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Communication by Leendert Verbeek, President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities

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Madam Secretary General,

Excellencies,

Dear colleagues,

As I said at the opening of the session, we are coming together at a time when one of the Council of Europe member States, Ukraine, is the victim of an act of war by the now former member State the Russian Federation.

For almost a month, the Ukrainian population has been firmly and admirably resisting the aggression while being targeted by the bombs of the aggressor or thrown on the roads of exile to seek shelter in neighbouring countries.

For almost a month, Europe has been living a new reality that was brutally imposed on us. But this new reality has produced the opposite effects than sought by the aggressor: it has united us all, it has demonstrated the strong unity of the Ukrainian people and their will to defend their independence and freedom, the democratic values that the Organisation stands for.

The international community reacted quickly and unanimously from the start, calling on the Russian Federation to immediately and unconditionally cease its war in Ukraine and withdraw its troops.

Our Bureau also expressed “its unwavering commitment to the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine within its internationally recognised borders”. Later today, as I said earlier, our Congress will be adopting a declaration on this war.

The war in Ukraine has brutally reminded us that nothing is ever certain, especially not peace. This is why we must continue to stand united, to defend our values and to commit ourselves against the suffering, barbarism and destruction of war.

As the Secretary General of the Council of Europe said last week before the Parliamentary Assembly, words are powerless in the face of the enormity of this situation. Nothing we can say can ease the pain of those who have lost their homes, livelihoods or loved ones. But we can make our contribution by not giving in to the hell of war and by continuing tirelessly to defend our values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law throughout the continent.

These values do not make us weak, contrary to what some would have us believe, but they strengthen us in our freedoms and our desire to build more inclusive, more equitable and more resilient societies. And

building these resilient societies starts at the level of villages, municipalities and cities and builds up to regions and whole countries. This is the approach of the mayors, councillors and elected regional politicians who serve their populations, provide them with the services they need and create identity, a feeling of togetherness. This feeling of the people of belonging together finds its expression in common ownership for what is happening in our municipalities. People take responsibility and are willing to stand up and defend what is important to them.

We see in Ukraine today that our friends in the country are taking ownership. I think, this is also a result of the many reforms which were undertaken in Ukraine especially on decentralisation and local empowerment. We hope that the Congress, the Council of Europe and many of you through our cooperation activities have contributed a small part. The mayors and councillors are knots of a big net of dedicated and able actors on the ground. And these knots are linked to each other. These connected knots build a net which spans over Ukraine and helps it to resist.

The Congress will relentlessly continue to cherish these values, within the Council of Europe, it will continue to work to strengthen grassroots democracy and to support the daily work of local and regional authorities.

We saw it during the COVID-19 pandemic, and we see it even more dramatically today in Ukraine: for those of the inhabitants who could not or chose not to flee their country, the mayors, local elected representatives and civil servants play an essential role. They are by their side, on the frontline and do their best to bring them safety and comfort, but also essential services such as food, water, medical care, heating and electricity. I wish to pay tribute to these local leaders and workers for their key role in solving the daily problems of citizens in their cities and towns.

We learned last week about the kidnapping of the mayors of Melitopol and Dniprorudne, Zaporizhya oblast. I immediately called for their release as well as for an end to the pressure exerted on local elected representatives in the occupied territories. In the meanwhile, we have learnt that one was freed by Ukrainian security forces but there may be three other Ukrainian Mayors who have been kidnapped.

We remain in regular contact with the Associations of local authorities and in particular the Association of Ukrainian Cities, our privileged partner for several years. We have also brought together our partners, European associations of local and regional authorities, to coordinate their support to Ukrainian people and authorities.

We stand firmly in support of the Ukrainian associations and local authorities, with whom we have been working on a daily basis, through our cooperation programmes, to strengthen local democracy and self-government, and make the reforms and the decentralisation of power in Ukraine irreversible.

We are convinced that our work has contributed to making local communities and their leaders stronger in standing up for democratic values. Even though the new project "Strengthening local democratic governance in Ukraine", launched in October 2021, is now suspended, I want to assure our partners and friends in Ukraine that we will be at their side again as soon as the war is over to rebuild and consolidate local democracy in their country.

Later today we will have a debate on Ukraine, and we will hear Minister Chernyshov, Mayor Klitschko and Mayor Senkevych tell us about the situation in their country.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This week, we are going to hold our session without the presence of the Russian delegation for the first time since the accession of this country to the Council of Europe in 1996.

On 16 March, the Committee of Ministers decided, in the context of the procedure launched under Article 8 of the Statute of the Council of Europe, that the Russian Federation ceased to be a member of the Council of Europe as from the same day, after 26 years of membership.

This decision is a firm and determined response to Russia's refusal to accept the values of this Organisation, cease its war against Ukraine and its persistent and wilful violation of Ukraine's sovereignty, the intangibility of borders and all international treaties that it ratified.

Like all convinced Europeans, I deeply regret this situation because the Common House of Europe called for by President Gorbachev in 1989 and which we had undertaken to build since then has just lost one of its inhabitants. By the war it has unleashed, Russia has placed itself under the ban of democratic nations and I sincerely hope that its leaders and the Russian people will put an end to this atrocious war and will not allow a new iron curtain to descend on Europe.

Besides the exclusion of the Russian Federation as of 16 March 2022, the Committee of Ministers has also decided “to suspend the rights of Belarus to participate as observer or in any other capacity in meetings and activities of the Committee of Ministers, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities or in any subsidiary organs or bodies thereof”.

The war against Ukraine has highlighted the importance of pursuing our work, the importance of having strong, democratic local and regional communities and leaders within a democratic system based on the core values of this Organisation.

Our work will be all the more determined this week and I invite you to take an active part in it here in the Congress and its chambers

- in debates,
- as rapporteurs,
- in election observation missions,

and continue when you return to your homes:

- as organisers of thematic conferences in your cities and regions – together with the Congress and its rapporteurs and spokespersons,
- as hosts of Congress committee meetings,
- as “Ambassadors of the Congress and of local self-government and regional democracy” in the General Assemblies of your respective national associations.

We, all together, have to speak up for, stand up for and act for democracy, for human rights and for the rule of law: here in Strasbourg and in our home countries.

To conclude, I would like us to pay tribute to the courageous and dignified resistance of Ukraine, its authorities and its people.

Thank you