

CEMR CONFERENCE Equality, Diversity and Inclusion - Bilbao, Spain, 11 - 13 June 2018

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Opening plenary session – “Setting the scene for a fairer future”

Bilbao, Spain, 11 June 2018

➔ First intervention:

Answer to the question: “Should there be a common European approach for equality, diversity and inclusion strategies?”(1mn)

In my opinion there is only one possible answer: a clear yes!

All over Europe we can witness how extreme right wing parties enter parliaments, how radicalization gains ground, how hate speech and rejection of others is recklessly expressed.

I admit that fighting for our goals is not becoming easier.

But we have values which can bind us and for which we can work together: Respect for human rights, for diversity and equality and our belief in solidarity.

These are the common guiding principles that have brought together countries around the idea of a larger Europe in the Council of Europe.

To get us through these challenges facing us, we need concerted action at this larger European level more than ever.

➔ Second intervention:

Presentation of the Congress of Local and Regional authorities and its activities in the field of equality, diversity and inclusion (4 mn)

Mr President, Dear Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure and an honour for me to take part in this high-level discussion today.

The CEMR is a long-standing partner of the Congress. I appreciate this opportunity for thinking together and exchanging opinions and experiences on equality, diversity and inclusion.

Europe is going through turbulent times. We are facing several crisis situations, including war at our borders, migration, radicalisation, and political discord.

At a moment when we need to defend democratic principles to guide our actions in order to overcome these challenges, our societies are fragmented and fragilised by a lack unity and cohesion.

Urgent action and strong responses to make our societies more resilient are necessary and not just at the international or national political levels but also at the local and regional levels.

The Congress has addressed this through its recommendations to Council of Europe member States to take action and promote respect for diversity, intercultural and interreligious dialogue and the early integration of migrants. We also developed a Toolkit with the purpose of informing and supporting local authorities in the organisation of intercultural and interreligious activities.

Apart from these urgent issues, we have long-standing social problems that require long-term solutions and continuous work.

Achieving gender equality is one such area of work. At the Congress, we are particularly sensitive to the political representation aspect of it. Achieving equal representation between women and men in the political sphere is proving to be a persistent challenge, in spite of all the committed work done for decades.

There are many solutions of course and in the Congress we opted for the quota solution to increase women's representation and I must say that for us it worked: Between 2011 and today, with the application of a 30% quota for the underrepresented sex, we managed to increase women's representation in our national delegations to 42%. In our executive body women now make up more than 50% of the members.

In 2017, I was elected as the first woman President of the Congress. This is a fact I am proud of, but I also realise that it has taken too long, given that our assembly has existed for longer than a quarter of a century.

Another area of long-term work is the inclusion of Roma and Traveller people. In 2013 we have set up a "European Alliance of Cities and Regions for Roma Inclusion" to unify our efforts for Roma Inclusion. Today the Alliance has 130 participating cities and regions from 29 different countries.

I would like to bring to your attention our newly adopted Handbook on Human Rights which is a selection of examples for achieving better integration of specific groups of people who need particular attention.

I conclude by reiterating what I said at the beginning: We need more solidarity and cohesion in our societies to face the current challenges.

➔ **Third intervention: reaction to the result of the poll on *women in decision making* (2 mn)**

Thank you Ms Sanchez,

Let's just have a close look at the results. The majority of participants thinks that (*--- depending on the result of the poll ---*)

- women should be more represented in decision making /
or
- women are underrepresented in decision making /
or
- there should be quotas on women in decision making positions /
or
- we need to find measures to enhance the number of women in decision making

You will not be surprised to hear that I, as a woman and a decision maker, strongly share this opinion. Yet, unfortunately we are still far away from an equal share of decision making positions between men and women.

Let me take the example of my own country, Austria. In Austria, we have 2098 municipalities and that means that we have 2098 mayors. Let us have a look at how many female mayors we have: Out of 2098 mayors only 146 are women.

Now let me tell you a story about this: In Austria we have certain first names, which are quite popular such as “Josef”. And out of the 2098 mayors, we have 148 mayors who are called “Josef”.

That means that in Austria we have more mayors called “Josef” than women leading our municipalities!¹ Well, for me, that shows that we have a lot of work ahead of us. But let’s not lose hope. The poll result shows that there are strong tendencies to change this.

Of course it is not the fault of the Josef. I am sure that many of them strongly support us in our fight to raise the number of women in decision making positions. That support is important. But the crucial point is that we need to think how we can achieve that. Local level politics is a significant starting point for women who wish to take responsibility in public life and decision making. We should do all in our power to provide women with the ways and means to get in there. I hope we will have an opportunity to talk more about this today.

Thank you.

¹ Source: derStandard.at (2016): <https://derstandard.at/2000040591721/Neue-Serie-Wir-sind-Dorfkaiser>