

Speech of the President of the Congress Gudrun Mosler-Törnström

General Assembly of the Hungarian National Association of Local Authorities

Budapest, 8 June 2017

Dear President, dear members

1. Let me begin by saying how pleased I am to be here at your General Assembly. It is a great honour for me. Thanks also to President Jenő SCHMIDT, for welcoming us - Andreas Kiefer, the Secretary General of the Congress, and me - to this beautiful city. Ever since the Hungarian National Association of Local Authorities (TÖÖSZ) was formed almost 30 years ago, during the transition of Hungary to democracy, it has been closely bound up with Hungary's democratic development.
2. You have been working with the Congress from the beginning and yours is one of the national associations that we work really well with. We have a long history of cooperation. National associations of local authorities are the key partners for the Congress, in rolling out its activities, in listening and in dialogue, in devising our policies and priorities for the future.
3. Establishing a strong national association is the first step for us when a country joins the Council of Europe and sends a delegation to the Congress, but here in Hungary you were one step ahead - your association was already in place before Hungary joined the Council.

4. National associations are also very important in the work of our strategic partners – the EU's Committee of the Regions, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions and the Assembly of European Regions. While some people express surprise that there are all these institutions and organisations working to improve democracy and governance at the local and regional levels, the truth is that there is never enough of this cooperation and in fact we are working closely together and finding synergies wherever we can.
5. The Hungarian delegation to the Congress is very important for us and I am glad to see several of you here today. Your delegation is one that you can be proud of. It punches above its weight. We have a Hungarian Vice-President, Anna MAGYAR, which makes Hungary one of the 17 delegations represented in the Bureau with decision-making powers.
6. Yours is a very active delegation by Congress standards. Several of your members are or have recently been rapporteurs. In the Current Affairs Committee, Anna MAGYAR is our co-rapporteur for the minority languages report, and Gyorgy ILLES was co-rapporteur for the migration report and in the Governance Committee, Henrietta BERO is deputy spokesperson for children's rights and Marta CAMPANARI-TALABER is the co-rapporteur of our report on financial compensation, which I shall say more about in a minute. These are all big subjects. Some of you have also been very active in our election observation missions [Anna MAGYAR and Gyorgy ILLES].
7. Another important body of the Congress is the Group of Independent Experts on the European Charter of Local Self-Government. Here again, the Hungarian contribution is outstanding. Our Hungarian expert, Zoltan SZENTE, Professor at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences of the University of

Budapest, is Vice-President of the Group and for many years has been one of our most trusted experts. The list of Congress reports drafted by Professor SZENTE is a long one and it is an open secret that we often turn to him for the most difficult subjects.

[The European Charter of Local Self-Government]

8. One of the main activities and responsibilities of the Congress is to oversee the implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government. This is the Council of Europe's main legal instrument for strengthening local democracy across the European space and we are proud of the fact that it has now been ratified by all 47 Council of Europe member states. It enshrines some fundamental principles for the good functioning of local governments, such as the need for properly defined powers and responsibilities and adequate financial resources.
9. We believe that local authorities, as the principle suppliers of local public services, should have the fullest possible autonomy in how they carry out their functions. Proper consultation is another key principle of the Charter. Local authorities need to be consulted by national governments on all issues and policies that affect them and for this there need to be robust and permanent consultation mechanisms in place, so that they can contribute to all such decision-making in good time.
10. We recognise that the situation in many of our member states in this respect is far from perfect - in fact it is one of our 'recurring issues'! These are the problems that are mentioned most frequently in our monitoring reports. It is also an issue that we encountered in our last monitoring visit to Hungary, back in 2012, so I would be interested to hear whether there

has been any improvement in that respect since our report. As a national association – one of your most important functions should be as a consultation partner for the national authorities.

11. Hungary has its own experience of a recentralisation of powers, so as we recognise that you are doing valuable work in this association, we are at the same time aware that you are facing considerable challenges and that the resources at the disposal of local government in Hungary are quite modest. But, as I like to remind our national authorities, there can be no democracy without local democracy. Democracy has its roots in our towns and villages and we would do well to remember that – as we see the growth of populist rhetoric and politics across the European continent.

[Status of local representatives]

12. I understand that one of the subjects that you will be discussing today is the status of local representatives. This is also a key issue for the Congress. The recent Congress report and recommendation on the subject could be of interest to you. You cannot have good local government and a good quality of local life without having competent local political elected representatives. And to attract the right people, you need proper pay and working conditions.
13. Too often local government work is poorly recognised and poorly paid. In my opinion this is a dangerous and risky situation. Worst is the risk of corruption. If your policemen earn peanuts, then they will be more tempted to increment their income by bribes and unnecessary fines. We all know this. Our Hungarian member Marta CAMPANARI-TALABER is co-rapporteur for a report on the “Financial compensation of local and regional elected representatives and public officials”,

which we expect to be ready next year and which should include some recommendations concerning the application of Article 7.2 of the European Charter, where our member states have accepted to provide 'appropriate financial compensation for expenses occurred in office' and 'compensation for loss of earnings or remuneration for work done'.

