

Council of Europe
Congress of Local and Regional Authorities
35th Plenary Session – 6-8 November 2018
Ceremony awarding the Congress medal to honorary
members
Artur Torres Pereira

Mr. President of the Congress,

Mr. Secretary-General,

Mr. Director of the Congress,

Dear members, colleagues and friends

Dear officials,

I can't but express my heartfelt gratitude to all present for the distinction you have kindly granted me.

I was a member of this House for two periods, separated by a ten year absence: thirteen years between 1983 and 1996 and another twelve between 2006 and 2018. All in all, a 25 year commitment to Democracy and Decentralisation, the Rule of Law and the defence of Human Rights.

When I arrived I was 33 years old, and one of the youngest members of this Congress. Today, at 68, I am most likely its eldest.

My first day was on the 17th October 1983, precisely when the primitive *Conference of Local Authorities of Europe*, created in 1957, changed its name for the second time and became the *Standing Conference of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe*; eleven years before changing it again to the current *Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe*.

During my first period, I was President and Vice-president of different committees, and I worked with particular enthusiasm between 1981 and 85 on the elaboration of our 'masterpiece', the *European Charter of Local Self-Government*. From 1991 onwards I contributed, admittedly fascinated, to the gradual integration of Eastern countries following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

During my second period, I intervened in the *observation of local elections* and, above all, in *monitoring* the application of the Charter in different member-states. I also participated in the implementation of *post-monitoring*, which was applied

in Portugal for the first time. I then had the privilege of succeeding Joseph Hoffmann and Hervig van Staa in the presidency of the largest of the Congress's political groups, the EPP, for six years.

I have known excellent Presidents, with particular admiration for John Morgan, Jean Claude Frécon, Hervig Van Staa and Gudrun Mosler-Tornstrom. As for the Secretary-generals I must point out Ulrich Bonner, and Andreas Kiefer in particular, whose leadership and diplomatic talent arrived at this Congress in due time.

I leave with enormous respect for every dedicated official, to whom I extend my greetings and thank for their competence and dedication, namely, two of the very best: Stéphanie Poirel, secretary of the Monitoring Committee, and Jean Philippe Bozouls, Director of the Congress. I will never forget them.

Mr. President, dear friends,

The current political situation in the two Europes – the European Union and the Europe extending all the way from “the Atlantic to the Urals” – is unfortunately darker today than when I joined this Congress 35 years ago.

The political momentum gained by the fall of the Berlin Wall has been progressively undermined by economical and financial crisis, by the growing gap between the European people and its leaders, by the emergence of authoritarian and anti-European drifts, the spreading of corruption and the resurgence of racism, xenophobia and populism.

In “greater” Europe, imperialist temptations are reviving and materialising earlier than many would have expected.

As if that weren't enough, isolationist demagogues are popping up like mushrooms all around the world; leaders whose interventions seriously put the world's peace and stability at risk.

Chauvinist nationalisms, ethnical hatred and regional separatisms have been responsible for leaving a trace of war and death in the history of Europe. And although recently the signs of the times seemed to point towards the lessening of borders, walls divisions and differences, once again we hear the discourse of isolationism, economical protectionism and the closing of borders; disrespect for difference and for the Other.

...“History is on the move again”... warns Toynbee. We must react firmly, in defence of the civilizational values and principles built upon centuries of people's sacrifice and suffering around the world as well as in Europe; principles which a few madmen in Europe and elsewhere are willing to gamble away.

According to George Steiner, the cultural legacy of the Europe ...“made up of cafés and coffee houses”... - a pillar of his, as well as our, idea of Europe – is at risk, and we must defend it with no fear.

A great portuguese writer, Miguel Torga, defined "the Universal" as "the local without its walls". That is why those most needed in the trenches of this fight for the Future, in the communities to them entrusted, are the local and regional authorities represented in this Congress, in the name of 800 million people.

The Congress has always held a justified aura of political romanticism. Out there lies resentment, enmity, distance, rupture and paralysis. Within, a great political ability to overcome disagreement and to generate consensus, bringing together people of distinctive cultures and origins around a shared set of rationally accepted principles and convictions.

Unlike most weakening European institutions, (including maybe part of the Council of Europe itself), the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities holds strong as a permanent reference for constructive dialogue, tolerance, respect, peace and political inclusiveness, no matter what happens out there.

That is why we can consider it today the main institutional guardian for the political and cultural European heritage of Civilisation and Freedom that each of its members, elder or young, have the duty to uphold.

Mr. President, dear friends,

As both the portuguese and european citizen that I proudly am, I have received from this Congress much more than I could give back. But I leave today with a clear conscience, confident that I have given my best in the name of a common, generous Idea of Europe inspired by a handful of visionaries at the end of an era of horror in European history – the kindness and need of which are confirmed with each passing day.

Adeus. Muito obrigado.

Good bye. Thank you very much.