

**41st Session of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities - Strasbourg, France, 26 to-
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Communication by Leendert Verbeek, President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities

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Dear members of the Congress,

As I indicated at the opening of the session, I am pleased that we could come together in person after what seems a very long time.

Throughout this long period, we have adapted our working methods to secure business continuity and continue fulfilling our role. We have gotten better and better at this and I can only thank you all and the teams behind the scenes for making it possible.

At the same time, a political assembly like ours needs personal interaction and this session is an important step in returning to the new normal.

Earlier this month, we also held the Congress Bureau meeting in person in Visegrad, Hungary. It was an important meeting not only because we could meet in person but also because we initiated a reflection on the Congress and its working methods; this reflection is intended to look at the current situation of the Congress with a view to proposing a way forward to strengthen the Congress capacity to fulfil its role and to deliver. We will continue this work over the next few bureaux meetings and I will be reporting back to you about the outcome of these discussions and the follow-up on Thursday morning, after the formal close of proceedings for this session.

The Congress continues to implement its priorities and ensure its statutory activities, whether it is the monitoring of the European Charter of Local Self-Government or the implementation of the work programme of committees. A number of important reports will be considered during the session as you have seen on the agenda.

The Congress also observed local elections in Morocco and Georgia and will observe the forthcoming elections in Denmark. The Congress continues to implement co-operation activities in member States and beyond.

On my side, I strive to give to the Congress increased visibility in particular in respect of the ongoing discussions on the draft programme and budget of the Council of Europe. I have had quite a number of meetings with Permanent Representatives to the Council of Europe and institutions of the Council of Europe. I have also participated in a number of ceremonies organised by the Council of Europe and made declarations on occasion of important dates such as the international date on democracy or the 60th anniversary of the European Social Charter. During my presence in Hungary for the Bureau meeting I also had a working visit with Hungarian authorities.

Dear colleagues, we all believe in the value of the work we do here in the Congress. The European Charter of Local Self-government is a unique international treaty; one of its kind at international level. It bears witness to the importance that the Council of Europe and its member States attach to local self-government. A distinctive feature of the Council of Europe from its inception, then followed by other international organisations.

However, this work can only be carried out if we have commensurate resources. Hence my reiterated call to all heads of delegations to mobilise their authorities in support of the Congress receiving the necessary resources in line with the budget recommendation we adopted last March.

This process will feed proposals of reforms concerning the visibility, practical organisation and role of the Congress. My purpose is to guarantee the sustainability of the Congress' efforts in these changing times. This will mean leaving our comfort zone and taking fundamental decisions to ensure the topicality and accessibility of our activities.

While uncertainty and challenges abound, there are many opportunities for the Congress, and I have no doubt about your commitment to our work. Be it participating remotely from your country or in person here in Strasbourg, I have full confidence in your capacity to make this session, as always, a challenging forum of exchange about local and regional democracy. We owe this to all the mayors, counsellors, and regional elected representatives who found themselves at the frontline of the pandemic, and who now must face the threat of centralisation and numerous social and health challenges.