

13th of April 2021

**Antonella Valmorbida – ALDA Secretary General**  
**addressing the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe**

On the first panel opening the dialogue with Civil Society on elections mechanism and participation after the Covid 19

*Agenda attached (annex 1)*

Excellencies, dear all participants and friends from the panel,

It is a great privilege for ALDA – the European Association for Local Democracy, to take the floor in such a distinguished panel addressing you all those difficult times. I speak on behalf of our 350 members (local authorities and civil society groups) from all over Europe and beyond, committed to the cause of local democracy and citizens participation. We were established by the Council of Europe 20 years ago and we have structured relationship with the Congress of local and regional authorities and now with the Centre of Expertise for good governance. We implemented so far almost 450 projects, which had an impact on about 25 million people.

It is worth to say that good governance and elections today, and not wealth, decides the faith of our citizens, life or death of millions of people and survival of our planet. The pandemic made very clear that we need innovative instruments for governing a complex, demanding and interacting world.

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The Council of Europe unites us all, despite the difficulties and sometimes, profound, differences. And we I say all, I mean governments, local authorities, civil society and citizens. The Council of Europe offers us a framework of rules and clear guidance. In my field of work, I would like to recall the European Charter on Local Self-governance, **Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision-Making Process**, which was then embedded in the<sup>i</sup> **CM (2017)83-final**. I would like here to recall the fundamental **Recommendation CM/Rec (2018)4<sup>ii</sup>** and in its appendix which says that “**local public life**” regards all matters, services and decisions and in particular the management and administration of the affairs relating to or concerning a local community and that “**citizen**” are any person (including, where appropriate, foreign residents) belonging to a local community. The fundamental **Recommendation CM/Rec (2009)1 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on electronic democracy (e-democracy)** recalls simply that the IT is a mean and not an objective and if the trust is not there, if the dialogue is not there, IT does not help to build democracy.

ALDA is confronted by numbers of difficulties that we are constantly trying to turn into opportunities. Citizens and civil society are calling for being more engaged, they ask more responsibility for their present and their future. For us, the potential of local democracy and community involving at the local level is immense. We want to see more governance in this sense, truly supported by the governments, accompanied by laws, and then facilitated by practices. Local governments must enjoy the autonomy and strength to be real partners of their communities. Citizens and public authorities must be partners in order to identify new resources, build trust, create opportunities and confirm a strong sense of belonging. We will avoid of building always higher and higher barriers, which is bringing us to always more fragile democracy or puppet scenarios of democracy.

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Covid 19 did not change the societies and the way people related to democratic process but it has precipitated some ongoing changes. ALDA, on daily basis, see that citizens are now even more in need of proximity and answers for their demands, health, jobs, social support, education. ALDA thinks that democracy is the good choice for offering more solutions. Digitalization has speed up in all the communities and we need to adapt the way the citizens liaise and work with their local government in order not to stop the dialogue but transforming it, hopefully making it more effective. Local authorities must offer technical and educational support and not postpone too long the “lockdown” in participation. We need alternative ways of empowering engagement of citizens in a constant flow, which is the substance of participatory democracy. ALDA is convinced that participatory democracy will save democracy and not harm it. Citizens are not tired of participation or zoom. They are naturally attracted by **effectiveness**. If participation is well done and produces results, they will do it. the same with Zoom connection, they call for quality, education, material and support. E democracy and e voting is part of a way of participation, and we need to get equipped for it and to adapt our laws and practices.

We want to promote citizen participation – responsibility, - e-voting and democracy and that will become a new normality. I am now addressing to the house which is assisting legally most of the members states: yes, we need to have good laws and constitutions, but we also need to **implement** them and civil society, especially local communities, are there to help.

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ALDA suggests:

More institutional

- To propose a vast programme of monitoring and evaluation of the Committee of Ministers **CM/Rec (2018)4** Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers on the participation of citizens in local public life, to see how its component are implemented and to be adapted in concrete terms in the CoE member states, based on a tripartite partnership between civil society, local authorities and the governments bodies. We have to think also on how monitor and understand the development of the impact of the covid 19 on the **Recommendation CM/Rec (2009)1 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on electronic democracy (e-democracy), especially in terms of elections**

More on practices:

- ALDA proposes to strongly recommend in all the CoE members States to transfer into law and practices the **Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision-Making Process**. It has many answers about what it means to unlock the potential of citizens participation, to transform a conflict into a wealth of opportunities

More forward looking:

- **ALDA recommends opening a real path of research and deep reflection on the role of participatory democracy at the Council of Europe, the house of democracy**. We need to throw our hearts over the fence. Certainly, at the local level, field of implementation and

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European Association  
for Local Democracy

experiments will be much more interesting and quicker to be analyzed, monitor, and streamlined.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://rm.coe.int/16802eed5c>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://rm.coe.int/09000016807954c3>

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**Exchange of views with representatives of the civil society, organised under the aegis of  
the Chair of GR-DEM in co-operation with the President of the Conference of INGOs  
“Elections during the Covid-19 crisis: the role of civil society organisations”  
(Strasbourg, by video conference, 13 April 2021, 2.30 p.m.)**

**DRAFT AGENDA**

**14:30 Opening**

Ambassador Mårten Ehnberg, Chair of the GR-DEM

**Introduction**

Gerhard Ermischer, Vice-President of the Democracy Committee, Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe

**15:00-15.45: Questions A**

*How do civil society organisations manage to reach out to their public, to continue their work, to innovate and to adapt their methods of, and work on election management during the electoral period and to ensure voter information, education and outreach (including towards vulnerable and/or underrepresented groups), especially during the Covid-19 pandemic? How can they help mobilise voters, in particular young and first-time voters?*

*How can civil society organisations contribute to restore trust and reconnect citizens to democratic practices and decision-making in these difficult times?*

- Ken Godfrey, Executive Director, European Partnership for Democracy, Brussels
- Tanja Hollstein, Senior Elections Advisor, Westminster Foundation for Democracy, London
- Antonella Valmorbida, Secretary General, European Association for Local Democracy, Brussels
- Representative of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), Warsaw

**15:45-16.30: Questions B**

*Does the Covid-19 pandemic favour the use of new digital technologies in electoral processes and awareness raising campaigns? What are the advantages and risks of technological tools (e-registration, e-voting, counting)?*

*With the increase of Artificial Intelligence, how can election integrity during electoral processes be ensured and how can the misuse of AI applications to disseminate disinformation and to manipulate voters' behaviour be countered?*

- Rast'o Kužel, Executive Director, MEMO98, Bratislava
- Jordi Puiggalí, CSO and SVP Research & Security, SCYTL - Secure Electronic Voting, Barcelona
- Jordi Barrat Esteve, Professor of Constitutional Law, Tarragona
- Representative of the Advisory Council on Youth, Council of Europe

**Concluding remarks**

Gerhard Ermischer, Vice-President of the Democracy Committee, Conference of INGOs  
Ambassador Mårten Ehnberg, Chair of the GR-DEM