

Speech of the President of the congress Gudrun Mosler-Törnström

General Assembly of the Association of Basque municipalities

EUDEL

Getxo, 1st June 2017

Dear President, dear members

Thank you for inviting the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities to your General assembly. It provides an opportunity for me to give an overview of the work and the functioning of the Congress. Special thanks also to the President of EUDEL, Mayor Imanol LANDA JAUREGI, for welcoming us in the beautiful city of Getxo!

When I read your Statute, I felt that we share the same vision of government, that we are from the same family. You are working to promote and defend local and regional democracy and the general interests of your members before the administrative policy instances as well as the development of the European spirit in municipal bodies.

The Congress is the Assembly of local and regional authorities of the Council of Europe: It is made of more than 600 local and regional elected members, representing some 200 000 communities from 47 member States. It is not just a body, it is your institution; It belongs to you, local and regional authorities. This means the Congress is your strong voice at European level.

The local and regional representatives of the member states are represented in the Congress within national delegations, which take into account the political balance in their country. The Spanish delegation is made of 24 members among whom 12 are representatives of regional parliaments of Spain, including the Basque Parliament represented by M. Inaki AGUIRRE ARIZMENDI. Let me recall that your President M. LANDA JAUREGI is also a very active member of this delegation!

The Congress is a unique institution in Europe as it is responsible for assessing and developing the situation of local and regional democracy in the 47 Council of Europe member States.

It promotes local and regional autonomy, supports innovation and good governance, provides local and regional authorities support in addressing new challenges and helps them deliver their services to the citizens.

The Congress also observes local and regional elections, implements cooperation programmes in several member States, promotes citizen participation, raises awareness on the respect of fundamental rights and works on thematic issues such as fight against radicalisation, reception and integration of migrants and fight against corruption

Decentralisation and local and regional autonomy

The reference treaty for the Congress' work is the European Charter of Local Self-government. The Charter lays down the principles and legal aspects that govern autonomy and self-government and guarantees the rights of communities and their elected local, and - if they are not specifically excluded - regional authorities. It has now been ratified by all 47 member States. Spain has ratified it already in 1988, among the first countries to join.

On a regular basis, the Congress draws up country-by-country reports and recommendations addressed to governments focusing on the provisions of the Charter.

The Congress has tirelessly promoted local and regional self-government by fostering the principles of subsidiarity, proximity, good governance and active citizenship. We are convinced that local and regional self-government contributes to the stability and democracy in Europe. Strong democratic cities and regions contribute to inclusive, safe and fair societies.

Decentralisation means more responsibilities for the cities and the regions and more opportunities for their citizens to participate in the decision-making processes. In the past 40 years, local and regional elected representatives have become key players in national and European policies. They are the link between national governments and citizens and they can bring European values close to the people.

The degree of devolution in Spain has increased over the years. The regions are now responsible for more public spending and have more public employees than the national administration. The system of financing has been revised to give them more financial responsibilities and autonomy. Devolution, however, is still a source of lively debates. Regionalisation must respect national borders and should not be regarded as a problem or a danger, but rather as a means to maintain unity. If we want strong regions with strong competencies, there is the necessity for

loyalty. Central governments will need to trust that the regions will fulfill their competencies within the national contract.

Consultation between central governments and local and regional authorities

The European Charter of Local self-government lays down the principles that govern self-government. Article 10 of the Charter concerns the consultation of local and regional authorities by central government on all matters that involve them. Consultation is a central feature of local self-government and a vital process which serves to ensure that our multi-level governance system functions effectively. This is one of the pillars of our local democracy. For consultation to be effective, it needs to be properly anchored in the policy and regulatory framework of each Member State.

But consultation is not an easy process and it does not come naturally – it requires considerable efforts from all sides. Consultation requires engaging in real dialogue. It depends on trust between the levels concerned and it needs to be early and transparent.

