

Municipalization of Social Rights: The Changing Role of the Local and Regional Authorities

Natalia Mishyna*

Summary: The article explores the emerging trend of the municipalisation of social rights within the Council of Europe, with a particular focus on the role of local and regional authorities in upholding and implementing these rights. It examines the conceptual underpinnings of social rights, their inclusion in the European Social Charter, and their interaction with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Through an analysis of the case law of the European Court of Human Rights, the article highlights the growing involvement of local and regional authorities in addressing critical social issues, including housing and health. Special attention is given to the Ukrainian context, where these authorities face unique challenges due to the ongoing war and reconstruction efforts. The article argues for improved legal frameworks, capacity-building initiatives and international cooperation to engage local and regional authorities more effectively in the promotion of social rights. Recommendations are made to adapt the Council of Europe's tools and strategies to the realities faced by local and regional authorities.

Keywords: Council of Europe, European Social Charter, local and regional authorities, social rights, European Court of Human Rights, municipalisation of social rights, Sustainable Development Goals, Ukraine, human rights-based approach

Citation: MISHYNA, N. Municipalization of Social Rights: The Changing Role of the Local and Regional Authorities. *European Studies – the Review of European law, Economics and Politics*. 2024, vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 245–264, DOI: 10.2478/eustu-2024-0024

Acknowledgement: The paper is based on the materials of Natalia Mishyna's individual project 'The role of local authorities in the implementation of the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights', funded by the European Union MSCA4Ukraine. The views and opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the European

* Professor, Dr. Jur. h., Researcher, SAGE Laboratory, University of Strasbourg, Strasbourg, France. Contact email: nvmishyna@unistra.fr

Union. Neither the European Union nor the MSCA4Ukraine Consortium nor any individual member institution of the MSCA4Ukraine Consortium can be held responsible for them.

1. Introduction

Building on the emerging trend of the municipalisation of human rights within the Council of Europe, this article explores the extension of this concept to social rights. The municipalisation of social rights, defined as the increasing role of local and regional authorities in guaranteeing and implementing these rights, has become particularly relevant in the light of current global and European challenges (current threats to human rights in Europe, including the ongoing ‘implementation crisis’¹ regarding the execution of European Court of Human Rights judgments and the broader ‘polycrisis’ affecting the continent – such as the climate and biodiversity emergencies, geopolitical conflicts like the Russian invasion of Ukraine, economic instability, and large-scale human migrations²). Social rights, including access to housing, health care, education and decent work, are an essential subset of human rights and have a direct impact on the well-being of communities.

Local and regional authorities are in a unique position to address social rights because of their proximity to citizens and their responsibility for the provision of essential services. However, the growing recognition of local and regional authorities in the context of social rights remains uneven and fragmented, particularly at the global level. This article aims to fill this gap by examining the evolving role of these authorities in the promotion and protection of social rights, with a particular focus on Ukraine – a country facing extraordinary challenges due to ongoing war and reconstruction efforts.

The discussion begins by tracing the broader trajectory of the municipalisation of human rights, highlighting the significant contributions of the Council of Europe. It then moves on to the specific dynamics of the municipalisation of social rights, including the intersection of these rights with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). By contextualising these developments within the Ukrainian experience, the article highlights the transformative potential of empowering local and regional authorities to act as primary guarantors of social rights. The findings point to the need for improved legal frameworks, capacity-building

¹ MURRAY, R. Addressing the Implementation Crisis: Securing Reparation and Righting Wrongs. *Journal of Human Rights Practice*. 2020, vol. 12, no. 1, p. 1.

² WILSON, R. *Facing Europe's huge challenges* (2024) [online]. Available at: <https://www.socialeurope.eu/facing-europes-huge-challenges>

measures and international support to fully integrate these authorities into the social rights agenda (starting from the local up to the international level).

2. Decentralising Human Rights: The Emerging Role of Municipalities in the Global and European Context

The trend towards the municipalisation of human rights is becoming more and more visible in international law, highlighting the role of local and regional authorities in promoting sustainable territorial communities in particular – and sustainable societies in general. This concept is supported by the influential international organisations. The United Nations Organisations underlines, that ‘[t]he role of local government in delivering States’ human rights obligations has never been more important’.³ Similarly, UNESCO provides guidelines and recommendations on how to support local authorities in implementing human rights.⁴

At the global level, this trend has not shown any significant dynamics in recent years. To argue this thesis, one could analyse global human rights monitoring reports or annual reviews of organisations such as the UN Human Rights Council, which rarely focus on regional or local authorities. Policy documents, declarations and resolutions of global summits (e. g. the UN General Assembly or the World Urban Forum) could further demonstrate rather slow changes in the involvement of local and regional authorities in the human rights sphere.

