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128th Session of the Committee of Ministers – Elsinore, Denmark, 18 May 2018

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

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Ministers,

Ambassadors,

Ladies and gentlemen,

In the Congress, as a political assembly, we attach great importance to the dialogue with the governments of member states. We are engaged in a political dialogue with you, Ministers, with your deputies in Strasbourg, with ministers for local government during our plenary sessions and in your capitals during every activity that we undertake, particularly during our missions to monitor the implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, to observe local and regional elections or when we implement Council of Europe Action Plans.

The European Charter of Local Self-Government is one of the Council of Europe's major treaties and has been ratified by all of our 47 member states. Central governments recognise the pre-eminent function of democratic local and regional self-government as a political force in our states. Local and regional authorities are an indispensable element of the checks and balances of our European model of society. These politicians work together in the Congress to add the local and regional dimension to the Council of Europe's *raison d'être*. I would like to commend you, Ministers, on the Recommendation on participation of citizens in local public life adopted on 21 March 2018. This Recommendation to member states contributes to strengthen trust in and credibility of the democratic institutions and helps to build inclusive societies. So local and regional authorities can better counteract populism which seeks to limit debate, delegitimise dissent and reduce political pluralism.

Today, Ministers, you have taken several important decisions and the Congress will contribute to the implementation of these decisions wherever there is a local or regional dimension; wherever mayors and councillors, presidents of regions and regional parliaments can contribute:

In this context I would like:

- to refer to the Secretary General's report on the "Role of and threats to institutions" and stress that democratic institutions in municipalities, cities and regions are fully concerned as well.
- to remind you that the Congress' outreach to over 200.000 local authorities is an asset that can and should be used when taking decisions about the future of the Council of Europe; .
- to highlight the Congress' contribution to the Organisation's human rights component with its guidelines for the implementation of human rights at local level.
- And to mention the co-operation with the European Union where the Congress joins forces with the Committee of the Regions, focusing in particular on migration and integration issues, to make best use of synergies and avoid duplication.

In the Congress we will continue our work in the most effective way possible. That is why, given the Council of Europe's current financial situation, we have decided to undertake a large-scale reform of our working methods, our structures and our rules, so that we can rise to the challenges facing us. We have adopted stringent cost-saving measures and launched a major reform that should safeguard our institutional role – to enable us to deliver on the expectations of the member states – and to make our budget more sustainable.

Although the initiative for this new reform has been imposed on us by the difficult situation in which we find ourselves, we are resolutely committed to using it as a chance to bring about a tangible, positive transformation. This process will require political imagination and courage, because we will doubtlessly be forced to make tough and painful decisions. Nonetheless, we are convinced of our ability to turn the crisis into an opportunity.

I am not afraid to tell you that the Council of Europe is lucky to have an assembly representing local and regional authorities in its midst: because the role of local authorities is essential for a good development of our societies and our communities! This institutional commitment sends out the strong signal that its member states believe that good democratic governance is not possible without local and regional authorities. The Congress therefore values its statutory role and appreciates being able to contribute to the debate in this Ministerial Meeting.

I would like to thank those countries, who publicly support the need for the necessary funding of the Congress and its work, notably Germany and Slovenia. Let me invite you, Ministers, to support the reform which the Congress will propose later this year in order to enable us to continue to deliver.

Thank you.