

NALAS General Assembly, 12-13 May 2022, Belgrade, Serbia

Speech by Aleksandra MALETIC (Serbia, EPP/CCE), Vice-President of the Congress

Belgrade, Serbia, 12 May 2022

Dear Secretary General, Ms Mačužić Puzić,
Dear President, Ms Badan,
Dear Ms Magyar,
Dear colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, on behalf of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, and in my capacity as its Vice-President, I would like to thank the organisers for the opportunity to address you on this important occasion.

Since NALAS establishment it has been a true advocate and our partner in the efforts to strengthen local self-governance and align in with the European standards. We are convinced that activities that are undertaken by the Congress and networks such as NALAS, particularly in the area of strengthening of local democracy, have contributed to a better life for citizens.

In these trying times, while local governments are recovering from effects of covid-19 virus, in medical, as well as in economic sense, we can say that we have witnessed the positive effects of good regional cooperation. Western Balkans demonstrated excellent cooperation in cross border distribution of

scarce resources which proved crucial in safeguarding our elderly and most vulnerable.

After overcoming the critical point of pandemic, we as a humanity found ourselves in great tribulation. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe stands with Ukrainian people. People from South-East Europe know what war brings; they sympathize with all civilians in conflict zones, past and present. We all hope that there will be no other conflict zones in the future.

Dear colleagues,

We are indeed living in a specific moment, characterised by multiple crisis which put the exercise of local democracy under growing constraints and pressure.

At the same time, we are facing the threats of continuous climate change and its already visible consequences for our planet. In this framework, we highly appreciate the *Guidelines for responding in emergency situations* developed by NALAS, which emphasise the immediate role of local authorities and put forward their associations as the main co-ordinating and mobilising actors.

This conference is focused on role of municipalities in providing quality water and sanitation services. Water is not a commercial product like any other but a heritage which must be protected. Furthermore, water must not become a luxury; it should be equally accessible to all citizens- this reflects the importance of this conference.

Ladies and gentlemen,

To be able to respond properly, we need resilient and sustainable municipalities and cities. In these challenging times, it is more important than ever to focus on building resilient communities. The ability to prevent, resist and adapt to the consequences of crisis, and to bounce back quickly should be at the very core of democratic governance today. We must pursue and persevere with our work of building democracy and delivering good governance, for the benefit of our citizens and their trust in regional and local authorities. However, to achieve this, local authorities cannot act alone, but in co-operation and with shared responsibility with other levels of government. One of the good examples of cooperation at the national level, which contributes to better development at the local level, is the Open Balkans initiative.

The Open Balkan initiative is creating a foundation for better, unstoppable economic development of the three participating countries - Serbia, Albania and North Macedonia. At this point I find it appropriate to quote the President of Serbia; certainly, Mr Rama and Mr Zaev had similar statements. Mr Vučić said: "Whatever we may do, connecting the people is the most significant goal".

The Congress insists on strong multi-level governance, which entails strong local authorities, with proper competences and level of autonomy of decisions, including the sufficient financial resources to implement these decisions. We believe that the key to achieve this is an inclusive and transparent dialogue of national governments with local authorities and their national associations.

It goes without saying that the citizen remains at the heart of our action, and we must look at new ways and forms of democratic engagement of citizens in our deliberations and decision-making, in the governing processes at regional level. I'd also like to take the opportunity to recall that this June we will mark 10 years since the entry into force of the Additional Protocol to the European Charter of Local Self-Government on the right of citizens to participate in the affairs of a local authority.

We remain convinced that the efforts preserve our democratic heritage, undertaken by local and regional authorities and their networks and partners, are bearing fruit and will help us to better manage the present crisis.

Recent developments have highlighted the importance of safeguarding peace and protecting European fundamental values. The values of the Council of Europe are our common values as Europeans, and they must be preserved more than ever. United we shall overcome the hardships of today and build a peaceful future.

To conclude, I would like to re-iterate our support and congratulate NALAS for the excellent work that is being done. We look forward to pursuing our co-operation and joint efforts with NALAS for peaceful, more sustainable and resilient societies.

I thank you all and wish you a successful discussion ahead of us.