

1330th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies – Strasbourg, France, 28 November 2018

Communication by Anders Knappe, President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe

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Council of Europe, Strasbourg, France – 28 November 2018

Dear Ambassadors, Dear Secretary General, Dear Deputy Secretary General

Excellencies,

This is my first exchange of views with you and also my first official presentation as President of the Congress since my election on 6 November. I am delighted that this first official engagement is with you, the representatives of the member States and the executive body of the Council of Europe.

Dear Ambassador MATTILA-BUDICH, let me express the Congress' full support to the Chairmanship of Finland. The Congress intends to actively contribute to it as we did with the previous chairmanships. We are pleased that your local authorities have invited us to hold our Bureau meeting in Helsinki in March next year and we look forward to welcoming a representative of your government during our session in April.

Dear Ministers' Deputies,

My predecessors have had the opportunity to tell you how much we value our political dialogue with the member States and I want to reiterate this here today: the constructive political dialogue we have with the governments here in the Committee of Ministers and in the capitals is what allows us to successfully carry out our missions and in particular our monitoring missions.

The Congress is the second political assembly of the Council of Europe and, as such, it brings to this Organisation the second political dimension of democracy, which is that of shared governance. Without this dimension, democracy cannot be complete. We believe that shared governance embodies modernity. It represents the new world and the new societies that are developing before our eyes and in which governance is shared both horizontally AND vertically.

The European Charter of Local Self-government is an extraordinary tool intended to enable member States to develop this shared governance. It provides a framework of fundamental principles for strengthening local democracy and is sufficiently flexible to allow all member States to apply it in accordance with their specificities.

With its monitoring of the Charter, the Congress is part of the general monitoring mechanism of democracy put in place by the Council of Europe. We help governments to apply the Charter as best as possible for the benefit of their citizens.

I am convinced that promoting the quality of local and regional democracy is more important than ever at a time when our democratic societies are being challenged in many countries. It is at the grassroots that we can rebuild the trust and participation of citizens, which are the prerequisite for our societies to function fully in a democratic manner and in accordance with our shared values.

[Thematic priorities of the mandate: Fight against corruption, Gender equality and Youth participation]

Too often, elected representatives have lost the confidence of their citizens, partly because ethical behaviour was somewhat of a grey area. Today we can observe within European societies a new wave of calls for transparency and heightened public expectations of ethical conduct and we must find answers to these requirements. Trust must be regained.

Corruption, in particular, continues to pose a major threat to local and regional governance and democracy in Europe, and governments and parliaments at all levels urgently need to address it effectively. The Congress will continue to focus its action on prevention - promoting higher ethical standards and better protection mechanisms at local and regional level, as well as transparency. It will be one of the top priorities of my mandate.

In this regard, I am happy to inform you that, during its 35th Session, the Congress adopted a Code of Conduct for its members. The recent experience of the Parliamentary Assembly - where the unethical behaviour of a few members affected the reputation of the whole institution - convinced us to take this initiative in order to prevent a similar situation within the Congress.

At the opening of the 35th Session my predecessor, Ms Mosler-Törnström, the first woman to be elected to the Presidency of the Congress, expressed the wish that the Congress continue in the future to raise the profile of gender equality and the place of women in politics, within our communities and within international organisations. I assured her and I assure you today that I fully intend to do so. I am convinced that we need to engage even more in this priority fight if we want democracy to be as real and complete as possible.

The goal is the same with the participation of citizens and of youth in particular. We need to encourage young people to become more involved and take a greater share in the development of our societies and in particular in their decision-making processes.

In this regard, I am proud that, since 2014, we have invited youth delegates to participate in the work of our sessions and, for the last few years, we have supported their development of specific, grassroots projects at home between our two annual sessions. I must say that the projects that were presented to us at the 35th session by the youth delegates and their contributions to the debates were incredibly rich and pertinent. During my mandate I intend to continue to promote the participation of young people in the work of the Congress.

[The reform of the Congress]

The current political and financial situation of the Council of Europe is a cause for concern to all of us. We very much hope that a political solution to the problem with the Russian delegation in the Parliamentary Assembly will be found. We are convinced that Russia's place is in the Council of Europe, alongside all European States.

Given this uncertainty, the Congress decided, at the start of 2018, to launch a reform process aimed at protecting its functioning in spite of the difficulties encountered. In particular, we wanted to preserve the capacity of the Congress to fulfill its statutory missions. The intention was to streamline its functioning, to strengthen its institutional autonomy and to assert its specificity. It was also considered essential to enhance the Congress' flexibility, in other words: giving the Congress the basic tools with which to react in the future as rapidly and autonomously as possible.

To that end, we undertook the revision of our Charter; which is our statutory and indeed our founding text. Its revised version was approved by the 35th Session two weeks ago and is being submitted to you for adoption. We count on your support in this regard.

The Congress is aware of the need to make further savings. We have already had to adapt to the situation after the sudden change of status of Turkey and in responding to the zero nominal growth policy. And the staff of the Congress secretariat was seriously cut since 2010, which has a significant impact on the quantity of the work – while the political leadership, of course, fully supports the Secretary General of the Congress in maintaining high quality in what is delivered!

The reform proposals you have received from us have an immediate qualitative dimension – like simplifying the composition of the Chambers and pushing back the renewal procedures for one year – and a potential savings dimension which have to be addressed in 2019 and can be effective with the renewal of the Congress for the new mandate in the second semester of 2010.

Mr. Kiefer has presented this timeline to you in July and recently in October 2018.

The Congress members are ready to continue the path of reform and are realistic enough to see difficult times coming up, which will require further savings. In view of the 30th anniversary of the ECLSG in September and the crucial role of local democracy for democracy in our member states, I would like to reiterate the request to endow the Congress with the necessary means in order that it can deliver: We are convinced that 3% of the Council of Europe budget for the Congress is a justified share for this important and successful work the Congress is delivering within the Council of Europe.

[The Congress' contribution to Ministerial in Helsinki]

Next May, in Helsinki, your Foreign Ministers will discuss the future of the Council of Europe. The Congress has been invited by the outgoing Croatian Chairperson of the Committee of Ministers, [Minister **PEJČINOVIĆ BURIĆ**] to contribute to the reflection to be held by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs in Helsinki in May 2019 and I would like to inform you that the Bureau of the Congress has appointed the two Chamber Presidents as rapporteurs.

I can assure you that the Congress will continue its work to improve the quality of democracy and governance at local and regional level and to develop its role and delivery further.

We intend to remain a dynamic force within the Council of Europe. The Congress is and shall continue to be the political body implementing the local and regional dimension of the missions and priorities of this Organisation.

Dear Ambassadors,

Two weeks ago, during our session, we welcomed the Vice-Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Croatia **Ms PEJČINOVIĆ BURIĆ**, speaking on behalf of the Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers and I would like to thank Ambassador **PAPA** for having helped to organise the Minister's participation.

We also had the pleasure of exchanging views with the Vice-Minister of Interior of Lithuania and the Minister of Regional Development and Infrastructure of Georgia who took part in the debates on the situation of local and regional democracy in their respective countries. Thank you also to the Ambassadors of Lithuania and Georgia for their precious support.

Thank you for your attention.