

2016-2018

TWO YEARS AS PRESIDENT IN THE SERVICE OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL DEMOCRACY



**Compendium of speeches by
Gudrun MOSLER-TÖRNSTRÖM,
President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities**

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Foreword

In October 2016, at the 31st session, I was elected President of the Congress. This was the first time in



Congress history that a woman had been elected to this position. At the same session, national delegations were renewed and the Congress now has more than 42% female delegates. This is the result of a deliberate quota policy implemented by the Congress to increase the representation of women in politics.

My wish is that this policy be continued in order to avoid any regression.

Promoting women in politics and giving them equal treatment is one of the struggles I have led throughout my political career, and one which I pursued with determination during my two years in

office.

I wanted the keynotes of my Presidency to be listening, exchange and co-operation between all actors of governance at local, regional, national and European level. I have taken care to ensure continuity in the policy approaches adopted by my predecessors while maintaining a requirement for concrete and rapid responses to the new challenges posed to our societies.

For two years I have been carrying forward the idea of a strong and vibrant local and regional democracy, based on the European Charter of Local Self-Government, a major text now ratified by all Council of Europe member States which enshrines the fundamental principles for the proper functioning of local governments.

I am convinced that local and regional authorities have an eminently strategic role to play in helping our States and societies to face the major challenges of our time. Strong local and regional authorities with clear powers and appropriate resources can make a significant contribution to easing tensions and contributing to stability and security in our cities. They are also an asset for anchoring democracy at the heart of our societies.

I am convinced that democracy at the national level cannot work without a democracy of proximity, closer to the citizens. This is the unswerving message I wanted to pass on through my interventions throughout this challenging and exciting mandate.

**31st Session of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities -
19 October 2016, Strasbourg, France**

Ladies and gentlemen, dear members and colleagues

Let me first warmly thank you for the trust you have placed in me for the leading of this Assembly during the next two years.

I am both glad and proud. I can assure you that I will fulfil my mandate with great commitment and determination.

I would like also to welcome the renewed delegations, especially the new colleagues and would encourage them to actively involve themselves in the work of the Congress.

The strengthening of democracy, human rights and the rule of law at local and regional level are the core objectives of the Congress, its mission.

These are the values we have to fight for. Without these values, our societies would face a decrease in solidarity and an increase in radicalisation, extremism, xenophobia and recentralisation. These tendencies will eventually, let us make no mistake about it, destabilise the democratic structure of our continent.

The work of the Congress is, therefore, clearly more important than ever. Monitoring of local and regional democracy in member States and observation of local elections, are among the main tasks of our Congress. They both serve to strengthen the political dialogue with the governments and with the ministers in our member States. These core activities must be continuously expanded.

Later this morning we will listen to the report our outgoing President Jean-Claude Frécon. I would like to thank him for his incredible commitment and passion. He took over the work done by his predecessors and continued to develop post-monitoring and political dialogue with the governments. I will also take over from him to work on reinforcing the commitment of member States vis-à-vis the Charter and will pursue the goal of "100% Charter covering 100% of the territory of Europe".

In 2018 we will celebrate the 30th of the entry into force of the Charter. We need to use this opportunity to take stock and think about how we can strengthen the commitment of member States in regard to the Charter, notably by raising awareness on its applicability in domestic law.

Beyond the tasks of reinforcing our core business I feel we need to continue our work in the field of fighting corruption, radicalisation and violent extremism, based particularly on prevention and education. Another one of my objectives is to raise awareness on the importance of respecting human rights at local and regional level.

Naturally, the question of the integration of migrants and refugees will remain a major challenge for local and regional politicians in the upcoming period and I will strive to find concrete ways to address this within the Congress and with the Committee of Ministers.

In this relation, as in many others, local and regional politicians in rural zones have an important role to play and I will support all initiatives to empower these areas and promote their potential, strengths and qualities.

Dear colleagues,

To face all the challenges we shall meet, we need strong local and regional communities, with clear competencies and appropriate resources.

We have a long path ahead of us. On this path we will encounter obstacles but also, I hope, occasions for celebration of positive developments. Recently, for example, I learnt that the French Government had just decided to share VAT receipts with the regions to replace the traditional grant funding they used to receive. While this may seem a somewhat technical - even arid – fact, it actually represents a radical departure in the way the regional level is taken into account as a political player. The State has decided that tax receipts should be divided between itself and the regions. Of course, there will be lively discussions as to the exact proportion received by each, but at the end of the day the relationship between the State and its regions will be substantially transformed.

And this means, dear colleagues, that in France, and indeed elsewhere, the process of decentralisation which began some 35 years ago, is still actively progressing and will continue to do so.

I cite this example to show that decentralisation is an evolving process which needs our full involvement.

It is this evolution and process I would like to contribute to as President of the Congress, with the support and commitment of all members of our Assembly.

Thank you.

**World Forum for Democracy, Plenary Session 1 - “Learning by doing: From preaching to practicing democracy” -
7 November 2016, Strasbourg, France**

My name is Gudrun Mosler-Törnström, I am the new President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe.

Since the inception of the Forum, the Congress has been an active partner in its organisation – because local and regional authorities know first-hand the challenges facing our democracies, and have to respond to these challenges on a daily basis in their communities. Indeed, the Forum is an important place to share our experiences and learn from each other.

Active citizens are the driving force of any democratic society, and education for democratic citizenship must underpin our every effort for building pluralist, inclusive and intercultural communities. It rings even more true today, when our societies are blighted by deception in mainstream politics, by a lack of trust in politicians, which prepare the ground for extremism and radicalisation.

We in the Congress are convinced that living in a democracy requires learning about the foundations of democratic society, and understanding the importance of the rule of law and respect for fundamental human rights.

This is why in our recommendation on promoting diversity through intercultural education, and in our Strategy against radicalisation at local level, we have been stressing the need for dialogue between religions.

It has been said that understanding what you have learned comes from using your knowledge in practice. And this democratic practice begins at local level.

This means that we have to introduce more and more participatory elements in representative democracy, and provide for practical ways to engage our citizens directly in democratic governance. We need to allow our citizens both to use their education and knowledge in practice, and to gain new knowledge by practicing democratic participation.

I am confident that the discussions during this Forum will produce many other, new ideas of practical ways and mechanisms for practicing democracy.

Thank you.

**World Summit of Mayors - “Alliance of European cities against violent extremism”-
9 November 2016, Rotterdam, Netherlands**

Dear Mayor, dear President, dear participants and friends,

The fact that so many politicians and experts have responded to our invitation shows once again that the topic of radicalisation is one that concerns all of us in our daily political work.

Given its unique role as a pan-European, political assembly that represents more than 200 00 local and regional authorities, the Congress has always contributed to combating the root causes of radicalization in European cities. And if I speak about Europe, I mean the local authorities from greater Europe, from all 47 Council of Europe member states.

There are multiple reasons that can contribute to individuals becoming radicalized: Lack of integration into society, political disengagement or exposure to extremist individuals, groups or organizations. The local, cultural and social context affects the radicalization process which is reflected in the public authorities' response. Among these, prevention and de-radicalization rather than repression are actions that coincide with the competences of local and regional authorities.

At the Congress we have always been convinced that radicalization can be best contained at a level closest to the vulnerable individuals in the most affected communities. Therefore, local politicians and administrations play a vital role in identifying such tendencies in their community and shaping policies that do make an effective contribution to prevention.

I would like to emphasize one of our main contentions: Local authorities should not be left alone in this endeavor. The coordination between various government levels is an important dimension in protecting citizens against these threats and creates synergies, so does cooperation with civil society, researchers and practitioners.

From the numerous discussions with our Congress members and the extensive work of our colleagues on the issue of radicalization, I have noted that there is an urgent need to bring local decision makers together and provide a space for inter-city exchange with regard to local preventive initiatives against radicalization. Exchanging experiences and best practices among colleagues and seeing first-hand how to respond to this phenomenon, is often the most efficient way to push for change on the ground. This is the background of the “Alliance of European cities against violent extremism” we launched last year in Aarhus and I am happy to welcome you today to the second edition of this unique event.

Today's sessions will not only allow you to exchange best practices and discuss the recent developments regarding initiatives to tackle the causes of radicalization. In addition, you will have the chance to see various projects implemented in the city of Rotterdam and learn more about capacity building and training programmes.

The end of this conference will be marked by the endorsement of the Declaration of Rotterdam. You have copy of the draft text in front of you and you are welcome to comment on it.

I encourage you to actively participate in all three sessions and make use of the diversity reflected in this group of mayors and experts coming from 29 countries.

I wish us all a successful conference!

**1271bis meeting of the Ministers' Deputies - Transfer of the Chairmanship Estonia to Cyprus -
21 November 2016, Strasbourg, France**

Ministers, Ambassadors,

First of all, I would like to congratulate Minister Jürgen Ligi for the successful implementation of the interesting Estonian Chairmanship programme. The Congress had the pleasure of having a very lively exchange with Mr Hanno Pevkur, Minister of Interior of Estonia, at our session on 20 October.

I would also like to assure Minister Ioannis Kasoulides that the Congress will take a very active part in the Cypriot Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers. It will contribute to the implementation of the priorities of the Cypriot chairmanship presented today by participating in all events with a local and regional dimension.

We will start with a meeting of the Bureau on 10 February and I am looking forward to meeting with the Cypriot authorities on this occasion.

Four weeks ago the Congress adopted its priorities for the next four years. And I am happy to see that many of ours complement your priorities.

The work of the Congress will focus on building stable democratic institutions at local and regional level, on pluralistic and inclusive societies with democratically active citizens. This is fully in line with the Cypriot priorities.

Other areas where the Congress will actively contribute are the inclusion of people with disabilities, the promotion of social rights and responses to the challenges of the migration flows, to name just a few. I refer to the needs to prepare a sustainable integration of those who will stay and to prevent radicalisation among our own populations.

The Chairmanships of the Committee of Ministers provide an excellent opportunity for the Congress to continue our political dialogue with the governments of the member States. This exchange is the natural continuation of the dialogue we engage in during our monitoring and post-monitoring of the European Charter of Local Self-Government.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a good tradition that the Minister representing the Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers participates in the session of the Congress and discusses with the councilors, mayors and presidents of regions represented in the Congress. We are looking forward to welcoming you or the minister responsible for issues of local and regional democracy in March 2017.

I wish you, Minister Kasoulides, every success for the six months of the Cypriot Chairmanship.

Thank you.

**CALRE Plenary Assembly, Second Session “Regions and the European future”,
Panel I: “The European migrant crisis: a global issue, a territorial issue -
25 November 2016, Varese, Italy**

Mr President, Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

It is a great pleasure for me to address the Plenary Assembly of CALRE today – and to be back two years after Santiago de Compostela, where I also represented both the Congress and my own regional parliament of Land Salzburg.

The Congress is a natural partner of CALRE: We share the same values of democracy and human rights. We have a common cause that is the promotion of territorial democracy, as well as multi-level and cross-border cooperation. This cooperation is more than ever crucial, especially in the context of the European refugee and migrant crisis.

The challenges raised by this crisis for us are manifold. Local and regional authorities are the first port of call in cases of emergency and they are often left with limited means and guidance to tackle the current situation.

