



Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South-East Europe
Réseau des Associations de Pouvoirs Locaux de l'Europe du Sud-Est

Sofia Declaration

on

**Enforcing the political neutrality and independence
of Local Government Associations**

**by the Presidents of
NALAS Member Associations**

Sofia, 15 June 2010

Considering the principles of the local self-government enshrined in the European Charter of the Local Self-Government, ratified by almost all NALAS member countries,

Convinced that EU integration cannot be achieved without a strong, modern and effective local self governments,¹

Recognizing the democratic right and the autonomy of local governments to associate for their common cause,

Convinced that decentralization cannot be successful without strong local government associations, which are the natural and often the main drivers of the decentralization process,

In respect to the status of the local government associations as non-political organizations, consolidating all local authorities irrespective of their political views, ethnic structure, size, economic development, etc.,

Noting some worrying fragmentation trends in some NALAS member associations,

We, Presidents of NALAS Local Government Associations:

Encourage local elected officials and local governments to:

- *Be active and support* their national association and claim for a fair representation of their interests or convictions,
- *Push* for consolidation and co-ordination of activities in countries where associations are fragmented, based on political or ethnical divide, or even when division is based on historical developments or /and on legally induced distinction between different types and levels of local government units,

Invite Central Governments of South East European countries to:

- *Assure* a legal framework which will encourage cooperation of all local authorities under a single national umbrella,
- *Assure* a higher fiscal autonomy of the local governments and,
- *Increase* the predictability of local funding in a multi-year perspective,
- *Avoid* any form of favoritism in distribution of grants or other decisions and policies which might provoke fragmentation of existing national association of local governments
- *Be aware* that a strong and unified association can be a significant partner in implementing government policies and advancing quality of services to citizens,
- *Use* the national associations to build partnerships with local authorities which is vital for EU integration processes and use of EU funds;

Urge parties and party leaders to:

- *Refrain* from any interference in the internal affairs of the local government associations for the sake of their own political and electoral interests,

Appeal donors and international partners to:

¹ During its 5th general assembly held in Istanbul on December 11, 2009, NALAS adopted a Declaration on Active Involvement of Local Authorities of South East Europe in EU integration process. <http://www.nalas.eu/publications/NALAS%20ISTANBUL%20DECLARATION.pdf>

- *Raise and diversify the forms* of support for the development of strong national associations of local governments from South-East Europe,
- Be cautious if any activity might encourage fragmentation of a national association,

We, the Presidents, commit that our Local Government Associations will:

- *Refrain* from any form of political affiliation and remain politically neutral,
- *Rely* on the principles of impartiality and equidistance, placing the protection of their members' rights and interests above any differences of political or ethnical nature,
- *Ensure* equal representation of its members in the association's governing bodies regardless their political views, religious belief or ethnical origins, and will avoid any form of discrimination based on these criteria,
- *Address* the interests of different groups of local government units (such as urban versus rural, small versus big, ethnical background),

and, where applicable:

- *Search* the dialogue with other associations, their affiliated local governments and non affiliated local governments in the country in search for unification
- *Search* the dialogue with central government to create the necessary legal framework for unified associations
- *Support*, under the umbrella of NALAS, those unification processes in countries where needed,

Our target is that – by the end of 2012 – all NALAS member countries have strong local government associations and/or consensual organizations or at least a functioning coordination mechanism for advocacy among the existing associations that represent and defend common interests of all local authorities in their country.