welcome all new members to actively engage in our shared mission, and I invite all Congress colleagues who share our dedication to democracy and human rights to join us without delay!

As we approach the end of another political and calendar year, I wish everyone some rest and family time.

Yet as I do so, I cannot but think about all of the challenges facing our members, political groups and parties in a very uncertain world—especially the on-going Russian war of aggression in Ukraine and the tragedy of recent flooding in Spain, to name just two.

As members of our political family, we understand the immense challenges that local authorities have in delivering good services to our people, even in normal times. These challenges are only compounded when we face war, threats of war, political and civil unrest, or disasters caused by climate change.



Council of Europe's Commissioner for human rights: key information about the [mandate](#)

[Follow](#) the Commissioner's work

[25th anniversary](#) of the institution of the Commissioner for Human Rights

THE LOCAL DIMENSION OF HUMAN RIGHTS: ILDG MEETS WITH MICHAEL O'FLAHERTY, COUNCIL OF EUROPE COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

At its meeting on 14 October, the ILDG group had the honour of receiving Michael O'Flaherty, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights for an exchange of views on the local dimension of human rights.

"The work of the Commissioner is primarily directed toward our member states and our governments. However, human rights have a clear local dimension, particularly when it comes to their implementation—whether in the reception and integration of migrants, combating discrimination, including in schools, or protecting minorities and vulnerable groups. Moreover, many human rights violations occur locally, and it is up to local authorities to address these challenges in their day-to-day work," said ILDG President Stewart Dickson in his opening remarks.

This was the first time the Commissioner for Human Rights had

come to address the ILDG group, and the ILDG greatly appreciated the Commissioner's call for joint action and regular contact with the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities.

"The Commissioner began his address by reminding us—and quoting Eleanor Roosevelt's 1958 statement—that universal human rights begin in small places, close to home. We couldn't agree more. He also warned us that the passion for



human rights is diminishing, and it is our everyday duty to ensure that human dignity, rooted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, remains the solid foundation of our societies," declared Stewart Dickson.

HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE CONGRESS WORK

Mélanie Lepoutier, Deputy Permanent Rapporteur of the Congress on Human Rights



Following the Reykjavik Summit, the Congress reinforced its work on the implementation of human rights at local and regional level by nominating one permanent rapporteur and two deputy rapporteurs. Mélanie Lepoutier, Deputy Permanent Rapporteur on behalf of the ILDG group, presents her activities within the framework of her mandate.

On 10 and 11 July 2024, together with my two colleagues Congress'

regional elected representatives in implementing human rights in local and regional public policies. We met with the President of the European Court of Human Rights, Marko Bošnjak, to discuss the follow-up to the Court's judgments at local and regional level. The aim of the visit was to strengthen the coordination between the Congress and other Council of Europe bodies working on human rights issues.

permanent rapporteurs, I carried out a study visit to the various Council of Europe departments responsible for human rights. The aim was to gain a better understanding of the CoE's work and raise awareness of the role of local and

regional elected representatives in implementing human rights in local and regional public policies. We met with the President of the European Court of Human Rights, Marko Bošnjak, to discuss the follow-up to the Court's judgments at local and regional level. The aim of the visit was to strengthen the coordination between the Congress and other Council of Europe bodies working on human rights issues.

Furthermore, as part of my mandate, I had the opportunity to travel to Sarajevo to assess a project implemented by the Congress in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Local elected officials shared their challenges in implementing human rights, including the rights of women, children, and minorities.

At the end of October, during a meeting held as part of the Council of Europe's campaign for the safety of journalists, I had the opportunity to discuss the issue of local journalists who, particularly in Ukraine, find themselves directly on the front lines and serve as our primary providers of information. It was also an opportunity to address the right to reliable information, which every member state must guarantee for its citizens, and the role of local authorities in protecting this right and safeguarding journalists.

UKRAINE: THE UNBREAKABLE STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM AND PEACE

Mykola Lukashuk, Ukraine, Chair of the Dnipropetrovsk Regional Council, First Vice-President of the All-Ukrainian Association of Local Self-Government Bodies "Ukrainian Association of District and Regional Councils"



Ukraine has already been fighting a desperate struggle for its independence and territorial integrity for three years. The full-scale invasion by Russia* in February 2022 became a challenge not only for Ukrainians but also for the entire democratic world. The daily shelling, infrastructure destruction and civilian deaths are just a part of the terrible reality our country is facing. However, Ukrainians demonstrate unwavering courage and unity in their fight for freedom.