Many regions have been severely affected in different ways: as regions of arrival, regions of transit and as regions of destination of the refugees. They were and they are shouldering an important part of the burden of this crisis.

National governments have been slow in developing and coordinating their policies and in showing solidarity and in applying their decisions at European level.

For weeks ago, in October, in one of our committees our members from 47 countries adopted a report on the role of local and regional authorities in the reception of refugees and integration of migrants. And also the Congress members from your regions and member states endorsed the report and the recommendation. We underlined in that report that conceptions and approach must be changed urgently:

Firstly, we must stop seeing local and regional authorities as being primarily involved at – or rather confronted with - the end phase of the reception and integration process. On the contrary, local and regional policies promoting migrants’ integration should be seen as a pre-condition for the development of a systemic reception policy. Governments must consult with regional and local authorities and coordinate their action, providing legislative and financial backing. What happened in Calais in France is a good example of how not to do it.

Secondly, our motto must be service provision to the individual human being, regardless of their status as asylum seeker, refugee or migrant. Treating refugees and migrants as somehow “less” than others is a risky business. It leads not only to disrespect of their rights as humans but, very importantly, it leads to prejudiced, racist and xenophobic beliefs to take root in the host communities.

Thirdly, integration must start as early as possible, from the moment of arrival. Regional and local authorities must develop programmes that bring newcomers and host communities together in activities, such as sports or intercultural events, even if the asylum seekers do not stay in the region very long.

You can find a link to the relevant Congress documents and this report in the compilation of Congress documents which was prepared by our secretariat for this conference.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Many of today’s migrants are tomorrow’s fellow citizens. To understand this is something that is essential for policy making. To enable this transformation, we need to promote dialogue, education and active participation of newcomers as well as closer cooperation and better coordination between all levels of governments.

Regional governments and parliaments have a particularly important role to play here: They can coordinate the work of local authorities, set up networks to exchange information and greater transfrontier cooperation, and promote intercultural education to encourage host communities' knowledge of migrants' rich backgrounds.

It is also more than ever urgent for us to defend and promote territorial democracy if we want to tackle the current migration crisis.

I would like to invite CALRE members to liaise with the Congress members coming from their respective parliaments. All German, all Belgian, many Italian, Spanish and British regional parliaments have members in the Congress. They were recently appointed for a four year-mandate. These members are the natural link between the important thematic work done by CALRE in the different working groups and our Congress. Fighting corruption, monitoring and developing regionalisation as well as migration and integration and the respect of human rights, are key areas of common interest.

Thank you for your attention.

**41st General Assembly of the Central Union of Municipalities and Communities of Greece (KEDE) -
3 December 2016, Athens, Greece**

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure for me indeed to speak to you today on behalf of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe.

I am grateful to the Central Union of Municipalities and Communities of Greece, KEDE, for giving me the opportunity to participate in this General Assembly. I look forward to having an exchange with you on the challenges, priorities and issues of concern facing your Association, the local authorities of Greece and indeed your country.

I am particularly pleased to be here not only as President of the Congress but also as co-rapporteur on local and regional democracy in Greece. Needless to say, I am very much aware of these challenges, notably as regards the economic situation and the refugee crisis, but also as regards the specificities of your country. After visiting Greece during two monitoring missions of the Congress, I understand better the realities you must face – for instance, how difficult it can be to manage a municipality located on an island or in a mountainous area.

In our recent monitoring report, we drew the attention of national authorities to these specificities, which require solutions to address the particular needs for municipalities and regions. We also pointed to the lack of consultation of local authorities by the central government, the weakness of fiscal autonomy, and – among others – the lack of finances which correspond to the transfer of competences. The recommendation which we sent to Greek national authorities addressed these issues and asks the Government to take measures to solve them.

Since the adoption of this recommendation in March 2015, a Congress delegation had the opportunity to come back to Athens in September this year, on the invitation of the Governor of the Attika region and Congress member, Mrs Rena DOUROU.

The delegation was led by the former Congress President, Mr Jean-Claude FRECON, and visited two refugee camps to assess the challenges that the reception of refugees represent for a region and a municipality. We are convinced that this type of visits are crucial for Congress members and contribute to better conveying an appropriate political message to governments.

The former President, Mr FRECON, also had the opportunity to meet the former Minister of the Interior, Mr KOUROUMBLIS, to whom he suggested launching a post-monitoring process between Greece and the Congress.

The aim of this process would be to strengthen the political dialogue between the Congress and the Greek government in order to implement our recommendation in the framework of an agreed calendar. I hope that the newly appointed Minister, Mr SKOURLETIS, will take a positive approach to this proposal. Our experience in other countries shows that such post-monitoring helps to accelerate the process of improvement of local democracies in Europe.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Council of Europe Congress and KEDE share a long tradition of close and fruitful co-operation between our two bodies. The Congress itself is of course a pan-European association, an assembly of local and regional authorities from the 47 member states of the Council of Europe. It is made up of more than 600 local and regional elected members, representing some 200 000 communities from across the European continent.

The Congress is indeed your assembly within the Council of Europe. It has a unique mandate to assess the situation of local and regional democracy, observe local and regional elections and put forward

recommendations to both national governments and grassroots authorities for improving the governance of our communities.

The Congress is also engaged in implementing co-operation programmes in member states and neighbourhood regions, and working to achieve inclusive multicultural societies, to increase citizen and youth participation, and to foster respect for diversity and for fundamental rights at local level, among many other issues.

In October, the Congress held its second session this year. On this occasion, all national delegations were renewed for the next four years. I would like to congratulate the 7 representatives and 7 substitutes of the new Greek delegation and in particular its President, the Mayor of Samos Island, Mr Michail ANGELOPOULOS, who was also elected Vice-President of the Congress. His participation in the Congress Bureau means that the Congress will have an even stronger link with your delegation and your association, and we all are looking forward to this collaboration.

In this regard, I would like to thank KEDE for inviting the Congress' Monitoring Committee to hold its next meeting in Athens on 16 February, which is yet another proof of your continued commitment to Congress activities.

I myself have been elected President of the Congress during the session in October. I am particularly proud that the Congress has taken another step towards equality by electing a woman as president for the first time in its history.

Ladies and gentlemen,

National associations of local and regional authorities, such as KEDE, are of crucial importance to the Congress. They are our main partners in the national setting, the bridges linking together local and regional communities of European countries.

We work closely with them and consult them when we define our strategic orientations. The Congress priorities for 2017-2020, which were adopted during the past session in October, were drafted in consultation with all Congress members and with the national associations.

National associations play an essential role in the work of the Congress. They participate in the selection process of national delegations. They help national members fulfil their work within the Congress. And they can act as Congress relays in their countries, giving follow-up to Congress recommendations and visibility to Congress reference documents and texts.

As I have said, the core mission of the Congress is to monitor the situation of local and regional democracy in member states. We base this work on our reference text, the European Charter of Local Self-Government.

Article 10 of the Charter concerns the consultation of local and regional authorities by central government. This is one of the pillars of our local democracy. Consultation is a central feature of local self-government and a vital process which serves to ensure that our multi-level governance system functions effectively.

Consultation is also one of the "recurring issues" in many countries which we identify during our monitoring work. We want to see progress in this area and will continue to work on improving the situation. As I have said at the beginning of my speech, this is also one issue which was addressed in our report on Greece and included in our recommendation to the Greek government.

Both the monitoring and the election observation by the Congress contribute to the post-monitoring process, which we have developed over the past years and which is based on our political dialogue with the national authorities.

We consider this dialogue as essential because the challenges and difficulties faced by our communities need to be tackled by pooling the efforts and resources at all levels of governance – European, national, regional, and local. We strongly hope for a positive response from the Greek government to launching such post-monitoring process in your country.

For my part, my participations in this General Assembly and the bilateral meetings I will have are all an integral part of this dialogue, aimed at promoting decentralisation in our member states and strengthening the capacities of local and regional authorities and their associations, such as KEDE.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The programme of this General Assembly is very interesting and impressive indeed. I look forward to our exchanges today, and wish your association and all of you every success in your future work.

Thank you for your attention.

**1274th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies -
11 January 2017, Strasbourg, France**

Dear Ambassadors, Ladies and gentlemen, Madam Chair,

Thank you for your kind words.

Indeed, I have the honor of being the first woman ever to be elected President of the Congress. Let me add that the Presidency of the Congress is not only constituted by me but also includes the Presidents of the Congress' two Chambers. Since last October, the President of the Chamber of Regions is also a female politician, Gunn-Marit Helgesen, from Norway. At the renewal session in October 2016 we reached a figure of more than 42% women in the new composition of the Congress. Let me add that 11 of the 17 members of our new Bureau are women.

These achievements may well be the result of the policy the Congress has implemented for many years now in order to increase the representation of women in politics, and in particular since 2008, when it introduced a quota ensuring at least 30% of the under-represented sex in the national delegations – among full members AND among the substitutes.

The same results should be achieved at national level. There is still a long way to go in many member States. But we know that the implementation of proactive policies produces results over the medium to long term. The Congress will continue to encourage gender equality policies at all levels in order to enable women to access all spheres of leadership in our towns and regions.

Ladies and gentlemen,

You met my predecessor Jean-Claude Frécon very often. As you know he passed away in December and I would like to pay tribute to him before you today. President Frécon was both a dedicated councilor, mayor and French Senator and a committed European and Congress President. He spent his long career and his successive mandates in promoting the European Charter of Local Self-government. Jean-Claude Frécon promoted our motto "100% Charter over 100% of our territory". He was therefore especially proud when the last ratification of the Charter took place in 2013 and finally all 47 member States declared themselves bound by this milestone legal instrument of the Council of Europe.

He also worked to develop the political dialogue with member States and, as such, was an architect of the first signatures of the Congress' road maps with national governments as follow-up to Congress monitoring reports.

The Congress owes him a lot and we will miss him.

Last November, the Congress Secretary General Andreas Kiefer, has provided you with the results of the October Session. The activity report he presented to you on this occasion contains a lot of examples of the statutory work of the Congress. I will therefore focus on the political dimension of our activities and the opportunities I see for the co-operation of national governments with local authorities and of this Committee with the Congress.

The monitoring of the European Charter of Local Self-government is our statutory mission and we will continue to fulfill this core activity to improve the situation of local and regional democracy in Europe. We will, in particular, continue to identify the recurring issues that come up during our monitoring visits and pass them on to you as representatives of the national governments. These recurring issues can feed into a common reflection on how to improve the situation in member States, on how to better implement some provisions of the Charter in national legislation and policies, which appear difficult to apply. These recurring issues can be the basis of a fruitful dialogue in order to ensure that this treaty is taken into consideration in law and in practice. I mean a dialogue not only between the Congress and national authorities but between all parties involved at national level.

Along with our statutory activities, we follow closely the political developments in member States. The Congress adopts a proactive attitude to help bring concrete and efficient solutions to current challenges – and many of them have to be taken at the level of the Congress members with their experience and problem-solving competence.

The crisis of migrants and refugees will certainly remain one of the main challenges for many of our member States. We are convinced that this crisis can and will be overcome by the pooling of all competences and capacities. This means that local and regional authorities can be part of the solution if they are consulted and involved in the drawing up and the implementation of national policies. We have seen some very good examples, in particular those concerning the settling of refugee families.

