

Speaking notes for Ms Gabriele NEFF before the  
Special Permanent Committee of the Regions of the Hellenic Parliament,  
31 August 2017

1269 words: 10 minutes

Mr Chairman,

Esteemed Members of the Hellenic Parliament,

Madam Governor,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honor for me to address the Special Permanent Committee of the Regions in my capacity as member of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe and as Chair of its Current Affairs Committee. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak to you today.

The mandate of your Committee is large and covers many social and political issues. So is ours. I will limit my speech today to three subjects of interest to both our Committees:

- Refugee and migrant issues
- gender equality
- and children's rights.

With regard to the latter, children's rights, I am very grateful to Governor DOUROU for her initiative to promote the Congress' Pact against sexual exploitation of children - and for being ready to sign this Pact.

But let me first focus on the **refugee and migrant crisis**.

We all know that the mass movement of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants has an impact on the political, social and economic situation in our countries. And we all agree that it is a massive humanitarian challenge. We need to find solutions because it will not go away by itself.

We in the Congress are very much aware that Greece has been particularly affected by this crisis. Together with Italy, your country has been carrying the burden of taking responsibility for thousands of desperate passengers. High-level representatives of our Congress and our Thematic Rapporteurs have visited Samos and Athens last year, to obtain first-hand information on the difficulties facing the local and regional authorities there.

The Greek delegation to the Congress has been very active in our work on this question. I am particularly grateful to Rena DOUROU and to Michalis ANGELOPOULOS, the Chair of the Greek delegation, for their collaboration. Our thanks go also to KEDE, the Central Union of Municipalities of Greece, and their President, Mr PATOULIS, for their support.

Together we have underlined many times that a series of measures are needed to confront this crisis:

- We must ensure a coherent international legal framework and more solidarity between the countries with regard to the reception of refugees and migrants.
- We must work for an efficient collaboration with civil society organisations.
- And we must achieve a balanced distribution of tasks between the different levels of government.

All of this we noted in the new Congress' Report "From reception to integration: The role of local and regional authorities facing migration" which was adopted in March this year. We are happy to see that - in spite of the difficult beginnings - some positive achievements are being made to tackle these issues.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, around 40% of asylum seekers obtained legalisation of their status; 35,000 were provided with housing facilities in refugee camps or in apartments.

A concrete example from your country - the so-called “Education Passport” for refugees and asylum seekers who wish to receive higher education in Greece - is very much in line with what we have been asking in our Recommendation to member States.

If we want integration, we need to make sure the newcomers to our host communities can make a contribution and use their skills for the common good. And we should try to learn from each other and take on board good practices of integration from other countries.

We in the Congress are determined to continue our work in order to support the cities and regions in their efforts to tackle the crisis. In October, the Current Affairs Committee will discuss a report on the role of local authorities regarding refugee children and minors. Another Report will focus on border regions facing migration flows. Both will be adopted by the Congress in March 2018. Next year, there will be also a new Congress Report prepared on the situation of voting rights of migrants and internally displaced people at the local level.

Coming to the **rights of children** - this is an area of action where we have been very active in the Council of Europe, in particular through the “1 in 5” Campaign against sexual exploitation of children.

The Congress joined this Campaign in 2012, and we created our own Pact of Towns and Regions to stop sexual violence against children. More than 60 towns and associations have signed this Pact in the meantime. And as I've mentioned – we are very happy that the Attica Region will do the same.

In 2015, we started to organise seminars for national associations of local and regional authorities from all member States, in order to raise the awareness of policy officers for children's rights at the local and regional level.

Our aim is to get together every two years, exchange information and views and get more towns and regions to sign up to the Pact. This year the meeting was held in Serbia and several cities – among them the Mayor of Belgrade - have signed the Pact.

However, sexual abuse is not the only aspect of children's rights that interests us.

In 2015, we also looked into how the economic crisis affected service delivery to children, in our report on "Championing children's rights in times of austerity: Local and regional authorities' responsibilities".

This year, in our report on refugee children and minors we will look at how local authorities can protect and assist these vulnerable groups with particular attention to their integration through promoting language skills and boosting education.

Finally, I would like to say a few words about our work on **gender equality**.

We have looked at various aspects of this question in the past and a series of resolutions and recommendations have been adopted by the Congress over the years:

- On gender budgeting in 2016;
- On fighting increasing poverty of women in 2015,
- On combating domestic violence against women in 2009.

But there is one area which is a Congress subject *par excellence* if I might call it that. I am talking about women's participation in political life. We are a political body and gender representation in political institutions is a crucial question for us.

In this field, the Congress achieved very positive results by setting for itself the target of achieving the participation of 30% of women in national delegations. We began to set up quotas for national delegations in 2008. We also recommended this to all elected bodies in our member States.

In 2011, the 30% target was reached. In 2014, 57 % of our Congress members were men while 43% were women. Today, women constitute 65% of the executive of the Congress. We see this as a successful application of the quota system.

I know that this is a controversial subject and that some are against the idea. What I can say today is that it allowed us to achieve a very good result in less than ten years.

Ladies and gentlemen,

**To conclude,** I would like to invite you - on behalf of the Congress - to continue your cooperation with the regional and local authorities of your country, and also to reach out to non-governmental organisations.

Only through cooperation and consultation between all levels of government and through the exchange of knowledge and good practices we will be able to find effective long-term solutions to all the issues I mentioned just now.

And one last word: You will find some information leaflets on our activities and copies of the Pact Toolkit available here. The secretariat can tell you where to find them.

Thank you for your attention.