

Assembly of European Regions General Assembly – Lillehammer, Norway, 23 May 2018

Speech by Gunn Marit Helgesen, President of the Chamber of Regions of the Congress, Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe

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

It is a special pleasure for me to be here today in my capacity as President of the Congress' Chamber of Regions and to address your General Assembly on behalf of the President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, Mrs. Gudrun Mosler Törnström, who regrets not to be able to be with us.

The Congress and the Assembly of European Regions share a long history of close cooperation. Over the years, we have built a very special relationship indeed:

- your Assembly is one of the statutory partners of the Congress, which is the highest level of our partnership status;
- many of your member regions are represented in the Congress and actively participate in its work;
- for example, your previous President, Hande BOZATLI, was our long-time member and Congress Rapporteur;
- and your current Vice-President Anna MAGYAR is also Vice-President of the Congress and Bureau member from the Chamber of Regions.

I should add that we have a long-standing cooperation with your Youth Regional Network and its President Gloria VITALY in the Congress' youth activities and promoting the participation of young people, which includes the participation of Youth Delegates in Congress sessions.

I am very pleased that recently, our cooperation has gained a new momentum:

- we have a Representative of your Assembly in the Congress Bureau, Thomas ANDERSSON;
- your current President, Magnus BERNTSSON, addressed the session of our Chamber of Regions in October last year.

In addition, AER Secretary General Mathieu MORI regularly participates in the Congress Bureau meetings and liaises with our Secretary General Andreas Kiefer, who is also here today and tomorrow.

One aspect of deepening co-operation is creating synergies. We have mutually analysed our priorities and work programmes and will build concrete activities on them. In addition, we can increase synergies by having representatives in our respective leadership structures. In concrete terms: I would be happy to see political representatives from AER member regions stand for elections to the Congress Bureau in November 2018 for a mandate of two years in the Chamber of Regions.

So, it is clear that our channels of communication are well-established and remain open, and that there is a great potential for synergies in our action. The need for such renewed partnership is especially critical today, dictated by the need for “reinventing” Europe – Europe which is facing the challenges of rising populism, radicalisation, consequences from increased migration and the need for well-reflected integration and solidarity. As we are here in Norway and as I am representing the Congress of the Council of Europe with delegations from 47 member states I want to underline that this debate about the future of Europe does not only concern the European Union! It concerns the wider Europe and the debate has to be led by the elected politicians in the cities and the regions. It is our task and duty to communicate about the values of Europe, of unity in diversity, of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, of citizen participation and respect for minorities.

Amid the current debate on the future of Europe, we in the Congress fully share your Assembly’s position that inter-regional cooperation and best practice exchange are paramount if we are to strengthen a democratic Europe where citizens are meaningfully engaged in their common future.

It is especially true as the regional dimension is featured prominently on the European agenda today. Regions are a bridge between the central power and local communities, between national authorities and citizens, and remain the driving force for integrating diversity, which we have always seen as a source of strength. Yet the burning questions today are

- how to uphold and develop regional identity within the constitutional framework of the State, in maintaining the State’s integrity;
- how to ensure proper dialogue between national and regional authorities, and proper representation of regional interests at national and European levels;
- finally, how to promote and strengthen territorial solidarity and to counter regional egoism, making sure that regional self-government does not turn into regional selfish government.

Indeed, as the commitment to democratic values and institutions is being put to a test by the current challenges, as the new dividing lines are being formed across our continent, should Europe be going down the road of fragmentation into isolated regional exclaves?

Of course, we would have to look at many aspects of these issues, not least at the adequacy of the existing system of territorial cohesion in Europe. At its session last March, the Congress’ Chamber of Regions started debating these questions. We would very much welcome the insights and contribution of the Assembly of European Regions to these exchanges of practices and ideas, and to our eventual recommendations to both national governments and regional authorities – as much as we will appreciate your support in translating Congress recommendations into concrete action in your regions.

We are convinced that engaging citizens in decision making and problem solving is the best antidote to populism and egoism, and the best response to today’s challenges. We need a more inclusive Europe and more direct co-operation between regional communities. This is our common objective, and this is our joint mission of all European institutions and associations representing regional authorities – such as the Congress, such as the European Committee of the Regions, such as the Assembly of European Regions.

Let us renew and strengthen our partnership to keep up the existing momentum – and let us reaffirm yet again our conviction that stronger regions mean stronger states, and better governance for the benefit of our citizens!

Thank you.