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Statement by Andreas Kiefer, Secretary General of the Congress, in the Opening Session

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(5 minutes)

I would first like to thank President Juan-Pablo SANCHEZ DURAN for inviting the Congress to address also this year's Plenary Assembly of the Conference of European Regional Legislative Assemblies. This shows the good and long standing relations between CALRE and the Congress.

Please let me convey warm greetings of President Gudrun MOSLER TÖRNSTRÖM, who sincerely regrets not being with you here today. Both, the President and I enjoyed very much having been able to participate in the festive event in Oviedo in July to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the foundation of CALRE and to praise the visionary decisions of the founders of CALRE.

[CALRE activities]
The activity reports of the Presidency of CALRE and of the Working Groups are impressive and I would like to congratulate you all to these achievements! Many of the issues addressed by CALRE and its member parliaments are also part of the 2017 - 2020 work programme of the Congress of the Council of Europe and thus areas for cooperation.

[Responses to the challenges in Europe]

Europe is confronted with many challenges. Refugees and migration, radicalisation, distrust in political institutions and actors leading to political instability and the rise of populism. We are experiencing a serious crisis of representative democracy. If appropriate responses are not provided, the risk is the destabilisation of the democratic functioning of our societies.

The Congress has explored ways of further developing participation. Should we better consider citizens' initiatives or citizens' consultation by referenda? How can e-democracy applications be exploited while, at the same time, guaranteeing the security and the reliability of the virtual consultations?

For addressing these challenges, I would like to thank in particular President Carolina DARIAS SAN SEBASTIAN and President André ANTOINE who contributed, as guest speakers, to the 32nd Session of the Chamber of Regions of the Congress. The Congress benefitted from their experience on migration and on interactive democracy.

[Regional parliamentarians in Congress and the CoR]
It seems that the cooperation of regional parliaments with each other and their external relations and European activities are not sufficiently known and understood – both at European and at national level. But also within the regions themselves!

Regional Parliaments have representatives in the Committee of the Regions of the EU and in the Congress of the Council of Europe. Almost all the regional Congress members from Spain, Germany, Italy and Austria are members of a regional parliament. But it seems there is not enough interaction and exchange between these members and their respective parliaments or European affairs committees. Sometimes even the Presidents of regional parliaments do not know about the work of their members in the CoR and in the Congress. I therefore welcome that the President of the Congress and the President of the Committee of the Regions were both invited to address the Presidents of the Regional parliaments of Germany and Austria and their guests from South Tyrol and the German Speaking Community of Belgium. This bi-annual conference – this summer chaired by Harald Sonderegger, President of the Parliament of Vorarlberg and head of the Austrian Delegation in the Congress as well as member of

the CoR - was an excellent opportunity to exchange information, to discuss the mutual interests and to identify areas for synergies.

It is no co-incidence that both Presidents of the European Institutions representing local and regional authorities – Karl Heinz Lambertz for the CoR of the European Union and Gudrun Mosler-Törnström for the Congress of the Council of Europe - are former Presidents of regional parliaments with legislative powers!

In addition CALRE holds the status of observer with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe – a status which rarely has been used and could be developed further for specific issues.

The Congress will keep on fulfilling its statutory mission of monitoring local and regional democracy in Europe and giving a voice to local authorities and regional governments and parliaments. In doing so, the Congress will be happy to respond to the challenges together with the CALRE and its representatives.

Our working programme 2019 foresees monitoring missions to almost all countries represented in CALRE: Austria, Belgium, Germany, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom.

The reports on Finland and on Italy were adopted recently (IT: October 2017).

I invite you to prepare these visits in your respective countries and meet with the Congress rapporteurs. These monitoring visits are excellent opportunities to take stock of the situation of regionalisation and regional democracy as well as of the compliance with the European Charter of Local Self-Government. They are also an occasion to present democratic innovation – for example as shown in the case studies of the CALRE working groups - and to identify shortcomings and to stimulate reforms. We have seen good examples of "pre-monitoring assessments" carried out by a national association of local and regional authorities. This exercise lead to a better quality, more relevance and concrete impact of the Congress report and its Recommendation addressed to the national government.

The Congress will keep on contributing to the Council of Europe fundamental values: the rule of law, democracy and human rights. These values are in contrast with the various forms of populism, nationalism, selfishness, intolerance and all the instances of extremist violence which threaten Europe.

In this spirit the Congress looks forward to continuing our good co-operation with CALRE!