

**NALAS General Assembly 2017**

Vienna, 19 May 2017

**Opening speech by Breda Pecan (Slovenia, SOC), Vice-President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities**

Mr President,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,  
Dear Colleagues,

It is a pleasure for me to address the twelfth General Assembly of NALAS today on behalf of Ms Gudrun Mosler-Törnström, President of the Council of Europe Congress of Local and Regional Authorities.

This is not my first time with you at the occasion of the General Assembly. Having been able to join you last year, I am delighted to be here once again, since the Congress has a special relationship with NALAS and has been closely involved with your activities from the outset, and moreover, because I represent one of the countries from the region in the Congress Bureau.

NALAS has been, and continues to be, very important to the Congress. Important because we see you as a success story, a shining example of what can be done, a beacon of hope in a region that has known more than its fair share of problems and conflicts, and which is considered as “fragile”, as stressed by the EU Council at its summit in March this year.

It is important too, because you bring together the national associations of local and regional authorities in the region; and these associations are our most essential and genuine partners for promoting and implementing European standards and policies for local democracy, and thereby improving the lives of our citizens.

NALAS is recognised for the high quality of its work, for its networking capacity, and for the spirit of co-operation it maintains in the region and with its partners. The work done to support its members, and the services it provides to them, are further tangible evidence of its success. Moreover, the issues addressed are in sync with the Congress’ priorities which, for 2017-2020, focus on two main lines of action: “Enhancing the quality of local and regional democracy” and “Building safe and inclusive societies that respect diversity”.

NALAS can be regarded as an inspirational platform which builds synergies with other parts of Europe. We congratulate you for the achievements made since its establishment in 2001. It is heartening to see this strong and independent network playing a crucial and necessary role in consolidating local self-government in the region and in building its future. Indeed, we share the same views that local autonomy and decentralisation contribute to the stability and democracy within each individual country, in the region, and in Europe as a whole.

The Congress, which celebrates its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, has been advocating, over these past sixty years, for enhanced local democracy, and for a strong involvement of local and regional authorities in the overall decision-making both at national and European levels.

Through the monitoring of the implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, now ratified by the 47 member States of the Council of Europe, we engage in dialogue with the respective national governments. Our responsibility is to defend the interests of local and regional authorities, to ensure that they have sufficient competences and financial resources to respond to people’s needs and expectations, and to foster exchange of good practices, dialogue and co-operation.

Unfortunately, recent reports prepared by Congress have shown similar trends all over Europe: a slow-down of decentralisation processes and even tendencies to re-centralise and to limit the powers of local and regional levels.

The inadequacy of financial resources, as well as the lack of, or need for, improved consultation of local authorities and their associations - which are key principles of the Charter - are also constant concerns which are being flagged up as recurring issues in our monitoring work. We have long been working to raise the quality of such consultation. [I am pleased to inform you that this work is going ahead and that we should have a set of draft guidelines ready later this year for adoption by the Congress. I should also stress that the recent setting-up of a Central – Local Government Consultative Council in Albania, is a good example in the region as a tool for exchanging views and preparing legislation, where local and regional authorities can exert their right to be consulted and have their voice heard.]

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The NALAS network spans a large geographical area representing an important political space. We, in the Congress, believe in a robust NALAS network formed of strong, pluralistic and mature associations who can help strengthen the voice of local and regional authorities, vis-à-vis the central authorities and the European institutions. We need such networks to defend and explain, at all levels, the needs, rights and expectations of local authorities and their communities. We need such a network in the South East of Europe, and the Western Balkans in particular, to address the remaining obstacles for better local governance and for enabling the integration process as a whole; the process of political, economic and social integration.

Today you will discuss an important policy document, the NALAS Position paper on *Western Balkans in the loop, Local Governments and their associations as key stakeholders in the EU integration process*.

We in the Congress, as all of you in NALAS, share the view that local and regional authorities, and their respective associations, are key partners who should play a vital role in the dialogue to strengthen local democracy and to coordinate integration efforts with a view to ensuring stability in the region. They can influence this process significantly, in particular by improving communication with citizens and by bringing Europe and its institutions closer to them.

It is our firm conviction that the decision-making power should be greater at the local level, so as to provide quality and improved local public services. The political integration of South-East Europe will be successful only if local democracy enjoys both a strong and sound legal basis, as provided by the European Charter of Local Self-Government, as well as enhanced practices of local governance.

Indeed we believe that Europe will only gain from a multi-stakeholder and bottom-up approach, with strong local and regional authorities that are well prepared to implement and respond to EU standards. In this regard, we would advocate for new ways to include them in the Instrument of Pre-Accession Assistance, with greater possibilities and direct access to funding opportunities.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We share the same goal of improving local democracy and governance at the local level for the stability of our continent. I would like to reiterate the Congress' continuous political support to NALAS and its activities, as they are highly relevant to the Congress' objectives and priorities, and vital for building the future of this region. We work on the same path with similar objectives, mutually consolidating one another's work and achievements. This cooperation must continue in order to ensure sustainable success.

I wish all of us stimulating and inspiring discussions during this General Assembly. I trust they will enable NALAS to continue to develop its activities and influence in moving the South-East-Europe further along the integration path.

Thank you.