

**General Assembly of the Conference of European Regional Legislative Assemblies (CALRE), Parliament of Andalusia - Seville, Spain**

## Speech by Andreas Kiefer, Secretary General of the Congress

*Check against delivery - Seul le prononcé fait foi*

**Expert Panel What can we do for Europe? Contributions from the regions to the challenges of the Union**

**10 November 2017, Parliament of Andalusia - Seville, Spain**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are holding this panel discussion among presidents of regional parliaments and with representatives of the Committee of the Regions and of the Congress of the Council of Europe in difficult times. This exchange will address fundamental issues of the functioning and especially of the acceptance and acknowledgement of political action, of accountability, of sustainable and representative political institutions at regional and at European level.

Regions were conceived, and must still be seen today, as a bridge between central power and local communities, between national authorities and citizens. Most importantly, regions, with their unique identities, must be the driving force for integrating diversity – ethnic, linguistic, cultural – and realising diversity advantages within our member States. Today, regions must strengthen their role as a connecting point that brings different cultures, traditions and identities together and serves as a channel of dialogue between national, regional and local authorities and citizens – and as a channel of cooperation in maintaining unity in diversity. This unique position shall therefore define the role and responsibility of regions in shaping the future Europe.

In the Congress, we are convinced that it is indeed possible to express our unique regional identities, defend regional interest and uphold regional autonomy within the national framework of the State, in respect of the principles of constitutional loyalty and territorial integrity. In the motto of Europe – United in Diversity – the first word is equally important to the last one.

Our motto should be “Strong Regions in Strong States”, which can also be interpreted as “Stronger Regions Mean Stronger States”. We need to have strong regions, with enlarged powers, able to guide the economic development of their territory and to protect their cultural identity with due regard for diversity. It is only stronger regions that can contribute to the challenges facing Europe today, some of which I mentioned at the opening of this Assembly – challenges of migration and integration, challenges of greater citizen engagement and overcoming the feeling of citizens’ exclusion from governance – a feeling of alienation that fuels the rise of populism and contributes to violent extremism.

Our focus today must be on building what is making us stronger – involving citizens, strengthening protection of their human rights, supporting integration and fostering inclusive regional communities – these are the most effective responses to the current threats. Regions have a crucial role to play in achieving these objectives, by taking measures sometimes ahead of national governments. Let us not fear

innovation: our proximity to citizens, the dialogue and cooperation with local authorities, enables regions – especially the regional parliaments with legislative powers - to act as catalysts for exploring new methods and innovative approaches, and supporting local communities in their initiatives.

We must take a closer look at the importance of dialogue, the importance of consultation mechanisms and processes, between national and regional authorities – bearing in mind that the principle of consultation, enshrined in the European Charter of Local Self-Government, is equally applicable to regions.

We must take a closer look at involving citizens, in all their diversity, in decision making at regional level – at engaging them in regional community building through their greater participation, participation of women, of minorities, of young people. A loss of trust in politicians by our citizens and their feeling of exclusion from democratic processes are seen today as a major reason for rising populism and nationalism, leading down the road to fragmentation of our continent into self-isolated exclaves. Bringing citizens back on board, having them work side by side with governments and parliaments, making them feel empowered to make decisions on their future, is the best antidote.

In this process, we must take a closer look at the role of associations representing regions at the European scale, the role of regional networks such as CALRE. Their advocacy work as defenders of the interests of regional authorities, their work to promote regional representation in the governance systems is of utmost importance for shaping the future of regions both within member States and within Europe.

Finally, as we reflect on the contribution of regions to the future of Europe, we must take a closer look at our proposal for a system of “multi-level governance”, which would balance a multi-polar distribution of powers between European, national, regional and local levels – and the place and competences of regions within this system. This year’s White Paper on the future of Europe, produced by the European Commission, offers five possible scenarios – all of which dealing with relations between member States, and none specifying the role of regions or local communities. A notion of “multi-level governance” is regrettably missing from this reflection.

Yet today, regions are increasingly taking on the responsibilities for competences that have been traditionally seen as the prerogative of national governments – in the areas of democratic governance, the rule of law and delivery of human rights. The regions with legislative powers are spearheading this process, not least through the capacity of their legislative assemblies to adopt regional measures that go further and deeper than those at national level.

The Council of Europe’s annual reports on “State of Democracy, Human Rights and the Rule of Law”, by its Secretary General Thorbjørn Jagland, set forth a complementary vision of the future Europe – a vision based not on the economic integration of nation-States but on a broader notion of democratic integration and democratic security of our societies, a Europe inclusive not only for member countries but first and foremost inclusive for European citizens, who are in the centre of public policies.

This vision stresses the importance of decentralisation and dialogue on regional devolution as an essential component of a balanced distribution of powers and therefore enhanced democratic security. It puts forward measures for strengthening human rights protection and supporting integration and inclusive societies as an effective response to the current threats of populism, migrant crisis and terrorism. Finally, this vision identifies fair representation and participation of citizens as key to good democratic governance and a remedy against the feeling of alienation, which fuels the rise of populism.

The regions, as well as local authorities, have a crucial role to play in shaping and implementing these measures.

If I were to sum up in a few words what the regions can contribute today, I would say “safeguard and ensure the link to the citizen”; building the bridge between European institutions and the people. Because the regional politicians are together with the citizens they represent on a daily basis! Today’s political challenges can only be successfully addressed in societies and communities that are inclusive, transparent and participatory, where human rights and the rule of law are strong and well anchored. Achieving this, however, involves not only clearly defined competences, resources and power-sharing between different levels of government, not only effective mechanisms of citizen participation, and not only inclusive policies and measures for advancing integration and combating prejudice and discrimination. These are crucial, but the success of such measures also entails, probably as a starting point, active citizenship on the part of community residents.

Fair representation and participation of citizens is key to good democratic governance, and education for active democratic citizenship is crucial for citizen engagement. Regions and local communities are the level where citizens learn their first democratic experience, and where direct interaction between citizens and elected representatives is possible and brings tangible results. They are also the space where different community groups interact and dialogue with one another, and where fostering intercultural relations and improving understanding of diversity are the most relevant.

To put it another way: bridging the gap between power and citizen, between regions, Länder, comunidades autonomas and central authorities, as well as representing local and regional interests at national and European level and contributing grassroots experiences to national and European policy making is what regional can contribute to the challenges of Europe today. Regions can and should contribute to creating an additional layer of identity, which is complementary to the local, the regional and the national identity: it is the identity of being proud to be a European! A citizen of a Europe, which respects democracy, human rights and the rule of law – and strong regional identities.

Europe will not be a success story if it only addresses our rational dimensions. Europe will be a success story only if Europe also touches the emotions and the hearts of the Europeans. Regions with legislative powers, and especially the regional parliamentarians as the most reliable interlocutors with the people, have a crucial role to play in this process of developing and fostering a European identity.

I very much look forward to our discussion.