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

*Check against delivery*

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The Council of Europe finds itself in the face of a new reality on the European continent.

Democracy and democratic values are severely challenged by the multiple crises unfolding simultaneously.

The Russian Federation's war against Ukraine is a flagrant violation of international law and the very essence of what the Council of Europe stands for.

Our Congress has unanimously condemned this attack.

This war represents not only a major humanitarian, migratory and economic tragedy but also a threat to the peace and stability of the continent, not seen since the end of the Second World War.

The war has added to the challenges of climate change and degradation of the environment, polarisation of society and growing inequalities, rising extremism and populism, distrust of political representatives and institutions and abstention from elections, disinformation and fake news.

Much of this has been aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

This new reality compels us to unite, with a renewed energy and commitment at all levels of governance, around the Council of Europe's core values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law on which Europe was rebuilt after the Second World War.

All levels of governance means you as the Committee of Ministers but also individually as representatives of the member States, the municipalities and cities and the Congress as their representative organ within the Council of Europe and the national parliaments and PACE.

We in the Congress are convinced that the grassroots level of territorial communities – villages, towns, cities, provinces and regions – plays a crucial role in defending, reviving, and reinvigorating democratic processes.

Local and regional elected representatives, by their proximity to citizens, are essential in connecting with people and building strong links with them in support for democracy and democratic values.

The high level of citizens' trust enjoyed by local and regional authorities must be seized by national governments to ensure democratic renewal of our societies and to reach out to the citizens and link them to our values.

Kristiansand in Norway or the "local councillors for Europe" in Austria are just two very good communication examples of many.

The war in Ukraine has brought to the forefront this key role of democratically elected local leaders, engaged tirelessly and courageously in solving the daily problems of citizens in their martyred towns and villages, and who are being targeted precisely because of this leading role.

The Congress has repeatedly denounced the killing, kidnapping, intimidation and replacement of mayors and councillors.

These actions and the attempts to legitimise them through so-called referendums, can in no way be recognised by the international community.

The admirable resistance and resilience of the Ukrainian cities and people shows the importance of the work of local and regional authorities and the need to have strong local and regional communities and leaders within a democratic system based on common values. Our Congress has created an online platform “cities for cities” to connect needs and demands with offers and help – directly between cities. In June 2022, I will participate in a conference with Ukrainian mayors to discuss the reconstruction of Ukraine after the war, notably also the full re-establishment of democratic structures at local and regional level.

This session is an occasion to collectively reflect upon the future; the future for our continent and the future for the Council of Europe.

Our citizens need more than ever a strong Council of Europe and the values and principles the Council of Europe stands for and defends.

The Congress, its members and the territorial communities it represents form a vast network of 130,000 local and regional authorities in Europe, in which the core values of the Council of Europe are embedded.

This network contributes to building more sustainable, inclusive and participative societies.

There is no doubt that democratic renewal begins at the level of villages, municipalities, cities and regions, and the Congress is a formidable asset for the Council of Europe in this respect.

A stronger multi-level governance will allow for more effective co-operation and coordinated action both among and within countries at all levels.

Today’s challenging times remind us of the crucial importance of our values.

These are the source of our strength, which need to be further protected, defended and promoted within the Council of Europe and its member states at all three levels of governance.

This has been the essential role of the Council of Europe since its creation in 1949 and today, at this crossroads this role should be reaffirmed and consolidated.

The Congress is one of your few institutional tools to reach out to the citizens and to give the Council of Europe visibility, translated into concrete action.

The Congress supports the Committee of Ministers in reaffirming that multilateral co-operation within the Council of Europe remains the only means to build a future of peace, security and cohesion in Europe based on common values.

The Congress further supports the holding a Summit of the Council of Europe Heads of State and Government.

This to define common responses to the current challenges, and to shape the future of the continent for our sake and that of generations to come.

Just as the founders of the Council of Europe did back then.

As Winston Churchill put it eloquently in 1946, we must recreate the ‘European family’ of justice, mercy and freedom so that our young be able to regain the simple joys and hopes which make life worth living.

The Congress with its mayors and councillors from all 46 member states, stands ready to actively contribute to this reflection process and to the implementation of its results for the benefit of the women, men and children we represent and for whose well-being we are mandated, responsible and accountable.