For example, while major international events such as the current COP29 environmental forum in Baku, Azerbaijan, address certain human rights issues, they often fail to make a clear link to the role of local and regional authorities. This neglect is significant because local and regional authorities are critical actors in addressing environmental challenges, from implementing sustainable urban planning to promoting environmental justice at the community level. By neglecting the link between human rights and the capacity of these authorities to influence environmental policy, such forums are missing an opportunity to advance the municipalisation of human rights in the world-wide context.⁵

³ BACHELET, M. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 9th World Human Rights Cities Forum, 30 September 2019. *Cities, local and regional governments and human rights*. United Nations [online]. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/about-us/what-we-do/partnership/local-governments>

⁴ How to support local authorities to implement human rights. UNESCO [online]. Available at: <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/how-support-local-authorities-implement-human-rights>

⁵ MISHYNA, N. Bodies of self-organization of the population: getting taxes, paying taxes. *Lex Portus*. 2019, no. 4, pp. 28–41; MISHYNA, N., SURILOVA, O. Constitutional and Administrative

In contrast, the European arena is demonstrating a noticeable shift, with local and regional authorities increasingly recognised as key actors in promoting human rights and the SDGs. European institutions, policy-makers and local actors have begun to recognise the crucial role of local and regional authorities in promoting and enforcing human rights. This has led to a rapid acceleration of municipalisation processes within the European framework. The increased attention to municipal involvement reflects a broader trend towards decentralisation, where local governance is seen as a key driver of sustainable, inclusive and rights-based development.

The European Union pays a lot of attention to this trend and has played an important role in supporting its development. A notable example is the publication by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) entitled “Human Rights Cities in the European Union – Practical Guidance: A Guide to Support Local Authorities in Making Human Rights Part of People’s Daily Lives”. This guide is a collaborative effort between the FRA, a network of human rights cities and various practitioners across the EU.

As the authors point out, “this guide can help cities that want to improve their efforts to respect human rights. It aims to encourage local authorities to adopt higher human rights standards”.⁶ The guide aims to facilitate mutual learning among local authorities on human and fundamental rights, enabling cities to integrate human rights principles into everyday governance and improve the quality of life of their citizens.

By providing concrete recommendations and promoting knowledge-sharing practices, the EU demonstrates its recognition of local and regional authorities as key actors in the implementation of human rights. This initiative not only strengthens the role of the local and regional authorities within the EU, but also provides a model of good practice for other countries and regions around the world.

The Council of Europe also plays a crucial role in promoting the growing trend towards the municipalisation of human rights, mainly through the activities of its Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (the Congress). In recent years, human rights have become one of the main priorities of the Congress, reflected in its initiatives and events.

Aspects of the Ukrainian Medical Code. *Wiadomosci Lekarskie*. 2020, no. 1, pp. 191–195; MISHYNA, N., BATANOV, O., FEDORENKO, V., BATANOVA, N. Constitutional and Municipal Trends in the Reform of the Ukrainian Health Care System. *Krytyka Prawa. Niezależne Studia Nad Prawem*. 2022, vol. 14, no. 2, pp. 99–111.

⁶ Human rights cities in the European Union – Practical guidance. A guide to support local authorities in making human rights part of people’s daily life [online]. Available at: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2022-guide-human-rights-cities_en.pdf

The Congress actively promotes awareness-raising and capacity-building through a dedicated website on human rights at local and regional level. Its official web-site provides access to a range of relevant materials, including a selection of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). While not all ECtHR judgments are directly relevant to local and regional authorities, there is a growing number that involve or impact them, such as *Assanidze v. Georgia*, *Polyakh and others v. Ukraine*, *Demir and Baykara v. Turkey*, *Stanev v. Bulgaria*.

The judgement in the case *Assanidze v. Georgia*⁷ highlights the role of local and regional authorities in the unlawful detention of individuals and the failure to enforce court decisions. It highlights the critical responsibility of sub-national bodies in guaranteeing the right to liberty and the execution of court decisions, which are cornerstones of human rights protection. The judgment in case *Polyakh and others v. Ukraine*⁸ deals with the dismissal of civil servants following legislative reforms and touches on issues of procedural fairness and the right to a fair trial. It illustrates how legislative changes at the national level can have a direct impact on regional and local authorities. The judgment in *Demir and Baykara v. Turkey*⁹ case focuses on the right to collective bargaining and trade union freedoms, directly implicating local and regional authorities as employers. It demonstrates the need for local and regional authorities to respect labour rights and promote fair working conditions within their jurisdictions. The judgment in case *Stanev v. Bulgaria*¹⁰ concerns the inhuman treatment of a person under guardianship in a social care institution, highlights the obligation of local and regional authorities to ensure adequate social services and to prevent violations

