

Speaking points of Andreas Kiefer, Secretary General of the Congress, Council of Europe

CEI Local and Regional Authorities in the post crisis Europe – prospects for sustainable and resilient future, Sofia, 8 June 2022

Welcome and opening remarks

Mr. Stanislav Todorov (National Coordinator for Central European Initiative, Ministry of Foreign Affairs)

Mr. Zoran Jovanovic (Special Advisor to the Secretary General of the Central European Initiative)

Deputy Minister Nikolay Sidzhimov (for Environment and Water)

Mayor Daniel Panov, Chairman of the Board of NARMB,

Madam Executive Director Silvia Georgieva and your capable team,

Dear colleagues and friends,

It is good to be back to in person meetings and I would like to thank the Bulgarian CEI chairmanship for inviting the Congress of the Council of Europe to participate in and contribute to this important meeting of the key local actors of the region.

National associations of local and regional authorities are the most important partners of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, and it is only natural for the Congress to support their work and contribute to their initiatives such as this conference. The associations play a crucial role in relaying the Congress work in member States and in supporting the interests of territorial authorities, working in dialogue with national governments. Today's first meeting of the CEI Congress links the likeminded mayors and national authorities to new forms of political and concrete, operational cooperation.

This is why we, from the Congress of the CoE, welcome the creation of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Central European Initiative. Local and regional authorities, mayors, governors and councillors, are the knots in the democratic net that keeps Europe together. We in the Congress attach special importance to fostering networking and experience sharing between them, both within countries – where national associations provide a platform for such exchanges – and across national borders. With this new Congress, territorial communities of the CEI region now have a voice and a platform of exchanges, which we fully welcome and commend the Bulgarian CEI chairmanship on this initiative. This Congress complements the existing fora of national governments,

parliaments and the social partners to develop the region of the 16 CEI member states further, who are also member States of the Council of Europe.

Such networks only strengthen the local and regional dimension of the model of European democracy and society. As you know, the mission of the Congress of the Council of Europe is to advance territorial democracy on our continent, in particular through the implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in member States, which we monitor on a regular basis and to improve good governance like preventing corruption at all levels.

For Bulgaria, the most recent recommendation on local self-government was adopted in June 2021, in which we called in particular for clarifying and consolidating the competences of local authorities and strengthening their financial autonomy and capacity.

For us in the Congress, strong local competences and finances represent the core features of a functioning system of multi-level governance which we seek to develop in Europe. Multi-level governance, in turn, is a necessary condition for making our democracies and our societies more resilient to the multiple challenges and crises we are facing today. Prime Minister Kiril Petkov referred to this and the key role of mayors and councillors in his speech yesterday at several occasions.

Bernd Vöhringer, President of the Chamber of Local Authorities of the Congress and Mayor of Sindelfingen will refer to the role of the ECLSG in the context of saving the environment in the next working session.

As we are meeting today, the brutal war unleashed by the Russian Federation against Ukraine continues into the fourth month. Our thoughts, solidarity and support are with the Ukrainian people and authorities, mayors and local councillors who are at the frontline in defending their citizens and communities. At its session last March, our Congress unanimously adopted a Declaration condemning the war as a blatant breach of international law and a flagrant violation of the Statute of the Council of Europe.

Beside the unprecedented situation with the war of Russia against Ukraine, in Europe, the Covid-19 pandemic had already highlighted the need to improve multi-level governance as a system that can provide the most effective response in crisis situations. This need was acknowledged by the Council of Europe member governments at their meeting in Athens in November 2020. The climate crisis and its environmental, social and economic consequences constitute another major challenge for our societies. In the face of the climate emergency, environmental protection has become a central issue for all levels of governance. Here, too, multi-level governance plays a crucial role as local and regional authorities are key actors in combating climate change – not least through their important contribution to achieving the relevant Sustainable Development Goals.

The Congress of the Council of Europe acknowledged this role by including work on localisation of the SDGs and building sustainable communities among its priorities for 2021-2026. We are convinced that localising the SDGs is key to achieving the UN Agenda 2030, and that local and regional authorities must be closely involved in designing and implementing national action plans – as well as in presenting Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) at the High-Level Political Forum in New York.

A good example is the Norwegian 'whole of government' approach, where the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities, KS, conducts a Voluntary Subnational Review and participates in the preparation of the country's VNR. From the CEI region, Italy and Montenegro will be presenting their VNR this year, and we hope that the input from the country's local authorities will be taken on board. In this regard, national associations of cities and regions also play a role in encouraging national governments to take into account their local expertise and to support local and regional authorities in developing their own voluntary reviews.

The role of local and regional authorities in implementing Agenda 2030 is crucial because over two thirds of the SDG targets can only be implemented if we act at the local or regional level. But territorial authorities must have the freedom and resources to act, with the necessary decision-making and financial autonomy; and they must have the needed skills and tools to act, which can be acquired through networking and exchanges of best practices among municipalities and regions themselves.

This brings me back to the importance of such platforms as the Congress of CEI Local and Regional Authorities – a platform of dialogue, a forum of experience sharing, and a representative voice of territorial democracy within the Central European Initiative. Your role in strengthening multi-level governance in the region, building resilience of communities and responding to today's challenges is crucial.

The CEI is about networking and exchanging. And so is the Congress of the Council of Europe. So, let me propose to you to organise a meeting of the Congress members of your 16 countries to build on the spirit of the previous Montenegrin and the current Bulgarian CEI chairmanship around one of the two Sessions of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities. This will help to enhance regional political cooperation, stimulate cooperation and create additional synergies. Please get back to us, we are happy to help organising such a meeting together with the ambassadors of your countries to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg.

I wish you every success in this important mission – and you can count on support of the Council of Europe Congress in your work today and in the future!

Thank you for your attention.