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1298th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies – Strasbourg, France, 25 October 2017

Communication of Gudrun Mosler-Törnström, President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities

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Exchange of views with the Ministers' Deputies
Strasbourg, France, 25 October 2017

Dear Ambassadors,
Dear Secretary General, Dear Deputy Secretary General,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is now twelve months since I was elected President of the Congress on 18 October 2016. At the start of our 33rd Session last week, I had an opportunity to take stock of this past year. But let me reassure you – I am not going to repeat the details of that statement.

I would, however, like to share with you the point that neither the situation in the world nor the situation in Europe has improved in recent months. I am referring both to a certain form of insecurity that is pervading multilateral relations and to the development of internal crises affecting some of our member states. At the same time, the economic and financial crisis, the migrant crisis, terrorist attacks and the rise of populism have continued to pose a threat to everything we, Europeans, have put in place over the past seventy years.

This situation is really exceptional and requires us to have a clear vision of the kind of future we wish to build together. We must have the courage to tackle all these challenges facing us.

Let us take the example of terrorism, from which no town or city, large or small, is spared. The local and regional authorities that the Congress represents have, thanks to their proximity to ordinary citizens and realities on the ground, a major role to play in effectively combating this scourge, in terms of both prevention and enforcement. Central governments are working hand in hand with local and regional authorities to address this particular threat. It is this cooperation between all levels of governance that should serve as a model for managing all the crises that are threatening us.

I think of the separatist tendencies that are emerging here and there. They are currently running high in Spain, but other member states are not immune either. You probably followed the debate which we had last week on the situation in Catalonia, during which members of the Congress made it clear that, in their view, dialogue was the only option. In a modern democracy, constructive dialogue between central government and regional entities is essential. But our members also reaffirmed the need for everyone to abide by the rules of the game, and in particular our constitutions, without which the rule of law would be just an illusion. Our conviction is that a modern democracy naturally functions within an institutional legal order that is binding on all parties.

In the Congress we have long advocated the need of having strong regions in Europe. But we have never believed that weak nation states could provide a solid foundation on which to build Europe. We do not want devolution at the price of a fragmented Europe, and I was pleased during our session to see that our members were unanimous on this point.

Many years ago, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe had the wisdom, the political vision, to equip itself with an assembly of local and regional representatives that is unique in Europe. In our institutional environment today, where powers and responsibilities have been redistributed between the different levels of governance, this has been a wise strategic choice, but you, as representatives of the national governments, need to make use of this asset.

Local and regional representatives hold some important trump cards. Not only do the territories we represent make their own policies within the scope of their powers, but these territories are also the places where many of the policies decided at national level are implemented. So it is with the representatives of these territories that a robust, on-going dialogue needs to be maintained, to seek together solutions that will ensure the security and stability of our societies.

This institutional co-operation between the different levels of governance, which we are working to develop throughout Europe, is already a reality here at the Council of Europe. We can see it at work in the relations between the Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly. In this regard, I would like to mention the report of Mr Nicoletti, adopted by the Assembly two weeks ago, which suggests that the two statutory organs of the Council of Europe engage in a joint procedure to harmonise their rules governing the participation and the representation of member States in their bodies. The Congress fully supports this suggestion and is ready to contribute. Institutional cooperation can also be seen in the close ties forged by the Congress with the Parliamentary Assembly and of course with your Committee. In our view, this co-operation and political dialogue are essential.

Ladies and gentlemen, the mission of the Congress is to contribute to strengthening local and regional democracy in our member States. Fulfilling this objective presupposes that sufficient resources are allocated to our activities. I would like to remind you that our share of the Organization's regular budget has decreased in recent years. Some governments have already expressed their conviction that a return to 3% of the Organisation's budget would be necessary for the Congress to carry out its missions and I would like to thank them for this.

As Former President of the Parliament of Salzburg, I know how difficult budget discussions can be. I would just like to say, without any pretence, that local democracy deserves this organization to devote 3% of its budget to this work. This would be a reasonable share, which would provide a solid foundation for our work.

Next March, in Tunisia, there will be the first local elections in the history of this country. The observation of these elections will unfortunately not be possible only on the regular budget of the Congress. We will thus need to use voluntary contributions from your States to fulfil this mission. The stakes are high, since the Congress, and more generally, the Council of Europe, are invited to accompany this historical democratic transition with the clear support of our member States.

This is one example of the value of providing the Congress with the means it needs, not to develop peripheral activities, but to contribute to the Council of Europe's main objectives.

This is the roadmap that I have set myself and I count on your support to carry it out.

Thank you