⁷ *Assanidze v. Georgia* (Application no. 71503/01; Judgement of the European Court of Human Rights of 8 April 2004) [online]. Available at: [⁸ *Polyakh and others v. Ukraine* \(Applications nos. 58812/15 and 4 others; Judgement of the European Court of Human Rights of 24 February 2020\) \[online\]. Available at: \[⁹ *Demir and Baykara v. Turkey* \\(Application no. 34503/97; Judgement of the European Court of Human Rights of 12 November 2008\\) \\[online\\]. Available at: \\[¹⁰ *Stanev v. Bulgaria* \\\(Application no. 36760/06; Judgement of the European Court of Human Rights of 29 June 2010\\\) \\\[online\\\]. Available at: \\\[249\\\]\\\(https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre; NELSON, L. Stanev v. Bulgaria: The Grand Chamber’s Cautionary Approach to Expanding Protection of the Rights of Persons with Psycho-social Disabilities. Strasbourg Observers. 2012 \\\[online\\\]. Available at: https://strasbourgobservers.com/2012/02/29/stanev-v-bulgaria-the-grand-chambers-cautionary-approach-to-expanding-protection-of-the-rights-of-persons-with-psycho-social-disabilities/</p>
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of dignity and well-being in their institutions. These judgments demonstrate the increasing relevance of ECtHR jurisprudence for local and regional authorities, highlighting their role in implementing human rights standards (increasingly social rights) and addressing systemic issues that directly affect communities. By bridging the gap between national obligations and local implementation, these cases highlight the integral role of local authorities in the human rights system.

Moreover, local and regional authorities are playing an increasingly active role in execution of these judgments, bridging the gap between States' legal obligations and the practical implementation of human rights standards on the ground. By facilitating this link, the Congress is making an important contribution to the mainstreaming of human rights in local governance, strengthening both accountability and sustainable social development across Europe.

The annual reports of the Committee of Ministers on the execution of judgments provide relevant insights into this growing trend. Since 2007, the number of references to local, regional and municipal authorities in the execution process has varied, but shows a general upward trend. For example, the number of mentions was limited to 4 in 2007¹¹, but reached its first peak in 2010 with 14 mentions¹². After some volatility in the following years, 14 mentions were recorded again in 2015¹³, highlighting a period of increased focus on the role of local and regional authorities. Although there was a brief dip in 2018¹⁴ and 2019¹⁵ (2 and 3 mentions respectively), the numbers have stabilised around 4–6 mentions in recent years, with 6 mentions in 2023¹⁶.

¹¹ Supervision of the execution of judgments and decisions of the European court of human rights. 1st Annual Report of the Committee of Ministers. 2009. 271 p. [online]. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=0900001680592ac3>

¹² Supervision of the execution of judgments and decisions of the European court of human rights. 4th Annual Report of the Committee of Ministers. 2010. 202 p. [online]. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=0900001680592ac6>

¹³ Supervision of the execution of judgments and decisions of the European court of human rights. 9th Annual Report of the Committee of Ministers. 2015. 277 p. [online]. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=090000168062fe2d>

¹⁴ Supervision of the execution of judgments and decisions of the European court of human rights. 12th Annual Report of the Committee of Ministers. 2018. 98 p. [online]. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/annual-report-2018/168093f3da>

¹⁵ Supervision of the execution of judgments and decisions of the European court of human rights. 13th Annual Report of the Committee of Ministers. 2019. 98 p. [online]. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/annual-report-2019/16809ec315>

¹⁶ Supervision of the execution of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights 2023 – 17th Annual Report of the Committee of Ministers (2024). 170 p. [online]. Available at: <https://edoc.coe.int/en/european-convention-on-human-rights/11835-supervision-of-the-execution-of-judgm>

This upward trend is significant for a number of reasons. First, it reflects the evolving understanding of local and regional authorities as key actors in the promotion of human rights. Second, it underscores the importance of decentralisation, where sub-national bodies are increasingly seen as critical actors in addressing systemic human rights challenges and effectively implementing judgments.

The choice of 2007 as the starting point is connected with the fact, that the first analysed report, dated 2009, covers the numbers from 2007¹⁷; it coincides with the Council of Europe's efforts to increase the visibility and participation of local and regional authorities in human rights enforcement. This was particularly evident following the reforms of the execution procedures and the introduction of targeted reports to monitor compliance with the Court's judgments. Since then, the increasing number of mentions in official reports reflects a growing recognition of local and regional authorities as indispensable partners in securing human rights and contributing to wider compliance with European human rights standards.

