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Speech by Gunn-Marit Helgesen, President of the Congress

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Gunn Marit Helgesen, President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities

Dear colleagues,

Welcome to the 51st Session of the Congress.

We have a busy agenda ahead of us but let me begin by reaffirming our solidarity with Ukraine, which continues to face relentless attacks.

This week, we will stand firmly alongside the Ukrainian people and our colleagues who continue to serve their communities in extraordinarily difficult circumstances. I would also like to pay tribute to the Council of Europe staff members in our Kyiv office for their dedication in implementing our cooperation projects in dire circumstances.

We know how devastating the loss of innocent lives and the destruction of homes, schools and essential services are — and how difficult it is to rebuild when everything risks being destroyed again. I am therefore always impressed by the dedication of our Ukrainians colleagues in our work.

Dear colleagues,

Across Europe, we are also witnessing growing social tensions and unrest in many of our cities.

The rising cost of living, the housing crisis, the difficulties facing students and young people, and widening inequalities are putting enormous pressure on our communities.

For too many citizens, the prospect of a better future seems increasingly out of reach. Frustration is growing, and with it, distrust towards political institutions and those who represent them.

We have seen this frustration turn into anger, and sometimes violence in some of our member States.

I would like to assure the mayors whose town halls have been attacked or even destroyed during such outbreaks of violence of our full support.

Violence and destruction can never be the answer.

But we cannot ignore the reasons and concerns that fuel much of this unrest.

Our responsibility as elected representatives is not only to listen, but to respond with concrete solutions.

We must make housing more accessible, protect essential public services, create opportunities for young people and ensure that no one is left behind.

Above all, we must rebuild trust between citizens and those who govern them.

And this is where local and regional democracy has a crucial role to play.

We see our citizens' difficulties first-hand. We are often the first to hear their frustrations, but we are also best placed to engage with them, bring people together and turn their concerns into action.

Trust cannot be restored through declarations alone. It must be earned, day after day, through dialogue, honesty and results.

These challenges demand strong political responses at every level of governance.

At European level, the ongoing reform of the Council of Europe offers an opportunity to make our Organisation more focused, effective and responsive to the challenges facing our democracies.

We have powerful tools at our disposal: common standards, monitoring mechanisms and practical expertise.

We must use them more effectively and ensure that our work makes a tangible difference.

Local and regional democracy must be at the heart of the Council of Europe's response to the challenges ahead.

We will have the opportunity to discuss this with the Secretary General this afternoon.

The New Democratic Pact for Europe is particularly relevant in this context.

Across our continent, democratic institutions are facing growing mistrust, polarisation and disinformation.

Too many citizens feel that their voices are no longer heard, and that democracy is failing to deliver.

We cannot defend democracy without also making it work for people.

This is why the Congress plays an active role in shaping the New Democratic Pact.

This week, we will discuss how to identify the early signs of democratic backsliding, strengthen election observation and prevent corruption at local and regional level.

These are not abstract institutional questions.

They go to the heart of public confidence in democracy: the integrity of elections, the transparency of public decisions and the accountability of those who exercise power.

I encourage you all to contribute to this debate, drawing on your own experiences and the challenges you face in your communities.

Dear colleagues,

The challenges we face are considerable, but so is our responsibility.

Let us use this session to strengthen our common commitment to a democracy that is closer to citizens, more responsive to their concerns and capable of delivering real solutions.

Because ultimately, the strength of our democracy will be measured not only by the institutions we defend, but by the difference we make in people's everyday lives.

Dear colleagues,

Before we begin our debates, I am pleased to announce that the Congress is now on Instagram.

You are welcome to spread the word among your networks, follow the Congress account and share the posts or leave a comment.

I wish you all a productive and successful session.

Thank you.