

“Dynamic local democracy, the key to citizen mobilisation”

Joint declaration of Congress President Herwig VAN STAA
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1. We have come together to celebrate 25 years of the European Charter of Local Government and 60 years of the European Charter of Municipal Liberties – the Charter of Versailles. These flagship texts of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) have been at the forefront of developing and reinforcing territorial democracy across the European area.
2. Much has been achieved and today we have paid tribute to some of these achievements. The European Charter of Municipal Liberties paved the way for the European Charter of Local Self-Government, which, as of 2013, is applied in the 47 member states of the Council of Europe. The next step is to deepen and extend its application.
3. While we have much to celebrate, we cannot ignore that decentralisation - local and regional democracy - has reached a crossroads. True democracy is inclusive, based on participation and ownership. There are many threats to democracy and they are increasing, not decreasing, aggravated by the severe economic crisis.
4. The monitoring of the European Charter of Local Self-Government by the Congress has been greatly strengthened in the past few years. The results of this monitoring are flagging up several causes for concern in member states. Governments are using economic arguments to recentralise and to claw back competences, squeezing local budgets and restricting the freedom of local authorities to raise income through taxation and to decide how to allocate and spend their resources.
5. Much is at stake. We must highlight the risks, alert Europe’s citizens and the elected authorities which represent them at local, regional and national levels. We need better governance and cooperation between all levels – European institutions and national, regional and local authorities. But good governance without democracy is a dangerous chimera. Democracy, the right to choose and the right to participate, has to be at the heart of governance.
6. It is dangerous and short-sighted to roll back democracy, ownership and participation, by seeking to make short term financial savings on a pretext of greater efficiency. This threatens cohesive societies, with committed citizens willing to take responsibilities.
7. But the future can be bright. We are witnessing new participatory models, new partnerships, new forms of dialogue and new forms of consultation. New technologies are giving us new opportunities to involve our citizens directly in the processes of local government.
8. The European Charter of Local Self-Government has inspired a generation; it has underpinned the development of local democracy for 25 years. It is now time to adapt it, to strengthen the protections that it offers and to take account of the *acquis* of 25 years of the European Charter and 60 years of the Charter of Versailles.
9. The Congress and the CEMR stand ready to work together to improve the legal safeguards of territorial democracy in Europe and to support committed mayors and councillors in our municipalities.

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