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Speech by Andreas Kiefer, Secretary General

Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, Council of Europe

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(ca 1226 words – 10 minutes)

Mr Chairman,

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear friends,

It is a great pleasure for me to have the opportunity to address you today, at the General Assembly of the Assembly of European Regions. I very much regret not being able to be with you today in Brussels and to have missed the welcome event last night. It is these informal events that build and foster relations, trust and even lasting friendships.

As a large European network representing regions from 35 countries¹, the Assembly of European Regions is an important strategic partner of the Congress, with shared values and principles.

The Assembly's strategic goals and principles, its vision of a grassroots Europe is perfectly in line with the goals and principles of the Council of Europe and the Congress, and it comes as no surprise that our organisations have been actively cooperating since the foundation of the Assembly – first, in the framework of the

¹ <http://aer.eu/aer-largest-independent-network-regions-wider-europe/>

Standing Conference of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe, then in the framework of the Congress established in 1994.

The Assembly of European Regions and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities have a very special relationship. Our two institutions have always cooperated and supported each other in their work, always with one goal in mind: strengthening territorial democracy, multi-level governance and subsidiarity. Our regional governments, assemblies and parliaments must have the means and capacities to deliver!

The AER is one of only two “statutory partners” of the Congress. Besides in institutional matters we cooperate in developing the dimension of deliberative democracy and youth engagement at regional level, through the participation of the Congress Rapporteur on deliberative democracy in your thematic debate; my participation, together with a Congress Youth Delegate, in the AER Summer Academy, and participation of the Congress regional Rapporteur on rural youth in your debate on regions empowering young people. The AER Summer Academy will also be presented during the World Forum for Democracy in November, in a Lab sponsored by the Congress.

The Congress and the AER are natural partners in promoting regional democracy and better regional governance – we as an organ in a pan-European institution – you as an association and network in most of our CoE member states. And as you, we in the Congress strongly believe that the future of Europe lies in reinforcing local and regional democratic self-government, fostering cross-border cooperation and dialogue between Europe’s towns and regions, and promoting regional diversity.

We recognise the regions as key partners in the European project, a bridge between the State and citizens within their local communities. For us, stronger regions with stronger competences and financial autonomy are a crucial component in the multi-level governance system, and the driving force for ensuring territorial cohesion on our continent. This is what unites our two institutions.

Many AER member regions are represented in the Congress and actively participate in our work as rapporteurs, Bureau members and committee chairpersons.

Many AER members have directly engaged in the Congress work. For example, your former President, Hande BOZATLI, was our long-time member and Congress Rapporteur and Thomas ANDERSSON, former AER Bureau member, is the Chair of the Congress Current Affairs Committee. Magnus BERNTSSON is our rapporteur on local and regional democracy in Belgium. I also want to mention the participation of your Youth Delegates in Congress sessions and the long-standing past cooperation with the Youth Regional Network and its President Gloria VITALY; and, of course, my excellent cooperation with the former Secretary General Mathieu MORI and the current Secretary General Christian SPAHR, who both attended many Congress events and Bureau meetings and actively supported Congress work on different occasions.

The Congress and the AER cooperated extensively on regionalisation issues – for example, the Congress Reports on regionalisation and the AER Report on the State of Regionalisation in Europe. The Council of Europe “Reference Framework on Regional Democracy” was made available during several AER Assemblies.

And most recently, after Russia brutally attacked Ukraine, we worked closely together, in regular meetings with other key European partner associations, to coordinate our action and build synergies to ensure assistance to Ukrainian regions and municipalities. I am very pleased that this work has led to the creation, by the European Committee of the Regions in June, of the European Alliance for Cities and Regions for the Reconstruction of Ukraine, with the participation of six European associations, including the AER. The AER also supported the [“Cities4Cities”](#) initiative, launched by the Congress and the City of Sindelfingen in Germany to connect the European cities and the regions with their Ukrainian counterparts.

Dear colleagues,

Today, Europe is going through very difficult times. Russia's war against Ukraine has a devastating impact on the people of Ukraine, but also on the European continent and beyond. Under the strain of this war and many other challenges such as the

COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, migration, economic and social problems, we witness polarization of the society and the rise of extremism fuelled by hate speech and fake news. We are witnessing a decline in citizen trust in politicians and institutions of governance, at all levels of government.

As we tackle these challenges, we need to go back to the origins of the European project and restore unity of purpose and unity of values in our common mission. We must reject all forms of violence and embrace diversity, and most importantly, we must learn to better respect each other in spite of having divergent opinions and beliefs, which are increasingly threatened in today's society.

It is thus more important than ever to support local and regional governments, guide them through these crises, and give them the means and the power to act. And both the AER and the Congress have a crucial role to play in this regard.

We know that towns and villages, cities and regions are best placed to engage citizens directly in decision-making and democratic processes, so that our communities become stronger, more inclusive and more resilient to future challenges. Dialogue and civic debate are of utmost importance in ensuring that extreme views stop being mainstream and a silent majority is just a spectator of noise actors on the stage of social media.

The Congress, like the Assembly of European Regions, is committed to contributing to the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the implementation of the UN Agenda 2030. The Congress actively contributed to the AER Conference on this subject in October 2021, when we reaffirmed our common will to build sustainable societies for our citizens, and we will pursue cooperation on these issues.

Ladies and gentlemen,

To conclude, I would like to congratulate you on the excellent work already accomplished, and wish you every success in the years to come. I have no doubt that the Assembly of European Regions and the Congress will remain key partners in

empowering the regions and promoting regional self-government. The areas of co-operation and synergies have clearly been identified, and we have, without any doubt, many joint projects ahead of us. Our complementarity is strength: The Congress as an organ and monitoring body in the Council of Europe and the AER as a vibrant network of committed politicians and dedicated civil servants, with political leaders actively working in both structures.

I have a special relationship with the AER. From 1989 onward, my home region Land Salzburg, was very active and has benefitted a lot from the contacts made and know-how learned before Austria became an EU member in 1995. It is this exchange and mutual learning for politicians and administrations that makes AER membership so beneficial – mutually beneficial!

Among the many examples from my experiences I want to mention

- Cooperation with Caras-Severin in transferring a skilift from Maria Alm to Semenic
- Hosting Agi Kardos from Timis as an intern in the Salzburg European Affairs Office in the framework of the AER membership
- And the platform of associations to contribute to the constitutional and then Lisbon Treaty achieving Subsidiarity, Proportionality and services of general interest to be included in the text

This shows that together we can achieve something: Define objectives, rally the likeminded and actively participate in the structures.

I am very grateful to have been able to work with you over the past twelve and a half years as Secretary General of the Congress, and I appreciate the great support, I had from the AER for my candidature and election at the time.

I can only wish the AER and the many friends and colleagues I have met and worked with over the years all the best for the years to come.

I will miss you!

Thank you!