

**32nd SESSION**

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**Communication by Gudrun Mosler-Törnström, President of the Congress, at the 32nd session**

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Last October, I received from the hands of the outgoing President, Jean-Claude Frécon, the relay baton of the presidency of the Congress. The baton was passed in the spirit of an action collectively led by the successive presidents. I will take up again this metaphor of the relay race that he developed when presenting the results of his mandate and in my turn, in October 2018, I will pass the baton to my successor. But what does this relay consist of?

Above all, it is the conviction that local and regional authorities are responsible for carrying out a considerable share of public action in our States. And to be able to carry out this action in an effective and beneficial way for all citizens, communities need the appropriate means, that is to say the appropriate budgets, competences, laws and legal protection.

In short, I am convinced, and I want to share this conviction with you, that our role, as local and regional elected officials, is important and indispensable to our societies, that we must carry it with dynamism and enthusiasm, and that this is what brings us here together, in our Assembly. But let us be realistic, we have not all arrived at the same point in our respective countries. Some countries are more advanced than others in terms of the quality of local and regional public action, but whatever the situation may be, I remain convinced that we share the same view of the usefulness of our action and its necessity. For if we, members of the Congress, do not have this conviction, what is our purpose?

I sometimes find a lack of commitment on the part of some delegations to defend their own prerogatives vis-à-vis the central governments and I would like to reiterate today, at the opening of this first session in 2017, that we are the representatives of the two hundred thousand territorial communities and not of their national governments. Certainly we work closely with central governments and we will continue to do so, but we are not here to represent our governments and their views. We are the representatives of local and regional governments, serving the citizens. It is this conviction that must act as our compass.

Dear colleagues, I ask you sincerely and solemnly: be relentless activists in favour of the self-governance of cities and regions. The Europe of democracy and the Europe of values are in danger. Jean-Claude Frécon, in his speech last March, said that "the clouds are gathering over Europe". He was making a pessimistic, but also realistic, diagnosis of the situation in our member States and, in particular, the situation of local and regional democracy. When I see elected mayors arrested and replaced by civil servants, when I see powers transferred to the central government on the pretext of saving money, when the wind of recentralisation blows, I feel that the great ambition that is ours, the one we have been defending for exactly 60 years within the Council of Europe, is undermined.

But this is not an inescapable fate, dear colleagues. And this is the meaning I want to give to my chairmanship. Nothing is written in stone and everything is possible, It simply depends on our ability to invest and mobilise ourselves in order to convince our capitals, in order to convince the Committee of Ministers here in Strasbourg that the crises we are going through can be overcome by collective, concerted and concrete action to which local and regional authorities and the Congress can and must contribute.

The local and regional level is the foundation of any system of governance, and a guarantee of its stability. This is indeed the philosophy of our Congress.

A house built on shaky grounds will not last. A society in which citizens' needs are not met, and their concerns not addressed, at the level closest to them – this society will see social tensions and upheavals.

This is why the Congress is in constant dialogue with national governments to defend the interests of local and regional authorities, and to ensure that they have sufficient competences and financial resources to respond to people's expectations in their communities.

Local and regional authorities and politicians, all of us, have an eminently strategic role to play in our States, our societies. How can they be convinced if we in Congress are not the enthusiastic bearers of this message?

Dear colleagues, I invite you to mobilise against any form of retreat of local self-government. We must and we can reverse the trend in order to continue to make progress towards local and regional self-government and, by doing so, we will make a contribution, I believe, to the democratic stability of our continent.