

Conference
“Volunteering for democracy”
Recommendations from civil society and local authorities
(Bydgoszcz, Poland, 8 July 2011)

Speech by President Keith Whitmore
Congress of Local and Regional Authorities
Council of Europe

Mayor Bruski,
President Vinther,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you to the Conference on Volunteering for Democracy on behalf of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe. I wish to thank the conference organizers, the Association of Local Democracy Agencies, ALDA, and the City of Bydgoszcz [BID-gosh] – both long-standing partners of the Congress – for giving me an opportunity to speak on this subject of major importance in the framework of participatory democracy, which is taking shape in Europe today.

It also gives me particular pleasure to be here in Bydgoszcz [BID-gosh], a city which hosted, two years ago, a meeting of the Congress' Committee on Culture and Education and a seminar on creative cities. The subject then was promotion of cultural diversity through local heritage, which implies a strong involvement of both local authorities and civil society. Today, we will be discussing again the need to build partnerships between local government and civil society organisations to ensure their active participation in democratic processes and their contribution through volunteer work.

Volunteering is part and parcel of the broader issue of civic participation, democratic participation of citizens in political and public life, which is growing in importance today. Today, the traditional system of representative democracy is being increasingly challenged by the need to integrate the elements of direct democracy and provide a framework for increased citizen participation, which should be constant and not limited to elections alone. Volunteering is a strong component of this emerging participatory democracy.

The regional and local levels guarantee the most direct interaction between citizens and governance structures. As such, they represent a perfect ground for innovation and testing new methods in this area. There are also instances where

volunteering has a major impact on the way regional and local authorities organise certain services, playing an important role in service provision and contributing to local and regional economies. This contribution of voluntary work, both economic and social, must be recognised and promoted, especially its social value in involving people in democratic processes and building active citizenship in our communities.

In this context, I should point to a specific role of volunteering in education for democratic citizenship – a concept of fostering democratic culture and developing the necessary knowledge and skills among citizens, which is being actively promoted by the Council of Europe. Last year, its Committee of Ministers adopted a Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education, which stresses in particular the role of civil society and volunteer work. This issue was included among the Council of Europe priorities for 2012-2013. Last week, the Current Affairs Committee of the Congress approved a first report on the subject, dealing with the tools available to local authorities to ensure education for democratic citizenship in their communities.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We can see that the legal framework for volunteering is beginning to take shape today. We can trace its origin back to the European Charter of Local Self-Government, which laid down already in 1985 the right of citizens to democratic participation. This right was reaffirmed further in the Additional Protocol to the Charter, adopted two years ago, which speaks of the duties of both national and local authorities to engage citizens in public and political life at local level. Also two years ago, the Congress gave its full support to the Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision-Making Process, proposed by non-governmental organizations having participative status with the Council of Europe. The Code speaks in particular of the need to involve civil society organisations at all levels of governance.

For its part, the Congress has done a great deal of work on participatory democracy, ranging from the participation of foreign residents and migrants to the participation of women and especially young people. I could mention in particular the Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life, our recommendations on the participation of women in local politics and our proposals to set up consultative councils of foreign residents and migrants at local and regional level, or our work to promote local voting rights for foreigners and the implementation of the Council of

Europe Convention on the Participation of Foreigners in Public Life at Local Level.

However, what we need today is the practical partnership between local and regional authorities and the volunteer sector, and a practical framework for their cooperation. The authorities at the grassroots should support voluntary organisations, help with the training of volunteers and provide guidance in voluntary project management. They should themselves set a good example by actively participating in voluntary projects. A particular attention should be paid to involving young people and youth organisations, including setting up youth councils or assemblies at local and regional levels. Our objective should be to bring together local and regional authorities and civil society to spread expertise and good practices, raise awareness and encourage exchanges of experience – in other words, to build partnerships for the benefit of our citizens and the improvement of local democracy and self-governance.

This is why the Congress welcomes the initiative of our counterpart in the European Union, the Committee of the Regions, which held a Forum on volunteering in January this year to look deeper into these issues. We also fully support the ALDA recommendations for local authorities and civil society organisations to elaborate joint policies for the promotion of

volunteering, and to set up mechanisms for civil society participation as part of a favourable framework enabling the contribution of voluntary organisations to policy-making.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In conclusion, I would like to stress the contribution made by Local Democracy Agencies and their association to this process. For us, the concept of Local Democracy Agencies, first launched by the Congress in 1993, embodies the spirit and philosophy of public engagement and volunteering. Over these years, LDAs have shown great examples of involving local societies in projects for democracy- and confidence-building, and I would like to reiterate the continued support and commitment of the Congress to the partnership and long-lasting co-operation with ALDA.

Today, we are pleased to see the network of LDAs expand into South Caucasus, with the forthcoming opening of a new agency in Armenia, which will add to the one already operating in Kutaisi, Georgia. We can only encourage further expansion of the ALDA network, as Local Democracy Agencies and ALDA fit into the vision of the future of the Congress as an instrument of its policies.

I am convinced that much experience for voluntary work at local level can be drawn from ALDA operations and applied in other local and regional communities, in particular in the framework of the Eastern Partnership process with its emphasis on the important role of local democracy. In this context, the Congress welcomes and supports ALDA's strong involvement in the Civil Society Forum for Eastern Partnership, which only confirms the Association's role in creating synergies between local authorities and civil society.

This conference is yet another proof of it. I would like to thank the organisers once again for this excellent initiative, and to wish you all the best for constructive and productive work.

Thank you.