

Ukraine Reconstruction Business Forum – Rotterdam, The Netherlands

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

Opening of the Forum – Welcoming speech

Check against delivery

17 June 2022

Vice-Prime Minister Svrydenko,

Special Envoy Dzhaparova,

Dear Ambassador Kononenko,

(Mayor Aboutaleb)

Dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, I thank you 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.

As you probably know, in view of the brutal war waged by the Russian Federation against Ukraine, 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.

I would also like to use this opportunity to express our appreciation for the appeal of President Zelensky to cities and regions in the rest of Europe for support in rebuilding Ukraine, acknowledging the role local authorities and local elected representatives play in the times of war and post-war reconstruction.

We can see the evidence of their crucial importance on the frontlines in Ukraine today, playing a key role in defending their communities and their citizens, in providing them with essential services in these horrendous conditions.

This is why local and regional authorities are targeted by the aggressor, and I condemned on several occasions the intimidation, abductions and killing of local and regional elected representatives in Ukraine.

The mayors and local councillors are a vivid example of the courage and resilience of Ukrainian people and local authorities in defending the country and democratic values.

The government in Kiev told me they did not realize in the beginning of the war they possessed a second army.

An army being the local and regional authorities.

Without their courage and bravery the present situation would be totally different.

The local authorities played a decisive role in the defense.

This 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 believe that the Congress, the Council of Europe through our co-operation activities executed since 2014, have contributed an important part.

Becoming aspiring member of the EU would be a great stimulant in this matter.

The fact that Ukrainian people have embraced the democratic values and made them their own is a source of their strength today.

It is through commitment to these values that the reconstruction of Ukraine will come, which I believe must indeed start with local communities, from the bottom up.

In these circumstances, we feel that our role is to provide support to 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 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 initiative that led to this valuable tool.

The promotion of solidarity and resilience at local level constitute the backbone of the co-operation 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 reconstruction 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 reconstruction 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,

During the official visit to Ukraine from 1 to 4 June, I have been in the position to personally witness the commitment of local elected representatives, their representative association, the Association of Ukrainian Cities, the national authorities to stand at the forefront against the aggressor and to rebuilding their country.

In total we met in meetings more than a 100 mayors and about 300 mayors participated remotely on internet.

I was accompanied by the Congress Secretary General Andreas Kiefer.

On this occasion, I signed a joint Declaration with Vitali Klitschko, Chair of the Association of Ukrainian Cities and Mayor of Kyiv.

We are calling for the reconstruction of Ukrainian communities and the restoration of the functioning of local authorities in line with the European Charter of Local Self-Government.

Our programme also included visits to the Kyiv Oblast to examine the situation on the ground, meetings with mayors and representatives of central authorities, including with Minister Chernyshov, minister for communities and Territories Development of Ukraine.

We visited amongst others communities in the warzones of Kyiv, Zhytomyr, Irpin, Bucha and Fastiv.

We discussed the possibilities for reconstruction and the challenges that lie ahead on traumatised inhabitants, returning soldiers, reconstruction of roads and buildings, connected to the need for organization and coordination of all these activities.

This all in relation to the mutual felt urgency to continue the development of democracy in the country as a whole, but especially on the basis of local government.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Ensuring rapid and stable reconstruction of Ukrainian communities and the restoration of the full functioning of local governments to address unprecedented humanitarian, social, economic and environmental challenges they face as a consequence of war is of utmost importance. This can be achieved through partnerships between Dutch and Ukrainian municipalities and regions.

Only with a good functioning government on all scales projects with companies will be successful.

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

The Congress, as a political institution representing both regional and local authorities, will promote and facilitate partnership building and we will use the opportunity of inviting Dutch local authorities to events organised under the Congress project in Ukraine.

Our 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 for your attention.