

Political Declaration on the future role of NALAS in decentralized co-operation in South-East Europe

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Mr. President, Excellencies, distinguished representatives of international organizations, dear colleagues, it is an honor to greet you all and to thank you for accepting our invitation to attend NALAS General Assembly meeting.

It is an honor and a pleasure for me to address all of you today at the 2nd General Assembly of the Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South East - Europe. NALAS existed for 4 years as an informal network, which helped its members establish close and friendly relationships. Last year, in September, NALAS held its first assembly meeting. On this occasion executive bodies of the Network were elected and NALAS became a formal organization.

NALAS mission is twofold:

- A. To build partnership between local authorities and their associations in SEE in order to contribute to stability and security in the region and henceforth contribute to the process of EU integration and enlargement;
- B. To initiate and carry out regional initiatives for its membership with a view on strengthening the associations of local authorities in SEE in becoming a viable representative of local authorities vis-à-vis central government and being better able to provide efficient services to local governments in SEE for the benefit of the citizens of the region.

It is a major objective for NALAS to stimulate the exchange of information and experiences among its members, to disseminate and promote the results of its own activities.

The first mid-term objective of NALAS that was defined by NALAS Strategic Plan and NALAS Action Plan 2006-2008 is to gradually give the NALAS the possibility to become an efficient knowledge center on various issues: a so-called "topic-oriented knowledge center". The idea is to gather and disseminate documents and information on the member associations and local authorities in SEE in general, and to focus also on topic-oriented material drawn from the NALAS task forces' productions.

The Knowledge Center will be designed to perform three basic functions: Advocacy, Member Services, Public information reaching out media and civil society.

1. Advocacy:

- Systematic collection of information on legal developments in SEE;
- Analysis of those legislations in terms of impacts on local government;
- Collection of laws and by-laws on various topics, i.e.: implementability, impact on municipal budget, on human resources (capacity building needs), on stepwise implementation and enforcement, on monitoring of performance (benchmarking).
- Preparation of positions and promotion of interests of the local authorities from SEE in front of European and international institutions.

2. Member services

- To allow the Associations to develop gradually a demand driven service concept;
- education and trainings;
- The promotion of each Association to become a "regional focal point" for at least one category of services;

It is important to understand that the role of NALAS is very complex: its members are associations of local authorities, which means that NALAS has, as one of its main objectives, that of providing capacity-building support to associations through education of their staff, exchange of experiences and joint collection of information. At the second level, these and other joint activities and projects will help associations to become a viable partner of central governments in presenting the interests of their members, as well as providing better services to local authorities and supporting them in their development. This leads us to the final beneficiaries, the citizens, who will profit from having well-organized and competent local authorities.

By achieving this objectives NALAS needs to show its supporters and other international partners its maturity and readiness to become an important player on the international scene.

At international level, we see NALAS as a contact point for South-East European local governments with the European Union and other international institutions and donor organizations. Successful promotion of its members and the whole region on one hand, and transfer of European standards, values and experiences to the region on the other, will also join the efforts of national governments of the respective countries in bringing them closer to EU.

In this process, NALAS also benefits from a varied membership: the fact that NALAS gathers associations from EU member states; candidate countries; and all potential candidates gives added value to the network. For example, the experience that Slovenian colleagues shared with the others concerning the accession process, use of EU funds and implementation of EU directives was precious and opened new perspectives for cooperation (at regional but also bilateral level).

Let me mention here, that within this context, NALAS asked the Committee of the Regions of the EU to consider the possibility to permanently invite NALAS in the Committee of the Regions, since we strongly believe that NALAS could be a good EU partner on issues regarding local self government in SEE. We also asked for help in finding the possibilities to give consulting mandate to NALAS in the drafting of new EU structural programs dealing with local governance in SEE, since the another added value of NALAS is to be a huge network reflecting local authorities' opinions on the subject, and not only the opinion of central governments.

The answer we received from the President of the Committee of the Regions was that the Committee of the Regions strongly supports and applauds the current efforts of NALAS to create a functional network of regional authority associations in South East Europe. The Committee believes that such efforts are a necessary contribution to the construction of the multi-level fabric of democratic governance. It is our experience that stable, decentralized democratic governance as part of multi-level system can foster peace and prosperity in the region, thereby enhancing prospects for accession and improving relations and cooperation within the European family.

