

# The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities



## Conference on Practical Approaches Towards Effective European Transfrontier Co-operation

Maastricht, Netherlands, 6 July 2009

### Speech by President a.i. Ian Micallef, Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, Council of Europe

Mr Chairman,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,  
Dear colleagues,

It is a great pleasure for me to open today this conference on practical approaches towards transfrontier cooperation in Europe. Allow me to welcome the initiative of the organisers of inviting the Congress to contribute to this conference – by the active participation of several members – with a view to prepare the Utrecht Ministerial Conference.

The Congress acquired a broad experience in the field of transfrontier co-operation both on its principles and on different initiatives of co-operation, such as the Euroregion. Promoting cooperation between communities across national borders is one of the priorities of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, a pan-European assembly of communities and territories which I represent as its acting President.

In the Congress, we are convinced that one of the main challenges facing our communities today is to respond to the need for greater territorial cohesion, to bridge the urban-rural divide and the development gaps between communities. Transfrontier, or cross-border, cooperation between communities offers an excellent opportunity for action towards achieving this objective, by strengthening regional and local economies, facilitating interaction and dialogue between communities, and helping to reduce regional disparities.

On behalf of the Congress, I would like to express our gratitude to the Association of Netherlands' Municipalities, VNG, our long-standing partner, for helping to organise this conference, as well as the Dutch authorities, and in particular Mr Gerd Leers, Mayor of Maastricht, for being our hosts. It is not by accident that this event is taking place in a city which itself has become a symbol of European integration and cooperation that transcends national borders.

Over the recent years, this cooperation has been rising in importance on our continent hand in hand with the growing decentralisation of powers towards territorial level, and the advancing European integration at all levels of governance. Both these processes are leading to an increase in the role and capacity of local and regional communities on the one hand, and the gradual disappearance of political and administrative borders on the other. This has not only made transfrontier co-operation possible and easier than before, but indeed it has become an indispensable tool for attaining our more ambitious goals – I am thinking not only about bridging gaps between communities, erasing economic and social disparities and improving territorial cohesion, but also about raising the quality of local and regional governance as a whole.



The Congress has already organised several colloquies and debates on transfrontier cooperation this year, the most recent one being a seminar on the European dimension of cross-border cooperation on 19 June, organised together with the University of Strasbourg. However, the particularity of today's conference is its emphasis on practicality and effectiveness, based on the specific examples and experiences of cities and regions. The conference will also look at the multi-level dimension of transfrontier cooperation, which is to say cooperation not only between local and regional but also with national authorities.

This multi-level governance approach is of particular importance to the Congress. For some time now, we have been bringing this idea to life within our two platforms for transfrontier and interregional cooperation, launched between 2006 and 2008 – the Adriatic and Black Sea Euroregions. They represent cooperation models of a new type because they bring together and promote cross-border cooperation between communities from both EU and non-EU member countries. Their innovative character lies also in the fact that they provide for structured and multilateral co-operation, involving national, regional and local authorities; for cooperation between cities and regions which do not necessarily share common borders; and for cooperation that is not exclusively territorial but also maritime.

I am pleased to see that the experiences of these models will be examined during this conference. We in the Congress are also pleased that this approach will receive legal basis thanks to the adoption of the third additional protocol to the 1980 Madrid Convention on Transfrontier Cooperation which deals with European cooperation groupings from both EU and non-EU countries. At the beginning of June, the Congress gave a favorable opinion on this text, which will complement the legal framework established by the Madrid Convention and its two additional protocols, adopted by the Council of Europe.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Decentralisation is an irreversible process which can only gain in strength, so is the development of cross-border cooperation. The future of this development, its impact and the practical benefits that it will bring to our communities depends to a large extent on the approach we adopt, on the proposals and recommendations which we will make today.

On behalf of the Congress, I thank the Dutch Delegation to invite us in Maastricht and look forward to your deliberations at this conference, which I wish every success.

Thank you.