Our message to the national authorities is that local and regional authorities should be made full partners in addressing these challenges. Statements from national ministers and parliamentarians, on how indispensable mayors and councilors and their administrations are, remain only lip service if they are not followed by concrete action. The assets of local administrations and the trust of the people in their mayors will lead to getting the support of local populations and meaningful consultation with them lead to viable solutions. These – sometimes not popular - decisions can only be taken and implemented effectively if local populations are brought on board and convinced. We need European solidarity on the basis of our common values. The Congress is the European platform of exchange to facilitate this.

Another example is the fight against violent extremism and radicalisation leading to terrorism. Involvement of local and regional authorities is indispensable in the drafting of security and prevention policies. Local and regional elected representatives are working in the field. They know the situation in their neighborhoods, their towns, their communities. They can act as an early warning system and can also implement local policies as a complement to national ones. We know that good results can be obtained by small-scale policies designed with local populations in mind. Municipal or community police, for example, where they exist, can be a good support to the work of the national police.

Dear Ambassadors,

The Conference of Local Authorities of the Council of Europe – predecessor of the Congress – held its first session in Strasbourg on 12 January 1957. Local democracy in the Council of Europe will thus be 60 years old tomorrow. The Conference has changed over the years and has evolved to the Congress you know today. The Congress, supported by its professional secretariat, has steadily increased in political maturity and operational capacity. It has become a reliable partner and a valuable support for national governments and public policies. In this respect, it has followed the same evolution as the local and regional authorities in the member States, which have increasingly gained autonomy, competences and capacities.

You will have understood that I am firmly convinced of the need for close consultation and involvement of local and regional authorities in the development of national policies. If governments give in to the temptation to recentralise decision-making processes, this would clearly not be the right way to develop our democratic societies. It would also mean to do without the capacity and the proximity of local politicians, who are willing to take responsibility. As President of the Congress for the next two years: this is the message that I will continue, untiringly, to promulgate.

Thank you.

**Joint conference of the Committee of the Regions the Congress - “The role of local and regional authorities in preventing corruption and promoting good governance” -
28 February 2017, Brussels, Belgium**

Dear President, dear colleagues, Ladies and gentlemen,

Seven years ago, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and the Committee of the Regions, together with the City of Messina, and the Sicilian Region, organised a conference in Messina on the prevention of corruption at local and regional levels. That marked the beginning of our cooperation on this issue. So it is a great pleasure for me to be here today, in my capacity as the President of the Congress to address you as we take this cooperation to a new level.

For the past month, hundreds of thousands of Romanians are taking to the streets of Bucharest to protest against a contentious decree that would have decriminalised some corruption offences and protected politicians from prosecution. Two weeks ago, citizens gathered in Paris and in other French cities, to protest against the corruption of elected officials. These demonstrations are a clear indication of the widespread discontent that grows among the citizens, and shows that no country in Europe is spared from corruption.

Let me begin by reaffirming the strong commitment of the Congress in the fight against corruption. At its last session, on October 2016, the Congress adopted a “Roadmap of activities for preventing corruption and promoting public ethics at local and regional levels”. It is a comprehensive and long-term approach to corruption prevention that sends a clear signal of our intention to make this a priority activity for 2017 and the years to come.

At the same session, the Congress adopted its priorities for 2017-2020. In these priorities we affirm that we will work on means to prevent corruption, and strengthen values based on ethics and transparency, including transparency in declarations of interest and public procurement. It will promote rigorous governance frameworks and the development of common standards and will support the development and use of e-democracy tools which can help to increase transparency and better involve citizens.

While the problem of corruption is acute at all levels of government and in all the countries of the European Union and the Council of Europe, our job is to focus on the local and regional levels. The importance of this issue is clear as there is a strong link between the behaviour of elected representatives and the quality of governance. It is the matter of trust between constituencies and their elected representatives.

Why is this issue particularly important in local government affairs?

In many European countries, local authorities are managing a bigger and bigger share of public expenditure. As our colleagues in the Committee of the Regions are well aware, regions are more and more involved in the co-financing and management of European funds. This is a good thing. This has been the political direction of both our institutions’ work for years.

Yet local and regional authorities have seen their budgets and competences increase without a corresponding improvement control and disciplinary procedures. If we witness an increase in corruption at the local level, then the principle of decentralisation could be threatened.

Power brings responsibility and opens doors for possible abuse. The increasing number of local and regional elected representatives, the great authority and discretion they are given and the fact that local governments are the major employers, regulators and service providers in many cities and regions may lead to conflicts of interests, clientelism and nepotism.

All in all, corruption is intrinsically linked to the complexity of today’s societies.

Preventing and combating it is not only a legal and an economic necessity but must also be seen as an imperative for rooting decentralisation in Europe and for improving governance at local and regional levels. If competences of local and regional authorities are not to be called into question, we must fight

against corruption in all its forms. This is the only way to ensure decentralisation and to resist potential attempts to recentralise powers and competences.

Two principles are closely related to this issue: public ethics and transparency.

The Congress took up the issue of ethical governance almost 20 years ago. Back in 1999, it adopted a "Code of Conduct for the integrity of local and regional elected representatives", setting out general principles governing public duties and specific obligations of elected representatives during the taking, holding and relinquishing of office. In this Code, we have affirmed that in fulfilling their responsibility, local and regional elected representatives have a duty to uphold high ethical values in their conduct.

We have now begun revising that code of conduct and we have decided to extend it to unelected officials in local and regional administrations. I am convinced that the exchanges that will be held today, especially during our roundtable on Codes of conduct this afternoon, will make a valuable contribution to this work.

In the Congress we are convinced that the key elements for fighting corruption at local and regional levels are the sharing of ethical values, the respect and the control of the rule of law and of the public interest, transparency and the involvement of citizens in the management of public values.

That is why we believe it is important to increase publicity with regard to all decisions concerning the performances of municipalities and regions. In this respect, the existing Code of Conduct proposed means of supervision, such as the declaration, on request, of election campaign expense, of personal interests or other functions.

It also requires transparency in exercising the public duties, like making public decisions and grounds for decisions or responding to any request from the public concerning local government affairs. It also promotes measures fostering openness. Publishing data makes it easier for the civil society to scrutinize public spending, potentially adding an informal venue for detecting corruption.

In this regard, at its next session the Congress will examine a report on "Open data for better public services". This report examines how the release and the re-use of public data can give local governments the opportunity to transform themselves into more transparent, democratic and effective authorities. It gives numerous examples of how city data is being used to increase transparency, accountability and public participation, in areas such as participatory budgeting, fiscal transparency and political transparency.

The fight against corruption and the promotion of public ethics is a long-term priority for the Congress, and I am confident that both our institutions will agree not just to continue but to strengthen our concerted effort to improve local and regional standards in this area.

I am confident that this conference will serve to launch a new phase in our cooperation in this fight. Together we can make a real impact.

Thank you.

110th Plenary Session of the Venice Commission - 10 March 2017, Venice, Italy

Dear President and Members of the Venice Commission, Ambassadors, Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased and honored about the opportunity to address this distinguished expert forum here in Venice and to talk about the latest developments in the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities.

You may know - I was elected President of the Congress at the 31st Session in October last year. I am the first woman in this function which gives reason to be also a little proud of the Congress – particularly in the context of what we have celebrated this week, on 8th March.

In my home country, in Austria, I am Vice-President of the State Parliament of Salzburg. I am member of Congress since 2009 and have been able, over the last years, to gain practical experiences in many activities at the local and regional level. I consider these practical experiences as the solid foundation of my mandate as a President in the next two years.

I made my very first election observation mission to Azerbaijan and was, further on, Head of several delegations who observed local elections in Ukraine. The last one, the largest Congress' mission ever, was organised – together with the colleagues from the Parliamentary Assembly – in October 2015. I participated also in several missions to monitor the implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government – in Sweden, France and Greece, to mention only the most recent ones.

Let me now highlight some current activities of the Congress and ways to co-operate with the Venice Commission and other strategic partners.

Co-operation has been since long a leading principle of the work in the Congress. With regard to the European Union, we are in the process of developing targeted strategies on anti-corruption and de-radicalisation policies for cities and regions. A conference on the role of local and regional authorities in preventing corruption and promoting good governance was organised last week in Brussels, in co-operation with the Committee of the Regions. Over the next months, we will revise the European Code of Conduct for the integrity of local and regional politicians. This is part of a broader action plan to address issues such as transparency, nepotism and conflicts of interests at the grassroots' level.

The new Congress' Checklist for compliance with international standards and best practices preventing misuse of administrative resources during elections was discussed in yesterday's meeting of the Council for Democratic Elections. This is a very concrete example of co-operation with the Venice Commission. The Opinion provided by your Commission will serve as a source of inspiration for the further consolidation of our Checklist which is on the agenda of the next Congress' Plenary Session, where Richard BARRETT, a member of your Commission, will take the floor in order to contextualise the work already done to prevent administrative resources during elections. This malpractice has made its way into the established European political culture and is particularly relevant in our municipalities – because of the specific and close link between incumbents, candidates, public employees and voters.

Co-operation with other strategic partners, notably the Parliamentary Assembly, is also high on the agenda of the Congress with regard to anti-radicalisation programmes and our policies on migration challenges at the local level. We are pleased that the Congress President has been invited to address the June Session of the Parliamentary Assembly to discuss about the “management of the migration and refugees flows”. We welcome very much this opportunity to explain the position of local and regional authorities in this respect. In autumn, the Congress is going to organise the third Summit of Mayors for the “Alliance of European cities against violent extremism”. This event will take place in Barcelona, in co-operation with EFUS, the European Forum for Urban Security.

This leads me to what we all consider as the *raison d'être* of the Council of Europe - democracy, human rights and the rule of law. The full title of your Commission - "European Commission for Democracy through Law" – describes very well what we in the Congress are embracing, at the local and regional level

of government. We want to achieve democratic stability through the implementation of European standards at grassroots' level. Our core instrument in this respect is the European Charter of Local Self-Government with its mechanism, the Congress' monitoring.

Since the last plenary meeting of the Venice Commission in December 2016, the Congress has carried out monitoring missions to Switzerland, Serbia and we are about to start our monitoring of Italy next week. Furthermore, a new Report on the implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in the 47 member States of the Council of Europe will be presented during the next Congress' Plenary in two weeks' time. It aims at providing an overview on the implementation of the Charter based on monitoring recommendations. It is interesting to note that the conclusions of this analysis echo the recurring issues which the Congress highlighted in another Report which covers the recommendations over a period from 2010 to 2016. It stresses, among other issues, the lack of direct applicability of the European Charter on Local Self-Government and the Congress recommends that national authorities ensure direct applicability of this treaty ratified by the 47 member States.

As regards monitoring activities, smaller countries will be in the focus of the Monitoring Committee this year and I trust that Leen VERBEEK, the President of this Committee, will update you on the specific application of the Charter in these countries at one of your next meetings.

