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CIVEX Commission

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Secretary General of ALDA

## Challenges of EU enlargement in view of the next institutional mandate - the local and regional perspective

Dear Chair, dear all participants,

This is a particular day and time for us in ALDA, European Association for Local Democracy, because we are agreeing today with you our joint action plan, which will be discussed later, following up on a Memorandum of Understanding that has been signed officially a few weeks ago. I bring to all of you the best regards of our newly elected President, Mrs, Natasa Vuckovic, Director of the Democracy Center Foundation of Belgrade. As mentioned in our new Strategy 2024-2028, together, also with our members, both local and regional authorities and civil society, we can do more in a context of serious threats ahead of us.

I am also happy to be back to Vilnius where I came for the first time (and then many other times later) in 2002/2003 supporting our local members toward the accession of the country to the European Union, with a project called EUMayors, supported by the European Commission. I also came recently to meet members and partners of ALDA, part of the important diaspora both from Ukraine and Belarus, which is hosted here, in this city and country with admirable courage and strength.

ALDA was created in 1999 at the initiative of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe to support local communities in the context of the war in the Balkans. Through the Local Democracy Agencies, platforms of cooperation between local authorities and civil society representatives from European and from non-EU countries, we put in place the spirit of multistakeholder cooperation and city to city diplomacy. Our work also extended progressively toward: Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, Armenia as well as in Türkiye, North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. We are now working also on a more global approach in partnership with DG Intpa.

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We welcome the successful steps of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia towards accession and we are strongly advocating for a mandate of the new EU political leaders that will make all necessary efforts to transform into reality the accession of Western Balkans to the EU.

Our recommendations, coming from 30 years of activities, are :

- Decentralisation and functioning local governance are fundamental to sustain EU accession. It allows a functional distribution of powers and resources, and it gives the local and regional authorities the possibility to engage with their community, being accountable to them and address problems and build solutions. If we want trust and engagement of citizens, democracy and accountable institutions, we need to support decentralisation.
- We need to give substance and means of implementation to decentralisation, set in legislation, otherwise the sense of useless processes is soon spreading among citizens, undermining their trust in institutions and soon in democracy itself.
- Substance means :
  - o To give local authorities and regional authorities resources coherent with their mandate. They will be the centre of the accession funding and process.
  - o To support capacity building for local authorities and staff with theory and practice and possibility to experiment public management, policy making, cooperation and territorial approach to development and growth in dialogue with national and local institutions.
  - o To support all actions that will engage citizens to work with local and regional authorities and all forms of participatory democracy. Recently the Mayor of Mykolaiv, that many of us know, Oleksander Sienkevich, told me that they need to rebuild the roads but they also need to build people capacities, in their team and in their society.
  - o But while we are working on participatory democracy, we also need to strengthen representative democracy, especially at the local level, by actions, preparation of elections, working on candidates, both mayors and councillors, engage in a vivid political life and create capacity and awareness of local politics.

As for the action plan proposed, we are indicating some elements to substantiate what I mentioned here.

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We are working this year for the opening of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Local Democracy Agency in Ukraine, in Vinnytsia with a French/Spanish partnership and in Kharkiv with an Italian and French partnership. For all of them, we wish to associate the CoR and to contribute collectively to the development of local and regional authorities and communities in Ukraine. We are already working in the Dnipropetrovsk region and in Odesa region, as well as with the LDA Mariupol in exile in Kyiv.

In February 2022, after more than 10 years of activities in Ukraine, our association decided to increase its efforts with more LDAs in Ukraine. The LDAs represent an efficient tool of decentralised cooperation as they allow to implement a full range of activities, from facilitating peer-to-peer learning between their partners to delivering humanitarian assistance. Thanks to their governance and diversity of partners, they identify their priorities based on the local needs and the possibilities of support available. The activities of the LDAs also allow to animate the network of our members and partners in Ukraine, providing capacity building opportunities and international networking opportunities.

Because of their multi-stakeholders approach, the LDAs have been acknowledged by the Ukrainian government as an efficient tool for social cohesion. In preparation of the future Ukraine recovery conference 2025, we have also been recognised by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a meaningful tool to mobilise Italian and European cities and regions, as well as their citizens toward supporting Ukraine. We are happy to be a member of the Alliance for the Reconstruction of Ukraine of the CoR and partners of U-Lead with Europe project.

In this context, I am pleased to inform you that we will hold a meeting in Kiyv in September, possibly back-to-back with the CORLEAP meeting. The event will have 2 parts: a training on EU project cycle management, addressing the challenges of possible accession funds and a preparatory meeting for Ukrainian partners and members of ALDA toward a conference on the URC 2025. In November, in cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Italy and other institutional partners, we will organise an international event to start preparations for the URC 2025 in Italy. We hope to welcome you all on this occasion.

We will be present at the European Week of Regions and Cities, with a stand to present updates on our initiative and we will join the annual conference of the Bridges of Trust.

I would like to mention a few other initiatives on which we would be interested in cooperating with the CoR: in November and December we are planning to organise activities and trainings on

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participatory democracy and local governance and community approach in Southern Caucasus, with our members and with the Local Democracy Agency of Kutaisi (Georgia) and Gyumri (Armenia). In Moldova, with our local team, we will start a project, called INSPIRE, on good local governance in September with again many opportunities of gathering and training.

As ALDA capitalised experience in the Balkans with members and partners, we are also working on a large programme in the region, called BOOST, where we are targeting three topics, such as cultural heritage, youth and rural development, in partnership between civil society and local authorities, as a way to consolidate economic development and limit brain drain.

Last but not least, we are organising a summer local democracy school at the Villa Fabris, in Thiene (Italy), at the end of August.

Finally, as the CIVEX committee is focusing on citizenship and migration, I would like to mention our flagship on migration. Our flagship aims at joining forces among all relevant parties, including local authorities and civil society actors representing migrant communities, for meaningful inclusion policies and services, and a higher representation of migrants in decision-making processes. In this context, we are going to create and support a community of practices and provide peer-to-peer learning opportunities, in the frame of our EC-funded projects on migration, and we will also explore with partner cities how to work on the possible return of Ukrainian refugees to Ukraine. In this regard, enlargement policies are key to determine an effective approach to guarantee the rights of both EU citizens and the nationals of third countries.

Thank you for your attention and I am looking forward to future cooperation.

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