In conclusion, the steady increase in references to the local and regional (as well as the municipal) levels in the execution of judgments is a clear indicator of the municipalisation of human rights. It confirms that local and regional authorities are not only participants, but also key drivers in the promotion and protection of human rights in all Council of Europe member states. This emerging European focus highlights the growing importance of sub-national authorities as intermediaries between international human rights standards and their practical implementation at the community level. While this transformation is still underway, the rapid momentum observed over the past decade suggests a promising shift that positions Europe as an increasingly active player in the global discourse on the municipalization of the human rights in general – and social rights in particular.

ents-of-the-european-court-of-human-rights-2023-17th-annual-report-of-the-committee-of-ministers.html

¹⁷ Supervision of the execution of judgments and decisions of the European court of human rights. 1st Annual Report of the Committee of Ministers. 2009. 271 p. [online]. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=0900001680592ac3>

3. From the Municipalisation of Human Rights to the Municipalisation of Social Rights in the Council of Europe

In the context of the Council of Europe, the rights typically referred to as ‘social rights’ are primarily those found in the European Social Charter. In constitutional theory, the categorisation of such rights can vary; for example, the right to education is often classified as a cultural right. Within the Council of Europe, however, it is specifically one of the rights of the European Social Charter.

It is important to underline that in the Council of Europe context, social rights are often “overshadowed” by the civil and political rights guaranteed by the European Convention on Human Rights (1950). This “separation of human rights” – a term proposed by the author of this article – has become increasingly evident as the case-law of the ECHR and the European Committee of Social Rights continues to expand and diversify.

The Council of Europe’s Vilnius Declaration (2024) highlights the indivisibility and interdependence of all human rights and explicitly addresses social rights related to work, housing, social protection, health and well-being, as well as certain economic, cultural and environmental rights¹⁸. This broad understanding is also reflected on the official website of the Council of Europe, which refers to the European Social Charter as the “Social Constitution of Europe”. The notion of a ‘social constitution’ encourages critical reflection on whether there is a relevant constitutional framework that integrates all human rights in Europe, or whether these rights remain fragmented in different legal instruments.

Traditionally, constitutions consolidate human rights into a single, synergistic framework. However, integrating the various Council of Europe (CoE) standards – in particular the European Convention on Human Rights and the European Social Charter – both with the relevant case law – into a coherent implementation framework remains a real challenge. This research aims to address this challenge by developing a unified platform to assist local and regional authorities in applying CoE human rights standards more effectively.

The current state of research reveals a significant gap in the treatment of human rights within the framework of the Council of Europe. While the European Court of Human Rights and its case law are widely studied and implemented

¹⁸ The Council of Europe’s Vilnius Declaration [online]. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/en-vilnius-declaration/1680b0dcf3>

(see, for example, Donald and Speck¹⁹, 2022, Dzehtsiarou²⁰, 2022, Jaskiernia²¹, 2022, Lambert Abdelgawad, 2016²², 2017²³), the European Social Charter and its related rights receive considerably less attention (see, for example, De Schutter²⁴, 2019, Malinowski and Lwoff²⁵, 2020, Nolan, 2014²⁶, 2023²⁷ and blog posts Glas²⁸, 2024, Malinowski²⁹, 2024).

An analysis of the leading journals in the field – such as the European Human Rights Law Review, the European Journal of Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights Law Review – reveals a stark disparity:

- *European Human Rights Law Review* published 6 articles on European Social Charter rights in 2023, 9 in 2022 and 4 in 2021, out of an average of 23 articles per year;
- *European Journal of Human Rights* had 0 articles on ESC rights in 2023, 2 in 2022 and 0 in 2021, out of an average of 18 articles per year;
- *European Convention on Human Rights Law Review* published no articles on ESC rights in 2023 and 2021, and only 2 in 2022, out of an average of 15 articles per year.

¹⁹ DONALD, A., SPECK, A.-K. The Dynamics of Domestic Human Rights Implementation: Lessons from Qualitative Research in Europe. *Journal of Human Rights Practice*. Special issue. 2022, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 48–70.

²⁰ DZEHTSIAROU, K. Can the European Court of Human Rights shape European public order? Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. 240 p.

²¹ JASKIERNIA, J. Actual challenges for the implementation of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights. *Review of European and Comparative Law*. 2022, vol. 48, no. 1, pp. 103–131.

