

**Council of Europe Conference of Ministers  
responsible for Media and Information Society**

**Freedom of Expression and Democracy  
in the Digital Age:  
opportunities, rights, responsibilities**

**(Belgrade, 7-8 November 2013)**

**Speech by Natalia Romanova,  
President of the Chamber of Regions  
Congress of Local and Regional Authorities  
Council of Europe**

Mr President,  
Ministers,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to address this Conference on behalf of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe.

As an assembly of local and regional elected representatives, the Congress attaches great importance to the good functioning of the media as a crucial element of democratic society. Media play a major role in upholding democratic values, especially today when they are being eroded by the economic crisis and its consequences – a rise in xenophobia and intolerance, disillusionment with mainstream politics and escape in extremism and populism.

Media, with its capacity for informing and educating the citizens, and for communicating advantages of living together in our increasingly diverse societies, are an important tool for helping to counter these negative trends. This role of the media is only increasing against the background of growing cultural diversity in Europe, as they are called upon to promote intercultural dialogue and contribute to a participatory democracy model, based on the participation of all citizens and residents in decision making.

New media especially, operating in a digital environment, provide new channels and opportunities for citizen participation, for example through blogging and social networks. This new environment is particularly well suited for consultations and direct interaction between citizens and public authorities, and thus serves to foster active citizenship so much needed today.

New opportunities presented by the digital-era tools and technologies in the framework of Information Society provide a unique possibility for broad access to media content, for its creation and instant dissemination, as well as for a wide public feedback and exchange of opinion. New technologies can certainly enhance citizen participation in communication and

information flows, as we are already witnessing a phenomenon of “citizen journalism”. The Digital Age can also inspire new methods of media financing. On the other hand, it also presents challenges in terms of copyright, accuracy of information and independence of opinion, content damaging to public interest, and fair cost distribution, among others. I am sure this Conference will address these issues as well.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Much as at the national level, the diversity of local and regional media, media that are truly pluralist and independent, is an essential element of democracy at the grassroots. Media are an integral part of local and regional democracy as well; this importance of local and regional media in the democratic process must be recognised, and the media must be given proper means and capacity to function properly. The Congress has in the past addressed this question in its resolutions and recommendations on the state of regional print media in Europe – pluralism, independence and freedom in regional press, in 2002, and on regional media and transfrontier co-operation, in 2005.

In these texts, we have expressed our concern about the decline in the number of independent media available to individuals and groups in society, about the excessive concentration of media ownership as a serious threat to diversity and pluralism, and about lower standards and ethics in professional journalism. We have been calling for better training for journalists, respect for editorial independence, greater media engagement with citizens – and in particular young people – as well as for promoting regulatory instruments that favour truly competitive and pluralistic media.

We are currently preparing a new report on the role of regional media in building participatory democracy. This report will examine whether regional media live up to these expectations today as well as the existing barriers preventing their proper functioning, such as centralised control over media and a lack of regional input, insufficiency of financial means, concentration of ownership and a lack of diversity in the media, censorship and restrictions on media freedom, among others. The report will also take into account the decisions of this Conference.

The questions addressed in the Declaration and resolutions of this conference are of direct concern to local and regional authorities as well – whether it has to do with developing a free and pluralist digital environment, ensuring a safe environment for the work of journalists at local and regional levels, or maintaining the essential role and functioning of the media. With their competences broadening due to the decentralisation of power, local and regional authorities have an increasing responsibility for upholding the freedom of expression in their communities – both by maintaining public service media and by developing and supporting non-profit community media, as recommended in Resolution No 2 of this Conference.

Essentially, local and regional politicians are addressing the same issues as the national level, but from the angle of the actual needs and opportunities in their own communities, tailoring national measures to the local environment. This allows for building important synergies across the different levels of governance, with grassroots authorities contributing their practical experience

of what works on the ground. This is why the Congress is very much pleased to provide its input to this Conference.

And this is why we fully support its Declaration and resolutions. Together with national governments and parliaments, local and regional authorities stand committed to upholding the freedom of expression and media freedom, the freedom of association and assembly, and the right to a private and family life. Together with other levels of governance, we are engaged in combating hate speech and incitement to violence in our communities, countering it with intercultural dialogue and joint activities for community building.

Together with other levels, we are also engaged in protecting children from violence and abuse, in particular through the active participation of the Congress in the Council of Europe's "One in Five" Campaign and our Pact of Towns and Regions to stop sexual violence against children. Local and regional authorities are also making a very practical contribution, within their competences, to improving media and digital literacy, including for vulnerable groups, through their educational and integration efforts.

Local and regional media are a vehicle to channel this action, and the Information Society is a new environment in which they operate. Media in general, including new media, must be the engine for moving this Information Society forward. European institutions, national governments and parliaments, as well as local and regional authorities must act in concert to make sure that the media have freedom and means to play fully their role in democratic development.

Thank you.