

## 131st Session of the Committee of Ministers

# Speech by Leendert VERBEEK, President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities

Hamburg, Germany, 21 May 2021

*Check against delivery*

## A shared responsibility for democratic security in Europe

Mr President,

Madam Secretary General,

Dear Ministers and authorities of the Council of Europe,

Our continent is facing a situation where fundamental values and rights and democratic stability are at stake. Crises such as the current pandemic have added to the social, economic and political challenges and amplified the divide within our societies.

I would like to thank the Secretary General for her report on the State of Democracy, Human Rights and the Rule of Law, “A democratic renewal for Europe”. And I am pleased to hear that Ministers share the assessment, the diagnosis, how to address the challenges for our societies and to protect our values and re-establish “normality”.

We in the Congress are convinced that the Council of Europe has a central role to play in upholding democracy, restoring social cohesion, and reinforcing the resilience, strength and inclusiveness of our societies, thereby contributing to democratic security in Europe.

Now, more than ever, our societies need a genuine democracy of proximity. In order to achieve this, we need a renewed focus on the role of local and regional authorities. It is therefore symbolic that this Ministerial Session is held in the City Hall of Hamburg. Mayors and regional governments are the closest to the people and have the best understanding of the challenges faced by their communities. They can and will reconnect with the citizens and restore confidence in democratic processes and institutions. This has been proven yet again during the pandemic, when mayors

and councillors found themselves at the frontline of responding to the crisis and make ends meet. They will also be in the centre of action in the post-crisis recovery and the renewal of the social, political and economic fabric.

This crisis showed the need for more effective co-operation and co-ordinated action both among and within countries at all levels, in a spirit of multilateral co-operation and multi-level governance. I am pleased to hear that we agree on the diagnosis and, with the decisions taken today, also on the way forward, to implement the therapy and to invest in prevention: we all know, prevention is better – and cheaper – than the cure!

The Committee of Ministers and the Council of Europe as a whole must – and I am confident that it will - make the best use of the synergies produced by joining the capacities and forces of the parliaments, national governments, local and regional authorities and civil society.

Dear Ministers,

In March, the Congress adopted its priorities for the coming years. These priorities are fully in line with the Strategic Framework of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe and they are a concrete contribution of local and regional authorities to the action of the Council of Europe towards the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Our focus is on contributing to more resilient, more democratic, more cohesive and more sustainable societies. We want to achieve these goals by providing effective responses to public health crises, enhancing the quality of representative democracy and citizen participation, reducing inequalities, addressing environmental issues and digitalisation as well as artificial intelligence in the local context.

Minister Heiko Maas, on behalf of the Congress I would like to thank the German authorities for their support and the excellent cooperation throughout the German Presidency.

Minister Péter Szijjártó, we look forward to contributing to the implementation of the Hungarian Presidency priorities at local and regional level. We hope to welcome you at our session in October in Strasbourg.

Our co-operation at all levels of governance is more important than ever because our common response to the challenges we face today will shape our future and that of the generations to come.

Thank you for your attention.