

35th Session of the Congress – Strasbourg, France, 6 - 8 November 2018

Speech by Gudrun Mosler-Törnström, outgoing President of the Congress

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Presidency of the Congress 2016-2018: activities and achievements

Strasbourg, France, 6 November 2018

Dear colleagues,

My mandate as President of the Congress ends today and I am pleased to address you one last time to take stock of these two exciting years.

It is true that a two-year term passes quickly. The role of the President is primarily to facilitate the work of the Bureau and the Session and to promote exchanges between members in order to achieve results in a cooperative spirit and atmosphere. This is an important part of the job, which I gladly carried out because I am deeply convinced that dialogue and exchange are the keys to success.

The role of the President is to ensure the quality of the work and the exchanges held. It is not always easy to communicate and to understand each other in an assembly made up of 47 national traditions and cultures, but the most important thing is that everyone feels listened to and that political debates are conducted in an atmosphere of mutual respect. This is what I have tried to do and I think we did achieve a real quality of listening and debate.

Another aspect of the post is to convey the political message of the Congress following and building upon those of previous Presidents. It is precisely this continuity that guarantees the proper functioning of our Assembly. The policy we have been following for ten years is to focus on where our competences lie, our core business if you will. We strive to concentrate on what we know and where we know we can achieve results. It is this pragmatic policy that I have defended with all of my interlocutors. I believe that the Committee of Ministers has appreciated this pragmatism and I want to take this opportunity to commend the support of our ambassadors, whose help is essential for the Congress.

It is this pragmatic policy that allows the Congress to contribute effectively to the local and regional dimension of the Council of Europe's activities.

I believe that the Congress is now widely recognised for its strategic and its operational contributions to the Organisation. This is due in particular to the monitoring of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, our reference text. The Congress has set itself the goal of not only ensuring the implementation of the Charter, but also of making it a truly dynamic, living document that inspires territorial policies throughout Europe. Therefore we also proudly celebrate the entry into force of the Charter 30 years ago, on 1 September 2018!

How have we obtained recognition of and respect for this text? By being present on the ground - for the monitoring of course, but also for the observation of local and regional elections and co-operation programmes. Admittedly, the Charter is not fully respected everywhere, but it has become a benchmark text and a goal to be reached for the member States. I am proud to have been able to contribute to this collective work.

I would like to dwell for a moment on the role of national associations of local and regional authorities, which are our key partners. I took care to maintain a permanent dialogue with them and to participate in their General Assemblies whenever possible. I have never forgotten that they are the ones that allow us to reach all of our communities directly. It is with them that we have the best chance to develop our work to improve our cities and the lives of our citizens. I want to thank them for the tremendous work they carry out and which only they can do in discussing and working with our national governments.

Finally, on a more personal note, as the first woman to be elected President of this Assembly, I have been keen to raise the profile of gender equality and the place of women in politics, in our communities and in international organisations.

In October, at the last session of the Parliamentary Assembly I took part in an event alongside the President of the Parliamentary Assembly, Liliane Maury-Pasquier, and the Chair of the Committee of Ministers Marija Pejčinović Burić, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign and European Affairs of Croatia.

It is, I believe, the first time in the history of the Council of Europe that the chairmanship of the three political entities of the Organisation has been held by women. Things change, lines move! But we must continue to lead this fight for equality, and we must lead it together with men, because it is a fight that concerns us all.

I would like to share an anecdote with you: there was a poster hanging on the wall in my office here in the Council of Europe, with photos of every President of the Congress since the very beginning in 1957. They are all men, without exception. And then, just at the end of this long line of men, there is a picture of a woman, me!

My dear colleagues,

I will leave the Congress in a few weeks - I decided not to stand again for election in my region of Salzburg - but I would like to leave you with a message for the future, the future of this assembly: please ensure, and I am addressing all members of the Congress but also all the political groups, please ensure that this poster hanging in the office of the President shall, in the future, include the picture of just as many men as women. It is up to those of us who encourage women's involvement in politics everywhere in Europe to set an example by starting with our assembly.

My dear colleagues, this is not intended as a political legacy, it is, rather an invitation for our Congress to move towards a future where gender equality will no longer be just a promise but rather a commonplace reality of our daily lives. And I would wish that, in the future, it will be the norm to have a regular rotation between genders for the post of Congress President.

This is the message I want to leave you at the opening of this session. The Congress has been a true pioneer with regard to parity, it is now up to us to confirm this political will and to put it into practice.

I thank you for your support and for your never-failing dynamism in the service of our communities and our citizens.