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COMMUNICATION OF THE PRESIDENT
OF THE CHAMBER OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES
XAVIER CADORET

Wednesday, 30 October 2019

Dear colleagues, dear friends, welcome to what promises to be a lively session. A special welcome to our invited speakers.

Today, as we elect a Vice-President to replace the colleague who is leaving us, I am reminded that it was this time last year that I was elected as your president. So today marks the half-way mark, the mid-term of my chairmanship. It is time to take stock. What have we achieved? What is still to do?

In January, in our Bureau, we had a frank and thorough discussion about what our priorities should be. We agreed the monitoring of the Charter and the observation of local elections will continue to be two of the main priorities of this Chamber.

We have had some important missions this year, some difficult election missions and some challenging monitoring missions including in the Russian Federation and in Bosnia and Herzegovina. We are also continuing our post-monitoring activities, for example in the Republic of Moldova. This afternoon in the plenary, we will discuss the report on the 2019 local elections in Turkey and the repeat election in Istanbul, a reminder that the work of this Chamber is far too much to fit into one three-hour session.

We also agreed to work on the various issues that are emerging from the development of Smart Cities and the working conditions of mayors in Europe, which we believe are going from bad to worse. Both these issues are on our agenda today.

In our discussion on priorities, we also underlined the importance of working to address the urban-regional divide. In this respect, the Congress is now involved in a major EU project, where we are working with 18 other global partners. We had a first debate on this issue in our last Session in this Chamber in April. The Governance Committee is now preparing a report on this, which should be ready for our session next year. As part of this project we are welcoming, over a three-year period, a series of long-term study visitors, from the other partners in the consortium, to contribute to our work in the secretariat. The second of these, Dr Nicole LIEB, from the University of Munich, is here with us today, the last week of her study visit.

We also agreed to continue our work to restore local democracy in Mostar with the development of a project on encouraging citizen participation in that emblematic city of Bosnia and Herzegovina. There will be a visit of a Congress delegation organised soon to Sarajevo and Mostar in order to prepare a project on the building of democratic participation. This will occur in view of the next local elections to be held in Bosnia and Herzegovina in October 2020. We will try to make concrete proposals as to how in Mostar, where no local elections have taken place for more than 10 years, next year the voice of the citizens can be heard again.

The general theme of our Congress plenary session is 'Mayors safeguarding democracy'. But where are the mayors? What is happening to our democracy? Our democracy is in danger, it is under threat as never before. Our young people are becoming increasingly disenchanted and disaffected with traditional politics. People of all ages are no longer standing for local election. In Germany we have seen a mayor belonging to a neo-Nazi party being elected unopposed, because the other parties were not in the position to present candidates. How could that happen? Guest speakers will try to explain to us the reasons behind.

People are less and less willing to run for office. They feel that the job is simply not worth the stress and the risks. This is why we decided to organise today's debate on the "Working conditions of local elected representatives – desperately looking for mayoral candidates".

We need to look very carefully at our system of representative democracy. We cannot take it for granted that it will continue to develop and flourish. In more and more of our member states there are warning signs, worrying signals that the whole democratic system is in danger of breaking down.

We recently adopted a report on pay, the financial compensation of elected representatives. Last month the Committee of Ministers adopted a reply to our recommendation, in which they flagged up the importance of (and I quote) "ensuring that the exercise of elected public office at local and regional level is performed in proper financial conditions".

So the Committee of Ministers is on our side. That is good news. But democracy doesn't come cheap. If we value local and regional elected office, we must be prepared to ensure that there are adequate and attractive working conditions.

Dear friends,

Our world is changing quickly. We will see this clearly in our second debate, which is about Smart Cities and cybersecurity. Who is in charge of these new technologies – we the people or the smart apps? Who is taking the decisions? What happens to all the data being collected about you – who is in control and how to stop it falling into the wrong hands?

We can harness Artificial Intelligence to improve our lives, but it can also be used to undermine democratic processes. This is a real threat to our democracies, a risk to the principles of good governance and to individual freedoms. Democracy rests on transparency, equality and accountability. AI is often hidden and unaccountable. There is already much use of AI in democratic processes. We need to know whether we are talking to a machine or not.

5G technology is now being rolled out in many of our cities. Is it safe? Already there are discussions about the health risks of all this new technology and the huge increase in radio waves and our exposure to them that we are witnessing. With the new technologies come new forms of control, surveillance, forms of manipulation and covert influence. In the hands of the wrong people, these technologies can undermine our democracy and threaten individual human rights and freedoms.

The Council of Europe is at the forefront of the debate and reflection of the issues raised. The Committee of Ministers have just set up a new intergovernmental committee, the Ad hoc Committee on Artificial Intelligence, which will hold its first meeting next month. Its task is to examine the feasibility and elements of a legal framework for the development and application of artificial intelligence, based on the Council of Europe's standards on human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The Congress will be involved in this work – which is of immense importance to our authorities.

Ladies and gentlemen, I won't take any more of your time. We are all looking forward to some lively debates and I invite you all to speak up and share your experiences on these big issues. This is your Chamber, let us make the most of this opportunity!