

33rd Session of the Congress – Strasbourg, France, 18 – 20 October 2017

Communication of Gudrun Mosler-Törnström, President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities

**Communication at the Opening of the 33rd Session
Strasbourg, France, 18 October 2017**

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Following my election one year ago in October 2016, I underlined, in this very Chamber, the great importance I attached to the contribution made by the Congress, within the Council of Europe, to the defence of the Organisation's fundamental values – the rule of law, democracy and human rights. I contrasted these values with the various forms of populism, selfishness, intolerance and all the instances of extremist violence which threaten us and which – if we don't provide an appropriate response – risk destabilising the democratic culture of our societies.

I also said on that occasion that I fervently believed in prevention and education as a means of facing up to these threats. And of course, I upheld the idea that strong local and regional authorities with clear powers and appropriate resources could make a significant contribution to addressing these challenges.

In so doing, I was following in the footsteps of my predecessor, Jean-Claude Frécon, who, in March 2016, sounded the alarm, stating that "dark clouds are gathering over the continent". He was referring, you will recall, to the migration crisis, the lack of solidarity, the conflicts taking place on Europe's doorstep and within Europe itself, the economic and financial crisis and the terrorist attacks in our towns and cities.

Since then the situation has been constantly deteriorating. Worse still, other challenges have emerged to threaten the process of European integration. I am thinking of Brexit, of course, which is of concern not only to the European Union but to all of us, by giving the signal that a halt to this process of integration has become a possibility.

The election of a new President in the United States has not improved the situation; indeed it has even heightened insecurity at international level, particularly in its multilateral dimension. Pulling out of the international climate agreement, withdrawing from UNESCO, tearing up the Iranian nuclear agreement cannot but weaken the international community and Europe with it.

Dear colleagues, today we are facing a whole range of challenges that will test our ability to move forward together.

However, this picture of the dangers threatening us should not make us forget what we owe to the process of European construction. The 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, in March of this year, was an opportunity to take stock of the historic advances that have taken place over the last 60 years: the emergence of a European citizenship, the development of a harmonised regulatory space, the creation of a single currency adopted by 19 States, the eradication of the death penalty on the continent, a common approach to protecting all human beings, a specific conception of relations between our central governments and local and regional authorities, subsidiarity and finally peace, 70 years of global peace over the continent after centuries of war.

These are all positive advances which are in sharp contrast with a past shaped by conflict, war and nationalist hatred. We do not want to abandon these advances and each and every one of us, in our own particular roles, can help preserve what has been achieved. The Congress, like other bodies, has a key part to play in this connection.

A few days ago, the former Belgian Prime Minister, Guy Verhofstadt said in a rather provocative statement, that a Europe of the regions would be “madness” and would mean the end of the European adventure. I would put it another way and say that here in the Congress we are convinced of the need to have strong regions, with enlarged powers, able to guide the economic development of their territory and to protect their cultural identity with due regard for diversity. But I do not believe that the Europe we earnestly hope for can be built on weak nation States, a disintegrated, fragmented Europe which would be devoid of all influence in the world. What influence would we have vis-à-vis unified powers such as China and the US or regional powers that are stronger than each of our individual States?

In the face of all these challenges, in this major narrative playing out across Europe, our Congress, as the representative of some 200,000 authorities, can help ease tensions. Our message is clear; we know that devolution is essential, that municipal and regional self-government, clearly defined within the limits of each State's legally-established borders, is indispensable. But we do not want to see our nations implode.

In the Europe of values I spoke of at the beginning, whether for the European Union or the Council of Europe, there is no room for selfishness, be it national or regional. There is no place for nationalism, whether national or regional. The Europe to which we in the Congress are committed is a Europe of solidarity, a Europe with a strong local and regional identity.

It is only if all tiers of government make a combined effort to bring about genuine political dialogue that we will be able to avoid undermining everything we have achieved over the last 70 years.

This is the road-map I would like us to follow for the well-being of our citizens, with due regard for the differences and the richness of our diversity.

Thank you.