²² LAMBERT ABDELGAWAD, E. Dialogue and the Implementation of the European Court of Human Rights' Judgments. *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights*. 2016, vol. 34, no. 4, pp. 340–363.

²³ LAMBERT ABDELGAWAD, E. The Enforcement of ECtHR Judgments in Europe. In: *The Enforcement of EU Law and Values: Ensuring Member States' Compliance*, ed. A. Jakab & D. Kochenov. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, Chap. 19, pp. 326–340.

²⁴ DE SCHUTTER, O. The European Pillar of Social Rights and The Role of The European Social Charter in The European Union Legal Order. *Council of Europe*. July 2019. 65 p.

²⁵ MALINOWSKI, J., LWOFF, L. Pandémie de Covid-19 et droits de l'Homme : vers une vigilance renforcée et un travail intergouvernemental au service de la résilience. *Droit, Santé et Société*. 2020, no. 2, pp. 62–69.

²⁶ NOLAN, A. Economic and Social Rights After the Global Financial Crisis. *Ebook*. ISBN 9781316061374, 2014.

²⁷ NOLAN, A. Human rights and the cost-of-living crisis. *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights*. 2023, vol. 41, no. 1, pp. 3–12.

²⁸ GLAS, L. R. The tide is turning for the European Social Charter: The Vilnius Declaration and the Warm-up thereto. July 19, 2024 [online]. Available at: <https://strasbourgobservers.com/2024/07/19/the-tide-is-turning-for-the-european-social-charter-the-vilnius-declaration-and-the-warm-up-thereto/>

²⁹ MALINOWSKI, J. *Social rights in Europe—in need of a new impulse?* [online]. Available at: <https://www.socialeurope.eu/social-rights-in-europe-in-need-of-a-new-impulse>

These figures indicate a significant research gap, with social rights under the European Social Charter being under-researched in comparison to civil and political rights under the European Convention on Human Rights. The literature review shows that in the context of CoE human rights standards, the synergy between the European Convention on Human Rights and the European Social Charter is most visible in publications that focus on the role of local and regional authorities in protecting human rights. For example, studies such as Durmuş, 2020³⁰, 2024³¹, Kiefer³², 2011, Lambert³³, 2024, Mostl and Tiefenbacher³⁴, 2021, O Molin³⁵, 2019, Saul³⁶, 2024, highlight how local governance structures can effectively implement both sets of rights, demonstrating a holistic approach to human rights at the grassroots level. Similarly, publications by non-European authors, such as Afiero³⁷, 2023, Gomes da Silva³⁸, 2018, Nicole and Sakkers³⁹, 2022, Oomen⁴⁰, 2018, reflect this trend and indicate a growing recognition of the importance of local and regional authorities in the global human rights discourse.

³⁰ DURMUŞ, E. A typology of local governments' engagement with human rights: legal pluralist contributions to international law and human rights. *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights*. 2020, vol. 38, no. 1, pp. 30–54.

³¹ DURMUŞ, E. Exploring the role of regulation in urban citizenship practices: looking at Swiss and Turkish cities. *The International Journal of Human Rights*. 2024, vol. 28, no. 7, pp. 1159–1188.

³² KIEFER, A. Human rights: local and regional authorities in action. *European Yearbook on Human Rights*. 2011, pp. 483–495.

³³ LAMBERT, E. Les autorités locales et la mise en œuvre des arrêts de la Cour européenne des droits de l'homme : une implication win-win. *Revue trimestrielle des droits de l'Homme*. 2024, vol. 2, no. 138, pp. 307–327.

³⁴ MÖSTL, M., TIEFENBACHER, W. Building bridges between local governments and the scientific community to promote human rights. *European Yearbook on Human Rights*. 2021, pp. 651–660.

³⁵ O MOLIN, L. The role of local and regional authorities in the implementation of human rights [online]. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/0900001680718f20>

³⁶ SAUL, M. Local authorities at the European Court of Human Rights. *The International Journal of Human Rights*. 2024, vol. 28, no. 7, pp. 1060–1085.

³⁷ AFIEROHO, U. It Takes a Village to Deliver a Sustainable Infrastructure; a Conceptual Paper on Refocusing the Stakeholder Theory on the Community [online]. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/371139143_It_Takes_a_Village_to_Deliver_a_Sustainable_Infrastructure_a_Conceptual_Paper_on_Refocusing_the_Stakeholder_Theory_on_the_Community

³⁸ GOMES DA SILVA, K. The new urban agenda and human rights cities: interconnections between the global and the local. *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights*. 2018, vol. 36, no. 4, pp. 290–310.

