

36th Session of the Congress – Strasbourg, France, 2 – 4 April 2018

Elements for the Communication of Anders Knape, President of the Congress

Check against delivery

Strasbourg, France, 2 April 2018

The Congress is celebrating this year the 25th anniversary of its establishment within the Council of Europe. The first session of the Congress took place from 31 May to 3 June 1994.

There are four of us in the Congress today who witnessed that first plenary Session: Michel GUEGUAN (France), Jean-Pierre KLEIN (Luxembourg), Gaye DOGANOGLU (Turkey) and myself.

A joint celebration of this 25th anniversary will be held with the Committee of the Regions in Brussels on 27 June 2019 including a debate on the “development of democracy and good governance in Europe: monitoring devolution and regionalisation”.

The main objective of this celebration will be to demonstrate the possible synergies between the work of the Committee of the Regions and the Congress to further strengthen local democracy, to maintain the social fabric of societies and safeguard democracy, in a context where Euroscepticism and populism are on the rise, and where local and regional authorities are facing serious challenges.

The Council of Europe was a forerunner in integrating the local dimension very early on into its activities (first session of the Conference of Local Authorities in 1957).

Today, the Congress is the second political assembly of the Council of Europe and brings to the Organisation the second political dimension of democracy, which is democratic local self-government and regional democracy in a system of shared governance.

The position of the Council of Europe - and of the Congress within the Organisation - is in danger because of the political and financial crisis it faces .

Situation in the Council of Europe

Since last session, the situation has not improved and there have been no positive developments in the political crisis with Russia and the ongoing non-payment of budget contributions by Russia.

At the end of January 2019, Secretary General Jagland presented an update of the situation in his address to the Parliamentary Assembly. He will address the Congress on Thursday and I invite you to take this opportunity to discuss the current situation and the ways out of the crisis with him.

Mr Jagland noted that the deadlock with the Russian delegation in the Parliamentary Assembly had not led to the return of Crimea to Ukraine or improved the human rights situation in Russia. Instead, the deadlock had created a crisis within the Organisation.

He urged the Assembly and the Committee of Ministers to sit down and work concretely on clarifying the rules and the distribution of power between the two organs, in a way that will strengthen the authority of the Organisation, based on equal rights and equal obligations.

He underlined that the departure of Russia from the Council of Europe would hurt the Russian people most, because it would deprive them of protection under the Convention system.

This situation is a cause for concern to the whole Council of Europe including for us in the Congress.

We have always supported a political solution to the problem because we are convinced that Russia's place is in the Council of Europe, alongside all European States. This is also the message I gave to the Committee of Ministers during our exchange of views in November 2018.

The political crisis has also generated a significant financial problem for the Organisation.

After several serious reform steps and substantial cuts, the Organisation is now confronted with a "contingency plan" to respond to the missing €33 million per year, which the Russian Federation owes the Council of Europe.

This contingency plan is currently being discussed by the Committee of Ministers and will possibly be adopted in June or July 2019. I fear that all parts of the Council of Europe will have to contribute to the cuts in 2019 and even more so in the Organisation's budget for 2020 and 2021.

This Plan will certainly affect the Organisation's ability to implement some of the policies in the defence of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, for which it was created 70 years ago.

Consequences for the Congress

This political and financial crisis in the Council of Europe is challenging for the Organisation as a whole but also for each of its individual entities including the Congress

As the discussion on the contingency plan advances in the Committee of Ministers we will know more precisely what new cuts will be imposed on us. We discussed this in the Bureau meeting yesterday and will have an in-depth exchange in our next meeting. We will have to review the priorities which the Congress adopted for 2017 – 2020 and the priorities for the new mandate starting in October 2020 will also have to take into account the difficult situation.

We will hold a debate on the budget of the Congress this afternoon and the draft recommendation that will be submitted for your adoption clearly sets out the challenges that are ahead of us.

For several years now, and even more so since the beginning of this crisis, we have been constantly asked to do more with fewer resources. The Congress has contributed more than proportionally to the cuts in the Organisation.

Our repeated requests to increase the Congress' share of the Council of Europe's budget to 3 % have so far not been heard - the percentage granted to the Congress is now at a historical low of 2.52%

Yet the expectations concerning the Congress' work continue to be higher than ever and we have continued to review our working methods and achieved efficiency savings

The new language regime we adopted at the end of 2018 is one of the measures we have taken to face the budgetary constraints.

We have also been obliged to cut several activities (Summit of Mayors against radicalisation, for example)

We must draw the attention of the Committee of Ministers to the fact that this development is not sustainable in the long run if we want to maintain the quality and scope of our statutory work

I invite you all to pass this message on to your national authorities

Tomorrow we have an exchange of views with the Finnish Chair of the Committee of Ministers and we must take this opportunity to express our concern and ask for the Committee of Ministers' support

Congress Contribution to the Ministerial meeting in Helsinki

In this difficult context, the Finnish Chairmanship will host the next meeting of the Committee of Ministers in Helsinki on 16 and 17 May to discuss the future of the Council of Europe

During the last session, in November, the Croatian Chair of the Committee of Ministers Mrs PEJČINOVIĆ BURIĆ invited the Congress to contribute to this reflection

Our colleagues Gunn Marit HELGESEN, and Xavier CADORET have prepared a draft contribution which we will debate this afternoon and I would like to thank them for their excellent work

The Helsinki meeting will be crucial for the future of the Organisation and the future of the Congress within the Council of Europe.

Our contribution aims at alerting the governments of the crucial role that the local and regional level plays in supporting the European model of democracy and the European model of society.

Central States must recognise local democracy as an essential pillar of democracy and use the local level for democratic renewal of the system.

The Congress is a key element within the Council of Europe, in responding to the challenges facing the Organisation and the political challenges facing many member States.

The Congress is strong in its achievements and in the experience accumulated over decades of promoting local democracy in Europe with its monitoring of the European Charter of Local Self-government.

The Congress is ready to contribute to the demand for democratic renewal across our societies.

This is the message that our contribution must pass to the ministers in Helsinki

Dear members,

Difficult times and many challenges ahead in the Council of Europe and its member States

The Congress has taken the lead in reforming its working methods and identifying possible savings to meet the crises within the Council of Europe

The Council of Europe is more important than ever, with its institutional experience, to restore social bonds and the legitimacy of democratic debate.

The Congress is an essential part of this process – it represents local elected representatives who are a direct link between public institutions and citizens - can contribute to finding solutions and help restore genuine democracy

We must convince the central governments and the Ministers present in Helsinki that we have a crucial role to play within the Council of Europe and beyond in the member States to safeguard democracy and defend Human Rights and the Rule of Law.