Lack of consultation is regularly identified as part of the “recurrent issues” that we identify in our monitoring work. It is for this reason that the Congress prepared a strategy and issued guidelines on what makes good consultation processes. These guidelines underline in particular the important role national associations have in representing local and regional authorities

in the national and regional capitals and in safeguarding their right to be consulted on matters that concern them.

Congress thematic priorities and activities

In recent years, Europe has been facing great difficulties: economic crisis, mistrust in politics and politicians, lack of solidarity towards refugees and migrants, rise of extremism, nationalism and terrorism.

These challenges are threatening our societies. The economic crisis, in particular, and the consequent decline in the cities and the regions' revenues, has placed their capacity to satisfy citizens' expectations at risk.

The aim of the Congress is to contribute to the restoring of trust in politics and in the public administration. Good political governance is possible only if the population trusts its elected representatives at all levels. We, as local and regional politicians, must therefore act as models for society as a whole.

In this context, the Congress has organised debates and exchanges of good practice on good governance and the respect for the rule of law in territorial administrations. It has in particular worked in recent years to identify ways to prevent corruption, notably through the strengthening of public ethics and

transparency. It has promoted rigorous governance frameworks and the development of common standards. Currently, among others, we are revising the European Code of Conduct for the political integrity of local and regional elected representatives, adopted by the Congress in 1999.

Another challenge is the trend to radicalisation leading to terrorism. The terrible terrorist attack in Manchester last week has proven once again how much more efforts we must produce at all levels to prevent and combat radicalisation and violent extremism. To this end, the Congress has prepared “Guidelines for local and regional authorities for the prevention of radicalisation and manifestations of hate at grassroots level” and has launched an “Alliance of European cities against violent extremism” which is a platform for exchange aimed at facilitating co-operation for preventing radicalisation.

In this field, like in so many others, the contribution of local and regional elected representatives to the work of central governments is indispensable. Local and regional authorities are the level closest to citizens and to the most vulnerable or exposed individuals in the communities. We are convinced that extremist and radical leanings can be countered by proximity work on the ground, in particular in the field of education and prevention.

Local and regional authorities are also in the front line in dealing with the reception and integration of migrants and refugees, which is another huge challenge for Europe as a whole. Local and regional authorities are at the frontline in cases of emergency and they are often left with limited means and guidance to tackle the situation. Many cities and regions have been severely affected in different ways: as places of arrival, of transit and of destination for the refugees.

During its last Session in March, the Congress adopted a report on the role of local and regional authorities in the reception of refugees and integration of migrants. Among others, this report urges governments to consult with regional and local authorities and coordinate their action, providing legislative and financial backing. It also advocates that integration must start as early as possible, from the moment of arrival. Regional and local authorities must develop programmes that bring newcomers and host communities together in activities, such as sports or intercultural events, in order to create the right conditions for mutual understanding and integration.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We, in the Congress, are convinced that the response to all these challenges cannot be other than European, with the involvement

of cities and regions in national and European decision-making processes.

Decentralisation, self-government and regionalisation provide different pathways to the same destination: the final objective is to bring political and administrative structures nearer to citizens in order to respect their cultural diversity and heritage and to strengthen democratic stability and security for all.

His Majesty the King of Spain visited Strasbourg one month ago, on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of Spain's accession to the Council of Europe. I had the privilege of meeting him and of listening to his speech to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. I want to share this with you. He said "Democracy requires the bringing together of emotion, reason, trust, participation, a constructive attitude and a conciliatory spirit. It requires sincere dialogue and, as a consequence, the taking of decisions in a responsible manner".

In my view this is highly relevant for national governments and parliaments, for regional governments and parliaments and for provincial and municipal councils.

And this is also the spirit of the work that the Congress wants to achieve for and with its members and the local and regional communities across Europe.

I thank you once again for inviting the Congress of the Council of Europe to be part of this important event and I wish EUDEL a bright future.

Thank you