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Democracy and local governance in South-East Europe: the role of Local Democracy Agencies (LDAs)

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Explanatory memorandum
Local and regional elected representatives of South-East Europe

Summary:

This report explains that in the development of local and regional democracy in South-East Europe NGOs and civil society are key actors, enabling people to play a part in local life and make a contribution to stability and democratic change in the region. In this context the LDAs established by the Congress have done important and concrete work in local authorities of South-East Europe, in line with major Council of Europe and Congress principles. The report takes stock of action by the LDAs and their association, the ALDA. An information document by the head of ALDA is also available. The draft resolution puts forward various proposals for improved synergy of LDA, ALDA and Congress activity.

R: Chamber of Regions/L: Chamber of Local Authorities
ILDG: Independent and Liberal Democrat Group of the Congress
EPP/CD: European People's Party/Christian Democrat Group of the Congress
SOC: Socialist Group of the Congress
NR: Member not belonging to a political group of the Congress



Introduction

Democracy and local governance in South-East Europe cannot develop solely through the action of governments or international and European organisations. Active participation by citizens and their main representatives (associations, NGOs, etc) is also essential. Since the early nineties, the Congress has understood the importance of a commitment in the field in South-East Europe in order to achieve progress in local democracy. When it set up the Local Democracy Agencies (LDAs), the Congress involved numerous European towns and cities in these agencies' operation, thereby making its contribution to the development of civil society in South-East Europe. The aim of this report is to highlight the decisive role of civil society in the progress made in democracy and local governance, and particularly to evaluate the role currently played in these fields by the Local Democracy Agencies and their grouping, the Association of Local Democracy Agencies (ALDA).

The importance of civil society¹ in the development of democracy and local governance in South-East Europe.

In South-East Europe, as in the rest of Europe, a strong and well-organised civil society is the best guarantor of stable political democracy. NGOs constitute a robust democratic bulwark against possible excesses by governments, and they are the best possible means of promoting democratic security.

Civil society has a vital role to play in the development of European co-operation and stability, in the creation of lasting peace and in the transformation of the countries of South-East Europe into modern European democracies. NGOs and their networks enable solid democratic safeguards to be introduced which prevent violations of the Council of Europe's principles: Human Rights, the rule of law and democracy.

South-East Europe remains, notwithstanding many positive developments, a fragile region where major efforts need to be made to establish lasting democracy and stability.

In the view of the Congress, democracy can be established on an enduring basis only if it is put into practice effectively at local and regional level. Without genuine participation by citizens, social partners and organisations representing civil society, it is difficult to establish local democracy that will endure.

NGOs' role was very much emphasised at the 3rd Summit of Heads of State and Government (Warsaw, May 2005). Their place within the Council of Europe is widely recognised and valued. For its part, the Congress is presenting to this 15th Session a major report on partnership between local and regional authorities and NGOs in Council of Europe member states (cf draft resolution CG(15)10RES).

It seems vital, before considering the specific role of LDAs, to emphasise the importance of NGOs and civil society in general in the democratic development process in South-East Europe.

The Council of Europe, like the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe and the European Union, has derived great benefit from the experience, and has supported the activities, of many associations which are active in the Balkans.

Furthermore, the associations of local authorities in the countries of South-East Europe - within the framework of the NALAS network - as well as the LDAs have been associated with the two conferences of Ministers responsible for local government in South-East Europe, held respectively in Zagreb (25 and 26 October 2004) and Skopje (10 and 11 November 2006).

Similarly, the major European associations of local and regional authorities (CEMR, AER, CPMR, etc) have set up specific working structures devoted to South-East Europe.

¹ "Civil society" may be defined as NGOs (groupings centring on common causes, such as Human Rights associations, cultural and environmental associations, assistance bodies, etc), as well as employees' and employers' organisations, organisations representing economic and social interests, gender equality organisations, youth movements, associations which enable citizens to play a part in local public life and associations of religious inspiration.

“Civil society”, which seems to be a complex and heterogeneous entity, plays a vital role in the entire process of stability and co-operation in the Balkans. All the players in the Balkans unanimously acknowledge that only active participation by civil society can make it possible for training and co-operation programmes effectively to reach their ultimate beneficiaries, namely the citizens directly concerned.

The Council of Europe and other major international and European organisations have all initiated specific programmes, in their own domains and with differing financial resources, in the countries of South-East Europe. The success of these programmes usually depends on the part played by civil society, which plays a decisive role in the establishment of participatory democracy.

There is now a rich network of NGOs, the fruit of almost 15 years of international co-operation in such varied fields as the protection of human rights, the protection of disadvantaged social groups, the strengthening of the capacities of local authorities and the training of large numbers of local and national officials. The many NGOs active in the Balkans depend to a large extent on major international donors (international financial institutions, UN agencies and the major international NGOs).

The general objective of these programmes is to enable local authorities themselves to acquire within their own territory the skills and capacities that they need.

The European and international programmes which have made it possible to ascertain the “best practices” in interregional co-operation and local governance have generally relied on NGOs with a particularly strong local base.

Some NGOs with years of experience are now involved in the political debate and have achieved wide recognition. This does not exclude the possibility of the organisations funded by donations and set up to implement international aid programmes facing financial difficulties when these programmes come to an end.

International funds are currently being cut in the Balkans, and their methods of distribution altered.

