

CALRE 2016 Plenary assembly - 24-25 November 2016 - Varese, Italy

Speech of the Secretary General of the Congress, Andreas Kiefer

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would first like to congratulate CALRE on the agenda of this General Assembly which includes very topical issues: "Regions and the European future" as well as "The European migrant crisis: a global issue, a territorial issue".

In the presence of Congress Vice-President Karl-Heinz Lambertz, I am honoured to convey the greetings of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities. Congress President Mrs Gudrun Mosler-Törnström unfortunately cannot be present today but will join us tomorrow.

Common membership and co-operation

Most of you know the Congress very well. It is composed of 648 local and regional elected representatives from the 47 Council of Europe member states.

From the 8 countries having regions with legislative powers represented in CALRE we are happy to count ten Presidents of regional parliaments as members of the Congress. This is the perfect basis for synergies. Altogether we have 59 Congress members coming from CALRE regional parliaments. In addition several Presidents and members of governments of regions with legislative powers work in the Congress since last October. This offers an opportunity for pooling ideas and joint ventures for reinforcing our political cooperation.

On behalf of the Congress, I invite you to establish an exchange of information between you, the Presidents, and the members of your regional parliaments, who represent your region in the Congress. This would create synergies and be mutually beneficial.

The Congress has for many years been active in the promotion of regionalisation in addition to our well known monitoring of local self-government. We have prepared a compilation of Congress documents of interest for regional parliaments in English and French. I invite you to read, disseminate and make use of this material.

I wish to draw your attention to an exhaustive study on "Regionalisation in European countries- 2007-2015)" commissioned by the Congress to Professor Francesco Merloni (Italy). This is a study which was published earlier this year and will be useful for common political work.

The Congress is happy to foster the co-operation with CALRE on the issues which remain high on our agenda as defined in our recently adopted priorities for the period 2017 to 2020. These priorities were adopted after a dialogue with all European and national associations of local and regional authorities held on 19 September 2016 in Paris. I would like to thank your Secretary General, Isabella Molina, for taking part in that meeting.

How can we continue and further step up our co-operation?

CALRE holds observer Status with the Congress since 2003. The Congress has updated its partnership statuses in order to ensure a more tailored approach to its relations with its main partners. The new CALRE President will receive, already next week, the updated Rules and Procedures of the Congress together with an invitation to decide which form of co-operation is

most appropriate for you. I warmly encourage the incoming presidency to look into this and we look forward to stepping up our co-operation.

In this context I want to draw your attention to that fact that CALRE holds observer status with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe since many years. We are convinced that this setting offers an excellent framework for even closer inter-parliamentary cooperation which has not been used in the past. The Congress stands ready to provide guidance in this matter.

Synergies based on clear priorities

The Congress priorities focus on evaluating and developing local and regional democracy in the 47 Council of Europe member states. For the period 2017-2020, two main areas of work are defined:

"Strengthening the quality of local and regional democracy" covers the good functioning of local and regional communities as well as their level of autonomy and resources and their ability to deliver services to citizens.

Within this first area lies of course the promotion of regional democracy as a factor for political and territorial stability in Europe. We keep a close look on trends in regionalisation in our member States and stand ready to provide support and expertise wherever needed. In recent years, the Congress adopted three important reports on "Regions with special status" (October 2013 - Bruno Marziano), "Trends in regionalisation in Council of Europe member States" (October 2015 - Marie-Madeleine Mialot-Muller) and "Autonomy and borders in an evolving Europe" (March 2016 - Rapporteur Karl-Heinz Lambertz).

The Congress will continue to act as a strong advocate of regional democracy throughout Europe. It will further promote, including through its monitoring, post-monitoring and co-operation activities, the principles laid down in the Reference Framework for Regional Democracy, (which will have its 10th Anniversary in 2019). The Congress will also continue to promote the development and strengthening of regions, and the reflection on the potential of regional structures and institutions for reducing regional tensions.

The second area of the Congress priorities, "Building secure societies that are respectful, inclusive and closer to citizens" addresses the current challenges which communities face, the ways to ensure their better functioning, advocating ethics and transparency against corruption, how to face challenges of receiving and integrating migrants and refugees, fighting radicalisation and violent extremism, as well as the issues of rights and protection of minority, underprivileged and vulnerable populations. The Congress is working on the many different paths which exist for helping local and regional authorities tackle the general issue of diverse and inclusive societies.

Our positions and proposals in this area will be presented in more details by Ms Mosler-Törnström tomorrow.

As you can see, Congress' current and future priorities point at a number of topical issues which are of relevance to the regional parliaments represented in CALRE. Several CALRE working groups such as "Interactive Democracy", "Migration, social policies and human rights" and "Gender equality" deal with policy areas of mutual interest and of specific experience of the Congress and the Council of Europe.

Responsibility for social rights

Let me illustrate this with a first concrete example of Congress' implication in the area of Social rights. During the 31st Session of the Chamber of Regions on 20 October 2016, a debate was conducted on the theme "social rights in Europe: the implementation of the European Social Charter at regional level".

Within the Council of Europe, the European Committee of Social Rights is monitoring the implementation of the European Social Charter, one of the major treaties of the Organisation. Its decisions and conclusions concern situations of non-conformity or violations of the European Social Charter in some States Parties in connection to responsibilities carried out by Regions. The debate in the Congress Chamber of Regions was based on these reports. Members could share information on very concrete examples of good practices in regions but also to express specific recommendations in the implementation of the European Social Charter by regions. The Chamber of regions will continue this work in next years to help implementing these recommendations.

Briefly two examples: In Austria, the Länder are indeed responsible of the implementation of some areas covered by the European Social Charter in particularly for the protection of children (articles 7 and 17), for handicapped persons (article 15), family and elderly policies (articles 16 and 23), social welfare (article 13) and migrants workers and their families (article 19). In the Land of Baden-Württemberg in Germany, the "Charta der Vielfalt" (Diversity Charter) is an initiative which clearly seeks to put into practices the rights and values of the Social Charter through the promotion of diversity.

Legal framework for lobbying

Let me quote one more example - referring to the work of the CALRE WG "Better regulation": The Council of Europe is in the final stages of preparing a Recommendation for the Committee of Ministers on the legal regulation of lobbying activities in the context of public decision-making. Unlike the controversial EU lobbying regulation, this text includes local and regional authorities as the "objects of lobbying activities" rather than seeing them as "potential lobbyists". We will let the Presidency have the revised draft soon and we are happy that the role of regional parliaments and of regional governments is explicitly recognized in this draft Recommendation. We expect its adoption by the Committee of Ministers in the first semester of 2017.

The Congress is happy to continue the co-operation. I want to thank the outgoing chairman, President Cattaneo, for his great commitment and I wish the incoming CALRE presidency all the best!

Thank you!