During the war nearly 4,500 air alerts were sounded in Dnipropetrovsk region, the longest of which lasted approximately 12 hours. More than 8,500 enemy attacks were recorded, including about 700 missiles and more than 1,700 kamikaze drones were launched at us. Enemy shelling damaged almost 21,000 buildings, facilities and communication systems, 800 of which were completely destroyed. Russia is ruthlessly using ballistic missiles, Iskanders, and the Shahed drones to terrorize the Ukrainian population.

The daily attacks on the Nikopol district, which is separated from the occupiers only by the Dnipro River, are acts of deliberate terror against Ukrainians. Hiding behind the nuclear power plant in occupied Enerhodar, the Russian Federation relentlessly shells the residents of Nikopol with artillery and kamikaze drones, aiming to create an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty. Russia seeks to demoralize the population of

Dnipropetrovsk region by any possible means to complicate access to basic necessities, exacerbating humanitarian problems, pressuring local authorities and provoking a flow of refugees.

Attacks on civilian infrastructure - schools, hospitals, hotels, residential buildings - have become commonplace. The occupiers believe that fear will break us. Just one of the many heinous crimes committed by the invaders was the attack on a residential building in the city of Kryvyi Rih that led to the death of a 32-year-old mother and her three children: 10-year-old and 2-year-old boys and a two-month-old baby girl. Similar tragedies are unfolding everywhere: Kyiv, Kharkiv, Odesa, Lviv... These attacks are not just war crimes, but the deliberate destruction of civilians. The enemy's goal is to create a humanitarian catastrophe.

One of the main fronts of this war is the energy sector. Russian missiles and drones systematically target power plants, substations, and power lines, leaving millions of people without electricity, heat, and water. During the most difficult periods, Ukrainians have been forced to live without electricity for more than 12 hours a day.

Despite this, Ukraine demonstrates incredible resilience: since the beginning of the war, electricity has been restored to 1.7 million households in Dnipropetrovsk region alone, which is the equivalent of almost the entire population of Berlin. However, the enemy does not relent.

Russia is stockpiling missiles for new massive attacks, attempting to paralyze the Ukrainian energy sector this winter.

The damage caused to the Ukrainian economy has reached hundreds of billions of dollars. The United Nations Development Programme estimates that full recovery and reconstruction of the country will require \$486 billion. This will demand titanic efforts from both Ukraine and our international partners.

Despite all this, Ukraine continues to fight. The international community is lending a helping hand: weapons, financial support, and humanitarian aid are vital to our struggle. We are deeply grateful to our international partners for their support!

Ukrainians are not only defending their homeland but also upholding the democratic values of the entire world. Our faith in victory remains unwavering. Together with our international partners, we will stand firm, defeat the aggressor, and restore peace to our country. This war has demonstrated that freedom and human dignity are the highest values and are worth fighting for as a united force.

We will win. Ukraine will prevail. Peace will return.

** As an act of solidarity with our Ukrainian colleagues, we kept the lowercase spelling in this text, as proposed by its author.*



EXPANDING PARTNERSHIPS WITH UKRAINIAN CITIES AND REGIONS

Marc Cools, President of the Congress

Every day, Russia's war of aggression inflicts a devastating toll of destruction and human suffering in Ukraine. Over 80,000 people in the country require prosthetics. The challenges of rebuilding schools, housing, and rehabilitation centres are immense. With winter approaching, the systematic destruction of energy infrastructure highlights the critical need to provide generators to the civilian population.

Partnerships and twinning agreements between cities and regions across Europe and their Ukrainian counterparts can help address these humanitarian needs. Many such partnerships already exist, but more are urgently needed. **By developing these connections, our towns and regions not only fulfil the duty of assisting people in distress in a neighbouring country**

but also forge bonds of friendship with the local authorities involved.

This was the message I emphasized on 13 November in Strassen, Luxembourg, at the International Forum *"Bridges of Solidarity: Humanitarian and Social Initiatives from Cities to Cities."* I extend my thanks to the town of Strassen for initiating this Forum, where Martine Dieschburg-Nickels, Liberal Vice-President of the Congress, played a key role.

Partnerships with Ukrainian cities and regions are vital to complement the solidarity initiatives already



undertaken by our citizens, as well as by European countries, international organisations such as the Red Cross, Médecins Sans Frontières, and the European Investment Bank. **Experience has demonstrated the tangible and practical impact of local partnerships. Let's build more of them!**

BRIDGES OF SOLIDARITY

Martine Dieschburg-Nickels, Luxembourg, Vice-President of the Congress



After 1,000 days of war in Ukraine, it is high time to intensify efforts to address the plight of the Ukrainian civilian population and municipalities.