³⁹ NICOLE, L. I., SAKKERS, H. The UN-Sustainable Development Goals going local: learning from localising human rights. *The International Journal of Human Rights*. 2022, vol. 26, no. 2, pp. 262–284.

⁴⁰ OOMEN, B. Frontier cities: the rise of local authorities as an opportunity for international human rights law. *European Journal of International Law*. 2018, vol. 29, no. 2, pp. 607–630.

As underlined at the High-Level Conference on the European Social Charter in Turin (2014), ‘[f]or years we have regarded social and economic rights as secondary and, so to speak, supplementary rights, disregarding the fact that the substance of these rights, that is access to the vital common goods (food, clothing, shelter, health, education, etc.), represents – both theoretically and historically – the premise for claiming and availing oneself of fundamental civil and political rights’⁴¹. The President of the European Committee of Social Rights, A. Nolan, echoed this sentiment a decade later, stating in 2024, that ‘[t]he European Social Charter has often been the poor relation of the European Convention on Human Rights. That may be changing’⁴².

The Congress is in a unique position to effect change in this regard, although its efforts in the area of social rights have been uneven. On the one hand, the Congress has demonstrated its commitment through initiatives such as Volume 2 of the Handbook for Local and Regional Authorities on Human Rights, which is dedicated exclusively to social rights. On the other hand, there are notable gaps, such as the lack of reference to the European Social Charter in its European Urban Charter III (2023): Urban life in the era of change⁴³. In this document, the Congress refers to instruments such as the European Convention on Human Rights, the European Charter of Local Self-Government and the Rule of Law Checklist adopted by the Venice Commission, as well as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the UN’s 2030 Agenda. However, the European Social Charter is not included.

Attention to social rights is essential for the Congress for several reasons.

First, the Congress has a direct role in advancing the integration of social rights into the human rights framework. This is evident in its recognition of the cases, mentioned in the section 2 of this article (*Demir and Baykara v. Turkey*, *Stanev v. Bulgaria*), along with the other cases which highlight the intersection between local governance and the protection of social rights. The case *Loizidou v. Turkey*⁴⁴ on property rights concerns the restitution and compensation of displaced persons, which requires local and regional authorities to manage housing and land allocation effectively. It highlights the role of municipalities in ensuring

⁴¹ High-Level Conference on the European Social Charter. General Report (2014) [online]. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=090000168048acf8> Para. 129.

⁴² NOLAN, A. *European Social Charter: more relevant than ever* [online]. Available at: <https://www.socialeurope.eu/european-social-charter-more-relevant-than-ever>

⁴³ European Urban Charter III (2023): Urban living in the era of transformations. Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe [online]. Available at: <https://search.coe.int/congress>

⁴⁴ *Loizidou v. Turkey* (Application no. 15318/89; Judgement of the European Court of Human Rights of 18 December 1996) [online]. Available at: <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre>

property rights as part of a broader framework of social rights. The case *O’Keeffe v. Ireland*⁴⁵ deals with the failure of the local education system to protect a child from abuse, and emphasises the role of local and regional authorities in maintaining a safe and rights-compliant educational environment. It highlights the duty of local and regional authorities to ensure that social infrastructure respects human rights. The case *Budayeva and others v. Russia*⁴⁶ concerns a mudslide disaster and the failure of local authorities to reduce risks, resulting in a violation of the right to life. It highlights the social responsibility of the local authorities in disaster prevention and the protection of vulnerable populations. One more example is the case *Yordanova and others v. Bulgaria*⁴⁷, that focuses on the eviction of Roma communities, raising issues of non-discrimination and the right to adequate housing. The judgment stresses the obligation of local and regional authorities to balance urban development with respect for the rights of vulnerable groups to housing and protection from homelessness.

Taken together, these cases demonstrate how social rights at the local and regional level contribute to wider human rights compliance and underline the importance of local and regional authorities in their execution (as well as in the implementation of the social rights standards in general).

Second, the Congress links its strategic priorities to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)⁴⁸. According to its official website, the work of the Congress focuses on 12 of the 17 goals set out in the UN’s 2030 Agenda⁴⁹. According to its official website, the Congress prioritises SDGs related to poverty reduction (Goal 1), health (Goal 3), education (Goal 4), gender equality (Goal 5), decent work and economic growth (Goal 8), reducing inequalities (Goal 10), sustainable cities and communities (Goal 11), and climate action (Goal 13), among others. These goals are directly linked to improving the well-being of citizens and communities, a responsibility that cannot be achieved at the national level without effective implementation at the local and regional level⁵⁰. Achieving the SDGs is

⁴⁵ *O’Keeffe v. Ireland* (Application no. 35810/09; Judgement of the European Court of Human Rights of 28 January 2014) [online]. Available at: <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre>

