

24th Baltic Sea States Subregional Co-operation (BSSSC) Annual Conference. “Bridge Over Troubled Water – Value of Regional Co-operation in the Time of Challenges”.
Hämeenlinna, Finland 14-16 September 2016.

Dear organisers and all stakeholders,

I would like to thank all those who contributed to this event for your invitation to the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe. May I briefly introduce the Congress of the Council of Europe that I am honored to represent today.

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities is one of the 3 institutional pillars of the Council of Europe, the other two being the Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly. Its 636 members - who hold elective office as regional or municipal Councilors, mayors or governors - represent over 200,000 authorities. One of their main missions is to monitor the implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-government that includes engagements taken by the Council of Europe member states:

- ☐ local self-government: including its basic powers and responsibilities recognised in domestic legislation,
- ☐ the right of local authorities to regulate and manage public affairs in the interests of the local population relying on adequate financial resources
- ☐ The right of local authorities to be consulted by other levels of government

Local and regional democracy is the Congress of the Council of Europe’s field of expertise. In this framework, the Congress prepares regular country-by-country reports on the state of local and regional democracy in all the 47 Council of Europe

member states. This helps its member states to progress towards establishing effective local and regional self-governments.

The Congress represents the interests of local and regional governments in the shaping of European policy and encourages regional and transfrontier co-operation for peace, tolerance, and sustainable development.

We have been increasingly called to provide response to the challenges that our societies are facing such as (among many others) radicalisation, the refugee crisis or corruption.

Let me briefly let you know the state of play in the Congress in the field of migration, since your Workshop N° 4 deals with integration of migrants.

The integration of migrants and refugees at local level has been a priority for the Council of Europe since 1992, when the Convention on the Participation of Foreigners in Public Life at Local Level was opened to signature. Since then, the Congress has developed a specific approach promoting cooperation between all levels of governance.

A report titled “From reception to integration: the role of local authorities facing migration” is currently in preparation and will be discussed in March 2017. It underlines that today’s migrants and refugees are tomorrow’s citizens and that specific action is needed to ensure their integration. It also highlights that the centralization of financial resources makes it difficult for local authorities to integrate migrants and refugees in small towns and villages. It stresses furthermore that cultural activities are powerful integration tool. This theme was already developed further to Resolution 318 (2010) on Cultural Integration of Muslim Women in

European Cities focusing on the specific angle of Muslim women. The follow-up report put forward some easily reproducible cultural activities such as languages or history courses but also sports.

A Social Integration Summit took place in Istanbul on 17-18 May, where a Declaration on the “Commitment to Local Action for Social Inclusion” was adopted.

Finally, the Council of Europe has adopted an Action Plan on building inclusive societies to which the Congress contributed by developing a Toolkit for Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue and by dedicating the European Local Democracy Week 2016 to the same theme.

Integration is a two-way process and awareness-raising of the host population is needed to prevent social exclusion, radicalisation and xenophobia. This is a challenge for multicultural societies that the Congress takes very seriously. Therefore, during its March 2016 session, it held a debate on “Rising to the challenges of creating intercultural societies at local level” further to which a “tool-kit” for use by elected representatives when organising intercultural and inter-religious activities was introduced.

May I now stress the importance that the Congress attaches to cross-border co-operation

Direct cross-border co-operation between local and regional authorities offers solutions to problems shared by their citizens. Inter territorial co-operation fosters mutual understanding between neighbouring countries and peoples, strengthens and legitimises the institutions of local democracy and promotes high-quality political and economic relations.

Populations living in the same area - even if separated by a sea or a border - establish social and economic ties: this creates a climate of confidence, improves tolerance, creates good neighbourly relationships and increases the standard of living of the citizens. The seas are no longer perceived as a barrier and, if correctly managed, they represent a common resource and a common opportunity.

The Council of Europe has been dealing with cross border co-operation since the mid-60s. The Council of Europe major instrument is the European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Co-operation between Territorial Communities or Authorities known as the Madrid Convention.

As far as the Baltic Sea is concerned, inter-regional co-operation was developed over many years and is well established. Borders in Northern Europe, which had been closed for years, are no longer dividing lines. The experience of neighbouring regions in the Baltic countries could be transferred to other border regions. The Baltic Sea co-operation initiatives could also serve as an example to be followed in other areas where there have previously been conflicts or difficult relationships.

The Baltic Sea Region is a dynamic region characterized by high levels of trade, cooperation and exchange on many levels. The region has the potential to prosper more. If the Baltic Sea Region cooperation is to be developed further, there is a need for a joint and coordinated approach to it.

The EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region can be welcomed. The strategy can lead to closer integration and cooperation in the region and contribute to the branding of the Baltic Sea Region as a competitive region not only in Europe but globally.

But it is important to include the neighbouring countries and regions bordering the Baltic Sea outside the EU in the initiatives of the Baltic Sea Strategy, as they play an important role in the development of the region. Joining EU and non EU members in the work for the development of the Baltic Sea Region is an obvious goal and an area for mutual cooperation between the Congress of the Council of Europe and the European Union.

Before I come to a conclusion, let me mention an issue that is very high on the political agendas of most of our countries: terrorism and radicalisation, which the Congress has addressed specifically in Aarhus less than a year ago,

The Aarhus Declaration of 18 November 2015 is one first joint step that cities are taking in the fight against terrorism since we decided to work towards setting up an Alliance of European Cities and Regions against Violent Extremism. The cities and regions in the alliance aim to establish a joint digital platform to step up their cooperation while paying particular attention to the safeguard of individual freedoms. The Summit of Mayors against Violent Extremism to take place in Rotterdam on 9 November 2016 will be dedicated to this purpose.

Now more than ever multi-level and bottom-up cooperation between local and regional authorities can play a key role in finding solutions to current major issues. It is by strengthening their role and powers that appropriate solutions can be found and the role of local and regional authorities is crucial in this endeavour you own the proximity to the citizens and are in a better position to help prevent potentially dangerous situations.

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Europe is facing difficult times and co-operation should play an even more critical role. The economic crisis, terrorism, environmental urgency as well as migration related topics endanger democracy. It is our duty to do our best to ensure that measures undertaken do not go against citizen's rights and democracy.

The Council of Europe's mission can be described as building bridges for a better Europe with the solid bricks of our values: human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

The challenges I have briefly described in my presentation are "troubled water" indeed, but I am confident that, through increased cooperation for cohesive societies, Europe will never play "The Sound of Silence".

I thank you very much for your attention