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Address by Mr Hanno Pevkur, Minister of the Interior, on behalf of the Estonian Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers

Mrs President, members of the Congress, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a particular pleasure for me to address you here today, on behalf of the Estonian Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers. Let me first offer my sincere congratulations to you [Mrs Gudrun Mosler-Törnström], on your election as President of the Congress. I wish you the very best in your functions.

I would like to begin by referring to the political issues which have retained our attention in the last months. I will then touch on the priorities of our Chairmanship which are of particular relevance to the Congress.

Firstly I must of course refer to the attempted coup d'état in Turkey and the dramatic events which took place during the night of 14 to 15 July. Both the Secretary General and the Estonian Chairmanship made visits to Ankara and maintained close contacts with the Turkish authorities following the coup and the subsequent declaration of the state of emergency.

On 7 September, the Ministers Deputies held an exchange of views with the Turkish Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Cavusoglu. It was pointed out during this exchange that the Turkish authorities are legitimate in their action to bring to justice those who organised and took part in the coup attempt. However, it was also underlined that due diligence must be exercised in ensuring full respect for the rights guaranteed by the European Convention on Human Rights, in particular the right to a fair trial, and to avoid any indiscriminate action that would target people who had nothing to do with the coup. A transparent, independent and impartial judicial process is essential. Respect for freedom of expression and of the media as well as freedom of association and assembly is another core principle to be upheld.

The Council of Europe should continue to provide its valuable assistance in Turkey. The Estonian Chairmanship trusts that the Turkish authorities will follow up the recommendations made after the two recent meetings held between experts from the Turkish Ministry of Justice and representatives of the secretariat on steps to take to ensure that the measures adopted under the state of emergency comply with the requirements of the European Convention on Human Rights.

The situation will continue to be followed closely by the Committee of Ministers.

A further priority for the Committee is the situation in Ukraine.

The democratic reforms undertaken by the country in the context of the 2015-2017 Council of Europe Action Plan for Ukraine are presently under review. Several important steps have already been taken and deserve to be mentioned, in particular regarding the judiciary, preventing and prosecuting corruption and the creation of a new National Police. Further efforts are under way with regard to other questions such as electoral legislation but also with regard to strengthening local and regional government. While some intensive work has been carried out on decentralisation, marked by several important pieces of legislation, the Congress will agree that only constitutionally-guaranteed decentralisation will anchor democracy at the regional and local levels. We must continue to support Ukraine in its efforts to this end and in the general implementation of the Action Plan and we count on the Congress's continued assistance.

In doing so, we must remember that the country is currently facing very difficult times. In this respect, the Committee of Ministers pays particular attention to the on-going conflict, the violation of territorial integrity, and the resulting deterioration of human rights and overall security.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Combating terrorism, radicalisation and extreme violence which can lead to terrorism, remains a high priority for the Committee of Ministers. Since the last session of the Congress, we have unfortunately witnessed a number of terrible attacks, such as those in Nice on 14 July and in the South of Turkey or more recently, the shootings in the United States.

Preventing radicalisation leading to terrorism requires a concerted response from all levels of governance: local, state, and international level. We have a good example of international cooperation format in the EU called the ATLAS network that unites European Union special intervention units. Under this network the ATHOS 2016 (Allied Terrorism Hindering Operation Simulation) international special intervention units' anti-terrorism exercise was held in Estonia on 15 to 17 August bringing together more than 400 participants and by being so the largest special units' counter-terrorism exercise in the European Union this year.

ATLAS network mostly deals with the consequences of radicalisation. In preventing radicalisation, however, local and regional governments have an important role to play at grass-roots level and I welcome the fact that the follow-up to your Strategy thereon will be examined during this plenary session. The Committee of Ministers welcomes the contributions that your Congress has already made with a view of tackling radicalisation such as the "Guidelines on preventing radicalisation and manifestations of hate at grass-roots level", the launch of the "Alliance of European cities against violent extremism" and the toolkit for local and regional authorities for "Organising intercultural and interreligious activities". I am sure that these will serve as practical and effective tools on the ground.

Another welcomed example is the theme of the European Local Democracy Week 2016 which is "Living together in culturally diverse societies: respect, dialogue, interaction". Identifying ways to promote cultural diversity as a richness and not a threat is crucial, but not only in combating radicalisation. Today we are witnessing a rise in racism, intolerance, discrimination, hate speech and other forms of extremist and xenophobic expression. The refugee crisis has further fuelled this growing atmosphere of intolerance. These trends threaten the building of inclusive and peaceful societies and it is imperative that we tackle the situation. We need to make a clear distinction between refugees and terrorists.

