

Schools of Political Studies
Thematic meetings during the World Forum of Democracy (3-7 November)

Professional Group Meeting
“Think global, act local: an everyday challenge for local authorities”
6 November 2014
Synopsis¹

This session was attended by approximately 25 members of the Schools of Political Studies from Albania, Bulgaria, Republic of Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Turkey and Ukraine.

Mr **Tim LISNEY** (Secretariat of the Council of Europe Congress, moderator), introduced the topic. Local authorities, due to their proximity with citizens, had a **special role to play in encouraging citizenship participation**. A healthy local democracy requires regular consultation and a strong relationship between citizens and politicians.

The participants split into three groups to discuss the following questions:

- How political are your local authorities?
- Can local authorities make us active citizens?
- How to respond locally to global issues?

Addressing the first question, as to whether their local authorities had real autonomy and competences and could be considered ‘political’ bodies, the groups’ rapporteurs emphasised that there were **different situations** according to both the country and the municipality concerned. In one of the countries represented, almost every local authority was totally dependent on their central government. However, in other countries municipalities exercised some degree of autonomy, even if it was only a small number of executive competences. Participants underlined the **general lack of trust in local authorities**, but added that it depended in many cases on the personality of the mayor in office.

With regard to the question: “how can local authorities encourage active citizenship?” the views expressed were quite diverse. Most participants agreed that, for local authorities, the best way to encourage the participation of citizens was **to involve people who are already active in local projects** which concern issues of their day-to-day lives; to encourage them to react in public debates and to participate in the municipalities’ activities. Another view expressed was that municipalities should **encourage civil society activities by supporting their actions and projects**. Concrete examples were given, such as a local referendum, initiated by citizens on a specific issue of the municipality, local projects organised by citizens and public consultations. The main obstacle to making citizens active was the continuing centralisation of political structures.

With regard to the best methods for engaging citizens with global issues and getting them involved in the local decision-making process, participants felt that in their own countries global issues tended to remain at the level of news stories and were **absent from current political discussions**. The main explanation reason given for this was a **lack of resources**. Participants considered that it was difficult to act on global issues while basic citizens’ issues had not been resolved (such as lack of education and employment). However, they believed that they could

¹ Notes taken by Cedric Bisschetti, Congress

begin by organising public meetings on global matters and introducing these questions into children's education in primary schools.

The invited expert, Mr **Leen VERBEEK** (Vice-President of the Congress, Regional Governor and King's Advisor in the Netherlands), reacted to these presentations. He considered that the two first questions were connected. Having visited some fifty countries in the course of his political work, he realised that **each country has its own culture and rules of operation**. It was impossible to introduce changes without **taking into account the culture of the country**. He took the example of Guatemala, in which children were learning about environmental issues at kindergarten schools, such as how to tackle the pollution of a river in their vicinity. The children would return home and challenge their parents to stop polluting their river and ruining their future. This was a small example of how work on global issues could begin and move forward.

He added that the most important thing was **to create a culture of democracy**, in which everyone should accept different opinions and combine the ideas, in order to negotiate ways forward that were acceptable to all. Questioned as to whether such compromise positions had their limits, Mr VERBEEK replied that there were no boundaries. He added that, given the culture of corruption in some countries, the **development of transparent practices and democratic debate** had to be seen as a **long-term process**.

Summing up, Mr VERBEEK underlined that it was important for politicians, especially at local level, to **be aware of their responsibilities in representing the people** who had elected them. They should not be pursuing their own interests. They had to prove to citizens that they were aware of the challenges facing their local communities. Local action on global issues could begin by raising these issues in public debates and meetings and should also lead by example to demonstrate that change was possible.