

**42nd Session of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities - Strasbourg, France,
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Speech by Mr Leendert Verbeek

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Debate on The Russian Federation's war against Ukraine

22 March 2022

Dear colleagues,

We have just heard moving statements by Minister Chernyshov, Mayor Klitschko and Mayor Senkevych.

We will shortly hear from our Ukrainian colleagues.

Who better than they can describe the situation, as we speak, on the ground in Ukraine?

I am not here to give you a description of what is happening: in this age of visual media, we have all seen the horrors on our screens as they unfold in real time, and I have already shared my own revulsion at this brutal war with you in my communication this morning.

Nor am I here to give you a list of casualties, of horrors, or destruction: we are all fully aware and following this information hour by hour.

As local and regional representatives, each one of us has chosen to serve our fellow citizens because we believe in the civic values of service to others, respect, tolerance, mutual assistance, justice and freedom and we have chosen to become members of the Congress because we believe in the values championed by the Council of Europe: democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

We have a duty, as members of this assembly, to denounce, with one, strong, voice, the war being waged by the Russian Federation against Ukraine, and this is why I am here: to present, on behalf of the Bureau a declaration which, with the amendments agreed by the Bureau yesterday, will stand as:

- the Congress' denunciation of an increasingly brutal invasion and as
- a statement of resolute support to Ukraine and its people.

The declaration contains six main messages, which are made more robust in the amended version:

- we condemn this violation of international law and international humanitarian law in the strongest terms;
- we call for the war to stop and for Russia's troops to be withdrawn, while also stopping any violations of human rights and providing for humanitarian corridors;
- we deplore the loss of life, the human suffering and the destruction;

- we express our steadfast support to Ukraine and its people;
- we reaffirm Ukraine's territorial sovereignty and territorial integrity;
- we underline our belief in the Council of Europe's values and that democracy, multilevel governance and human rights are stronger than war.

Lastly, we call on all local and regional communities in Europe and beyond to stay united and determined in their solidarity and support for the Ukrainian nation, its people and its authorities.

Some may feel, as I mentioned earlier, that in the face of such a situation, this declaration cannot have any impact and that it is after all simply words on paper, just another adopted text. However, I believe that it is very important, as I believe that every firm, public, stance we take has a dual purpose:

- We show the aggressor that we stand united and that their actions are justifiably vilified by the international community and add our voices to the growing global condemnation. We are, after all, representatives of the second assembly of the oldest human rights organisation in Europe.
- We show the citizens of Ukraine, our Ukrainian friends, colleagues and peers - the mayors and regional governors that are right now fighting for their citizens and their futures - that they are not forgotten, that we have boundless admiration for their courage, their tenacity and resourcefulness and that we will do everything in our power now, and in the future, to support them.

The Congress' voice matters because the grassroots have become the frontline in every sense of the word. The world can see the vital role mayors are playing not only in ensuring the safety of their citizens and their access to the necessities of daily life, but also by acting as human rallying points...which is precisely why they have become the targets of intimidation, abduction and worse.

I will not take more time so that as many of you as possible can speak in this debate. I will simply ask you to adopt the draft declaration as set out in Document CG(2022)42-21-AMDT2, not because on its own it will solve anything, but because through it democratically elected representatives representing hundreds of thousands of local and regional authorities from 46 European countries:

- stand with Ukraine,
- unanimously reject and denounce war and
- call for peace, a call we hope will be heard by the Russian people and their leaders.