

31st Council of Europe Conference of Ministers of Justice

RESPONSES OF JUSTICE TO URBAN VIOLENCE

Speech by President Keith Whitmore Congress of Local and Regional Authorities Council of Europe

Presidence,
Ministers,
Deputy Secretary General,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to address this Conference on behalf of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities. The issues we will be discussing during these two days have been indeed commanding our attention over the past years, with outbreaks of urban violence and social unrest bursting out more and more frequently in our cities across the continent.

We all remember anti-globalist actions during G8 summits, burning suburbs of Paris, social protest in Athens or, most recently, riots in my home country, the United Kingdom. While this violence certainly attracts international attention and brings about emergency response at the national level, it is urban communities – residents, businesses, public spaces – that bear the brunt of the unrest, and it is local authorities that represent the first line of response and that have to cope with its immediate impact and aftermath and to develop and implement “reconciliation” measures.

It is also from local authorities first and foremost that our citizens expect effective action in their defence when violence breaks out. After all, they act as intermediaries between the different technical services concerned, as interlocutors with different tiers of government, and they are also answerable to the electorate for security in the town and the electorate’s perception of security.

It is only appropriate then that the Congress would look into this issue, which we have done on several occasions in the past. However, our approach has always been to seek to address the root causes of urban unrest, which often goes to the question of inequality, discrimination, lack of access to rights, dire economic situation and unemployment, or lack of social cohesion. It is true that something that begins as social unrest or political protest is almost always used and hijacked by criminal elements, and that a disadvantaged and frustrated population represents a fertile soil for criminal minds and a breeding ground for violence.

But it is also true that we must distinguish the underlying reasons for an outbreak and respond accordingly. This is why our approach in the Congress has always been more of a preventative nature, seeking to establish dialogue between public authorities and local residents and to defuse tensions by fostering intercultural and inter-faith dialogue and building better relations between community groups, but also by

promoting integration, better social cohesion through employment and meaningful participation of citizens in community life.

Indeed, much urban violence today seems to come from the utter frustration and disappointment of our citizens with our democratic institutions and politicians, whose deficiencies were revealed with a vengeance by the current economic crisis, as well as citizens' feeling of exclusion and inability to have their say and to influence decision-making. This is especially true among young people, and this is hardly surprising: their unemployment in certain countries has hit or even passed the 50 per cent mark.

Last year, in the aftermath of the UK riots, the Congress organised a debate in its plenary session on new forms of civic activism, including urban violence. One of the guest speakers, a young activist from Greece, spoke of the crisis of values perceived by his generation of young people who see austerity measures – in the absence of jobs or prospects for the future – as youth having to pay for the corrupt political practices of previous generations. “I do not condone violence, but I can understand the reasons for it,” he said. “Politicians take decisions without consulting us. We are defending our right to express our opinions and to participate, but also our right to work, to housing and to education”, he added.

What has been happening in Greece is clearly political protest, the other extreme have been riots in the United Kingdom, which were widely condemned as criminal acts. However, the riots did reveal that the economic crisis has also weakened the UK social model of integration – a solidarity-based urban model where social cohesion and ‘living together’ are major objectives of local policies, which has always been advocated by the Congress. Post-riot reports pointed out that a lack of support and opportunity for young people contributed to the outbreak, and that the key to avoiding future riots is to have communities where everyone feels they have a stake in society, where opportunities are available to all, especially young people, where the police and the public work together to support the maintenance of law and order, and where the criminal justice system punishes those who commit crimes but also commits itself to making sure – for all our sakes – that they don't do it again.

In its resolutions on urban security in Europe of 2006 and on community policing of 2007, the Congress called for greater dialogue with local residents and the setting-up of ‘local urban security partnerships’ between public authorities, the police and local residents, as well as the private and voluntary sectors, media, universities and professional associations. We proposed measures for municipal police forging links with local residents, for establishing community-policing systems, and for fostering social cohesion in disadvantaged urban areas. We recommended national governments to put an emphasis on local policing, ensure respect for human rights in the exercise of police work, and encourage law enforcement agencies to work alongside leaders of ethnic groups and representatives of different faiths. Most recently, in our 2011 resolution on meeting the challenge of intercultural and inter-faith tensions, we called on local authorities to engage religious and cultural groups at local level.

Summing up, we in the Congress are convinced that our political and social response to urban violence must be fostering dialogue, building partnerships, engaging citizens – especially young people and minority groups – and addressing their concerns,

notably by encouraging job creation. Local and regional authorities are best placed to spearhead such action. However, as for *legal* response, responses of justice, which will be discussed at this conference, I believe that such response must be well targeted, taking into account the causes and circumstances, for it to be truly just and fair.

I know that it will be hardly possible to dot all the 'I's and cross all the 'T's during these two days, but I hope it will be possible to work out some basics for a common approach in response to urban violence. For their part, local and regional authorities will remain close partners of national governments in keeping peace and security in our communities.

Thank you.