

**Mayors Summit Against Antisemitism – Athens, Greece**

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

**Closing Session – Tudor Hall Restaurant, Athens, Greece**

*Check against delivery*

1 December 2022

Dear Mayor Bakoyannis,

Dear Minister Kerameus,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a particular pleasure for me to be here in Athens, the cradle of democracy to discuss issues at the heart of our societies and our way of living together.

The discussions have been a source of inspiration and thought about how local authorities can fight hatred and celebrate the diversity of our communities.

The challenges of living together and in particular the responsibility of those in power, were an ancient Greek preoccupation from Homer to late antiquity and a persistent question over the centuries.

History shows us some paradigmatic examples of success, of cultures and religions living together.

But it also shows us terrible examples of hatred and discrimination and the horrors that human beings are capable of.

As the President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, I look back on a day of inspiration, but also tough discussions about our own responsibility as local politicians to do better.

I will take these insights with me to the Congress, which has long been working to support cities in fighting discrimination.

For those who may be unfamiliar with the Congress, we are a body of the Council of Europe.

The Council of Europe is our continent's leading human rights organisation, protecting citizens' rights with independent and transparent monitoring bodies.

It was created in 1949 on the ashes of World War II, to make sure that the “Never Again” philosophy is embedded in European society and that Europe becomes a family of democracies based on Human Rights and the rule of law.

Its most well-known treaty is the European Convention on Human Rights, which binds all 46 of our member States and which is applied and protected by the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg but there are some 200 more such treaties addressing our societies challenges.

And let me say at the outset, Human Rights are not the problem but the solution. We have heard a lot about the first amendment today. We do not have a first amendment in Europe. Freedom of speech is of course a fundamental Human Rights enshrined in the European Human Rights Convention, but as much as it is a fundamental pillar of our European societies it is not an absolute right, it has limits among which the human rights of others, for instance: you cannot deny the holocaust in Germany, that would be a criminal offence. Likewise you cannot say that a minority is inferior, that would be a hate crime.

As for the Congress which I have the honour to preside over, it is part of the Council of Europe represents over 130,000 authorities across 46 member states and discusses the most pressing issues of local democracy and offers support in finding solutions.

By bringing together elected representatives, from large cities to small villages, from urban regions to rural areas, we facilitate a mutual understanding – a discovery of the fact that the daily challenges we as elected officials from different countries face at community level, are perhaps more similar than we may have thought.

Over the past two decades, we’ve had to face rising antisemitism, religious intolerance, hate speech about migrants and refugees, expressions of radicalisation and terrorism and movements questioning acquired rights of women and LGBTI persons.

In this context of rising hostility against minorities, the Congress has been working hard to look at how local politicians can use their potential as community leaders to build inclusive towns and cities. The mayors’ alliance against radicalisation set up by the Congress is an example of our efforts in this area.

Our conviction, deeply rooted on the dignity of human beings, is that cities have to be a place where everyone can feel safe and welcome.

Our cities are becoming increasingly diverse places, where people of different religions, ethnic origins, sexual orientations, and identities live and work alongside each other. There should be a place for everyone and everyone should be respected; there is no place for hatred, no place for antisemitism.

This diversity should be celebrated. With this comes significant responsibilities for mayors and elected representatives. Creating inclusive societies takes work and commitment from all levels of government and civil society.

There is a special role for local authorities.

As the bridge between communities and governments, we are uniquely well-placed to fight prejudice and foster a sense of trust among the different groups which shape our cities.

This trust is essential in strengthening democracy and can only be achieved when all groups feel free and safe to participate in public life.

It is up to mayors and local authorities to create this sense of security by tackling discrimination, antisemitism and xenophobia by creating spaces for respectful and constructive dialogue.

It is this vision of healthy, inclusive local democracy which has guided much of the Congress’ work in recent years.

In particular through our thematic reports outlining the role of local and regional authorities in effectively managing diversity.

For instance, we adopted a report exploring the role for local authorities in the protection of Jewish cemeteries.

This highlighted the importance of safeguarding the diversity of our cultural heritage in order to learn from our past.

The shameful realities of European history mean that Jews fleeing persecution have had to abandon religious burial sites and that some cemeteries now find themselves in towns and cities without a Jewish population.

Our report recommends that authorities partner with Jewish associations to guarantee the respectful protection and treatment of these sites.

Respect for the heritage of all groups who live or have lived in our cities is vital for fostering tolerance and understanding among different communities.

As local and regional elected officials, we have a responsibility to hold accountable peers who spread hate or incite intolerance.

Each and every one of our citizens deserves to feel the support of their local governments and trust that we will always act to protect and promote the interests of all our citizens.

In this increasingly polarised world, it is also important to recognise that we, as elected representatives, are not immune from hostility.

In a report adopted this October, the Congress investigated the worrying impact of hate speech on the working conditions of elected officials and the increasingly toxic environment in which politicians operate. The Israeli ambassador pointed to this issue this morning.

One of our conclusions was that this hate disproportionately affects and can discourage those from already underrepresented groups from seeking office.

As I said earlier, the participation of citizens from all backgrounds in local public life is vital for building strong cities.

Local authorities need to reflect the diversity of their communities in order to respond effectively to their needs.

This means that everyone should be able to take their seat at the table without having to face abuse or fear.

Our report therefore underlines the need for measures such as proper training and guidance for elected officials.

The report also supports participatory democratic mechanisms to promote strong and healthy links between citizens and their representatives.

These reports give a good overview of common challenges Europe's cities and regions face and give guidance on how to address them.

To offer more support to cities and regions to tackle these complex issues, the Congress has developed practical tools for our members to build stronger, more inclusive local democracies.

A good example are our human rights handbooks.

These are practical tools for local and regional administrations showcasing how to implement human rights at the local level.

Our first volume focused on how local authorities can fight discrimination against refugees, migrants, Roma communities, and LGBTI people.

Another practical example of how the Congress helps cities and regions building inclusive societies is our 2016 toolkit on “Organising Intercultural and Interreligious Activities at local level”.

This toolkit was made in response to extremism in Europe’s towns and cities.

It provides a guide to help cities across Europe bring citizens from different communities together, including twelve principles for interreligious dialogue and guidelines for local authorities.

While it is focussed specifically on interfaith dialogue, I think you may find it a useful tool for organising dialogue and combatting of hate between other groups of citizens as well.

Both the handbook and the toolkit are available in the Congress website which I encourage you to consult also listed in the Summit website.

These are very important tools in combatting prejudice.

Hatred and discrimination unfortunately touch all of our cities in some way, which means that we all have a shared stake in finding solutions.

This is a duty of each and every city across the world for the present and the future generation.

In this respect, I would like to refer to the UN Sustainable Development Goals and in particular SDG11 regarding “Sustainable cities and communities”.

Local action is needed for the achievement of more than two thirds of the sustainable development goals, so our role, our responsibility, is of paramount importance here.

I am convinced that by continuing to work together and share innovative ways of working, we can all contribute our share in making our cities more inclusive, safe and sustainable for all. And I think that Mayors Bakoyannis and Adams exemplify how that can be done.

I would therefore again like to thank the organisers of this summit which has been an opportunity to learn from one another on how to build strong, resilient and inclusive cities.

We should take these lessons home and stay in contact beyond this summit to learn from each other.

Let’s not focus on what others should do, but ask ourselves what we can do to make the world a better place.

Thank you