Moreover, there has been the second part of the Congress' Fact-finding Mission to Turkey on 19 and 20 December. I won't go into the details of this Fact-finding at this stage because my colleague Leen will do so later this morning, under item 14. I only want to mention the Congress' Report - which is due to be debated and adopted 29 March – and may also give rise to further concrete co-operation with the Venice Commission.

Let me conclude by some remarks on new Congress' activities which can be seen as complementary action to efforts already undertaken by the Venice Commission and other Council of Europe bodies – I am talking about our new programme of Congress South-Med Partnership. This initiative for southern Mediterranean countries is to meet the objectives of the neighborhood policy of the Council of Europe, at the local and regional level. The aim is to design a special framework for this Partnership for more regular exchanges of best practices and experiences with the countries concerned. As a consequence of preparatory visits carried out by the Congress last autumn, delegations from Morocco and Tunisia will come to Strasbourg to attend the Congress' Plenary Session and hold meetings to discuss next steps. A possible first occasion to implement parts of the co-operation programme could be the local elections which – further to the adoption of legal provisions – should be held in October in Tunisia. The Congress expressed already its readiness, in principle, to observe these elections and is interested to carry out preparations in close co-operation with our partners, notably the Council for Democratic Elections.

Thank you very much for your attention!

32nd session of the Congress - 28 March 2017, Strasbourg, France

Last October, I received from the hands of the outgoing President Jean-Claude Frécon the relay baton of the presidency of the Congress. The baton was passed in the spirit of an action collectively led by the successive presidents. I will take up again this metaphor of the relay race that he developed when presenting the results of his mandate and in my turn, in October 2018, I will pass the baton to my successor. But what does this relay consist of?

Above all, it is the conviction that local and regional authorities are responsible for carrying out a considerable share of public action in our States. And to be able to carry out this action in an effective and beneficial way for all citizens, communities need the appropriate means, that is to say the appropriate budgets, competences, laws and legal protection.

In short, I am convinced, and I want to share this conviction with you, that our role, as local and regional elected officials, is important and indispensable to our societies, that we must carry it with dynamism and enthusiasm, and that this is what brings us here together, in our Assembly. But let us be realistic, we have not all arrived at the same point in our respective countries. Some countries are more advanced than others in terms of the quality of local and regional public action, but whatever the situation may be, I remain convinced that we share the same view of the usefulness of our action and its necessity. For if we, members of the Congress, do not have this conviction, what is our purpose?

I sometimes find a lack of commitment on the part of some delegations to defend their own prerogatives vis-à-vis the central governments and I would like to reiterate today, at the opening of this first session in 2017, that we are the representatives of the two hundred thousand territorial communities and not of their national governments. Certainly we work closely with central governments and we will continue to do so, but we are not here to represent our governments and their views. We are the representatives of local and regional governments, serving the citizens. It is this conviction that must act as our compass.

Dear colleagues, I ask you sincerely and solemnly: be relentless activists in favour of the self-governance of cities and regions. The Europe of democracy and the Europe of values are in danger. Jean-Claude Frécon, in his speech last March, said that "the clouds are gathering over Europe". He was making a pessimistic, but also realistic, diagnosis of the situation in our member States and, in particular, the situation of local and regional democracy. When I see elected mayors arrested and replaced by civil servants, when I see powers transferred to the central government on the pretext of saving money, when the wind of recentralisation blows, I feel that the great ambition that is ours, the one we have been defending for exactly 60 years within the Council of Europe, is undermined.

But this is not an inescapable fate, dear colleagues. And this is the meaning I want to give to my chairmanship. Nothing is written in stone and everything is possible. It simply depends on our ability to invest and mobilise ourselves in order to convince our capitals, in order to convince the Committee of Ministers here in Strasbourg that the crises we are going through can be overcome by collective, concerted and concrete action to which local and regional authorities and the Congress can and must contribute.

The local and regional level is the foundation of any system of governance, and a guarantee of its stability. This is indeed the philosophy of our Congress.

A house built on shaky grounds will not last. A society in which citizens' needs are not met, and their concerns not addressed, at the level closest to them – this society will see social tensions and upheavals.

This is why the Congress is in constant dialogue with national governments to defend the interests of local and regional authorities, and to ensure that they have sufficient competences and financial resources to respond to people's expectations in their communities.

Local and regional authorities and politicians, all of us, have an eminently strategic role to play in our States, our societies. How can they be convinced if we in Congress are not the enthusiastic bearers of this message?

Dear colleagues, I invite you to mobilise against any form of retreat of local self-government. We must and we can reverse the trend in order to continue to make progress towards local and regional self-government and, by doing so, we will make a contribution, I believe, to the democratic stability of our continent.

Conference for the 35th Anniversary of the Parliament of Galicia - 5 May 2017, Santiago de Compostela, Spain

I would like to thank the host authorities, in particular Mr Santalices Vieira, President of the Parliament of Galicia, for inviting the Congress of the Council of Europe to this special event today and I take this opportunity to congratulate all the authorities present on this 35th Anniversary of the Parliament of Galicia.

Last week (on 27th April) I was honoured to meet His Majesty the King of Spain in Strasbourg on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of Spain's accession to the Council of Europe. His visit to the Council of Europe was very much appreciated.

I share his view that today - more than ever - rights, freedoms and the rule of law are absolutely vital elements for Europe. I particularly welcome his commitment to guarantee in the Spanish nation the rights and freedoms of all citizens, regardless of where they live, while protecting the various cultures traditions and institutions.

As he said, policy decisions taken must be founded in the values and principles on which democratic systems are based.

May I add that **subsidiarity** is one of these major principles?

[On the Congress]

In the Congress we take this to heart and strive for full implementation of that principle - which remains a solid and modern concept. It implies that the citizen remains at the core of decision-making processes and ensures that decisions are taken in the most efficient and beneficial way. At the same time, powers should be fairly distributed among all tiers of government, taking account of shared dialogue, complementarity, cooperation and coordination.

The existence of Regional Parliaments adds real value to democracy. Regional Parliaments extend the action taken at the grassroots by municipalities in accordance with subsidiarity. This provides for a more differentiated expression of the sovereignty of the people at a level closer to them.

As you may know, the Congress monitors the observance of local democracy in the 47 member states of the Council of Europe.

On a regular basis, the Congress draws up country-by-country reports and recommendations addressed to governments focusing on the articles of the European Charter of Local Self-Government. This treaty guarantees the rights of communities and their elected local, and - if they are not specifically excluded - regional authorities and we are proud that it has been ratified by all of our 47 member states, including yours.

The Congress has always been convinced of the need of a similar text for the regional level and worked on a European Charter for Regional Democracy but the political conditions in Member States did not allow for adoption. However, apart from the fact that the Charter does apply to the regional level of governance if this level was not formally excluded from the scope of the Charter, the Congress contributed to the elaboration of a reference framework which contains guidelines on regional democracy and which is very helpful in this respect. The Member states of the Council of Europe took note of it and decided to take it into consideration and to make use of it in case of territorial reform.

We are convinced that the regions can ensure that central governments' objectives are achieved more effectively and more economically:

- when the decision-making process is brought as close as possible to the citizen and thus to the regional communities;
- when all political parties and associations (even when they do not belong to the government majority) participate directly in public affairs;
- when a more equitable distribution of public resources takes account of the financial burden borne by regional entities.

[On Spanish regions/ Spain]

The Chamber of Regions of the Congress recently produced a comparative Study on “Regionalisation Trends in European Countries”. In this study the Spanish *Comunidades Autónomas* are considered real and efficient regional institutions.

During the first part of the devolution process, a considerable transfer of the state resources, infrastructures and public employees took place in favour of the Spanish regions. Subsequently, their Statutes of autonomy were amended several times.

The degree of devolution in Spain has progressively increased: regions are now responsible for more public spending and have more public employees than the national public administration. The system of financing has been revised to give them more financial autonomy.

The “*Comunidades Autónomas*” certainly comply with the Council of Europe’s standards on regionalisation and even go beyond those standards. However, devolution in Spain is still a source of lively debate, some parties in Catalonia and the Basque Country claiming “self-determination” and even independence.

But regional self-government, as we advocate it in the Congress, is not an appeal in favour of separatism.

The Council of Europe’s basic text –the “European Charter of Local Self-Government” supported by the “Reference Framework for Regional Democracy” provide a balance between central imperatives and peripheral realities, between national sovereignty and regional self-government - which does not mean secession.

This is all the more important today when the rise of populism and regional nationalism in Europe threatens the integrity of our societies.

Regionalisation should respect national borders and should be recognised for its unifying qualities, in some cases some regions and territories benefit from special status.

[On Congress’ Thematic Priorities and Activities]

New challenges confront us in rapid succession: the economic crisis, a mistrust of politics, difficulties in receiving refugees and migrants, the rise of various forms of extremism, nationalism and terrorism.

In particular, the economic crisis, and the consequent decline in the regions’ revenues, places at risk the regions’ capacity to satisfy citizens’ expectations and, in turn, has exacerbated popular discontent.

There is no doubt that regional Parliaments, need to act in all these fields, in complementarity and coordination with other tiers of government.

The Congress has organised debates and exchanges of good practice on good governance and the respect for the rule of law in territorial administrations. Our purpose is to restore trust in politics and in the public administration. Good political governance is possible only if the population trusts its elected representatives at all levels. We, as local regional and politicians, must therefore act as models for society as a whole.

The Congress has extensively worked in recent years to identify ways to prevent corruption, notably through the strengthening of public ethics and transparency. We promote rigorous governance frameworks and the development of common standards, while supporting the development of e-democracy tools at local and regional levels. These tools can help increase transparency and improve citizen participation. Currently we are revising the European Code of Conduct for the political integrity of local and regional elected representatives, adopted by the Congress in 1999.

Good governance remains an essential democratic principle: with a decision-making process brought closer to citizens, taking the form of direct participation of all parties and associations in the management of public affairs so as to create an efficient public administration to serve the population.

With a view to combating radicalisation and violent extremism the Congress has drawn up a strategy for cities and regions. We closely cooperated with the European Union in this endeavour and produced the “Guidelines for local and regional authorities for the prevention of radicalisation and manifestations of hate at grassroots level” as well as launching the “Alliance of European cities against violent extremism” (a platform for exchange aimed at facilitating co-operation for preventing radicalisation).

[Europe and the Regions]

The response to all these challenges cannot be other than a **European response**; and I am convinced that regional parliaments and governments must play a vigorous part in the European decision- making process and in European integration.

European states with strong regions, as well as strong local self-government will together better ensure that democracy, stability and peace will thrive in Europe.

Decentralisation, regionalisation and federal structures provide different pathways to the same destination: the final objective is to bring political and administrative structures nearer to citizens in order to respect their cultural diversity and heritage and to strengthen democracy for all. Here, regional Parliaments such as yours, have an important role to play.

I am pleased to say that the Congress has a well-established tradition of cooperation with Galicia and its Parliament thanks to Pilar Rojo Noguera, when she chaired the Conference of European Regional Legislative Assemblies, the CALRE. I can say that these links were very successful for promoting regional parliamentarism.

The Spanish regional Parliaments are well represented within the Congress including 12 Members of Regional Parliaments I mention in particular Mr Pedro Puy Fraga, who represents the Parliament of Galicia.

