

The Second Eurasian Women's Forum, Business Programme – St. Petersburg, 19-21 September 2018

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Opening of the Second Eurasian Women's Forum

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Madam Chair,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am very pleased to address you today, and especially so after you heard the President of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly. It is very symbolic that Presidents of both assemblies of elected representatives in the Council of Europe are women – as well as the Foreign Minister of Croatia, who is currently chairing the Committee of Ministers of this Organisation!

This shows our firm commitment to advancing women and gender equality – because for the Council of Europe and its Congress, fair and equal participation of women and men in public life is fundamental to democracy.

Over the past decades, we have seen a spectacular rise of women playing a more active role in all spheres of society, a rise in women's influence and impact on the global agenda. I am proud to be part of this change as the first woman President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities over its 60 years of history.

And I am also proud that in the Congress – which an assembly of local and regional elected representatives from the 47 member States of the Council of Europe, including the Russian Federation – we have enforced a 30 per cent minimum requirement for women's participation in national delegations. As a result, over the past five years alone, the representation of women in national delegations rose from 31% to 42%, and women constitute today 65% of the Congress executive leadership.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today, the questions of women's participation and representation, of equality between women and men remain firmly among top political priorities. This Forum is taking place against this background, and all of us present here are a testimony to these far-reaching changes.

On behalf of the Congress, I would like to thank the Organising Committee and personally its Chair, President of the Federation Council Valentina MATVIENKO, for this initiative and the opportunity to share our experience in advancing women in politics.

With their unique perspective and approach to dealing with the challenges facing us, women can make a tremendous contribution to global security and sustainable development, acting at the local, regional, national and global level.

However, much work is still to be done to remove barriers to realising the full potential of women and achieving their equal participation. Today, despite the progress made, women still remain largely under-represented at all levels of government and in all spheres of society. For example, in my home country of Austria, we have calculated that the number of mayors only sharing the same first name – Joseph – is greater than all of the mayors who are women!

Good laws are not enough to change the biased perception of the women's role in society, which is proving to be a persistent challenge. In the Congress, we are convinced that the local and regional level is key to advancing women and women's agenda. Being the closest to citizens, it is the level where biased attitudes towards women can be changed more easily through personal example and practical experience. It is also at the grassroots where women, as mayors, governors and councillors gain their political experience and develop their political profiles.

This is why the local and regional level is often a stepping stone for women's national career. I welcome today so many women participating in this Forum that started their road to success in local and regional communities. Some of them are heading delegations of their countries to the Congress and have been elected Congress Vice-Presidents – such as Head of the Russian delegation, Governor of Vladimir Region Svetlana ORLOVA.

We are convinced that if we do not reach a high representation of women at the local level, we will not achieve parity in national parliaments and governments. Some countries are using quotas to ensure the presence of women in elected councils. Others have achieved a balanced representation in the political parties, which influenced the composition of decision-making bodies.

And of course, advancing women must not be a matter for women alone. It is a matter for the whole society – not just its **better** half. It is extremely important to see more men as advocates of women's cause. This is why the theme of the World Forum for Democracy, organised by the Council of Europe in November this year, is "Gender Equality: Whose Battle?".

I would like to conclude by stressing again that engaging with women at the local level is the surest way to secure their participation at **all** levels of government. We need proactive local, regional and central governments and determined political parties to reach this objective. We also need media to present a non-biased image of women, their role and accomplishments, to change the stereotypes. And we need more platforms for dialogue, cooperation, mutual support and networking among women – but also between women and men – to share this positive experience.

This Forum is an excellent platform for such dialogue.

I thank you for your attention, and look forward to our discussions.