

Forum of Ukrainian Municipalities “reVIVED Ukraine - reVIVED communities” – Kyiv, Ukraine

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

Opening of the Forum – Welcoming speech

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Dear Mayor Klitschko,
Dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to express my gratitude for the opportunity to be here today and address you on behalf of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe.

I would like to start by welcoming this Forum of Ukrainian Municipalities, and especially Minister Chernyshov and Mayor Sadovyyi, as well as all our friends and partners from Ukraine who could join us today.

In the face of the brutal war waged by the Russian Federation against Ukraine, you, the mayors and local councillors, are a vivid example of the courage and resilience of Ukrainian people and local authorities in defending your country and democratic values.

We stand united in solidarity with you, the people and authorities of Ukraine, and we praise your courage and fortitude as you continue to fight against the invasion.

As you already know, the reaction of the Council of Europe was resolute and unanimous: Russia was expelled from this Organisation and all its bodies, and from most of its treaties and Partial Agreements. Moreover, in the last Session which took place in March, the Congress unanimously adopted the Declaration condemning in the strongest terms the Russian Federation's war against Ukraine. In a consistent response against this blatant breach of international law, the Congress reaffirmed that it stands firmly by Ukraine and its people.

The resistance that we admire today in Ukraine comes from the long-lasting work of embedding fundamental democratic values in the local communities. We 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 an important part.

The fact that Ukrainian people have embraced the democratic values and made them their own is a source of your strength today. It is through commitment to these values that the revival of Ukraine will come. I'm very pleased at the title of our meeting today, revived Ukraine – revived communities. Rebuilding this country

must indeed start with local communities, from the bottom up. And I can only welcome the appeal of President Zelenskyy to cities and regions in the rest of Europe for support in this recovery effort.

We in the Congress are convinced of a crucial importance of local and regional authorities, not only in defence, but also in revival of their country. We see that today the mayors, local councillors and civil servants play a key role in protecting their citizens and providing essential services in these horrendous conditions. Local authorities who enjoy the highest levels of trust of their citizens, are indeed crucial for the defence of their communities. This is why they are targeted by the aggressor and I condemned on several occasions the intimidation, abductions and killing of local and regional elected representatives in Ukraine.

In these circumstances, we feel that our role is to provide support to you, local authorities and communities in Ukraine. We therefore praise the solidarity shown by numerous local and regional authorities and their associations in other European countries providing aid to their Ukrainian counterparts, especially with refugees and internally displaced persons.

We also know that there is a growing cooperation and mutual support between Ukrainian local communities themselves, which is a remarkable example of peer support and solidarity. We hope that such examples will be show-cased and promoted to inspire others to do the same and show the practical way to achieve this.

To co-ordinate these efforts, the Congress supported the launch of Cities4Cities, a platform that already counts with more than 100 registered municipalities. I thank mayor Bernd Vöhringer and the City of Sindelfingen very much for this valuable tool. The Secretary General of the Congress, Andreas Kiefer, will provide additional information later today.

It was only yesterday that we witnessed an example of this solidarity when visiting the Mayor and Deputy Mayor of Chelm in Poland. They did a tremendous job in organising the reception of Ukrainian refugees. They are an example for many.

The promotion of solidarity and resilience at local level constitute the backbone of the cooperation project of the Congress in Ukraine, aimed at reconstructing democracy at all levels.

Today, we need to build concrete action and synergies between all actors in the field to ensure the revival of Ukrainian communities destroyed by the war. We need to seize the advantage of the existing trust between citizens and their elected representatives to foster engagement and recovery effort. The revival of Ukrainian communities will be grounded on the strength that we are witnessing today from Ukrainian cities and villages and in the success of their local initiatives.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Congress believes that the work to protect human rights, the rule of law and democracy in Ukraine should be intensified by responding to the needs expressed by the Ukrainian authorities and civil society. The war has brutally reminded us of the crucial importance of these values on which the Council of Europe is built, and which must be promoted and defended at each level of governance, making our communities and societies stronger.

These values, the values of the Council of Europe, are our common values as Europeans and they must be preserved more than ever.

Thank you.