

123rd Plenary Session of the Committee of the Regions
Brussels, 12 May 2017

Speech by Gudrun Mosler-Törnström, President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities

Mr First Vice-President, dear Karl Heinz Lambertz,

Dear colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to address the Committee of the Regions today in my capacity as President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe.

I would like to greet the many CoR members who are also members of the Congress and thus showing the close links between our institutions. Altogether there are 52 members of the Congress who are also members of the Committee of the regions.

There are several important anniversaries to be celebrated in 2017:

- the sixtieth anniversary of the Treaty of Rome and hence the creation of the European Communities;
- the sixtieth anniversary of our Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, since its predecessor met for the first time in January 1957;
- and finally the 10th anniversary of the signature of the Memorandum of Understanding between the Council of Europe and the European Union.

The Congress - within the Council of Europe - and the Committee of the Regions - within the EU - share the same fundamental values: human rights, democracy and the rule of law. They perform differently, work with different European member States, but have complementary roles.

It is hence natural that our cooperation has been developing steadily along the years and is of an added value for both our Organisations, as we, local and regional politicians, are closest to European citizens.

Within the Council of Europe, the Congress plays a specific institutional role. For 60 years now, the Congress (and its predecessor) has been advocating enhanced local and regional self-government, by defending the principles of subsidiarity, proximity, democracy, accountability, good governance and active citizenship. We know that strong and effective local and regional self-government contribute to stability and democracy, within each country and in Europe as a whole.

We believe that local and regional authorities should be closely involved in decision-making processes at national and European levels - whilst also being given a proper political and legal framework and sufficient means to exercise their duties and responsibilities in serving the citizens! This holds especially true for finding and implementing solutions in the on-going refugee crisis. I am very pleased that this was outlined also in the latest Congress report presented by Yoomi Renström.

Decentralisation and recurring issues

Recent studies carried out by the Congress showed that decentralisation has barely made any progress in member States over the past decade. We are all well aware that devolution is a lengthy and complex process, often countered by tendencies to recentralise power. We have to do everything NOT to move backwards.

As entrusted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, the Congress is fulfilling its mission as guardian of democracy at the local and regional levels through monitoring of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, a Convention now ratified by our 47 member States.

The Congress monitors its implementation through country-specific visits. 18 such visits are scheduled for 2017 and 2018.¹ We engage in dialogue within each member State, including with elected representatives and their national associations. We prepare reports which address the main self-government issues which require improvement. These reports enable us to identify the fields in which member States should act in order to comply with their commitments *vis-a-vis* local self-government European standards, as enshrined in the European Charter. We are then able to provide constructive advice both on legislation, and on practices related to local and regional authorities' competencies and aims through specific recommendations addressed to national authorities.

These monitoring reports have allowed us to identify a number of recurring issues relevant for local and regional authorities. I want to highlight three:

- restricted definition, allocation and exercise of local competences;
- the inadequacy of financial resources in relation to the tasks conferred and
- the lack of consultation by central governments.

Cooperation Congress and CoR

Dear colleagues, anniversaries are always a good occasion to take stock of the achievements and chalk out plans for the future. I am satisfied with the concrete results of our cooperation over the past years. Since Jean Claude Frécon, my predecessor, addressed the CoR plenary Session in December 2015, a new coordination body has been established: the High Level Group between the CoR and the Congress. We have already held two meetings, the last one organised in Paris, at the beginning of this year (31 January 2017). Such high level political coordination is extremely valuable for our respective work in promoting and consolidating local self-government, specifically in EU candidate countries and in its neighbouring countries.

I will highlight a few examples of our good co-operation:

1. The first example concerns our cooperation on priority thematic issues of mutual interest.

The Congress' current priorities for 2017-2020 are regrouped along two main lines of action: "Enhancing the quality of local and regional democracy" and "Building safe and inclusive societies that respect diversity".

A concrete example of our cooperation on thematic issues is our recent conference on "The role of local and regional authorities in preventing corruption and promoting good governance". This successful and very interesting event was jointly organised by the Congress and the Committee of the Regions in Brussels, on 28 February 2017.

Fighting corruption is a prerequisite of good local governance and is indispensable for regaining citizens' trust. Last year, the Congress adopted a "Roadmap of activities for preventing corruption and promoting public ethics at local and regional levels". We are also currently up-dating our "European Code of conduct for the political integrity of local and regional elected representatives", which was adopted already 20 years ago.

2. The second example I wish to put forward is our cooperation in the local and regional election observation missions. Since 2005, the Congress has been inviting the Committee of the Regions to join us in our election observation missions. Since 2012, members of the CoR have participated in 15 election observation missions. This type of cooperation is a concrete illustration of our common commitment to good local governance and shall be continued.

3. This leads me to my following point which is, in my opinion, a major area for coordination and cooperation; it is linked to our respective external policies.