⁴⁶ *Budayeva and others v. Russia* (Applications nos. 15339/02, 21166/02, 20058/02, 11673/02 and 15343/02; Judgement of the European Court of Human Rights of 29 September 2008) [online]. Available at: <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre>

⁴⁷ *Yordanova and others v. Bulgaria* (Application no. 25446/06; Judgement of the European Court of Human Rights of 24 September 2012) [online]. Available at: <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre>

⁴⁸ Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on Work of the Statistical Commission pertaining to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/71/313), Annex [online]. Available at: <https://daccess-ods.un.org/access.nsf/Get?OpenAgent&DS=A/RES/71/313&Lang=E>

⁴⁹ Sustainable Development Goals. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe [online]. Available at: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/congress/sdg>

⁵⁰ Human Rights at local and regional levels. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe [online]. Available at: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/congress/human-rights>

a shared responsibility of all levels of government – global, European, national, local and regional. The ultimate goal of the SDGs is to improve the well-being of citizens and their communities. Without effective local implementation, national policies linked to the SDGs risk falling short of their objectives. Social rights are aligned with the SDGs to ensure the well-being of citizens and communities.

4. Municipalisation of the social rights in the Council of Europe’s member – Ukraine

Local and regional authorities have massively emerged as critical actors in the realisation of social rights during the COVID-19 pandemic, often stepping into roles traditionally held by national governments. This development is in line with the Council of Europe’s emphasis on decentralisation and empowerment of local and regional authorities, in particular through the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities.

Currently, the concept of municipalisation of social rights has gained unprecedented importance in Ukraine in the context of the ongoing war and reconstruction efforts (both the repair of damaged infrastructure following massive drone and missile attacks, and the reconstruction of liberated territories). In the face of the challenges of war, Ukrainian communities have shown resilience and innovation in promoting social cohesion and protecting vulnerable groups⁵¹.

One of the biggest vulnerable groups now are veterans and their families. The existing Ukrainian legislation on this topic is old (not suitable for the current number of veterans), at the state level the relevant policy is still drafted by the authorities. Each local and regional authority do their bests to give the help, especially when it comes about the social rights. The Council of Europe actively supports veterans and their families in its member states, including Ukraine, through various programmes and initiatives aimed at promoting their social rights and integration into society. A notable example is the “Veteran Hub” initiative in the Shpola territorial community, which was highlighted in the “Best Stories” collection organised by the Association of Ukrainian Cities in cooperation with the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe (the initiative is co-funded by local budgets and private sector donations, demonstrating the potential of collaborative approaches). The Shpola Veteran Hub operates as a dedicated space for veterans and their families, based on principles

⁵¹ For the general information on social rights see: SMUSH-KULESHA, M., FEDOROVA, A., MOISA, B. *Sotsialni prava v Ukraini pid chas viiny. Hruden 2022. Zvit pro otsinku potrebi* [online]. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/needs-assessment-ua-2/1680a9b408> (in Ukrainian).

such as peer-to-peer support and community-driven solutions. The hub provides a comprehensive range of services, including legal assistance, psychological counselling and group therapy sessions. It also offers recreational and educational opportunities, creating a supportive environment for veterans and their families.⁵² In addition, the Kyiv ‘Vcentri’ HUBs focus on rehabilitation and integration programs for veterans and their families, including canister therapy and art rehabilitation.⁵³ These programmes are complemented by legal support and sessions with military counsellors, underlining the Council of Europe’s emphasis on promoting social cohesion and mental health. These efforts highlight the role of local and regional authorities, supported by the Council of Europe, in addressing the specific needs of veterans. Such initiatives not only provide practical assistance, but also contribute to a broader framework of implementing social rights and rebuilding communities, in line with the objectives of the European Social Charter.

Another vulnerable group are internally displaced persons and returnees (this group is even larger than veterans and their families). For example, the competition “Stories of Invincibility and Co-Action in Communities in Time of War”, organised under the Memorandum of Understanding between the Association of Ukrainian Cities and the Congress, highlighted initiatives that embody the municipalisation of social rights. One notable example is the Novovolynsk’s IDP Support Centre, which combines digital solutions, such as a chatbot for accessing basic services, with hands-on support for IDPs (and later returnees). This dual approach demonstrates how municipalities can operationalise social rights, from housing to employment, even under extreme conditions. Similarly, the Mariupol “I’Mariupol” Support and Dialogue Centres exemplify municipalisation by providing comprehensive support to IDPs (and later – returnees), including legal, psychological and social integration services.⁵⁴ By facilitating communication between this vulnerable group and the local and regional authorities, these centres

⁵² Best Stories of Invincibility and Co-Action in Communities in Time of War Organised Within the Framework of The Association Memorandum Made by The Association of Ukrainian Cities and The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of The Council of Europe (2023). Kyiv. 26 p.

