

**Meeting with the Union of Swiss Cities (UVS) and the Association of Swiss Municipalities (ACS)**

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

*Check against delivery*

2 May 2022

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear members of the Swiss delegation,

Dear colleagues,

I would like to thank you for inviting me to have this exchange with you today during my visit to your beautiful country.

I would also like to thank the Swiss delegation to the Congress and its President David Eray for their unwavering commitment to the work of the Congress, a commitment which translates into an active contribution to the work of the Congress.

It has also translated in members of the Swiss delegation playing important institutional roles in the Congress over the years: David Eray as rapporteur on digitalisation and artificial intelligence; Philippe Receveur, former Chair of the Monitoring Committee and, Claude Haegi, President of the Congress between 1996 and 1998.

For the Congress, national associations of local and regional authorities are our key interlocutors in the national setting of member States. They participate in forming national delegations to the Congress, and we rely on national associations for the implementation of Congress resolutions, advancing the principles of the European Charter of Local Self-Government and maintaining dialogue with national governments to defend the interests of territorial authorities.

Our relation is one of trust, co-operation and mutual support.

This relation is mutually beneficial.

The Congress represents the cities and regions of the 46 member states of the Council of Europe, provides them a forum for meetings, exchanges and cooperation, and carries their voice.

You, the national associations, support the work of your members in the Congress and help to disseminate information on this work carried out at European level, as close to the ground as possible, to the towns and regions that you represent.

Together, we have one same objective: to work for the citizens and our communities; to respond to their needs, expectations and aspirations, bring citizens closer to their authorities, involving them, and promote the values of the Council of Europe, in particular human rights.

This work serves to develop a sense of belonging to the communities, a sense of common mission and of ownership of the governing process.

In recent years, we have seen the common values and norms that form the basis of European societies being challenged on many fronts. The links between public institutions and citizens have become strained and we see election after election that the disaffection with politics, institutions and governance is growing to the point of endangering the very democratic functioning of our societies.

These worrying developments vary considerably from country to country and are further exacerbated by the damaging effects of disinformation, populism, rising extremism, distrust of political representatives and institutions, and abstention from elections.

We are also witnessing profound transformations in territories and societies, notably with the desertification of the countryside, ageing populations, increased precariousness, but also the impact of globalisation and environmental challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic has further amplified this territorial and social divide in many countries.

I am convinced that it is at grass root level, the level of our communities that we can contribute to reviving and reinvigorating democratic processes. It is on the ground that we, as local and regional elected representatives, can help to reconnect with citizens and regain their trust and support for democracy.

Local and regional authorities still enjoy the highest level of citizens' trust among politicians, and we must seize this potential for the benefit of democratic renewal of our societies.

Let us not forget that in the major crises we are going through and in the face of the enormous challenges that lie ahead: pandemics, armed conflicts and extremism, local and regional elected representatives are in best placed to implement concrete and effective policies which will produce the most immediate effects on the lives of their fellow citizens and protect them the most from the harmful consequences of these crises.

To achieve this, there needs to be a more deliberate rebalancing of power in most European states between the different levels of governance.

This is not the case in Switzerland, of course, which has a very exemplary system of democratic governance.

However, it is the case for many countries where more decentralisation is needed for multi-level governance that allows for real cooperation between all levels of governance, with formal and permanent consultation mechanisms, the allocation of adequate financial means and real decision-making power at all levels.

This is the focus of our work in the Congress, in particular through our monitoring of local and regional democracy, the observation of local elections and our co-operation programmes on the ground.

It is through the monitoring of the European Charter of Local Self-Government and its implementation in national law that we contribute to the advancement of local and regional democratic self-government and decentralisation - which is the Congress' core mission.

The Charter, with its core principles and optional provisions, commits all 46 Council of Europe member states to respect the rights and responsibilities of local authorities and to work towards the implementation of the principle of subsidiarity or shared democracy.

The Congress, with its monitoring mechanism, ensures the proper implementation of this essential legal instrument. An instrument which has been supplemented with an Additional Protocol on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority, which entered into force ten years ago and was ratified by Switzerland in 2017.

The principle of citizen participation outlined in the Protocol is enshrined also in the Preamble to the Charter and is at the very heart of the Congress' work. Deliberative methods have indeed become one of the most innovative ways of deepening citizens' participation in political decision-making and strengthening public trust in the political process. A report adopted by the Congress in its March session on this theme calls for greater citizen participation beyond elections.