My engagement **in** and **for** self-government in Spain will not end today.

At the end of the month I will be in Bilbao, where I shall meet the Association of Basque Municipalities. You can be sure that I will continue to bring together and to combine the forces of self-government so as not to divide, but to unite.

I thank you once again for inviting me on this important occasion.

123rd Plenary Session of the Committee of the Regions - 12 May 2017, Brussels, Belgium

Mr First Vice-President, dear Karl Heinz Lambertz, dear colleagues, Ladies and gentlemen,

I am happy to address the Committee of the Regions today in my capacity as President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe.

There are several important anniversaries to be celebrated in 2017:

- the sixtieth anniversary of the Treaty of Rome and hence the creation of the European Communities;
- the sixtieth anniversary of our Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, since its predecessor met for the first time in January 1957;
- and finally the 10th anniversary of the signature of the Memorandum of Understanding between the Council of Europe and the European Union.

The Congress - within the Council of Europe - and the Committee of the Regions - within the EU - share the same fundamental values: human rights, democracy and the rule of law. They perform differently, work with different European member States, but have complementary roles.

It is hence natural that our cooperation has been developing steadily along the years and is of an added value for both our Organisations, as we, local and regional politicians are closest to European citizens.

Within the Council of Europe, the Congress plays a specific institutional role. For 60 years now, the Congress (and its predecessor) has been advocating enhanced local and regional self-government, by defending the principles of subsidiarity, proximity, democracy, accountability, good governance and active citizenship. Because we know that local and regional self-government contribute to stability and democracy, within each country and in Europe as a whole.

Furthermore, we believe that local and regional authorities should be closely involved in decision-making processes at national and European levels - whilst also being given a proper political and legal framework and sufficient means to exercise their duties and responsibilities in serving the citizens!

[Decentralisation and recurring issues]

Recent studies carried out by the Congress showed that decentralisation has barely made any progress in member States over the past decade. We are all well aware that devolution is a lengthy and complex process, often marked by tendencies to recentralise power. We have to do everything NOT to move backwards.

As entrusted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, the Congress is fulfilling its mission as guardian of democracy at the local and regional levels through monitoring of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, a Convention now ratified by our 47 member States.

The Congress monitors its implementation through country-specific visits. 18 such visits are scheduled for 2017 and 2018.¹ We engage in dialogue within each member State, including with elected representatives and their national associations. We prepare reports which address the main self-government issues which require improvement. These reports enable us to identify the fields in which member States should act in order to comply with their commitments *vis-a-vis* local self-government European standards, as enshrined in the European Charter. We are then able to provide constructive advice both on legislation, and on practices related to local and regional authorities' competencies and aims through specific recommendations addressed to national authorities.

¹ The Congress will pursue this work in 2017 and 2018 by monitoring self-government engagements in: Monaco, San Marino, Latvia, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Austria, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany, Ireland, Portugal, Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation and Slovenia.

These monitoring reports have allowed us to identify, on a horizontal level, a number of recurring issues, such as:

- restricted definition, allocation and exercise of local competences;
- the inadequacy of financial resources; and
- the lack of consultation by central governments.

[Cooperation Congress and CoR]

Dear colleagues, anniversaries are always a good occasion to take stock of the achievements and chalk out plans for the future. I am satisfied with the concrete results of our cooperation over the past years. I will highlight a few examples.

1. The first example concerns our cooperation on priority thematic issues of mutual interest.

The Congress' current priorities for 2017-2020 are regrouped along two main lines of action: "Enhancing the quality of local and regional democracy" and "Building safe and inclusive societies that respect diversity".

A concrete example of our cooperation on thematic issues is our recent conference on "The role of local and regional authorities in preventing corruption and promoting good governance". This successful and very interesting event was jointly organised by the Congress and the Committee of the Regions in Brussels, on 28 February 2017.

Fighting corruption is a prerequisite of good local governance and is indispensable for regaining citizens' trust. Last year, the Congress adopted a "Roadmap of activities for preventing corruption and promoting public ethics at local and regional levels". We are also currently up-dating our "European Code of conduct for the political integrity of local and regional elected representatives", which was adopted already 20 years ago.

2. The second example I wish to put forward is our cooperation in the local and regional election observation missions. Since 2005, the Congress has been inviting the Committee of the Regions to join us in our election observation missions. Since 2012, members of the CoR have participated in 15 election observation missions.

This type of cooperation is a concrete illustration of our common commitment to good local governance and shall be continued.

3. An additional example is how the CoR and the Congress now coordinate their cooperation. Since Jean Claude Frécon, my predecessor, addressed the CoR plenary Session in December 2015, a new coordination body has been established: the High Level Group between the CoR and the Congress. We have already held two meetings, the last one organised in Paris, at the beginning of this year (31 January 2017).

Such high level political coordination is extremely valuable for our respective work in promoting and consolidating local self-government, specifically in EU candidate countries and in its neighbouring countries.

4. This leads me to my following point which is, in my opinion, a major area for coordination and cooperation; it is linked to our respective external policies.

The Congress and the CoR are in a position to contribute to such political agendas through dialogue and regular exchange of information on developments in the member States, candidate or neighbouring countries. This is vital for ensuring coherence in our approaches both for the benefit of those countries and for the relations we have with them.

One obvious example is Turkey. Turkey is an EU candidate country and a long standing Council of Europe member State. In the past months (since the coup in July 2016), the various bodies of the Council

of Europe have been actively involved in dialogue with interlocutors at different levels. On its side, the Congress has been dealing with issues of concern for local self-government.

Congress Vice-President, Anders Knape, and Leen Verbeek as chair of the Congress Monitoring Committee, have carried out a fact-finding mission to Turkey to investigate the sharp increase in arrests, detentions and removal of office of elected mayors and municipal councillors.

The rapporteurs have contributed to several debates and prepared a Congress report on the situation of mayors and councillors in Turkey, which was adopted by the Congress at its last Session in March. In its recommendations, the Congress expressed its conviction that the arrest and removal of office of so many local elected representatives in Turkey is damaging local democracy in that country, and seriously weakening civil society and the political parties. It condemned the excessive use of lengthy pre-trial detention of local politicians and called on the Turkish authorities to urgently re-examine their situation, and to rescind the legislation that it has recently introduced which enables mayors to be appointed by the central authorities.

It is absolutely necessary that the Congress and the CoR maintain their dialogue in order to better assess the political situation in the country, as well as to hold a coherent position and provide appropriate responses, within the global framework of our respective Organisations.

Another main field of cooperation is the EU Eastern Partnership, set up at the end of 2008, which encompasses five countries that are members of the Council of Europe (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) and Belarus.

In 2011, the Committee of the Regions set up the Conference of Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership, known as "CORLEAP". The Congress holds Observer status within CORLEAP and we share a number of common members. Obviously synergies and cooperation among us are crucial and mutually beneficial.

The Congress supports reforms in Eastern Partnership member States through its monitoring reports on the application of the European Charter for Local Self-Government in those countries. Through our post-monitoring dialogue, we engage in direct political dialogue with both national governments and territorial authorities, to ensure an effective follow-up to our proposals. The Congress remains committed to pursuing and strengthening its co-operation, and to building synergies with CORLEAP and its members on issues of common concern.

In Ukraine, for instance, the Congress signed a roadmap in 2015 to accompany the country in the implementation of its decentralisation reforms, based on the Congress Monitoring Report and on the work of a Congress representative in the Constitutional Committee of the Verhovna Rada.

Moreover, practical co-operation programmes are being designed and implemented in all six Eastern Partnership countries, including Ukraine (activities for supporting mayors in their roles as leaders for change; capacity-building activities for local authorities with a focus on young people engaged in social and political activities; dissemination of best practices of local democracy on a peer-to-peer basis among elected politicians).

In this regard, I thank the CoR for inviting the Congress to actively participate in the meetings of the Committee of the Regions Task Force on Ukraine. Through this, our institutions can jointly support the reforms in the country. I am happy to attend its next meeting in June in Khyriv.

5. Now, let's look outside our European borders and to enhanced cooperation in order to increase stabilisation and resilience in the neighbouring countries.. I am deeply convinced that the Southern Mediterranean is an area where the Congress and the CoR can develop stronger and valuable synergies.

The Congress has recently engaged in co-operation programmes in Tunisia and Morocco. Piero Fassino is our Congress spokesperson for the South Med cooperation activities. I am confident that he will be able to foster positive developments and strengthen cooperation with these countries. Regular contacts

between ARLEM and the Congress are already in place and this dialogue will no doubt lead to future mutually beneficial co-operation.

Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to conclude with some final remarks which should guide our action in the future.

The Committee of the Regions and the Congress support and enrich one another reciprocally. We strive to ensure that we do not duplicate our work and I am glad that we have found ways to reinforce our co-operation.

The High-level group which we have recently set up is a very concrete way of politically coordinating our actions on selected issues of true common interest and concern.

The next step will be our joint event on 5th July 2017, Strasbourg, to celebrate our partnership in the framework of the 10th anniversary of the signature of the Memorandum of Understanding between the European Union and the Council of Europe. I shall be pleased to welcome the CoR President Markkula, you, Mr Lambertz, and several members of the CoR to Strasbourg on this occasion.

Thank you for your attention.

127th Session of the Committee of Ministers - 19 May 2017, Nicosia, Cyprus

Dear President, dear Ministers, Ladies and gentlemen,

As President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, I have a regular exchange with your Deputies in Strasbourg. Today I am delighted to address you, the Ministers for Foreign Affairs, and to speak about the role of the Congress, the second Council of Europe Assembly. And let me say that the role and achievements have grown substantially over the past few years.

The Council of Europe had the foresight to open the way to representatives of local and regional authorities as early as 1957, exactly 60 years ago, when it created a committee within the Parliamentary Assembly, with the Congress that we know today being established at the first Summit of Heads of States and Governments in Vienna (in 1993)

The representatives of the territorial collectivities in the 47 member States you represent, work together in the Congress.

Strengthening democracy, human rights and the rule of law at local and regional level are the core objectives of the Congress; the tools to achieve this are monitoring of local and regional democracy and observation of local elections... Both serve to strengthen the political dialogue with governments and, beyond that, to strengthen local and regional democracy.

Today Europe is facing great difficulties: the economic crisis, mistrust in politics and politicians, the lack of solidarity towards refugees and migrants, the rise of extremism, nationalism and terrorism are threatening our societies. In this context, more than ever, the contribution of local and regional elected representatives to the work of central governments is indispensable. Solutions to many of today's problems lie in municipalities, cities and regions.

Local and regional authorities are the level closest to citizens and to the most vulnerable individuals in the community. We are convinced that extremist and radical leanings can be countered by education and prevention on the ground. Local and regional authorities are also in the front line in dealing with the reception and integration of migrants and refugees, which should be done with full respect for their human rights.

In order to fulfil their tasks, local and regional authorities must have the necessary means and they must be involved in the drawing up and implementation of national and European policies and legislation.

We are convinced that the mobilisation of all forces at all levels of governance will enable us to overcome the major threats to our values and to our societies. The Congress will contribute its part to the activities of the Council of Europe as a whole.

