

NEXPO – the NALAS International Municipal Fair
Sarajevo, 10th March 2011

Declaration
On
Local governments facing the future:
Good governance, social inclusion and European integration

We, mayors and elected representatives of the local and regional governments of south-east Europe, meeting together in Sarajevo on the occasion of the NEXPO International Municipal Fair organised by NALAS, have agreed upon the following Declaration:

The countries and peoples of south-east Europe need to take their proper place, very soon, within the European Union. This will mark another major step towards unifying our continent, and thereby enhancing our common goals of peace, stability and sustainable prosperity.

If the prospect of EU membership is to remain credible and attractive for our citizens,

- the EU needs to set out a clear, realistic target timetable and roadmap for each state, taking into account its situation, and on the basis that the necessary steps are taken in a timely manner to fulfil the criteria for membership, and
- Each country needs to take all necessary steps, with each level of government playing its part

The present state of uncertainty, if allowed to continue, will be damaging and potentially dangerous.

Our shared European mission imposes heavy responsibilities upon all of us – the European Union and its member states, the central and local governments of our region, and our citizens and partners.

Our call to the European Union – involve local government!

However, at present it appears to us that the EU's institutions are under-estimating the essential role of the region's local governments in preparing for EU integration. For example, the European Commission's recent Communication, "Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2010-2011", hardly mentions local government, while rightly highlighting the role of civil society and local community-based organisations. We therefore call on the institutions of the EU:

- To include the local government dimension in its strategic and operational planning for EU enlargement
- To involve local government, in particular via our national associations and their network NALAS, in relevant consultations and dialogue
- To ensure that relevant accession-related financing programmes are available to assist local government prepare for accession and achieve high quality development (see below)

We ask the Committee of the Regions to improve the coordination of its work with our region, which at present takes place in four separate working groups, and to include NALAS as observer to help identify common issues and promote cross-learning.

What we need from our national governments

Within our region, the processes of decentralization are incomplete and inadequate. The principle of subsidiarity on the level of political decision making process, as a fundamental principle of decentralization, is not respected so much as it has to be. The transfer of competences to the local level has often not been accompanied by a transfer of the necessary resources to implement them.

Moreover, local governments - through our local government associations - are not sufficiently consulted on the arrangements and preparations for accession to the European Union, including the pre-accession financing programmes.

We therefore call on our central governments:

- To accelerate the process of decentralization, with the transfer of the necessary competences, financial and human resources
- To involve our local government associations at all stages in the processes of decentralisation, financial decision-making, and preparation for EU membership
- To continue consultations and cooperation with the Council of Europe whose expertise is essential for compliance with European standards

Our proposals for pre-accession financing

On the key issue of pre-accession financing instruments and programmes, in particular for the post-2013 period, we urge the EU and our central governments to implement the following points:

- Our local government associations, including NALAS, should be involved from the outset in the negotiations, consultations and priority-setting,
- The instruments should include specific local government-related priorities, and should also ensure that the local government dimension of other broad priorities (e.g. equal opportunities, social inclusion etc.) is clearly identified
- A significant proportion of pre-accession financing should be dedicated to sub-national governments, in consultation with central governments, to enable them to prepare properly for EU membership
- To this end, there should be specific programmes or budget lines for local and regional governments, with processes adapted to their role and situation as democratic public institutions
- Provision should be made to finance local government technical assistance units, managed by local government associations, to support local authorities in drawing up good quality project proposals

Towards EU accession – the challenges for local governments

For us, the issues of good governance and EU integration are intertwined – they are two sides of the same coin. We face at least four main challenges in preparing for EU membership and beyond:

- A very large proportion of EU laws and rules have to be implemented by local governments, or have a direct impact on them
- As the governments closest to citizens, we need to build a “European dimension” to our work, bringing Europe closer to our citizens, involving them in big EU issues and providing good information
- The overall quality of our local government administrations needs to be enhanced, to meet the standards of good governance, manage resources effectively, deliver good public services, achieve positive results for citizens, and attract inward investment
- Our local development strategies need to be well-planned, participatory and citizen-focused, and able to make best use of territorial funding programmes (IPA, structural funds etc.)

To help to meet these challenges, local governments must themselves take many steps, including drawing up and implementing their own EU integration Action Plans. In particular, we need to ensure that the quality of local governance, in all its dimensions, is improved.

Innovation, inclusion and good governance

The purpose of democratic local government is to provide services and development in the interests of all citizens, without discrimination, and generally to promote their well-being. This requires constant learning, innovation and improvement on the part of local governments.

To this end, we emphasize once more the importance of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, which sets out the essential principles of local self-government, even if many national governments still fail to fully implement it. In this context, we underline the importance of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, and the need to encourage and maintain participation of all its members.

The Charter is now complemented by the Council of Europe’s Strategy for Innovation and Good Governance, which sets out the 12 main principles of good governance, and which involves a joint commitment by central government and the national association of local governments to achieve its objectives.

We express our support for the Strategy and our commitment to its principles, and encourage our local government associations to work with their members and central governments to implement the Strategy. We also endorse the new system of awards for local authorities who implement the Strategy - “the European Label of Governance Excellence”, ELOGE.

We have focused in particular, here in Sarajevo, on the issue of social inclusion. The Strategy for Innovation and Good Governance includes the principle of “human rights, cultural diversity and social cohesion, to ensure that all citizens are protected and respected and that no one is either discriminated against or excluded.”

We emphasize the need strategically to promote gender equality, to involve civil society, and to ensure that all minorities and disadvantaged groups are not only protected, but positively helped to participate in local affairs and decision-making. The issue of social inclusion is of particular importance in relation to the Roma and other similar minorities which have suffered, in practice, much long-term discrimination and exclusion.

Twinning and partnerships for peace and development

Local governments' twinning has, for over 60 years, been a powerful means of bringing peoples together across national frontiers to promote a united Europe based on peace, mutual understanding, stability and prosperity.

In recent decades, this has been complemented by an approach which sees twinning as a tool for local development, helping to deliver economic, social and environmental progress, improve public services and governance, and develop local governments' capacity.

Through sister city and friendship partnerships, European local authorities have also joined up with their counterparts in other continents, to promote the values of peace, tolerance and trans-cultural understanding, as well as practical benefits through peer-to-peer learning and exchanges.

We ask CEMR, NALAS and our national associations to encourage and support participation by our region's local governments in these diverse forms of trans-national twinning and cooperation, in accordance with their priorities.

We also urge the European Union to maintain and enhance its support for the different modalities of local government twinning and transnational partnerships, adapted to modern needs and circumstances, for the post-2013 period

Conclusion

We thank NALAS, together with the Mayor and City of Sarajevo, the Council of Europe, and all other partners, for having organised this timely and important Conference.

We invite the European Commission, European Parliament and the Committee of Regions, the Council of Europe, together with other international organisations and associations, to give positive consideration to this declaration, and ensure an appropriate follow-up.

We invite NALAS, CEMR and our national associations of local and regional governments to disseminate this Declaration as widely as possible, and to support and promote its conclusions.