¹ The Congress will pursue this work in 2017 and 2018 by monitoring the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government (ECLSG) in: Monaco, San Marino, Latvia, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Austria, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany, Ireland, Portugal, Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation and Slovenia.

The Congress and the CoR are in a position to contribute to such political agendas through dialogue and regular exchange of information on developments in the member States, candidate or neighbouring countries. I want to mention especially the monitoring reports of the Congress. This is vital for ensuring coherence in our approaches both for the benefit of those countries and for the relations we have with them.

One obvious example is Turkey. Turkey is an EU candidate country and a long standing Council of Europe member State. In the past months (since the coup in July 2016), the various bodies of the Council of Europe have been actively involved in dialogue with interlocutors at different levels. On its side, the Congress has been dealing with issues of concern for local self-government.

Congress Vice-President, Anders Knape, and Leen Verbeek as chair of the Congress Monitoring Committee, have carried out a fact-finding mission to Turkey to investigate the sharp increase in arrests, detentions and removal of office of elected mayors and municipal councillors.

The rapporteurs have contributed to several debates and prepared a Congress report on the situation of mayors and councillors in Turkey, which was adopted by the Congress at its last Session in March.

In its recommendation, the Congress expressed its conviction that the arrest and removal of office of so many local elected representatives in Turkey is damaging local democracy in that country, and seriously weakening civil society and the political parties. It condemned the excessive use of lengthy pre-trial detention of local politicians and called on the Turkish authorities to urgently re-examine their situation, and to rescind the legislation that it has recently introduced which enables the central authorities to appoint civil servants as caretaker mayors.

It is absolutely necessary that the Congress and the CoR maintain their dialogue in order to better assess the political situation in the country, as well as to hold a coherent position and provide appropriate responses, within the global framework of our respective Organisations.

Another main field of cooperation is the EU Eastern Partnership, set up at the end of 2008, which encompasses five countries that are members of the Council of Europe (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) and Belarus (as non-Member State).

In 2011, the Committee of the Regions set up the Conference of Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership, known as "CORLEAP". The Congress holds Observer status within CORLEAP and we share a number of common members. Obviously synergies and cooperation among us are crucial and mutually beneficial.

The Congress supports reforms in Eastern Partnership member States through its monitoring reports on the application of the European Charter for Local Self-Government in those countries. Through our post-monitoring dialogue, we engage in direct political dialogue with both national governments and territorial authorities, to ensure an effective follow-up to our proposals. The Congress remains committed to pursuing and strengthening its co-operation, and to building synergies with CORLEAP and its members on issues of common concern.

In Ukraine, for instance, the Congress signed a roadmap in 2015 to accompany the country in the implementation of its decentralisation reforms, based on the Congress Monitoring Report and on the work of a Congress representative in the Constitutional Committee of the Verhovna Rada.

Moreover, practical co-operation programmes are being designed and implemented in all six Eastern Partnership countries, including Ukraine (activities for supporting mayors in their roles as leaders for change; capacity-building activities for local authorities with a focus on young people engaged in social and political activities; dissemination of best practices of local democracy on a peer-to-peer basis among elected politicians).

In this regard, I thank the CoR for inviting the Congress to actively participate in the meetings of the Committee of the Regions Task Force on Ukraine. Through this, our institutions can jointly support the reforms in the country. I am happy to attend its next meeting in June in Khyriv.

5. Now, let's look outside our European borders and to enhanced cooperation in order to increase stabilisation and resilience in the neighbouring countries.. I am deeply convinced that the Southern

Mediterranean is an area where the Congress and the CoR can develop stronger and valuable synergies.

The Congress has recently engaged in co-operation programmes in Tunisia and Morocco. Piero Fassino is our Congress spokesperson for the South Med cooperation activities. I am confident that he will be able to foster positive developments and strengthen cooperation with these countries. Regular contacts between ARLEM and the Congress are already in place and this dialogue will no doubt lead to future mutually beneficial co-operation.

Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to conclude with some final remarks which should guide our action in the future.

The Committee of the Regions and the Congress support and enrich one another reciprocally. We strive to ensure that we do not duplicate our work and I am glad that we have found ways to reinforce our co-operation.

The High-level group which we have recently set up is a very concrete way of politically coordinating our actions on selected issues of true common interest and concern.

The next step will be our joint thematic event on fighting corruption on 5th July 2017, Strasbourg, to celebrate our partnership in the framework of the 10th anniversary of the signature of the Memorandum of Understanding between the European Union and the Council of Europe. I shall be pleased to welcome the CoR President Markkula, you, Mr Lambertz, and several members of the CoR to Strasbourg on this occasion. It will be a good occasion to present our joint work to the members of the European Parliament and to the Ambassadors who represent the member states in the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe.

Thank you for your attention.