

8th Annual Meeting of the Conference of the Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership (CORLEAP)

24 September 2018, 10:00 – 16:00, Kyiv City Council, Khreschatyk St 36

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

Dear colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Please allow me to thank the Committee of the Regions and greet all participants in this 8th annual meeting. It is an honour to address you today as Vice President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe. I am also glad to see familiar faces, which shows the good synergies between our two organisations.

The Congress, as a political body that promotes local and regional democracy and supports decentralisation, shares an affinity with the Committee of the Regions and CORLEAP – not only in the fact that several of you are also members of the Congress, but also in common aims and objectives. We have a natural bond between our two institutions and a great potential for **synergies**.

Both of us advocate for good governance and local democracy throughout Europe, promote ethics and transparency at local and regional levels, and work towards building safe and inclusive societies that respect diversity. In addition, the Congress monitors the implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, a core legal instrument which entered into force 30 years ago.

The **30th anniversary of the Charter** sends a strong message about its importance and relevance as a unique and irreplaceable international treaty for safeguarding and strengthening local democracy through Europe and beyond. In essence, the Charter is the bedrock on which our pluralist societies are built. There can be no democracy in any country without local democracy, and *“local authorities are one of the main foundations of any democratic regime”*, as member states endorsed in the preamble of the Charter.

Local authorities in Europe have made a huge progress during these 30 years, although there are still challenges ahead that we must overcome. When it comes to **municipal co-operation**, the implementation of the Charter in the six EU Eastern Partnership countries needs to be strengthened to set the conditions for democratic, fiscal and administrative sustainability at the local level. In this regard, central authorities need to advance and deepen on decentralisation so as to bolster the local self-government system and pave the way for sustainable municipal development.

Weak decentralisation in the Eastern Partnership countries has also jeopardised **local economic development**. In Eastern Partnership countries, financial and fiscal

decentralisation is advancing slowly. In this sense, there is certainly a need to boost local economic development, securing the devolution of powers to local authorities and the provision of adequate financing resources, and promoting co-operation at local and regional levels, including cross-border cooperation.

In this regard, the **associations of local and regional authorities** play a key role advocating the needs of their members and facilitating a rich dialogue at all levels of government. Moreover, the associations are strategic stakeholders to ensure the sustainability of the local self-government system, since they are placed at the core of the dialogue between local and national authorities.

Genuine decentralisation, however, cannot be fully achieved if local authorities do not promote transparency and accountability and foster citizen participation –that is, implementing open government standards and mechanisms–, three essential features for local democracy that will raise trust in local communities:

On one side, **transparency and accountability, coupled with public ethics**, will reduce corruption, attract investment and foster local economic development. Moreover, they can also increase government trustworthiness and generate trust among citizens and businesses, which will in turn foster participation and local economic development. Both components –reduction of corruption and increasing public trust– are necessary in order for local democracy to flourish. In this regard, the Congress will debate and adopt three key recommendations during our next Session in November, namely:

- A recommendation on transparency and open government;
- A recommendation on conflicts of interest at local and regional levels;
- And very importantly, a revised European Code of Conduct for all persons involved in local and regional governance.

On the other side, **participatory approaches** in decision-making processes are a pillar of our democracies which will increase trust on local authorities and contribute to a higher degree of legitimacy and ownership in the decisions taken at the local level.

In the Council of Europe, we believe that promoting inclusive participation and ensuring the ownership of participatory processes by citizens through co-creation processes from the outset will lead to greater levels of sustainability and resilience.

Dear Colleagues,

Greater transparency, better governance, increased citizen participation, better decision-making, greater public trust, reduced corruption and more effective public services have been at the core of the Congress support and co-operation activities in the region. We have been working in Eastern Partnership countries in bringing change forward and, in particular, accompanying mayors and local councillors in exercising their public responsibilities in a proactive and inclusive manner and engaging **young citizens** as local leaders and agents for change.

We are proud of our continuous support in the Eastern Partnership region towards the strengthening of the dialogue between different levels of government, the establishment of

sustainable consultation mechanisms between central and local authorities, and the implementation of ethical, innovative and inclusive policies and practices at the local level. The approach of the Congress co-operation activities underlines the importance of proceeding with decentralisation in parallel with capacity building at local level.

Proof of this is our **project in Armenia**, where we work closely with the Community Association of Armenia in building its institutional capacities to advocate for the interest of local authorities with a unified voice. Moreover, by supporting the work of the Association and its members, the Congress contributes to strengthening accountability, effectiveness and efficiency in the local self-government system in Armenia. As a result of our activities, the Association has strengthened its position as a key stakeholder in the governance system in Armenia, and is very active in framing national policies.

In **Ukraine**, the Congress' long-standing dialogue with all stakeholders has led to a **new project** which aims to improve the quality of local democracy in the country. The objective is two-fold: strengthening institutional frameworks and supporting local authorities and their national associations in their efforts to promote ethical decision-making and more citizen-oriented, inclusive, responsive and transparent local governance.

These two projects also showcase the importance of the operational pillar of our co-operation activities as a means to promote the values and standards of the Council of Europe, the Charter and its principles. Our approach, which also reinforces the **EU assistance** to the Eastern Partnership countries, is embedded in the Council of Europe Action Plans, agreed upon individually with the respective member states, and in other platforms and frameworks available.

Dear Colleagues,

To conclude, I would like to confirm the Congress' full support to the elected representatives who are ready to lead change in their countries for the well-being of their local communities. We will pursue our co-operation activities in the Eastern Partnership region to strengthen good governance and foster local democracy. Likewise, we will continue our co-operation with the Committee of the Regions and support to the local and regional dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy.

Thank you very much.