Considering the challenges faced over the past two years in successfully implementing social and humanitarian projects to assist Ukrainians—and recognizing that many organisations and associations working for the same cause have encountered similar challenges—the town of Strassen sought to share its experience and develop joint strategies with other stakeholders on the ground. This is how the idea for the International Forum *"Bridges of Solidarity"* was born.

The day of 13 November 2024 was dedicated to humanitarian and social aid. It brought together a diverse

group of participants, including local officials such as the mayors of Bucha, Lviv, and Skadovsk; young people who fled Ukraine and now live in Luxembourg; a Ukrainian teenager injured in a Russian attack; two Ukrainian war veterans who undergo rehabilitation at the Superhumans Rehabilitation Centre, which offers a personalised approach to physical and psychological recovery; the director-general of the Odessa Regional Clinical Hospital; members of the Council of Europe Congress of Local and Regional Authorities; Ukraine's Ambassador to Belgium and Luxembourg; representatives of numerous NGOs; Luxembourg's Minister of Family Affairs; and other officials, including school principals who have welcomed refugee students.

In the keynote speeches, including one by Congress President Marc Cools, and during the five roundtable discussions—attended by Congress officials such as Bernd Vöhringer, President of the Chamber of Local Authorities, Gudrun Mosler-Törnström, Rapporteur on Human Rights, and Oksana Derkach, Vice-President of the Chamber of Local Authorities—it became clear how critical it is to support Ukrainian citizens on multiple fronts: rebuilding infrastructure, providing transportation, supplying medical equipment to ensure optimal care for injured civilians and soldiers, and establishing psychological support for a population traumatized by nearly three years of war. The list of needs is long!

"Bridges of Solidarity" was an extraordinary event. The day was marked by poignant testimonies from young people, war veterans, local officials, and NGOs working on the ground. It concluded with the signing of three partnerships between the Commune of Strassen and the cities of Bucha, Lviv, and Skadovsk. This important ceremony underscored friendship and solidarity, sending a message of hope: **We are with you—today and in the future!**

www.bridges-of-solidarity.com

COOPERATION AGREEMENT BETWEEN FRENCH AND UKRAINIAN REGIONS

Information communicated by Christian Debève, Councillor Grand Est Region

On 26 September 2024, during the Congress of Regions of France held in Strasbourg, Carole Delga, President of Regions of France and the Occitanie Region, and Tetiana Yehorova-Lutsenko, President of the Ukrainian Association of District and Regional Councils (UAROR) and the Kharkiv Oblast, signed an agreement on enhanced cooperation. This accord marks the culmination of an initiative led by Franck Leroy, President of the Grand Est Region, aimed at enhancing collaboration between French and Ukrainian regions to support populations affected by the war and prepare Ukraine's reconstruction.

The signing ceremony brought together the presidents of French regions and the leaders of 14 Ukrainian oblasts and district councils,

including those heavily impacted by the war, such as the Kharkiv, Kherson, and Chernihiv regions. The visit by such a significant number of Ukrainian regional leaders, the first since the war began in 2022, served to reinforce existing partnerships and establish new ones. Since the onset of the war, the French regions have mobilized to support Ukrainians through emergency aid and medium-term cooperation projects, including

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[Communiqué de presse] Les Régions de France et les Oblasts Ukrainiens formalisent leur coopération renforcée lors du Congrès de Strasbourg



the partnership between the Grand Est Region and the Kharkiv Oblast.

[Official press release](#)

DEMOCRACY, INTEGRITY AND EUROPEAN INTEGRATION: UKRAINE

Jimmy Moloney, Ireland, Deputy Spokesperson for Ethics and Prevention of Corruption



On October 15th, in my capacity as Deputy Congress Spokesperson on Ethics and Prevention of Corruption, I provided an outline of the work of the Congress in this field via a video address to a roundtable discussion on Democracy, Integrity and European Integration. The discussion was organised by the City of Fastiv and Ukraine's Parliamentary Committee on the Organisation of State Power,

Local Self-Government, Regional Development and Urban Planning.

The event counted on the participation of Ukrainian MPs, representatives of the Ministry for Communities and Territories Development, and the National Anti-Corruption Agency. It provided a key opportunity to present the main result of the Congress-funded local initiative in Fastiv: a local anti-corruption code that will be put forward as a unified template for all Ukrainian communities.