14. The status of local elected representatives varies enormously from country to country. Given the variety of systems of local government in Europe, it is unrealistic for us to seek to have or to promote a single model of status. However, it is obvious to me that we need proper working conditions, proper compensation for work done and for what we have given up in terms of our careers. Local politics should not just be for rich males and old people. We need to attract women, mothers of families and we need to attract young people. With the right conditions of work we can do this.

[Local finance]

15. We are working on a report on adequate resources for local authorities. I know that this is a hot topic in Hungary. This is a follow up to the work we did three years ago. We make the point that some governments are recentralising as a pretext to get out of a financial crisis. This is not good. It is not good for our citizens. The Charter stresses the importance of own financial resources – we need tax-raising revenues. Centralisation can never adequately serve and respond to the needs of the people.

[E-democracy]

16. But even with modest means at our disposal, the continuing advances in communications technologies are opening up exciting new opportunities, both in terms of improving governance and making it more transparent and also in improving citizen participation. At our last session in March, we adopted a report on 'Open data for better public services', demonstrating how local authorities can improve local life and stimulate economic development by making datasets available to the public to re-use. We demonstrate how such data can make possible a whole range of social, cultural, democratic and environmental initiatives. This is part of our objective of developing Smart Cities and I am delighted to learn that many of Hungary's cities are involved in the European Innovation Partnership on Smart Cities and Communities.
17. Hungary was one of the first countries to ratify the Additional Protocol to the European Charter, on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority. Our latest report on citizen participation underlines that, by providing clear, comprehensive and accessible information on local and regional policies, authorities can strengthen active citizenship and foster a feeling of belonging to a community, and the duty to contribute to this community in a democratic society. More and more of our cities are demonstrating how information and communication technologies, combined with a policy of transparency, can have a direct impact on participation and public services.

[Congress priorities]

18. Last year, in its October session, the Congress adopted its priorities to guide its work over the next four years, 2017 to 2020. Two main areas of work were agreed – to strengthen the

quality of local and regional democracy and to build secure societies that are respectful, inclusive and closer to citizens. Strengthening local and regional democracy includes its fight against corruption – for which we are currently preparing reports on public procurement, combatting conflicts of interest and nepotism and also revising our 1999 code of conduct for political representatives and extending it to cover all those involved in the provision of public services.

[Current challenges for Europe and Council of Europe responses]

19. In April, the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Thorbjørn JAGLAND, issued his 2017 report on the State of Democracy, Human Rights and the Rule of Law. The 2017 report carries the title “Populism – how strong are Europe’s checks and balances?” I also recommend this report to you.
20. The Secretary General is concerned at what he refers to as the ‘illiberal swerve’ that is being taken in some of our member States, governments which appear to be less protective of their pluralism and more accepting of populism. He describes populism as ‘those who invoke the proclaimed will of “the people” in order to stifle opposition and dismantle checks and balances which stand in their way’. He observes that, in a growing number of countries, nationalist and xenophobic parties are making gains by challenging elites and exploiting public anxieties over migration and that, fearful of losing ground, the politicians in power are responding by toughening up their stances on issues such as asylum and law and order.
21. In his report he describes in detail the strategies that the Council of Europe is taking to counter this threat. The Congress is working intensively on several of the key issues that he

identifies, such as migration and refugees, Roma discrimination and countering violent extremism.

22. Unfortunately time will not permit me to tell you about all the exciting and indispensable work that we are doing in these areas, so I have decided to focus on one – our work with Roma. Hungary is playing a key role in our work on Roma issues. I know that Anna MAGYAR is a supporter of the DOSTA & UEFA Respect campaign. Our Hungarian member Gyorgy ILLES has also signed the “Declaration of Mayors and elected local and regional representatives of Council of Europe member states against anti-Gypsyism”.
23. Another mayor from Hungary - József IGNÁCZ of Besence Municipality, who is not a Congress member - has also signed the Declaration. Let me invite you all to follow his example and to get as many of your mayors and city councillors as possible to sign up to this important political declaration. There is now a Hungarian translation available. In fact we have already written to your association to underline our call of signatures to take an explicit stand against anti-Gypsyism.
24. In October last year the Congress adopted a Recommendation and a Report concerning “The situation of Roma and Travellers in the context of rising extremism, xenophobia and the refugee crisis in Europe”. As we point out in our report, discrimination against Roma in Hungary has now escalated into violence and physical assaults. The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights has expressed his concern at the “increasing influence of extremist rhetoric on the discourse of mainstream politicians and on society at large” in Hungary - particularly at the local level. So there is work to do here – and we are partners in this task.

25. Our report on Roma assesses how the situation of Roma and Travellers in Europe has evolved in the five years since our landmark report on “Roma inclusion as a challenge for local and regional authorities”. It underlines that, despite numerous efforts, the circumstances not only have not improved, but appear to have worsened during the refugee crisis. Local and regional authorities are at the forefront of responding to these new challenges, as they bear a great responsibility for the social inclusion of Roma and Travellers.
26. Let me make a few concluding remarks. I cannot stress too much how important the work of your association is for us. It is here in our national associations that we have the best chance to develop our work in our towns and cities to improve and enrich the lives of all our citizens. I thank you again for inviting us to this event and I wish you all – wish all of us rather – a stimulating and fruitful meeting.