

**Conference of national associations of local and regional authorities  
Strasbourg – 12-13 September 2024**

Speaking notes for Marc Cools, President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (6mn)

Distinguished guests,

I am honoured to welcome you at the opening of this Conference.

As the Secretary General of the Congress just mentioned, this event is the occasion to commemorate the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Council of Europe.

Milestones like this mark our long-standing commitment to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, principles that have guided us through decades of change and challenge. Today our commitments are symbolized by the gathering of the representatives from around 60 national associations across Europe.

Your associations are crucial partners of the Congress. Through your action, you are playing an essential role in the defence of the principles laid down in the European Charter of Local Self Government and in promoting the European values at the grassroots level.

But the Conference of National Associations is not just a ceremonial gathering; it is also a platform for dialogue, exchange, and collaboration. It is an opportunity for us to share our experiences, to learn from one another, and to develop common strategies and partnerships.

Our discussions over the next two days will underline the crucial role of local and regional authorities in addressing the challenges we face. From economic and energy crises to the ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine, from the COVID-19 pandemic to the rise of extremist movements, with environmental and climate challenges, our societies are under unprecedented strain. In this context, the need for coordination and cooperation across all levels of government is more critical than ever.

In the multi-level governance system, the role of local and regional authorities is especially vital. As the level closest to the citizens, we are on the front lines, addressing the needs of our communities and implementing policies that directly impact our citizens.

Being at the frontline also means taking the lead in crafting solutions. By raising awareness on human rights, taking decisive action on environmental and climate issues, and fostering greater citizen participation - especially among youth - we can build more resilient and inclusive communities. In this spirit, we are honoured to have the Youth Delegates of the Congress actively contributing to this conference: their voices are crucial in our pursuit of a better future.

At the closing of the event, we will adopt a joint Declaration, a commitment to our renewed dedication to cooperation and joint work. This Declaration will serve as a roadmap for our continued efforts.

Let us recall that the democratic stability of our continent depends also on our ability to embed the values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law in our local communities. The crucial role of local and regional authorities in this regard was recognised by the Council of Europe Summit in Reykjavik one year ago, with a strong mandate for action.

Let us also recall that the work of building and defending democracy is never finished. All throughout history, democracy and freedom have always been under threat from their antipode – tyranny. We see it today in Europe, once again. Our colleagues and friends in Ukraine, in particular, need us to assert our values without wavering, and to express our solidarity and practical support unceasingly.

To conclude, I would like to express my gratitude to all the participants, speakers and organisers for making this conference possible. I hope that it has enabled us to embark on a journey towards greater dialogue and collaboration.

I wish you a fruitful conference.