I took the opportunity to congratulate the City of Fastiv on the results putting in place a local anti-corruption code and a novel anti-corruption chatbot where users can browse anti-corruption legislation and practices, and alert authorities about alleged cases of corruption.

Open local government and strong public ethics are key to building confidence in public institutions. Local governments, local elected representatives, and civil servants have a crucial role to play in fostering and sustaining trust-building and participatory decision-making.

The professionalism and integrity of local elected representatives and local officials, as well as their ability to function in a transparent, responsive

and accountable manner, are core tenets of democracy and good governance. They are essential for delivering fair, equitable and quality services to citizens. To provide local and regional elected representatives and public officials with concrete tools, the Congress adopted the [European Code of Conduct for all Persons Involved in Local and Regional Governance](#). This code sets out ethical principles and standards at European level and it is a strong political affirmation of our fight against corruption in our cities and regions. In addition, the Congress has produced a series of thematic brochures and a [Handbook](#) on Open Local Government and Public Ethics in Ukraine with key practical measures to reduce exposure to corruption at local level and improve public ethics. It was very encouraging to see that Ukraine, even in wartime, works relentlessly to advance local democracy and good governance and, with that, foster and defend our European values.

More on the CoE's Open government and public ethics project in [English](#) and [Ukrainian](#)

47TH CONGRESS SESSION REPORTS PREPARED BY ILDG MEMBERS

We welcome very active participation from ILDG members in preparing and defending reports during the 47th session of the Congress, held in Strasbourg on 15-17 October 2024. We thank all our rapporteurs. All documents can be accessed on this [website](#).

Martine DIESCHBURG-NICKELS, Luxembourg, L, co-rapporteur

Verification of new members' credentials

Russian Federation's war of aggression against Ukraine. Destruction of cultural heritage in Ukraine

Linda GILLHAM, United Kingdom, L, co-rapporteur

Fostering a circular economy at local and regional level

Matthias GYSIN, Switzerland, L, co-rapporteur

Monitoring of the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in Iceland

Monitoring of the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in Malta

Gobnait NI MHUIMNEACAIN, Ireland, L, co-rapporteur

Monitoring of the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in Latvia

Stewart DICKSON, United Kingdom, R, co-rapporteur

Recurring issues based on assessments resulting from Congress monitoring of the European Charter of Local Self-Government and election observation missions (2021-2024)

Carla DEJONGHE, Belgium, R, co-rapporteur

Ageing communities – ensuring access to quality social care for older persons

Randi MONDORF, Denmark, R, co-rapporteur

Integration of youth perspectives in local and regional democratic life

REFLEXIONS AHEAD OF THE REFERENDUM

Alexandr Tarnavski, Republic of Moldova, People's Assembly of Gagauzia



On 20 October 2024, the Republic of Moldova will hold a referendum on amending the Constitution to enshrine the country's course toward European integration. Although this plebiscite is not legally binding, it carries

significant importance for the future of a country situated at the crossroads of geopolitical interests. Approximately 60% of the population supports freedom and European integration, but a substantial portion—around 40%—nostalgically looks to the past and envisions Moldova's future in close ties with the Russian Federation.

This referendum aims to resolve a debate that has lasted more than 30 years and to help unite Moldovan society around a common goal. I pay particular attention to the situation in the territorial autonomy of Gagauzia. Despite the fact that European integration offers new opportunities, especially for small ethnic groups and minorities, the Gagauz population remains skeptical and even hostile to this course.

Although the European Union is one of Gagauzia's largest donors (second only to Türkiye), and EU membership provides strong guarantees for preserving and developing Gagauz culture, propaganda, stereotypes, and the vested interests of the autonomy's leadership have resulted in the overwhelming majority of Gagauz people opposing European integration. The situation in Gagauzia vividly illustrates how the absence of a national programme to inform citizens about the benefits of European integration and the lack of minority participation in national processes can undermine the impact of European investments and support.

To this day, the Gagauz community remains insufficiently informed about the Copenhagen criteria applied to candidate countries for EU membership, particularly those

concerning human rights and minority protections. These criteria include key rights such as preserving cultural identity, access to education in native languages, equal participation in governance, and much more.

The information vacuum in Gagauzia regarding European integration serves as an important lesson for the European Union. It underscores the need to popularize and inform populations of future candidate

countries about the advantages of the European choice—not only for the majority nation but also for national minorities..

