

Assembly of European Region (AER) - General Assembly

Speech by Yuliya Svitlychna Vice-President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities

Sankt Pölten, Lower Austria, 31 May 2017

Ms President,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Colleagues,

I would like to thank Ms Hande Bozatli and the host authorities of Lower Austria for inviting the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe to the AER General Assembly today. Barbara Schwarz, regional minister for Education, Social and Family Affairs of the Government of Lower Austria, is a Congress member and I would like to extend a warm welcome to her and look forward to seeing her in Strasbourg. I would also like to greet the special envoy of the AER to the Congress, Thomas Anderson, who I will see again in just two weeks in Brno, in the next meeting of the Congress and the Chamber Bureau.

The Congress and the Assembly of European Regions have a history of solid cooperation and I am glad that this has been formalised by our respective Executive bodies, giving a fresh incentive to our synergies.

We share the same vision: we are convinced that regional self-government contributes to the principles of stability and democracy within the country and in Europe as a whole. We are convinced that advancing regional autonomy is the best antidote to separatism and disunity. It is crucial for us to underline this in view of the rise of populism and regional nationalism in Europe, which pose an unprecedented threat to the integrity of our societies.

The issue regarding the roles regions play within member States must remain high on our respective agendas.

The AER has recently analysed the “regional question” in its Study on the **State of Regionalisation in Europe**. On behalf of Gudrun Mosler-Törnström, President of the Congress, and of Gunn-Marit Helgesen, President of the Chamber of Regions of the Congress, let me congratulate you for this very timely and significant publication.

On its side, the Congress, which celebrates its 60th anniversary this year, has made its own contribution to the development of regionalisation. We have been tirelessly advocating for regional self-government by fostering the principles of subsidiarity, proximity, good governance and active citizenship.

Recent Congress work on “Trends in regionalisation in Council of Europe member states” showed, however, that regionalisation has made barely any progress over the past decade. Moreover, we have noted a current trend towards recentralisation in several member States. This is a threat for regional governments in terms of loss of autonomy, inadequacy of the allocated financial resources and lack of consultation.

In addition to this issue, regions constantly have to adapt to deal with a **number of issues which reflect the transformations of modern societies**.

Sharing of information and interaction between regions, in the form of peer-to-peer exchanges and cross-border co-operation, remains of utmost importance today. Regions and their representatives need to take a strong stand in defending their regional identities and to co-operate closely in the future to advance their interests.

Debates such as today's help regions to shape their policy and foster their effective co-operation. The Congress' work also aims to support regions in addressing the challenges that, the present and the future, hold for us.

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". For a number of these priorities, cooperation with the AER can be further developed.

The Congress' Committees and the AER's committees can step up their efforts to share experiences and develop synergies on topics of common concern - in particular regarding the work of the AER's committees on "Institutional Affairs", "Culture Education and Youth", "Equal Opportunities and Inclusion", or "International Cooperation and Mediterranean Issues".

I would like to provide you with just a **few examples**.

With a view to **combating radicalisation and extremism**, the Congress developed a strategy for cities and regions. We produced the "Guidelines for local and regional authorities for the prevention of radicalisation and manifestations of hate at grassroots level"; and launched the "Alliance of European cities against violent extremism".

As regards **migration**, in March, the Congress adopted a major report which focuses on migrants' reception and integration. In addition, the Chamber of Regions has held debates on border regions' difficulties in managing the migration emergency. We believe that regions - regardless of their geographical position in Europe - can, and must, play a major role.

The Congress has recently engaged in **co-operation programmes with South Mediterranean countries**, our neighbouring countries. Programmes are now being developed in **Tunisia and Morocco** to support them in strengthening the local and regional dimension of democratic governance. Such actions contribute to democratic stability of these countries and in the whole of Europe.

In addition, the Congress is currently updating its 2010 work on ethical local governance and respect of the rule of law as a means to restore citizens' trust in elected representatives at all levels. We pursue our work for **preventing corruption in local and regional administrations** through the strengthening of public ethics and transparency.

Furthermore, the Congress is actively advocating for **women's empowerment and leadership**. Acting at sub-national levels is essential, since these are the levels in which people enter into politics and start their political involvement. Since 2011, the Congress introduced quotas and consequently managed to increase the percentage of female members in all its national delegations. On average, women now represent 42% of Congress members. In this sphere, again, we can join forces.

Last but not least, the Congress decided to concretely **involve younger generations** in its activities. Youth Delegates are now fully-fledged actors in the Congress plenary Sessions. They are developing projects to promote a better understanding of local and regional democracy and are disseminating our

work and values. During our last session, the Chamber of Regions of the Congress invited several representatives of Youth Regional Parliaments to intervene on a debate on direct democracy and e-democracy. The President of the "AER Youth Network" was among them. Your presentation, Gloria, was very much appreciated.

I am convinced that we can, we should, and we shall work closer together, for the mutual benefit of the "European regional cause".

Thank you