As far as co-operation programmes are concerned, Congress members and national associations are invited to participate in various kinds of peer-to-peer activities, and it is through this exchange of expertise and experience that we can offer other local and regional authorities and their associations the assistance and means to acquire new skills and know-how as well as to strengthen their institutional capacities and their consultation procedures with national governments.

In this regard, I would like to underline that Switzerland is among the leading contributors of extra-budgetary resources to Council of Europe Action Plans in support of democracy building in member States, and in this regard, we are particularly grateful for the focus of your country on the support for local and regional democracy and self-government.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

The work on strengthening local democracy carried out by the Congress with its members and national associations is designed to respond to the major societal challenges and issues I have just mentioned. In the framework of the priorities that we have adopted for 2021 to 2026, we have set ourselves the particular goal of strengthening the resilience, democracy, cohesion, sustainability and digitalisation of our societies.

I would like to take the example of the dissemination of false information or hate speech and the exertion of pressure or even violence against elected representatives as one of many examples of the abuses that threaten the stability of our societies and the work, we are doing within the Congress to counter them.

Elected representatives, and this is particularly true for the local and regional level, are increasingly exposed to hate speech and online disinformation, but also to verbal or physical threats. This phenomenon has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Over the past several years, the Congress has held several debates on mayors under pressure and working conditions of elected representatives in times of hate speech and fake news on the internet.

The Congress has also engaged in a scientific co-operation project involving academics and experts to analyse the damaging effects of fake news and hate speech, as well as the way in which they affect local political debate. The project was presented to the Congress session in March 2022 and a Congress report is currently being prepared on this issue. This survey provides, for the first time, a scientific basis to define policies for combating hate speech and fake news in the local and regional context.

This is only one example of the concrete work achieved by the Congress to help local and regional authorities perform their duties and face their challenges.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

I have mentioned some of the main challenges we are currently facing in Europe, but the main one is of course the ongoing war of Russia against Ukraine, which represents not only a major humanitarian, migratory and economic tragedy but also a threat to the peace and stability of the continent, unprecedented since the end of the Second World War.

Since the beginning of the war, the Congress, its Bureau and I, in my capacity as President, have repeatedly condemned the Russian Federation's war against Ukraine, which is a flagrant violation of international law and the Statute of the Council of Europe. We have deplored the loss of life, suffering and destruction caused by this war, have called on Russia to immediately and unconditionally cease its military operations and to put an end to the violations of human rights and international humanitarian law. We have of course expressed our full support for Ukraine and its people, who are showing admirable courage and steadfast resistance in the defence of their country.

I also had the opportunity to pay tribute to the democratically elected local leaders in Ukraine, who play a key role in solving the daily problems of citizens in their martyred towns and villages, and who are being targeted precisely because of this leading role.

I have thus denounced in the strongest terms the brutal killings of civilians and the kidnapping, intimidation and even replacement of mayors and councillors in areas occupied by Russian troops. I would like to recall here that these actions, as well as the attempts to legitimise them through so-called referendums, can in no way be recognised by the international community.

Faced with the horrors of this war, what can we do at our level, individually or at the level of our communities?

At the last Congress session in March, we heard from the Minister of Community and Territorial Development of Ukraine, the Mayor of Kiyv, and the Mayor of Mykolaiv, as well as members of the Ukrainian Congress delegation, about the situation in their country.

Their testimonies were powerful and moving, and their appeal for help was not only about material and logistical needs but also about the exchange of practices and know-how in crisis

management. The Congress therefore mobilised its networks, and we organised several meetings of European associations of local and regional authorities with the Association of Ukrainian Cities to exchange information and facilitate co-operation and practical assistance.

The Congress has also sponsored a cities-4-cities online help platform, at the initiative of its President of the Chamber of Local Authorities and Mayor of Sindelfingen in Germany. The platform aims to help local and regional authorities across Europe to meet the material and logistical needs of Ukrainian local authorities.

The platform is available in English, German and Ukrainian and will soon be translated into French, Italian and Spanish. So far, some 25 Ukrainian cities have signed up and are requesting basic goods such as food and medicine, but also more technical goods such as machinery for road reconstruction. They also want to benefit from the experience of their colleagues.

I would like to invite you to mobilise Swiss cities and cantons to register on this platform and to contribute to the assistance and exchange of know-how for Ukrainian cities.

I will also be very interested to hear about initiatives underway in Swiss cities and regions in this regard.

It is in a major crisis such as this war or the COVID-19 pandemic that the leading role played by our cities and regions and their associations is truly revealed, showing their capacity for action, solidarity and mutual support. We in the Congress are proud to be able to support you in these efforts.

Thank you for your attention