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Communication of the President of the Chamber of local authorities

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Check Against Delivery

Dear colleagues,

Today we have several important debates and once again, our time is at a premium. Let me begin by welcoming our invited speakers.

We have three monitoring reports, on the situation of local democracy in Malta, Estonia and Iceland respectively, beginning with Malta. As chance would have it, I was in Malta last month for the plenary session of ARLEM. Malta is a strategic player in the field of Mediterranean cooperation. I am glad that the Congress is continuing to strengthen its own cooperation in that field.

I was told that delegations from Tunisia and Morocco were also here with us today attending the Session of this Chamber in the framework of their study visit this week in Strasbourg – so, let me welcome you warmly!

While in Malta I held a series of meetings with the Maltese delegation, the national association and our former president Ian Micallef, who is now a member of our Group of Independent Experts, with the aim of discussing the Malta's own work to develop its local democracy.

Such meetings form part of the political dialogue that is an essential part of the work of this Chamber. Much of this dialogue takes place in the context of our work to monitor the Charter and in our observation of local elections. Some of it involves direct discussions with the ministers concerned – and our three exchanges today with the relevant ministers of the countries that we are discussing are further proof that this dialogue has become more and more central to our work.

For my part, I intend to make a point of organising such meetings whenever I have the opportunity to visit a country in the course of my duties. Several more such visits are foreseen this year – including Spain, Armenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina).

Monitoring is not about policing, it is about dialogue, peer to peer collaboration to improve governance and democracy at the local level. In this respect we place a high value on our meetings with the Governments concerned and are very pleased when, as today, the ministers concerned come in person to our sessions to continue this dialogue. Let us all make the most of this opportunity.

The three monitoring reports that we will examine today remind us that this Chamber has a special responsibility with regard to the implementation of European democratic standards in the municipalities of our member states. This is very much about the European Charter of Local Self-Government, and so it is this Chamber, more often the Bureau of the Chamber, which examines any complaints of violations of the Charter.

We are getting more and more such complaints, which we usually refer to our Monitoring Committee, and I take this as a sign, a very positive sign, that more and more of our citizens are becoming aware of the commitments that their Governments have entered into when ratifying the Charter.

Today, as well as debating these three reports on local democracy in member states, we will have a debate on the reception of unaccompanied child migrants in our cities. This is one of the debates organised within the theme that the Congress has chosen for 2017 – ‘Decentralised policies for the successful integration of refugees’.

This isn't a topic of academic interest. We are seeing a real crisis unfold in our countries with this unprecedented influx of refugees. And as is so often the case, our cities are in the front line, it is we who are most directly affected by this crisis. The Congress – and our Chamber in particular – has a key role to play in relation to these issues, because of our special position of proximity with our citizens, who have to face these issues on a daily basis.

The dramatic influx of refugees into the European territory in recent months is a huge challenge which calls for a response from all of us. A particular problem raised by many of you is how to deal with the children, especially when – as too often is the case – they arrive unaccompanied. This is a huge challenge for our towns and cities. I know that in my own country, we planned for so many, but we got many more. These people need to be welcomed, accepted and integrated into all our communities. By sharing the load, it will become much lighter for all of us. We all have a role to play; we all need to be partners in this work. This – welcoming and integrating unaccompanied child migrants – is an excellent example of what we in the Congress can do.

We are also beginning work on how to ensure voting rights for migrants, refugees and displaced persons. We will prepare Terms of Reference soon and hope to have a report on this ready by next year.

As you are aware, together with our programmes on integration and anti-radicalisation, the Congress is also involved in action to fight corruption at the grassroots' level. A joint conference with our partner in the EU, the Committee of the Regions, has been organised recently and we are currently preparing a new Code of Conduct for local elected representatives and appointed officials.

We have a vital contribution to make on these issues, but, as I have said before, only if we are treated as partners, with respect, and on an equal footing with other levels of Government. And yesterday's debate in the Congress Plenary on recurring issues underlined the importance of bringing this to the attention of central Governments, again and again. Proper consultation is indispensable in this respect. We cannot accept solutions being imposed on us by our central Governments. This will generate resistance and suspicion with the risk that our citizens will reject the measures. If we are included at the outset, our national governments will realise that we hold the keys to an effective solution.

The need to improve consultation is frequently raised during our monitoring missions and consistently features as one of the recurring issues that we flag up as begin questions that urgently require more attention. We have long been working to raise the quality of such consultation. In 2014 we announced that we were preparing some draft guidelines for such consultation. I am pleased to be able to inform you that this work is going ahead and that we should have a draft text ready later this year.

Many of you have good practice to share in this respect. We know that it is by working together that we can move forward on these issues and make a real impact in improving the lives of those in our cities. I urge you to carry on this work and wish you all a stimulating and fruitful session. Thank you.