

Summing up and conclusions
of the International Conference organised within the framework of the Slovak
Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe

“IMPROVING GOVERNANCE AT LOCAL LEVEL – TOOLS AND STRATEGY”

Piešťany, Slovak Republic, 17-18 April 2008

The Slovak Republic took the initiative of convening this event in order to

- reiterate its commitment to local and regional democracy as a fundamental component of democracy,
- uphold the role of the Council of Europe as the European institution where central and local and regional government come together,
- and to take stock of – and take further – the positive results of the recent conference of European ministers responsible for local and regional government held in Valencia in October 2007.

The three main themes, which are at the core of Council of Europe member state’s common work for better local government, were selected: the quality of governance, citizen participation, and compliance with ethical standards in local government.

In these three respects, the Conference has met its objectives.

I.

Strategy for Innovation and Good Governance

As regards democratic governance, the Conference paid attention to the Strategy for Innovation and Good Governance recently adopted by the Committee of Ministers, following its endorsement by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, the Parliamentary Assembly and the European Ministers themselves.

The Strategy is a new and challenging initiative that aims at mobilising central governments and local authorities in the enhancement of good governance at local level. Good governance is essential if local government is to prosper and remain the corner-stone of our democratic societies.

The Conference agreed with and fully supported the objectives and goals of the Strategy: that citizens be at the hearth of local democracy.

In order for this to happen, local governments should direct their action towards the implementation of twelve principles of good governance. Their associations, with the support of central governments as necessary, should facilitate this task. In some countries, this is already happening. The representatives at central and local level of Belgium and Italy explained what actions have already been undertaken or are being

introduced in order for the Strategy to be adopted and implemented in their respective countries.

The Slovak Republic takes the Strategy seriously and will discuss with the Association of Towns and Communities of Slovakia and other association(s) of municipalities how to phase it in the course of 2008. Slovakia fully supports the Strategy and proposes to create the second group of countries preparing the implementation of the Strategy consisting of Slovakia, Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland and Austria. Slovakia will present this proposal at the next meeting of State Secretaries of the V4 countries responsible for public administration and through diplomatic channels to Austria.

The conference also clearly underlined the crucial guiding and co-ordinating role for the Council of Europe in the implementation of the Strategy by its member states. The structures envisaged for its implementation should be provided with the necessary means. Both the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and the intergovernmental sector of the Council should develop the necessary co-operation and synergies.

Slovakia will bring these considerations to the attention of the Committee of Ministers in order to promote the recognition of the Strategy as one of the major priorities of the Organisation for the years to come.

II. European Local Democracy Week

This Conference offered an opportunity to know more about and raise awareness of the European Local Democracy Week also launched at the Valencia Ministerial conference.

The Conference participants are convinced that local self-government can only be effective – and lasting – if citizens believe in it, take part in it, see it as providing a response to their most basic and immediate needs: housing, education, social and economic well-being.

Furthermore the conference participants expressed belief that making local self-government open and easy to access could help to bridge the yawning gap that some denounce between citizens and politics or public life.

In this respect, the Conference has been a great revelation. It has revealed that so many local authorities – and their associations – share this goal and are prepared and committed to open up to greater scrutiny and participation.

The conference participants are grateful to the representatives of big and small cities, their associations, and the nongovernmental sector, for the examples they gave of initiatives already implemented and of the goodwill that supports them. This will no doubt inspire the many others that heard the presentations and took part in the discussions.

The conference participants are also grateful to the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities for the support that it has consistently given to this initiative.

The Congress, European governments and above all the associations of local authorities have a role to play in fostering the idea, facilitating the exchanges of experiences and helping local authorities to learn from each other. Here too, the Council of Europe could – without too big an investment – provide a “forum” for the exchange of ideas, for instance through an enhanced website. The logo of the Week, unveiled at the Conference, will help focus the attention of citizens on this event and its European dimension.

III. Public ethics at local level

Last but not least, the Conference discussed public ethics at local level. This was not the first time the issue is debated at a European conference. Does it mean that unethical behaviour or, to put it bluntly, corruption is endemic in local self-government?

Certainly not, as the debate has shown, but sufficiently resistant – and resilient – to deserve to be monitored and fought against.

The participants, including a number of academics, provided ample evidence that not only does corruption in all its forms have a huge cost in terms of resources diverted and additional burdens placed on the public purse – and on citizens, in the last resort. It also disqualifies local government and widens the gap between citizens and public life.

If we are serious about putting the citizens at the heart of local democracy, we must also be serious about dealing with corruption and unethical behaviour at all levels of government.

Several experiences with national agencies for civil servants, the implementation of joint programmes between the Council of Europe and the European Commission and the Handbook on Public Ethics at Local Level produced by the Council of Europe were described and their lessons discussed.

The exchange of experience and the will to learn from each other – as eloquently restated by the Ministers themselves in Valencia – should remain the pillar of our approach to fighting corruption and promoting ethical behaviour.

The Council of Europe should also continue to elaborate standards and where appropriate binding legal instruments to combat corruption in all its forms. But a change in mentality is equally necessary to disavow those who practise it as if it were a fact of life. In this sense, the Congress is probably better equipped than other bodies to promote ethical values among local elected politicians.

The participants in the Conference were informed about the Centre of Expertise for Local Government Reform and its practical and useful capacity-building programmes. Slovakia supported the establishment of the Centre and now supports its consolidation after the initial three-year period. Ethics at local level is certainly an area where its work could be intensified.

IV. Further action

The participants in the Conference agreed on the following:

- a) effective local and regional democracy is essential for the consolidation and development of democracy as a whole across the continent;
- b) the Strategy for Innovation and Good Governance is a challenging initiative that local authorities should widely embrace. Central government and associations of local authorities should discuss how to adopt national programmes for its implementation. The Council of Europe should be ready to support, advise and assist in the implementation of specific programmes requested by member states. The resources allocated to the Strategy should be commensurate to the task;
- c) the Local Democracy Week is an exciting way of bringing local democracy closer to citizens; all municipalities and cities should be part of it. The Congress is particularly relevant for taking this idea further and promoting its implementation, in close co-operation with the associations of local authorities in member states;
- d) local and regional government is central to member states' fight against corruption and effort to promote ethical values. The Congress and member states within the appropriate fora in the Council of Europe must continue their co-operation on this issue.