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the Cypriot Government on their excellent Chairmanship and highlight the fruitful co-operation that the Congress has had with them. We are looking forward to continuing in this spirit of co-operation and dynamic work with the new Czech Chairmanship.

I would like, Mr. President, to express to your Government all the best wishes for this Chairmanship.

Thank you.

Conference on Human Rights and Humanitarian Law at the crossroads, “High level round table on “Human dignity in times of crisis” - 26 May 2017, Nafplion, Greece

Ladies and gentlemen,

The fundamental rationale (*raison d'être*) underlying our activities at the Council of Europe is the culture of human rights.

The Council of Europe advocates freedom of expression and of the media; it endorses freedom of assembly, equality, and the protection of minorities. It has launched campaigns and promotes human rights through international conventions, such as the European Convention of human rights, the Convention for Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, as well as the European Social Charter. It monitors the progress of member states in these areas and offers recommendations through independent monitoring bodies in order to make human dignity a reality in our member States.

As President of the Congress of the Council of Europe, it is my responsibility to give a political impetus to this role. Indeed, as an organ of the Council of Europe, the Congress has a specific role in this respect.

Just a minute ago, I made reference to “the culture of human rights”. This culture cannot be limited to national policies. We need these, of course, in order to ensure the spread and implementation of human rights, but I believe that all public stakeholders should be involved, all should be committed to the promotion, application, protection and challenge of raising awareness about human rights policies. All possible actors should be involved, whether in the political, cultural, social, or educational spheres.

My own sphere of action concerns territorial stakeholders: local and regional elected representatives who have specific responsibilities in their daily work with regard to freedom of assembly and freedom of expression in light of public security for instance. These responsibilities are sometimes exclusive to the competences of local and regional authorities and sometimes shared with central governments.

The Congress has to ensure that local and regional elected representatives are better aware of their responsibility as fully fledged actors in the field of human rights. And in order to do this it needs to raise awareness of local and regional authorities regarding the issue of human rights.

However - and I would like to stress this point - the Congress does not monitor human rights.

Other entities in the Council of Europe are in charge of monitoring human rights. However, by monitoring local and regional democracy in all member states of the Council of Europe, the Congress does something else. On the one hand it ensures that certain standards are in force in these states, standards which imply respect both for the rule of law and the practice of human rights. And on the other, it uses the monitoring procedure of the Charter, which offers opportunities for political exchange at all levels of governance, to raise the awareness of elected officials regarding their responsibilities in this field.

I must say that the economic, social and political challenges of the past few years have made locally elected representatives much more aware of human rights than they were in the past. The economic crisis, the refugee crisis, and recent conflicts in Europe and the world have confronted local and regional authorities with new responsibilities, many of which have cast issues of fundamental rights, human rights, and basic human dignity into sharp relief...

I could, of course, cite a multitude of stories in this regard. I could describe specific situations which local communities have had to deal with, and which have led them to look at their competencies and responsibilities in this field. I could tell you about circumstances which have even led certain among them to redefine or rethink policies in order to take human rights into account.

But I would like to focus on one example in particular: the question of how to manage the reception and integration of migrants and refugees by local and regional authorities. The Congress has worked a great

deal on this issue, which has naturally preoccupied a large majority of its members and has given rise to a wide exchange of views during its sessions and within its various bodies. The Greek delegation to the Congress, which is obviously very concerned with the matter, has contributed substantially to this work.

However, in the absence of a clear and coherent European response, there has been a crisis of policy surrounding the refugee situation. This has left local and regional governments with limited means and even fewer guidelines to meet their responsibilities. As the first port of call in such emergency situations, they are required to provide newly arrived migrants with protection, with support, and with access to key public services such as housing, healthcare and education. And they have had to do this according to the standards of human rights, without any discrimination.

In many cases this has been very difficult. Local and regional authorities have been quite unprepared to ensure and preserve - often with very limited means - the human dignity of these people. Many of the new arrivals in their territories, such as women and children, are extremely vulnerable; they are particularly at risk of violence, and can easily disappear or become victims of abuse, such as sexual violence and human trafficking.

Last March, the Congress adopted a report with a recommendation that was sent to the member States and a resolution addressed to local and regional elected representatives. This report calls for all public authorities to co-operate with the various levels of government (local, regional and national) to provide a coordinated response to the issues related to reception of refugees. It also encourages the collaboration of cities in various countries so that examples of good practice can be exchanged and innovative initiatives developed, involving all citizens, including the refugees themselves.

Many good practices already exist, and they deserve wide dissemination. They could help the elected representatives of different countries that have had to face the same problems on each side of the European continent. Our challenge, therefore, is to share these practices, to create some kind of a network, which would circulate such positive experiences all across Europe.

Let me give you an example: the municipalities of Strasbourg in France and Catania and Rovereto in Italy responded to a pan-European appeal to establish a network of solidarity between cities. Their aim has been to encourage greater cohesion among those dealing directly with the current situation and to co-ordinate local policies and specific initiatives for the reception of refugees more effectively.

These are very concrete actions initiated by locally elected representatives to guarantee the human dignity of refugees. And the process of monitoring local democracy makes it possible to encourage such initiatives and to promote them further. It allows us to transmit positive experiences, to share the knowledge of what works, and to make effective changes at the local levels of democracy. And it enables us to do this by protecting human rights in ways which sometimes borders on humanitarian law, as in the case of the management of refugees and migrants, or in the context of some parts of Ukraine, for example, where the Congress also works with local and regional elected representatives.

To conclude, I would like to stress our constraints and our capacities: No, the Congress of the Council of Europe does not intervene in conflicts. No, it does not work in the field of humanitarian law. Nor does it monitor human rights. However, our monitoring of local and regional democracy and the action plan of the Congress to raise awareness of human rights at local and regional levels make it possible to intervene effectively in favour of human dignity at the grass roots level. And this is being done through the exchange of information, through a quasi-militant commitment of local and regional elected representatives for more effective local democracy, and therefore by means of a real implementation of human rights in local policy designed to respect "the other" according to his or her personal and cultural identity, by safe-guarding his or her essential human dignity.

Democracy and human rights, regardless of the level of governance, are vitally interdependent.

The Council of Europe is there, through political dialogue with the authorities of any given country, to enhance respect of fundamental rights and liberties.

We highlight the necessity of exercising this respect daily and most urgently when it comes to human dignity and show that there can be no other sustainable way to manage conflict and crisis in our democracies.

Thank you for your attention.

General Assembly of the Association of Basque municipalities EUDEL - 1 June 2017, Getxo, Spain

Dear President, dear members

Thank you for inviting the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities to your General assembly. Special thanks also to the President of EUDEL, Mayor Imanol LANDA JAUREGI, for welcoming us in the beautiful city of Getxo!

The Congress is the Assembly of local and regional authorities of the Council of Europe: It is made of more than 600 local and regional elected members, representing some 200 000 communities from 47 member States. This means the Congress is also your strong voice at European level.

The local and regional representatives of the member states are represented in the Congress within national delegations, which take into account the political balance in their country. The Spanish delegation is made of XX members among whom 12 are representatives of regional parliaments of Spain, including the Basque Parliament represented by M. Inaki AGUIRRE ARIZMENDI. Let me recall that your President M. LANDA JAUREGI is also a very active member of this delegation!

The Congress is a unique institution in Europe as it is responsible for assessing and developing the situation of local and regional democracy in the 47 Council of Europe member States.

It promotes local and regional autonomy, supports innovation and good governance, provides local and regional authorities support in addressing new challenges and helps them deliver their services to the citizens.

The Congress also observes local and regional elections, implements cooperation programmes in several member States, promotes citizen participation, raises awareness on the respect of fundamental rights and works on thematic issues such as fight against radicalisation, reception and integration of migrants and fight against corruption

[Decentralisation and local and regional autonomy]

The reference treaty for the Congress' work is the European Charter of Local Self-government. The Charter lays down the principles and legal aspects that govern autonomy and self-government and guarantees the rights of communities and their elected local, and - if they are not specifically excluded - regional authorities. It has now been ratified by all 47 member States.

On a regular basis, the Congress draws up country-by-country reports and recommendations addressed to governments focusing on the provisions of the Charter.

The Congress has tirelessly promoted local and regional self-government by fostering the principles of subsidiarity, proximity, good governance and active citizenship. We are convinced that local and regional self-government contributes to the stability and democracy in Europe. Strong democratic cities and regions contribute to inclusive, safe and fair societies.

Decentralisation means more responsibilities for the cities and the regions and more opportunities for their citizens to participate in the decision-making processes. In the past 40 years, local and regional elected representatives have become key players in national and European policies. They are the link between national governments and citizens and they can bring European values close to the people.

[Consultation between central governments and local and regional authorities]

The European Charter of Local self-government lays down the principles that govern self-government. Article 10 of the Charter concerns the consultation of local and regional authorities by central government on all matters that involve them. Consultation is a central feature of local self-government and a vital process which serves to ensure that our multi-level governance system functions effectively. This is one of

the pillars of our local democracy. For consultation to be effective, it needs to be properly anchored in the policy and regulatory framework of each Member State.

But consultation is not an easy process and it does not come naturally – it requires considerable efforts from all sides. Consultation requires engaging in real dialogue. It depends on trust between the levels concerned and it needs to be early and transparent.

Lack of consultation is regularly identified as part of the “recurrent issues” that we identify in our monitoring work. It is for this reason that the Congress prepared a strategy and issued guidelines on what makes good consultation processes. These guidelines underline in particular the important role national associations have in representing local and regional authorities in the national and regional capitals and in safeguarding their right to be consulted on matters that concern them.

[Congress thematic priorities and activities]

In recent years, Europe has been facing great difficulties: economic crisis, mistrust in politics and politicians, lack of solidarity towards refugees and migrants, rise of extremism, nationalism and terrorism.

These challenges are threatening our societies. The economic crisis, in particular, and the consequent decline in the cities and the regions’ revenues, has placed their capacity to satisfy citizens’ expectations at risk.

The aim of the Congress is to contribute to the restoring of trust in politics and in the public administration. Good political governance is possible only if the population trusts its elected representatives at all levels. We, as local and regional politicians, must therefore act as models for society as a whole.

In this context, the Congress has organised debates and exchanges of good practice on good governance and the respect for the rule of law in territorial administrations. It has in particular worked in recent years to identify ways to prevent corruption, notably through the strengthening of public ethics and transparency. It has promoted rigorous governance frameworks and the development of common standards. Currently, among others, we are revising the European Code of Conduct for the political integrity of local and regional elected representatives, adopted by the Congress in 1999.

Another challenge is the trend to radicalisation leading to terrorism. The terrible terrorist attack in Manchester last week has proven once again how much more efforts we must produce at all levels to prevent and combat radicalisation and violent extremism. To this end, the Congress has prepared “Guidelines for local and regional authorities for the prevention of radicalisation and manifestations of hate at grassroots level” and has launched an “Alliance of European cities against violent extremism” which is a platform for exchange aimed at facilitating co-operation for preventing radicalisation.

In this field, like in so many others, the contribution of local and regional elected representatives to the work of central governments is indispensable. Local and regional authorities are the level closest to citizens and to the most vulnerable or exposed individuals in the communities. We are convinced that extremist and radical leanings can be countered by proximity work on the ground, in particular in the field of education and prevention.

