

**31st Session of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities – 19-21 October 2016, Strasbourg, France**

## Speech by Gudrun Mosler-Törnström, newly elected President

*Check against delivery*

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Ladies and gentlemen, dear members and colleagues

Let me first warmly thank you for the trust you have placed in me for the leading of this Assembly during the next two years.

I am both glad and proud. I can assure you that I will fulfil my mandate with great commitment and determination.

I would like also to welcome the renewed delegations, especially the new colleagues and would encourage them to actively involve themselves in the work of the Congress.

The strengthening of democracy, human rights and the rule of law at local and regional level are the core objectives of the Congress, its mission.

These are the values we have to fight for. Without these values, our societies would face a decrease in solidarity and an increase in radicalisation, extremism, xenophobia and recentralisation. These tendencies will eventually, let us make no mistake about it, destabilise the democratic structure of our continent.

The work of the Congress is, therefore, clearly more important than ever. Monitoring of local and regional democracy in member States and observation of local elections, are among the main tasks of our Congress. They both serve to strengthen the political dialogue with the governments and with the ministers in our member States. These core activities must be continuously expanded.

Later this morning we will listen to the report our outgoing President Jean-Claude Frécon. I would like to thank him for his incredible commitment and passion. He took over the work done by his predecessors and continued to develop post-monitoring and political dialogue with the governments. I will also take over from him to work on reinforcing the commitment of member States vis-à-vis the Charter and will pursue the goal of "100% Charter covering 100% of the territory of Europe".

In 2018 we will celebrate the 30th of the entry into force of the Charter. We need to use this opportunity to take stock and think about how we can strengthen the commitment of member States in regard to the Charter, notably by raising awareness on its applicability in domestic law.

Beyond the tasks of reinforcing our core business I feel we need to continue our work in the field of fighting corruption, radicalisation and violent extremism, based particularly on prevention and education. Another one of my objectives is to raise awareness on the importance of respecting human rights at local and regional level.

Naturally, the question of the integration of migrants and refugees will remain a major challenge for local and regional politicians in the upcoming period and I will strive to find concrete ways to address this within the Congress and with the Committee of Ministers.

In this relation, as in many others, local and regional politicians in rural zones have an important role to play and I will support all initiatives to empower these areas and promote their potential, strengths and qualities.

Dear colleagues,

To face all the challenges we shall meet, we need strong local and regional communities, with clear competencies and appropriate resources.

We have a long path ahead of us. On this path we will encounter obstacles but also, I hope, occasions for celebration of positive developments. Recently, for example, I learnt that the French Government had just decided to share VAT receipts with the regions to replace the traditional grant funding they used to receive. While this may seem a somewhat technical - even arid - fact, it actually represents a radical departure in the way the regional level is taken into account as a political player. The State has decided that tax receipts should be divided between itself and the regions. Of course, there will be lively discussions as to the exact proportion received by each, but at the end of the day the relationship between the State and its regions will be substantially transformed.

And this means, dear colleagues, that in France, and indeed elsewhere, the process of decentralisation which began some 35 years ago, is still actively progressing and will continue to do so.

I cite this example to show that decentralisation is an evolving process which needs our full involvement.

It is this evolution and process I would like to contribute to as President of the Congress, with the support and commitment of all members of our Assembly

Thank you