

## Chapter 4

# Cooperation between Local Authorities in Europe as a Force for Strengthening Local Democracy

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The authors chart the rise of horizontal cooperation between local authorities in the wider Europe as a post-war phenomenon, examining the main forms of cooperation in this area, how they have developed and what impact they have had and are having on the development of decentralised government in Europe. They then map out the main characteristics of the development of a European model of local democracy. Attention is given to the principal standards in this field and how they are evolving, with special emphasis on the European Charter of Local Self-Government.*

### **THE BEGINNINGS**

#### **The Early Years**

Local authority cooperation in Europe is a recent phenomenon, which can only be understood in its historical context. Local authorities only began cooperating in Europe in earnest in the 1950s, in the wave of enthusiasm for European cooperation and institution-building in all sectors. Until then local government, in those European countries which had introduced some form of decentralisation, had developed largely in isolation.

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Since the development of European local authority cooperation owes much to the wave of enthusiasm for international institution-building in the wake of World War 2, this chapter will analyse the main landmarks in the development of that cooperation, before proposing several features that characterise the European model of local democracy.

The early international actors with regard to cooperation between local authorities in the Europe were the Council of European Municipalities (CEM), forerunner of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR), set up in 1951 by a group of fifty mayors committed to peace in a post-war context, and the Conference of Local Authorities of Europe, launched in 1957 by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, which was to grow into the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (hereafter ‘Congress’).

### **The Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR)**

Local authority cooperation in Europe is regarded by many as having its roots in Seelisberg (Himsworth, 2011), a municipality in the canton of Uri in Switzerland. Here, on 1 October 1950, a group of ‘Western European Mayors’, meeting at the invitation of Adolf Gasser (Palayret, 2003), a professor at the University in Basel, adopted the Seelisberg Declaration (Seelisberg Declaration, 1950) and convened the constitutive congress of the Council of European Municipalities (CEM). The CEM was formally founded in Geneva on 28 January 1951 by a group of fifty European mayors. In October 1953, in Versailles, the organisation’s General Assembly adopted the European Charter of Municipal Liberties, which was signed on the occasion by over 1,000 European towns and cities. The Charter underlines the importance of local authorities having political and financial independence from national governments.

One of the first results of this cooperation was the development of town-twinning. The CEM made the promotion of twinning agreements a priority for its members. The first of these was signed in 1959 between Coventry and Dresden. In 1984, the organisation expanded to include regions, changing its name in the process to “Council of European Municipalities and Regions”. When the worldwide United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) was founded in 2004, the CEMR took on a new role as the European section of this organisation.

As of 2013, the membership of the CEMR included 54 national associations of municipalities and regions from 40 European countries, representing over 100,000 local and regional authorities. Its annual budget of about €2.5 million is principally derived from the membership fees of national associations, with about 15% coming from the European Commission.

### **The Conference of Local Authorities (CLRAE)**

The Strasbourg-based Council of Europe was the first intergovernmental organisation to pursue the development of local democracy. Already in 1952, barely three years after the founding of this organisation, the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe set up a special Committee on Municipal and Regional Affairs, at the instigation of Jacques Chaban-Delmas, Mayor of Bordeaux and member of the French National Assembly, who had also been instrumental in the creation of the Council of European Municipalities (Wassenberg, 2013). The purpose of this committee was of ‘spreading the European idea among the great mass of the people’ and obtaining local authority support for the work of European integration (Robertson, 1961).

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