Local and regional authorities are also in the front line in dealing with the reception and integration of migrants and refugees, which is another huge challenge for Europe as a whole. Local and regional authorities are at the frontline in cases of emergency and they are often left with limited means and guidance to tackle the situation. Many cities and regions have been severely affected in different ways: as places of arrival, of transit and of destination for the refugees.

During its last Session in March, the Congress adopted a report on the role of local and regional authorities in the reception of refugees and integration of migrants. Among others, this report urges governments to consult with regional and local authorities and coordinate their action, providing legislative and financial backing. It also advocates that integration must start as early as possible, from the moment of arrival. Regional and local authorities must develop programmes that bring newcomers and host communities together in activities, such as sports or intercultural events, in order to create the right conditions for mutual understanding and integration.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We, in the Congress, are convinced that the response to all these challenges cannot be other than European, with the involvement of cities and regions in national and European decision-making processes.

Decentralisation, self-government and regionalisation provide different pathways to the same destination: the final objective is to bring political and administrative structures nearer to citizens in order to respect their cultural diversity and heritage and to strengthen democratic stability and security for all.

His Majesty the King of Spain visited Strasbourg one month ago, on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of Spain's accession to the Council of Europe. I had the privilege of meeting him and of listening to his speech to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. I want to share this with you. He said "Democracy requires the bringing together of emotion, reason, trust, participation, a constructive attitude and a conciliatory spirit. It requires sincere dialogue and, as a consequence, the taking of decisions in a responsible manner".

In my view this is highly relevant for national governments and parliaments, for regional governments and parliaments and for provincial and municipal councils.

And this is also the spirit of the work that the Congress wants to achieve for and with its members and the local and regional communities across Europe.

I thank you once again for inviting the Congress of the Council of Europe to be part of this important event and I wish EUDEL a bright future.

Thank you.

**Conference “Public policies, democracy, rights and transparency in local governments” -
7 June 2017, Athens, Greece**

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank you for inviting the Congress of the Council of Europe to this conference and to pay tribute to Jean-Claude FRECON, former President of the Congress who was, as you know, a friend of Greece.

Jean-Claude FRECON was here in Athens less than one year ago, in September 2016, at your invitation, Ms DOUROU. Together with a Congress delegation he visited refugee camps in ELAIONAS and SKARAMAGAS and the logistic centre). He wanted to better understand the situation that you have to face, as Governor of Attica region, and that Greece as a whole is facing. This visit helped him and the rapporteurs to better focus the Congress action on the needs of the migrants and on the needs of the politicians, administrations and the indispensable civil society in the regions, cities and municipalities as regards the reception and integration of migrants and the role of local and regional authorities in this respect. He was a devoted supporter of Greek local and regional authorities and I would like to quote him when he addressed the members of KEDE (the Central Union of Greek municipalities) in September 2016.

He highlighted that “the Congress of the Council of Europe will mobilise its modest but determined forces to convince governments of our member States about the burning need to fulfill the obligation to gather all European territorial communities to lighten your load, notably by welcoming, where it is possible, families of refugees with the aim of integrating them. Your country has no vocation to become a huge refugee camp”, he said.

Jean-Claude FRECON chose strong and sincere words when he talked about the situation in Greece. So I would like to thank you again, Ms DOUROU, for allowing us to pay tribute to him again, and by doing so, to enable us to keep him in our memories and in our hearts.

I can assure you today that as President of the Congress, I will do my best to follow Jean-Claude FRECON's footsteps and invest all my energy and my determination as regards the situation of local and regional democracy in your country.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In 2014, the Congress carried out two monitoring visits to assess the situation of local and regional democracy in Greece in the light of the European Charter on Local Self-Government. This Charter was ratified by Greece already in 1989.

At that time, I was co-rapporteur on regional democracy in Greece, so I conducted the monitoring visits and of course presented the report which was then adopted by the Congress in 2015.

In the meantime, my position has changed. But as you can see, I am still very committed to local and regional democracy in Greece. In my past capacities as regional rapporteur and former President of the Chamber of regions of the Congress, I paid a particular interest to the regional issues.

My first surprise - so to say – was, when I discovered that the Greek ratification law of the European Charter on Local Self-Government explicitly excluded the regional level from the scope of application of that Treaty. According to Article 2 of the ratification Law (1850/1989), in Greece the Charter does not concern the second tier of local government. At that time, the Greek regions were branches of central government, they were “deconcentrated” State bodies, which could explain this restrictive declaration when the Greek authorities ratified the European Charter.

Today, in 2017, however the territorial structure of Greece has changed. The Kallikratis reform redefined the first and second level local authorities mentioned in the Constitution – at present the municipalities and

the regions – and changed their territorial structures, their basic organization, their competences, the financial system, the supervision by the State and the introduction of elections to regional assemblies. Greek regions play a role in the decentralisation process as they are the seat of the former prefectural administrations' services and they contribute to the provision of services to citizens. Regions are responsible for planning and implementing the government's regional policies in the areas of the regional responsibilities.

Especially, as we underlined in the Congress report on Greece, responsibilities on the planning and development, as well as responsibilities of administrative and management nature, have been transferred to the responsibility of the elected bodies of the regions, as the Managing Authorities for the Regional Operational Programmes and the Regional Development Funds have been placed under the regions. As second tier local governments, the new regions (as of 2011 after the entry into force of the Kallikratis reform) take over important responsibilities with regard to economic and regional development.

The regions design, plan and implement their own regional policies within the context of their competencies, according to the principles of transparency, effectiveness and efficiency. Regions exercise their competences within the framework of the relevant laws and administrative regulations, in a number of fields.

It goes without saying that Greek regions must have the means to pursue their policies, and to deliver their services. I am not referring to financial means only, but to a general autonomy, that is to say enlarged competences and responsibilities. Greece needs strong policies of regions. What does it mean? It means that on the one hand, Greece needs a strong regional policy of the European Union and of the Greek government. On the other hand, Greece also needs an own policy of the regions to design legal and political framework and to provide each regions with a political weight. And these strong policies of regions are necessary to make a reality of this tier of government which should also benefit from the rights provided by the European Charter of Local Self-Government.

In its recommendation, the Congress called on the Greek authorities to extend the scope of the Charter to the second tier of local government, namely the regions, by amending the existing legislation. After the Kallikratis reform, no doubts remain as to their status as democratic and accountable self-government authorities.

In our monitoring report we stressed that the Greek regions lack regulatory powers and do not have powers of self-organisation; they can only establish their own organisational chart and define internal rules for their own administration, but within a framework that is set by national laws, which tend to be quite extensive and standardise even secondary matters of details of administrative actions.

Yet the Greek constitution provides quite detailed provisions which contain regulations on local government and which should also apply to the regional level.

More than ever when Greek municipalities and regions have to face with burning challenges (such as the refugee crisis) these two tiers of government should have tailored competences and concomitant resources in order to achieve their respective policies.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Recently the Congress introduced a new procedure, known as the post-monitoring procedure. This follow-up to the monitoring report consists of political dialogue of national, regional and local authorities with the Congress, in order to develop and to agree on a timeline to implement the Congress recommendations for that country.

I must say that we have a very good cooperation with the national authorities and a very good dialogue. This year I had the privilege to meet the President of the Hellenic republic Mr. Prokopis PAVLOPOULOS twice; once in Strasbourg and once in Athens just two weeks ago. He supports the proposals of the Congress to develop local and regional democracy in Greece further and finds it relevant to work on the basis of the know-how provided by the Congress. The Minister of Interior, Panos SKOURLETIS, was at the Council of Europe premises in Strasbourg two weeks ago. This also demonstrates the close working relationships between Greek authorities and the Council of Europe.

So I trust that we will have a fruitful post-monitoring dialogue, which I hope will lead to the incorporation of the regional level into the scope of application of the Charter and thus to the strengthening of policies of the regions in Greece, in order to better serve the needs of the citizens... which is - at the end of the day - the final objective of such policies.

This is exactly what we are resolutely working on today at the Congress, hand in hand with the Greek authorities.

Thank you for your attention.

General Assembly of the Hungarian National Association of Local Authorities - 8 June 2017, Budapest, Hungary

Dear President, dear members

Let me begin by saying how pleased I am to be here at your General Assembly. It is a great honour for me. Thanks also to President Jenő SCHMIDT, for welcoming us to this beautiful city. Ever since your association (TÖOSZ) was formed almost 30 years ago, during the transition of Hungary to democracy, it has been closely bound up with Hungary's democratic development.

You have been working with the Congress from the beginning and yours is one of the national associations that we work really well with. We have a long history of cooperation. National associations of local authorities are the key partners for the Congress, in rolling out its activities, in listening and in dialogue, it devising our policies and priorities for the future.

Establishing a strong national association is the first step for us when a country joins the Council of Europe and sends a delegation to the Congress, but here in Hungary you were one step ahead - your association was already in place before Hungary joined the Council.

National associations are also very important in the work of our strategic partner organisations – the EU's Committee of the Regions, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions and the Assembly of European Regions. While some people express surprise that there are all these organisations working to improve democracy and governance at the local and regional levels, the truth is that there is never enough of this cooperation and in fact we are working closely together and finding synergies wherever we can.

The Congress also actively encourages local authorities to cooperate with their neighbours across national borders. There are huge benefits to be gained from this – in pooling our resources and expertise. Too often, however, our borders still act as barriers rather than as bridges. So I am delighted that today we have the participation of Board members from the national associations of neighbouring countries, a sign that Hungary's transfrontier cooperation is continuing to develop. In fact I believe that we have much to learn from you with regard to transfrontier cooperation – such your experience of local authority cooperation within the Visegrad Group, the 'V4', which cooperates, among other bodies, also with the Eastern Partnership countries.

The Hungarian delegation to the Congress is very important for us [and I am glad to see so many of you here today]. Your delegation is one that you can be proud of. It punches above its weight. We have a Hungarian Vice-President, Anna MAGYAR, which makes Hungary one of the 17 delegations represented in the Bureau with decision-making powers.

Yours is a very active delegation by Congress standards. Several of your members are or have recently been rapporteurs. In the Current Affairs Committee, Anna MAGYAR is our co-rapporteur for the minority languages report, and Gyorgy ILLES was co-rapporteur for the migration report and in the Governance Committee, Marta CAMPANARI-TALABER is the co-rapporteur of our report on financial compensation, which I shall say more about in a minute. These are all big subjects. Some of you have also been very active in our election observation missions [Anna MAGYAR and Gyorgy ILLES].

Another important body of the Congress is the Group of Independent Experts on the European Charter of Local Self-Government. Here again, the Hungarian contribution is outstanding. Our Hungarian expert, Zoltan SZENTE, Professor at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences of the University of Budapest, is Vice-President of the Group and for many years has been one of our most trusted experts. The list of Congress reports drafted by Professor SZENTE is a long one and it is an open secret that we often turn to him for the most difficult subjects.

