

Acceptance speech Presidency of the Congress,

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1347 words

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Dear colleagues of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe.

My election as the new President of our Congress is a very special moment for me.

10 **It is an honour to receive your trust to hold this position, thank you!**

I am fully aware of the duties and responsibilities that come with this important position and I am determined to devote myself to it.

15 **But I am not standing here alone.**

We are here, all of us, to meet the challenges of this new term.

20 **Together, we are all ambassadors of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and the values of Human Rights and Democracy that our Organisation, the Council of Europe, stands for and which are more important than ever.**

Together we represent more than 850 million citizens and more than 150.000 municipalities and regions.

In line with this reasoning, I am concerned over Turkey's recently announced withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention.

25 **This is a landmark treaty of the Council of Europe to prevent, prosecute, and eliminate violence against women and domestic violence.**

I can deeply regret this decision to withdraw from this important Convention.

30 **Therefore I call on the Turkish authorities to reconsider and remain within the Istanbul convention.**

35 **With the acceptance of my presidency, I am the successor of Anders Knape, Gudrun Mosler Törnström and many others before them.**

I am aware that both Gudrun and Anders have laid a foundation on which I can continue to build.

I am also aware that this is a solid foundation.

40 **A basis for further development, representing the values that we stand for.**

During his presidency, Anders Knape had to face difficult issues.

The successive budget cuts have impacted our activities.

45 **This worsened further by staff reductions and freezing of posts.**

In the last part of Anders Knape's presidency, the Corona crisis came on top.

The pandemic prevented all of us from having meetings in person to discuss relevant topics.

50 **Because meetings, discussions, conversations, consultation, knowledge transfer are core values for democracy, the restrictions to meet in person severely limited our possibilities.**

55 **Under leadership of Anders Knape, the secretariat has, in all respects, delivered an exceptional performance.**

Despite all limitations the quality of our work has increased rather than decreased,

I have experienced this during my chairmanship of the monitoring committee for the last four and a half years.

60 **Therefore, I would like to express my admiration for this achievement of Anders Knape and the secretariat.**

Please Secretary General , convey my appreciation to the secretariat.

65 **2021 could prove to be a turning point and be a herald for renewal.**

We have had a series of crises and do not know what is yet to come.

70 **The financial banking crisis, the climate crisis, polarization in society and the COVID-19 pandemic are all examples that mark this era.**

Crises such as these lead to a reevaluation of the role of public authorities.

75 **Citizens, but also the business communities experience and understand that public authorities are needed to deal with crises like these.**

Of course, governments do not always perform optimally.

Mistakes are made, but a lot of good is done too.

Society is experiencing turbulence, there is lots of motion.

80 **We have not asked for the events that happen to us, but they do present themselves.**

For many citizens this leads to feelings of loneliness, financial insecurity, of getting lost, not having partners to solve the problems that have arisen.

85 **There can be no misunderstanding that this cannot be a concern for national governments alone.**

Yes, national governments do have a great responsibility and must make the right decisions and take necessary measures.

90 **At the same time, it is evident that we as regional and local authorities are closest to the citizens.**

In that position we have important responsibilities that we can rightly be called upon.

We know the people and their needs as we are closer to them on their every day lives, more than central governments.

95 **We must stand next to our citizens, protect their human and civil rights, preserve democracy and where possible**

guarantee security and offer prospects for a healthy and economic future.

100 **It is because of this ambition we have to be alert on those situations where democracy and constitutional values, civil and human rights are at stake or in danger.**

We all are willing, and should always be, to stand for these fundamental rights, founded in the Charter of the Congress.

105 **Also, or maybe especially, in times of crisis the values of the Council of Europe should be guarded and if necessary be fought for.**

So the quality of life, the respect of the individual and the societal responsibility towards all of us will not only be guaranteed, but will be improved if possible.

110 **In this aspiration our tools are debate, reports, factfinding and monitoring together with our contacts, co-operation activities, publications and presentations.**

115 **I am a president with a social democratic background and as such a member of the political group of Socialists, Greens and Progressive Democrats.**

But I want to be a president of all political groups in our Congress, the EPP, the ILDG, the ECR and the members not belonging to a political group.

120 **During this Congress session together we will decide on the new priorities for this new mandate.**

These priorities should be translated into the programming of the three committees.

125 **I appeal to the coming Chairs of the monitoring-committee, the governancecommittee and the current affairs committee to be active and concrete in their programming.**

I invite you, together with the Presidents of both Chambers, the secretariat and myself, to work out this agenda and have the ambition together not to avoid difficult topics.

130 I am looking for a programme of activities directly connected
to our priorities in a way that the reports do have a relation to
the priorities and to each other.

Therefore, I propose we have regular meetings with the chairs
of the committees to support each other in this ambition.

135 Also I challenge the newly elected Bureau of our Congress to
stimulate and to guard these principles in a way that will
benefit us all .

In the Netherlands, my home country, we value the
cooperation with science.

140 The present COVID-19 pandemic has shown how important
this is.

The Group of Independent Experts is important in this
respect.

They make a significant contribution to the scientific quality
of our reports.

145 Therefore I want to express my appreciation for their valuable
contribution.

Dear colleagues,

150 I do have a strong ambition that, time after time, debate after
debate, report after report and through all the activities that
we undertake, we seek the highest possible scientific quality
of our work.

This in the knowledge that the quality of our work is the best
argument in complicated debates in the future.

155 This will strengthen our motivation, it will convince our
partners in debates.

It will show and convince governments and parliaments in our
member states of the value of our work.

160 To realize this ambition, the funding of our Congress is to be
raised to an adequate level.

We have been facing challenges on this matter for several years now.

165 **It is without question that a return to the target of 3% share of the ordinary budget must be achieved so that resources are in line with the requirements of our institutional and statutory tasks.**

Our secretariat staff resources are essential in this respect and the frozen posts must be unfrozen as soon as possible so that we can fulfil our mission.

170 **Let us all be united in our effort to reach the best possible quality of work.**

Let us all join, together with our secretariats, to stand for our Charter, to stand for our 150.000 communities, to stand for all our 850 million citizens!

175 **Let us all be the ambassadors of our Congress, so that we can achieve our goals in the years to come in unification and in solidarity.**

Thank you for your attention.

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