In very general terms, the NGOs active at local level in South-East Europe are having to face up to numerous problems, particularly corruption (due to ineffective public administration, the lack of an efficient institutional framework, the lack or reduced level of independence of the courts, etc), human rights violations (notwithstanding the efforts of international organisations, with the Council of Europe to the fore), deficits in local governance and associations’ lack of representativeness and government recognition.

This brief overview shows that civil society in the Balkans has played, and will be required to play, a very important role in democratic developments in South-East Europe. The organisations concerned currently face numerous political, financial and structural challenges. They have nevertheless made it possible to strengthen local institutions by providing technical assistance, helping to combat corruption and organised crime, encouraging the promotion of multicultural areas and boosting confidence among regions’ citizens in their local and regional authorities.

Much remains to be done, however. Local NGOs are asking for training so that they can adapt to the current situation. They need to strengthen their capacities so that they can take part in the process of European co-operation. Efforts must be made in several countries to develop freedom of association, create the requisite legislative framework, help civil society to gain true independence from politics and continue to develop partnership networks with their counterparts in the rest of Europe.

Specific features of the activity of LDAs

The LDAs are amongst a large number of NGOs active in South-East Europe. The main features of LDAs are:

1. A close link with the Congress

Since they were set up in 1993 at the initiative, and with the support, of the Congress, LDAs have continued to uphold the values of the Council of Europe, and more particularly the development of local democracy, good local governance and the rule of law.

The Congress ensures, through the activities of the LDAs in South-East Europe, implementation on the ground of the main principles of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, of the protection of minorities (on the basis of the Council of Europe Conventions) and of the principles for the promotion of human rights.

2. Partnerships with European towns and cities

With a view to carrying out their activities in close co-operation with partner towns and cities in Europe, each LDA operates on the basis of a network of partner towns. This specific feature of LDAs should enable a greater number of Congress members (and their towns or regions) to be directly associated with the operation of the LDAs.

The Congress is involved in the selection of towns to receive LDAs (these tend to be towns with ethnic minorities, and still bearing vivid scars from previous conflicts). The Congress must continue to follow the setting up of new LDAs, taking account of political and institutional developments in Europe. The opening of a new LDA in Albania and the plan for another in Belarus are politically significant and sensitive developments that the Congress should follow attentively, so it should be informed about these at a sufficiently early stage.

So as to make better use of the large network of towns and regions which are represented in the Congress, it would be beneficial both to the Congress and to the LDAs to give priority to finding new partners among the national delegations to the Congress.

3. Political, administrative and financial support from the Congress

From the very beginning of this initiative, the Congress has given both financial and administrative support to the launch of LDAs. This support has been decisive and has been continuing, albeit on a more limited basis for the past few years on account of not only budgetary constraints, but also the setting up of the Association of Local Democracy Agencies (December 1999), which has managed to find specific budgetary resources within the framework of international and European project management.

The Congress plays an active part in the meetings of the Association's different management bodies of which it is an ex officio member (Governing Board, Bureau), and in the General Assembly of the Association, as it did on 16 May 2008 in Vienna. The Bureau of the Congress appoints its representatives to the various ALDA bodies.

The contributions granted each year by the Congress to the individual LDAs and the administrative support given to the ALDA constitute a major share of the ALDA's resources. It would be appropriate to specify, with regard to the contribution that LDAs are in a position to make to the overall activity of the Congress, the future arrangements for the support that the Congress and Council of Europe will be able to give to the ALDA. On this assessment will depend the content of the revised agreement which the Association will sign with the Council of Europe, and which is currently being updated.

4. Improvement of the synergy between LDA and ALDA activities, on the one hand, and the Committees of the Congress, on the other
Several activities are already in progress and should be continued, in order to achieve better mutual information. The Committees and Working Groups of the Congress should be regularly informed of the activities of the LDAs and the Association. At the same time, the Agencies and Association should be better informed of the objectives and activities of the Congress, with a view to optimisation of the projects carried out on both sides. Recent experience has shown that the Congress should already be informed at the preparatory stage of LDA or ALDA projects. Lastly, the ALDA should continue to be closely involved in the work of the Congress' Working Group of local and regional elected representatives of South-East Europe (GTSEE).
5. Future projects and financing
As is shown by the appended report on the recent activities of the ALDA, the major part of the Association's resources comes from outside funding, particularly through European Union programmes, national associations of local authorities and voluntary contributions by governments. For its part, the Congress has requested voluntary contributions from governments for LDA and ALDA projects. The Secretariat has taken responsibility for financial supervision of the projects funded by voluntary contributions assigned to the Congress, but managed by the ALDA. Insofar as the greater portion of projects and funding has for some years been directly managed by the Association, the Congress should, as already stated, be informed at a sufficiently early stage of the projects for which the ALDA requests funding, so as to consider the support that it can grant.

Future challenges

From the Congress' point of view, the major challenges facing the Local Democracy Agencies are:

- the upholding of the main values of the Council of Europe in the management of LDAs' individual projects and the Association's major projects (this requires information to be exchanged between the Congress and the ALDA, and the results of major projects to be politically evaluated);
- a proactive approach to the Congress' and Council of Europe's own activities (for instance through participation in the various Council of Europe campaigns and a closer association with the network of political schools set up by the Council of Europe);
- greater involvement of members of the Congress (local and regional) in partnerships with LDAs;
- the possibility of carrying out joint projects between the Congress and the Association;
- an appropriate definition of the consultation and monitoring procedures between the Congress and the Association.