In this respect, much responsibility falls on the shoulders of local and regional authorities, who have to deal directly with the difficult consequences of social fragmentation and mistrust between citizens. It is therefore a welcomed development to note that one of the major priorities selected by your

Congress for 2017 to 2020 concerns building safe and inclusive societies that respect diversity. It is only by joining efforts that we can hope to bring about the results we are seeking.

Allow me now to say just a few words regarding the Estonian Chairmanship, which is nearing its end. The last six months have indeed been very full ones, during which we have worked towards furthering the core goals of the Council of Europe. Our Chairmanship identified three main priorities.

The first is the protection of human rights and the rule of law on the internet. We consider this is needed more than ever in the light of the technological revolution with which we are all living. Through providing support and hosting several events, and promoting the activities and instruments of the Council of Europe our aim was to promote internet governance as a catalyst for protecting the human rights of Internet users and ensuring their digital safety.

We believe that the digital age should be embraced by all levels of government. New technology provides numerous opportunities – not least with a view to reducing costs and improving efficiency, but also in promoting transparency, democratic participation and empowering citizens. I am sure that, as members of the Congress, you have a wealth of information and good practices that could be shared. Coming from a country where e-democracy is well developed, and has already proven its benefits, I would encourage the Congress to give consideration to this area of work.

This brings me to our second priority which is children's rights. During the Chairmanship we have sought to promote the new Strategy for the Rights of the Child, giving particular emphasis to child participation, children's rights in the digital environment and children in migration. These subjects will be addressed at an annual high-level conference organised by the Estonian Human Rights Institute on 3-4 November in Tallinn. I very much hope that the Congress will be represented at that Conference. As Estonia is also holding the presidency in UNICEF, a side-event on the subject of children in the migration crisis was organised in cooperation with UNICEF in the margins of the High level meeting of the Plenary of the UN General Assembly on large movements of refugees and migrants" on 19 September 2016.

The prevention of and fight against the sexual abuse of children also remains high on the children's rights agenda. Estonia will ratify the Lanzarote Convention in the coming weeks and continues to promote better implementation of the Convention. I would also recall that 18 November marks the European Day on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse. Given the gravity of the question and the important role of local and regional authorities in dealing with the victims of abuse and their abusers, I would urge all authorities to consider carrying out awareness-raising activities on this issue to mark this day. There are tools and material available from the Council of Europe Department responsible for Children's Rights which can be very useful to this end.

The final priority I shall mention here is that of gender equality. Achieving gender equality is central to the protection of human rights, the functioning of democracy, economic growth and sustainability. More equal societies work better for everyone. As you might be aware, Estonia has taken this priority very seriously by inaugurating the first female President, Mrs Kersti Kaljulaid last week. During our Chairmanship, Estonia has promoted the Council of Europe's Gender Equality Strategy for 2014-2017, whilst giving particular attention to gender mainstreaming and the role of new media in promoting gender equality. We welcome the fact that your agenda this week includes two interesting debates on the issue, the first on women's political participation and representation at local and regional levels and the second on gender budgeting. The Congress is an important partner for the implementation of the Strategy and these will certainly bring a useful contribution to the process.

These have been our priorities during the Estonian Chairmanship but they are objectives which will continue, long after our Chairmanship has ended. We hope that the Congress too, will continue to work on these important issues in its future work.

Before concluding, I would like to emphasise the commitment of Estonia to local democracy development.

We know that local government has a particular responsibility to be in close contact with local people, local communities and local businesses, whatever the financial constraints. As mentioned before, local authorities have a particular role to play to foster social cohesion, protect the vulnerable and ensure that citizens feel that they can put their trust in their local councils. Your debates on good governance in metropolitan areas, on ethics and transparency are all important elements to ensure that these goals are fulfilled.

I would like to emphasise that we, in Estonia, are in the midst of reforming our local governance. As described before, local governments have important role, but there is not always the needed capacity or capability to fulfil local needs. Thus we are on the road of laying the long term foundations to sustainable and able local governance.

Returning to the work of the Congress, you do not have an easy task ahead of you, but I wish you all well in your role for promoting and safeguarding the core values of this Organisation in your home towns and local communities, which nowadays is more crucial than ever.

I thank you for your attention.