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Strasbourg, France, 8 – 12 October 2018**

## Speech by Gudrun Mosler-Törnström, President of the Congress

*Check against delivery - Seul le prononcé fait foi*

### **Debate: The role of national parliaments in successful decentralisation processes**

**Strasbourg, France, 11 October 2018**

Madame President, dear Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure and an honour to be here today. I am pleased to say that the Congress and the Parliamentary Assembly are currently working more closely together than ever, and this debate is just one more reminder of the excellent co-operation between our two assemblies. We have a lot to offer to each other and to the Council of Europe as a whole.

We have been enjoying especially strong co-operation with your General Rapporteurs on local and regional authorities, most recently with you, Luis LEITE RAMOS, and we look forward to continuing this with your successor, Jean-Pierre GRIN, who will be speaking at the Congress session next month.

However, following these positive words, I must also share with you some very frank remarks, several members of PACE have made to me over the last few days: some of you told me that they were not aware what the Congress is doing, besides being the monitoring body for the European Charter of Local Self-Government and the only international body which systematically observes local elections.

Let me give some examples of our work: The Congress annually holds a summit of mayors against radicalisation (which we had to postpone this year due to the financial situation) we prepared a handbook for inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue in municipalities. The Congress prepares also reports on preventing corruption at local and regional level and proposals on refugees and migrants “from reception to integration”. It is in the cities and regions where the solutions for most of the challenges can be found. If it does not work at local level, it will not work at national level either. We in the Congress are the actors of the Council of Europe at grassroots level. There is a local dimension in many of the Council of Europe conventions and policies.

I am pleased to tell you that the Congress will adopt – in the November session - a handbook on human rights activities for mayors. We will share this important tool with you and invite you to use and disseminate it, as many of you also hold a local mandate.

I therefore believe that, beyond the good co-operation we have between our respective rapporteurs, we should work on a better mutual knowledge of our two institutions. There is always needs for better communication. For you like for us!

Decentralisation, our topic today, is obviously an area where we should intensify our co-operation. This report on the role of parliaments in decentralisation processes comes at a special moment for local democracy.

Decentralisation has been having a tough time of late. Partly due to the financial crisis, but not only. A lot of mayors and councillors are feeling the pressure, as their powers get eroded and their means to deliver curtailed.

I read in your report that you refer to one of our analyses made on recurring issues. Indeed, at the Congress we recently highlighted the recurring issues challenging and even threatening local and regional democracy in Europe, and it is meaningful to notice that there is a clear trend towards re-centralisation in our member States with:

- increasing supervision of local and regional authorities by national authorities,
- lack of financial resources, or increase of often earmarked State transfers which obviously put our local authorities in a situation of dependency with regard to our governments,
- and again a lack of consultation between national and sub-national levels.

These tendencies which we have identified are quite symptomatic of a decline of the principles of local self-government which, until a few years ago, were widely implemented in our member States. I believe that we should be worried about these developments.

From my own experience in this matter, I am convinced that decentralisation is directly linked to strong interaction and cooperation among all stakeholders involved in the process, as well as between the parliamentary commissions and local government representatives.

It is the quality of this interaction that we have to focus on. We need mutual respect between all actors, effective consultation, openness and transparency in a spirit of multi-level governance.

These consultations can give local authorities a better understanding of the overall responsibility of parliaments and governments for the whole public sector. We need to talk more in order to better understand our respective needs.

One of the key actors in the consultation process is the national parliamentary committee, which has the mandate to adopt a national regulatory framework on local self-governance. Unfortunately, national legislation rarely encourages parliamentary committees to organise such consultations. Since governments submit most legal initiatives to the legislature, parliamentary bodies might assume that the necessary consultations had already taken place in the preparatory stages. However, too often this is simply not the case.

Who better than parliaments – which are the houses of the citizens - can offer such adequate consultations mechanisms with the people and their elected representatives at local and regional levels?

The essence of a parliament is public deliberation of arguments, public debate, public discussion, consultation, openness...

So I would suggest that parliamentary committee rules of procedure should include specific provisions on the organization of consultations or public hearings with local authorities, identifying the subject of consultation, the procedures and time-frame, and the participants in this process.

I would encourage national associations of local and regional authorities to draw up Memoranda of Understanding with their national parliaments and line ministries. These memoranda could provide guidelines, spelling out further details of consultation processes and the operational modalities of the application of the right to be consulted.

We've been doing a lot of work on this very subject this year and I am pleased to announce that, at our next session, in the Chamber, on Thursday 8 November, my colleague Anders KNAPE will be presenting new 'Guidelines on the right of local authorities to be consulted by higher levels of government'. It is no coincidence that it is at this same debate that your new General Rapporteur Jean-Pierre GRIN has agreed to speak.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The local dimension has a special significance, since it is the one that is closest to the people and has direct contact with them. If we manage to achieve transparency at the local level, it will be easier later on to translate this way of working to the national level.

To conclude, I would like to say a few words about the European Charter of Local Self-Government, as we celebrate the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the entry into force of this Council of Europe treaty on 1<sup>st</sup> September 1988. Thanks to your rapporteur, Mr Ramos, the mayor of Lisbon and the Portuguese Parliament, we began the celebrations in Lisbon last month, on the occasion of the meeting of your Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development – yet another example of the co-operation between our two assemblies.

The Charter remains a key convention in its field, a unique legal instrument for safeguarding and developing local democracy in our member States and beyond. The monitoring of the Charter, which the Committee of Ministers has entrusted the Congress with, continues to form the basis of our own dialogue with national governments – and during these monitoring missions we have come to appreciate the central role that parliaments most often play in designing, developing and guaranteeing decentralisation processes.

I will always remember that the origin of the Congress starts in this assembly at the initiative of a French Prime Minister, Jacques CHABAN DELMAS in 1957 as your Assembly was already very much aware of the need to focus on the local and regional governance levels.

I see this genesis of the Congress as a logical link between our two institutions, which clearly have a vocation to cooperate on a number of subjects. Democratic governance is not happening at one level only! Democratic governance is a multi-level governance.

We, in the Congress, and our mayors and council members, need our MPs as much as you need local and regional elected representatives to carry out successful decentralisation policies that meet the needs of our citizens. It is through this synergy that we will succeed to strengthen democracy in Europe and to counter temptations to recentralize that are nothing more than a step backwards. This requires a daily attention from all of us, because democracy will not protect itself.

So, thank you once again for preparing this excellent report.