Thus, recognizing the important role that NALAS can have in the SEE region, the Committee of the Regions invited NALAS on a permanent basis to observe Committee of the Regions meetings .

NALAS will also encourage all the initiatives aiming at promotion and adoption of the Madrid Outline Convention on Transfrontier Communities. Cross-border co-operation between countries in our region is both necessity and reality. NALAS will promote harmonious relation both between countries and ethnic communities.

NALAS can also be very useful in the co-ordination of donor activities in the region, as exchange of information among donors is crucial, in order to make synergies and not to duplicate the same or very similar projects implemented in different countries.

Each association brings to NALAS a valuable experience in different fields, as all members are very active in their countries. At the same time, they all have close connections with different donor organizations, European institutions and sister associations from all around the world, and their strong credibility helps NALAS in approaching donors and finding new partners.

My appeal to donors active in the region would be to support NALAS by multiplying successful projects implemented in one country to the others, using the experience gained.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

National Associations of Local Authorities support and expect continuous dialogue and exchange of views and ideas with other European associations and their municipalities in order to improve cooperation and build confidence and security. All the time we are exchanging ideas, goods and people and therefore it is very important to have a permanent dialogue on issues that are of mutual benefit in order to accelerate solutions for challenges we are facing. Of course, we are all aware that SEE region is very specific, but I am convinced that there is a room for a help and support in the implementation of European standards in order to create constructive atmosphere in our countries in a way that experiences are shared to overcome problems and divisions from the past.

Issues like safety of border-crossings, tolerance, migration, minorities, illegal trade, and economy and ecology dimension require prompt and intensive cooperation.

Local authorities can and need to be a cohesion factor, and they need to take initiatives and to implement projects that will faster connect the region. Integration is an urgent process.

I am convinced that support programs for infrastructure, tourism, agriculture, environment don't need to be just social and donor driven. These programs can be also very profitable for all potential investors.

We hope that we can join together - NALAS, Council of Europe, EU Committee of the Regions and other international organizations and institutions - in making local governments a driving force in the development of the SEE region.

And instead of a conclusion at the end let me give you answers on some key questions.

What do we, as a Network of local authorities of SEE, expect from our Governments and International Institutions?

- Institutionalization of the dialogue between local and central government;
- Consultations in the process of policy making and adoption of legislation on issues related to local government competences.
- Involvement of ALA in intergovernmental working bodies preparing specific pieces of legislation;
- Involvement of ALA in the National programs for capacity building of local authorities;
- Inclusion of local governments in the process of EU accession.

What could we contribute in this process?

- Experts to participate in interdepartmental working bodies;
- Good trainers from the practice;
- Best practices from our members;
- Elaboration of draft documents/directions for reform of LG;
- Successful promotion of NALAS members and the whole region on one hand, and transfer of European standards, values and experiences to the region on the other, will also join the efforts of national governments of the respective countries in bringing them closer to EU;
- Attract additional resources through external donors;

Why do you need strong National Associations?

- Because you will have democratically legitimate and long term perspective partner;
- Difficult negotiations, but easy implementation – the municipalities are part of the solution;
- Because they provide you with common municipal position, and you should not consult each municipality;

Dear friends,

We have many challenges ahead of us. Let us turn them into great opportunities. To turn the challenges into opportunities will be possible if we are ready to meet our responsibilities. This refers to delivering good governance in our cities and municipalities. We have to be aware of the fact that European standards can be implemented only if our local authorities are able to deliver high quality services and to promote cultural, social and economic development at local level, through appropriate political leadership. On the other hand, our regional cooperation can really help to overcome dividing lines within the region. We can do something that is very difficult for representatives of national level: unite through cooperation the region of SEE based on values such as democracy, human right, solidarity and tolerance.

More than 2,500 years ago, during the Athenian Golden Age, Pericles, looking at the Acropolis, said: "They will say of us that we have created the most beautiful and happiest of the cities." A happy and prosperous society is our main goal, and democracy is the only way of achieving it.

Thank you.