THE EXODUS OF SERVICES OF GENERAL INTEREST FROM RURAL AREAS: LESSONS FROM THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

Viorel Furdul, Republic of Moldova, Executive Director of Congress of Local Authorities of Moldova, Straseni municipal councillor

Services of General Interest (SGIs) encompass essential services such as water, waste management, healthcare, education, transportation, and energy. These services are critical for sustainable development but are often inaccessible in rural areas, especially in countries with low levels of economic development and public spending like the Republic of Moldova. With over half of its population residing in rural areas, Moldova faces many challenges such as high unemployment, poor infrastructure, and limited access to public services, which exacerbate rural depopulation and marginalization. Moldova's case illustrates the urgent need to address factors undermining SGIs reform quality to prevent their failure.

Main Challenges Contributing to the Exodus of SGIs

*Neglect of Rural Significance

Rural areas are often undervalued, with debates questioning the cost-efficiency of investing in small rural communities. This has led to discriminatory policies that limit rural access to funding and development opportunities. In Moldova, rural areas are not only areas of economic activity but also vital custodians of culture and tradition. A balanced approach is necessary to ensure equitable development.

*Misinterpretation of Urbanization

The term "Urbanization" is associated with notions of progress and

modernisation. However, urbanization should not drive rural depopulation or erode rural identity. Instead, it should integrate urban qualities into rural areas, providing equal access to public services while preserving rural values. Urbanization must be inclusive, fostering a symbiotic relationship between rural and urban areas.

*Impact of Radical Territorial Reforms

Administrative-territorial reforms aimed at improving SGIs often backfire when poorly prepared or imposed without consultation. Negative effects include reduced service accessibility, loss of local identity, and public dissatisfaction. Sustainable reforms should focus on gradual, inclusive changes rather than abrupt mergers.

*Challenges with International Expertise

While international expertise has brought valuable input into the development of reform strategies, Moldova struggles with

implementation due to overreliance on external consultants and lack of local ownership. Reforms must prioritize actionable results, leveraging local knowledge and empowering local stakeholders.

Policy Responses and Special Measures

*Investing in Rural Areas

Policies should focus on improving infrastructure, connectivity, and local service providers. Supporting rural economies and empowering communities will create sustainable development pathways.

*Decentralization and Local Democracy

Decentralized governance ensures resources are efficiently allocated, programs are tailored to community needs, and citizens have a voice in decision-making. Strengthening local democracy is essential for inclusive rural development.

*Intermunicipal Cooperation

Collaboration between municipalities



– especially in such fragmented and diverse administrative and territorial landscape as the Republic of Moldova – fosters efficiency, shared resources, and improved service quality. Unlike radical territorial reforms, this approach respects local identities and promotes gradual development.

***Strengthening Local Authorities and Associations. The Key Role of the National Association of Local and Regional Authorities**

Local and regional authorities, along with their associations, play a pivotal role in planning and delivering SGIs tailored to community needs. These associations are essential for advocacy, capacity building, policy

development, and fostering social and territorial cohesion. They also promote partnerships across public, private, and civil society sectors and contribute to monitoring and evaluating service delivery.

To maintain socio-economic cohesion, strengthening these associations is vital. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities must contribute to their capacity building and institutional development, especially in Eastern Europe. National associations should be actively involved in implementing CoE programmes, which must also include components for enhancing their capacity and institutional resilience. Empowered

associations can effectively lead efforts to combat the exodus of SGIs from rural areas, ensuring equitable access to vital services.

Moldova's experience underscores the critical importance of addressing the challenges to SGIs in rural areas. By prioritizing decentralized governance, fostering collaboration, and empowering local stakeholders, the Republic of Moldova can ensure that rural communities thrive and remain integral to the nation's identity and economy.

[Debate](#) held on 4 April 202



THE ILDG GROUP WISHES YOU AND YOUR LOVED ONES A PEACEFUL HOLIDAY SEASON, A TIME TO FIND HOPE AND STRENGTH AMID UNCERTAIN TIMES

In just a few weeks, we will come together to celebrate the season of goodwill and togetherness—a time to cherish moments of peace and joy with our loved ones. Yet, as we embrace these moments, let us keep in our hearts those enduring profound hardships, from the ravages of war to other crises, with a special thought for the people of Ukraine. Our thoughts also extend to all who have faced the devastation of extreme weather this fall, reminding us of the shared challenges of our interconnected world.

May this season inspire us to act with compassion, resilience, and solidarity. Together, let us stand with those striving for freedom, justice, and human dignity, and remain committed to building a brighter, more hopeful future for all. We are looking forward to seeing you in Strasbourg soon!

NEXT MEETINGS: ILDG MEETING 25 MARCH 2025

48TH SESSION 25-27 MARCH 2025

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