⁵³ Best Stories of Invincibility and Co-Action in Communities in Time of War Organised Within the Framework of The Association Memorandum Made by The Association of Ukrainian Cities and The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of The Council of Europe (2024). Kyiv. 32 p.

⁵⁴ Best Stories of Invincibility and Co-Action in Communities in Time of War Organised Within the Framework of The Association Memorandum Made by The Association of Ukrainian Cities and The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of The Council of Europe (2023). Kyiv. 26 p.

bridge governance gaps and enable displaced populations to effectively defend their social rights.

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities has actively supported these efforts by providing platforms for the exchange of knowledge and best practices. For example, the Human Rights Handbook for Local Authorities provides guidance on the implementation of social rights, which Ukrainian local authorities have adapted to their specific challenges. Moreover, initiatives such as the European Urban Charter III (2023) reaffirm the commitment of the Council of Europe to integrate social rights into local governance, linking them to broader objectives such as sustainability and cohesion.

However, gaps remain in the legal and institutional frameworks for the full mainstreaming of social rights at the local and regional level. The lack of explicit mandates or resources for local and regional authorities to act as guarantors of social rights poses significant challenges. To address this, the Council of Europe and its member states need to prioritise capacity building and legal reforms that empower local and regional authorities to systematically uphold these rights. The example of Ukraine highlights the potential of municipalisation as a transformative tool, not only to address immediate crises, but also to build resilient, human rights-based communities.

Another critical dimension of the municipalisation of social rights in Ukraine is the role of local and regional authorities as hubs of innovation and adaptation. In times of war, the need for these authorities to provide basic services has increased, demonstrating their ability to implement social rights through grassroots initiatives. For example, many Ukrainian local and regional authorities have developed rapid response mechanisms to address the housing needs of IDPs. The Ternopil City Council's initiative to renovate vacant buildings for temporary housing shows how these authorities can creatively mobilise resources to ensure the right to housing in exceptional circumstances.

Significant progress has also been made at the local and regional level in the provision of health and social care. In Kharkiv, city authorities worked with local NGOs to set up mobile clinics to ensure that residents in conflict-affected areas had access to medical services.⁵⁵ Such initiatives illustrate how the municipalisation of social rights intersects with international human rights standards, and demonstrate the ability of local authorities to adapt global frameworks to local contexts.

⁵⁵ Mobil'ni kliniky Al'yansu prodovzhuyut' nadavaty dopomohu zhytelyam deokupovanoi Kharkivshchyny (2023). [online]. Available at: <https://aph.org.ua/uk/novyny/mobilni-kliniki-al-yansu-prodovzhuyut-nadavati-medichnu-ta-gumanitarnu-dopomogu-zhityam-deokupovanoi-harkivshhini/> (in Ukrainian).

At the political level, Ukraine's participation in the monitoring process of the European Social Charter has also helped to enhance the role of local and regional authorities in the protection of social rights. The European Committee of Social Rights has frequently noted the importance of these authorities in implementing the provisions of the Charter, particularly in areas such as education, health and housing. This external validation underlines the growing responsibility of local and regional authorities in bridging the gap between national commitments and local realities.

Despite these achievements, challenges remain. The uneven distribution of resources across communities, coupled with the lack of formal legal recognition of some social rights at the local and regional level, limits the wider application of these practices. Furthermore, the reconstruction process has exposed systemic gaps in coordination between national and local authorities, highlighting the need for clearer mandates and resource allocations to empower local and regional authorities.

The municipalisation of social rights in Ukraine offers valuable insights into the broader European and global discourse on decentralised governance and human rights. By demonstrating resilience, innovation and adaptability in the face of war and reconstruction, Ukrainian local and regional authorities exemplify the transformative potential of local self-government when aligned with international human rights standards. These experiences underscore the critical role of sub-national authorities as key actors in the implementation of social rights, bridging the gap between national policies and local realities.

Looking ahead, the success of the municipalisation of social rights in Ukraine and other Council of Europe member states depends on sustained international cooperation, targeted capacity-building initiatives and robust legal frameworks. As the Council of Europe continues to refine its tools and strategies, it must prioritise the inclusion of local and regional authorities in the human rights ecosystem. In doing so, it can ensure that the principles enshrined in the European Social Charter are not just theoretical commitments, but practical realities for communities across Europe.

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