

CALRE Second Standing Committee - Brussels, Belgium, 28 June 2018

Speech by Gudrun MOSLER-TÖRNSTRÖM, President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe

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Dear Madam President,
Dear members of the Standing Committee, dear colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure indeed to have the opportunity to speak to you today. I would like to thank this Committee and in particular President Ana LUÍS for the invitation to address you on behalf of the Council of Europe Congress of Local and Regional Authorities.

Our two assemblies share a long-standing relationship of partnership and co-operation, which led to the signing of our co-operation agreement in September 2010. Since then, our partnership has gained a new momentum, with your Presidents addressing plenary sessions of the Congress, and Congress representatives contributing to the work of your General Assembly, your working groups and other activities organised by CALRE.

For example, only over the past year,

- I had the pleasure of taking part in the Seminar on the 20th Anniversary of your Assembly in Oviedo last July, and to contribute to the debate on the future of Europe and the role of regions – a very important theme in the current political context;

- in November, Secretary General of the Congress Andreas KIEFER participated in your General Assembly in Seville;

Just last March, we welcomed your President Ana LUÍS during the Congress plenary session; I should say that we very much appreciated her contribution to the debate on regional identity and integrity of the State in the Congress Chamber of Regions.

On this occasion, the President and I met to discuss how to take our co-operation forward to a new dimension and build synergies between our two assemblies, that enjoy a natural connection indeed: many of the Congress regional members are also members of a regional parliament – for example, from Spain, Germany, Italy and Austria and from our non-EU partners in Switzerland.

I was myself President and Vice-President of the Landtag of Salzburg, and understand first-hand the challenges and importance of the work of regional legislatures.

Members of regional parliaments represent a natural bridge between our two institutions, and the Congress can only benefit from their active participation in its work.

From a practical point of view, this bridge can be strengthened if CALRE more actively proposed its members from regional parliaments for participation in the Congress Chamber of Regions, including as Chamber Vice-Presidents – in this regard, I should mention that the Congress will be holding elections of its leadership at its next session in November. The political groups in the Congress are currently negotiating scenarios for the future and I would like to see more members from regional parliaments as Vice-President of the Chamber of Regions or in the Committees. It has been too long that for example the Spanish delegation has not participated in the Bureau.

The Congress can also benefit from the contribution of CALRE and its member parliaments to its monitoring of the situation of regional democracy in European countries that are also CALRE members – for example, next year we envisage monitoring missions to Austria, Belgium, Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom and Portugal. We would appreciate the input of your regional parliaments to our reports and recommendations in order to add their specific views on the functioning of democracy and the respect of the European Charter of local Self-Government. Many of the regional parliaments are the legislators for laws and policies for the municipalities.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The challenges faced by our regions today are the same whether they belong to CALRE or the Congress, and it is not surprising that our assemblies share many areas of common interest. A comparison between the current priorities and work plans of CALRE and the Congress shows that we can indeed coordinate and join efforts, and better target our co-operation, in a wide range of thematic activities of your ten working groups and the Congress' three committees.

One such area is addressing the challenges of migration and integration of migrants and refugees. The Congress has been active in this field for more than two decades, beginning with the proposal of the Council of Europe convention on the participation of foreigners in public life at local level in 1992, and, more, recently, adopting recommendations on better access of migrants to regional labour markets and on the reception and integration of migrants by local and regional authorities. I should add that this year, the Congress adopted a manual of good local and regional practices in protecting the human rights of migrants, and will adopt in November a recommendation for border regions facing migration phenomena.

Citizen participation in regional decision making, and addressing the “disconnect” and distrust of citizens in the mainstream politics is another area of our common concern. The current rise of populism is largely fuelled by this feeling of exclusion from democratic processes and institutions among our citizens. The Congress has accumulated a wealth of experience on this subject over the years – which also addresses the participation of women, young people, migrants and minorities.

Closely linked to citizen participation is the question of fostering intercultural dialogue in our communities and promoting understanding of the advantages of cultural diversity among our citizens. This topic remains high on the Congress agenda for many years, and we have many recommendations and practical tools to show for it, elaborated and published over decades. I should add that since 2007, the Congress has also been organising the European Local Democracy Week – an annual event that brings together citizens and local and regional authorities to boost joint decision making, and I can only invite your regions to join it.

Promoting cultural diversity and inclusive citizen participation are the subjects that can hardly be separated from the use of regional or minority languages in our communities – an area of the most recent Congress focus. Last October, we adopted a report on the implementation of the European Charter of Regional or Minority Languages in our regions; only last month, in May, the Congress' Governance Committee held a conference on regional and minority languages, in the preparation of its report on the use of these languages by local and regional authorities.

Your Assembly is also very active in this area, which presents itself very well for our closer co-operation. In this regard, I look forward to the presentation later today of your initiative on the occasion of the European Day of Languages.

I can also mention of course the issue of gender equality as another area of our common interest, and I have already referred to the subject of women participation at regional level. This only illustrates what I

said earlier – that there is a great potential for synergies between us, and that both our institutions can benefit greatly from contributing to each other's working structures, taking into account each other's recommendations, "comparing notes" between our rapporteurs and coordinating our positions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before concluding, I would like to stress the importance of adapting our institutions in order to meet the current challenges facing us, in the context of the on-going debate on the future of Europe, European institutions, and the role of regions in this future landscape, given the complex relationship between the State and the region.

In this regard, I would like to inform you that the Congress has launched a reflection on reforming its structures and working methods, which we hope to carry to fruition before the end of this year.

But even as we reform our institutions to meet the current and future challenges, we cannot be fully successful if we do it alone. To meet the current and future challenges, she warmly encouraged other institutions to join the Congress' effort. "While co-operation between the Congress and CALRE is undoubtedly important, so are partnerships with other institutions and associations which work to advance local and regional democracy on our continent", she concluded.

We need a truly functional co-operation network in Europe. This is why the Congress signed at its last session in March a revised co-operation agreement with the European Committee of the Regions; we are pleased that CALRE had done the same, and I very much look forward to the address by the Committee of the Regions at this meeting.

I am convinced that the time is right to bring all institutional partners at one table to set common priorities and reinforce each other's action. I hope that next year, the year of the 25th Anniversary of both the Congress and the Committee of the Regions, will be a good occasion to do so.

Meanwhile, I would like to see my participation in this Standing Committee as a step in this direction, and to thank you once again for this opportunity.