[The European Charter of Local Self-Government]

One of the main activities and responsibilities of the Congress is to oversee the implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government. This is the Council of Europe's main legal instrument for

strengthening local democracy across the European space and we are proud of the fact that it has now been ratified by all 47 Council of Europe member states. It enshrines some fundamental principles for the good functioning of local governments, such as the need for properly defined powers and responsibilities and adequate financial resources.

We believe that local authorities, as the principle suppliers of local public services, should have the fullest possible autonomy in how they carry out their functions. Proper consultation is another key principle of the Charter. Local authorities need to be consulted by national governments on all issues and policies that affect them and for this there need to be robust and permanent consultation mechanisms in place, so that they can contribute to all such decision-making in good time.

We recognise that the situation in many of our member states in this respect is far from perfect - in fact it is one of our 'recurring issues' – the problems that are mentioned most frequently in our monitoring reports. It is also an issue that we encountered in our last monitoring visit to Hungary, back in 2012, so I would be interested to hear whether there has been any improvement in that respect since our report. As a national association – one of your most important functions should be as a consultation partner for the national authorities.

Hungary has its own experience of a recentralisation of powers, so as we recognise that you are doing valuable work in this association, we are at the same time aware that you are facing considerable challenges and that the resources at the disposal of local government in Hungary are quite modest. But, as I like to remind our national authorities, there can be no democracy without local democracy. Democracy has its roots in our towns and villages and we would do well to remember that – as we see the growth of populist politics across the European continent.

[Status of local representatives]

I understand that one of the subjects that you will be discussing today is the status of local representatives. This is also a key issue for the Congress. The recent Congress report and recommendation on the subject could be of interest to you. You cannot have good local government and a good quality of local life without having competent local political elected representatives. And to attract the right people, you need proper pay and working conditions.

Too often local government work is poorly recognised and poorly paid. In my opinion this is a dangerous and risky situation. Worst is the risk of corruption. If your policemen earn peanuts, then they will be more tempted to increment their income by bribes and unnecessary fines. We all know this. Our Hungarian member Marta CAMPANARI-TALABER is co-rapporteur for a report on the "Financial compensation of local and regional elected representatives and public officials", which we expect to be ready next year and which should include some recommendations concerning the application of Article 7.2 of the European Charter, where our member states have accepted to provide 'appropriate financial compensation for expenses occurred in office' and 'compensation for loss of earnings or remuneration for work done'.

The status of local elected representatives varies enormously from country to country. Given the variety of systems of local government in Europe, it is unrealistic for us to seek to have or to promote a single model of status. However, it is obvious to me that we need proper working conditions, proper compensation for work done and for what we have given up in terms of our careers. Local politics should not just be for rich males and old people. We need to attract women, mothers of families and we need to attract young people. With the right conditions of work we can go this.

[Local finance]

We are working on a report on adequate resources for local authorities. I know that this is a hot topic in Hungary. This is a follow up to the work we did three years ago. We make the point that some governments are recentralising as a pretext to get out of a financial crisis. This is not good. It is not good for our citizens. The Charter stresses the importance of own financial resources – we need tax-raising revenues. Centralisation can never adequately serve and respond to the needs of the people.

[E-democracy]

But even with modest means at our disposal, the continuing advances in communications technologies are opening up exciting new opportunities, both in terms of improving governance and making it more transparent and also in improving citizen participation. At our last session in March, we adopted a report on 'Open data for better public services', demonstrating how local authorities can improve local life and stimulate economic development by making datasets available to the public to re-use. We demonstrate how such data can make possible a whole range of social, cultural, democratic and environmental initiatives. This is part of our objective of developing Smart Cities and I am delighted to learn that many of Hungary's cities are involved in the European Innovation Partnership on Smart Cities and Communities.

Hungary was one of the first countries to ratify the Additional Protocol to the European Charter, on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority. Our latest report on citizen participation underlines that, by providing clear, comprehensive and accessible information on local and regional policies, authorities can strengthen active citizenship and foster a feeling of belonging to a community, and the duty to contribute to this community in a democratic society. More and more of our cities are demonstrating how information and communication technologies, combined with a policy of transparency, can have a direct impact on participation and public services.

[Congress priorities]

Last year, in its October session, the Congress adopted its priorities to guide its work over the next four years, 2017 to 2020. Two main areas of work were agreed – to strengthen the quality of local and regional democracy and to build secure societies that are respectful, inclusive and closer to citizens. Strengthening local and regional democracy includes its fight against corruption – for which we are currently preparing reports on public procurement, combatting conflicts of interest and nepotism and also revising our 1999 code of conduct for political representatives and extending it to cover all those involved in the provision of public services.

[Current challenges for Europe and Council of Europe responses]

In April, the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Thorbjørn JAGLAND, issued his 2017 report on the State of Democracy, Human Rights and the Rule of Law. The 2017 report carries the title "Populism – how strong are Europe's checks and balances?" I also recommend this report to you.

The Secretary General is concerned at what he refers to as the 'illiberal swerve' that is being taken in some of our member States, governments which appear to be less protective of their pluralism and more accepting of populism. He describes populism as 'those who invoke the proclaimed will of "the people" in order to stifle opposition and dismantle checks and balances which stand in their way'. He observes that, in a growing number of countries, nationalist and xenophobic parties are making gains by challenging elites and exploiting public anxieties over migration and that, fearful of losing ground, the politicians in power are responding by toughening up their stances on issues such as asylum and law and order.

In his report he describes in detail the strategies that the Council of Europe is taking to counter this threat. The Congress is working intensively on several of the key issues that he identifies, such as migration and refugees, Roma discrimination and countering violent extremism.

Ladies and gentleman,

Unfortunately time will not permit me to tell you about all the exciting work that we are doing in these areas, so I have decided to focus on one – our work with Roma. Hungary is playing a key role in our work on Roma issues. I know that Anna MAGYAR is a supporter of the DOSTA & UEFA Respect campaign. Our Hungarian member Gyorgy ILLES has also signed the "Declaration of Mayors and elected local and regional representatives of Council of Europe member states against anti-Gypsyism".

Another mayor from Hungary - József IGNÁCZ of Besence Municipality, who is not a Congress member - has also signed the Declaration. Let me invite you all to follow his example and to get as many of your mayors and city councillors as possible to sign up to this important political declaration. There is now a

Hungarian translation available. In fact we have already written to your association to underline our call of signatures to take an explicit stand against anti-Gypsyism.

In October last year the Congress adopted a Recommendation and a Report concerning “The situation of Roma and Travellers in the context of rising extremism, xenophobia and the refugee crisis in Europe”. As we point out in our report, discrimination against Roma in Hungary has now escalated into violence and physical assaults. The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights has expressed his concern at the “increasing influence of extremist rhetoric on the discourse of mainstream politicians and on society at large” in Hungary - particularly at the local level. So there is work to do here – and we are partners in this task.

Our report on Roma assesses how the situation of Roma and Travellers in Europe has evolved in the five years since our landmark report on “Roma inclusion as a challenge for local and regional authorities”. It underlines that, despite numerous efforts, the circumstances not only have not improved, but appear to have worsened during the refugee crisis. Local and regional authorities are at the forefront of responding to these new challenges, as they bear a great responsibility for the social inclusion of Roma and Travellers.

Time is running out, so let me make a few concluding remarks. I cannot stress too much how important the work of your association is for us. It is here in our national associations that we have the best chance to develop our work in our towns and cities to improve and enrich the lives of all our citizens. I thank you again for inviting me to this event and I wish you all – wish all of us rather – a stimulating and fruitful meeting.

(German only)

Europa-Forum Wachau - Zwischen Asien und USA: wie kann Europa wettbewerbsfähig bleiben? -

10 Juni 2017, Stift Göttweig, Austria

Sehr geehrte Damen und Herren, liebe Mitdiskutanten in diesem Arbeitskreis,

Zunächst herzlichen an die Veranstalter für die Gelegenheit, beim traditionellen Europa-Forum in der Wachau sprechen zu dürfen. Das ehrt den Kongress der Gemeinden und Regionen im Europarat – und ist mir persönlich eine große Freude.

Möglicherweise hätten Sie mich als Repräsentantin von 200.000 Gemeinden und Regionen in den 47 Mitgliedsländern des Europarates nicht unbedingt in einem Arbeitskreis vermutet, in dem über Wirtschaftsfragen diskutiert wird. Die einzigen großen Themen, mit denen sich der Europarat nicht beschäftigt, sind Verteidigung und Wirtschaft, heißt es immer.

Doch das ist nur auf den ersten Blick richtig. Beim genaueren Hinsehen erkennt man, dass auch eine Institution wie der Europarat, der sich seit seiner Gründung im Jahr 1949 dem Schutz von Menschenrechten, Demokratie und Rechtsstaatlichkeit verschrieben hat, unverzichtbar ist für wirtschaftliche Prosperität, Wohlstand und gute Zusammenarbeit in Europa - und über europäische Grenzen hinweg.

Ohne gemeinsame Standards zur Absicherung der demokratischen Grundfreiheiten und des Rechtsstaates gibt es keine nachhaltige Standort sicherheit und keine Anreize für Investitionen. Ohne wirtschaftliche Prosperität fehlen die Arbeitsplätze, was wieder zu sozialen Spannungen führen kann und eine Gefahr für die Menschenrechte darstellt. So einfach ist das – und zugleich so kompliziert!

Der Zusatznutzen des Europarates ist es, in den fast 70 Jahren seines Bestehens Verfahren entwickelt zu haben, die es möglich machen, die Einhaltung der völkerrechtlichen Verträge zum Schutz der Menschenrechte und der Demokratie in den Mitgliedsstaaten zu überprüfen. Eines der wichtigsten Verfahren dabei ist das so genannte „Monitoring“.

Der völkerrechtliche Vertrag, der die territoriale Demokratie in den 47 Mitgliedsstaaten des Europarates absichert, ist die Europäische Charta der Kommunalen Selbstverwaltung aus dem Jahr 1985. Darüber hinaus wurde 2010 ein Referenzrahmen für Regionale Demokratie verabschiedet, der dem Umstand Rechnung trägt, dass es in vielen, wenn auch nicht in allen Ländern des Europarates regionale Gebietskörperschaften gibt, die zwischen Regierungs- und Gemeindeebene angesiedelt sind und dort wesentliche Aufgaben erfüllen, nicht zuletzt im Interesse der wirtschaftlichen Prosperität und eines gesunden Arbeitsmarktes.

Ungefähr alle fünf Jahre werden die Mitgliedsländer des Europarates turnusmäßig vom Kongress der Gemeinden und Regionen besucht um sicherzustellen, dass die Kommunen die ihnen im Zuge der Selbstverwaltung übertragenen Aufgaben im Interesse der Bürgerinnen und Bürger erfüllen können. Dass sie zum Beispiel genügend Finanzmittel haben, um Verkehrs- und Infrastrukturprojekte in ihrem Verantwortungsbereich umzusetzen. Dem zugrunde liegt natürlich das viel zitierte Subsidiaritätsprinzip, wonach öffentliche Aufgaben vorzugsweise auf jener Entscheidungsebene erledigt werden sollen, die den Bürgern am nächsten ist.

Macht zu dezentralisieren und jene Gebietskörperschaften, die den Bürgern am nächsten sind, bei Planungs- und Entscheidungsprozessen in den Gemeinden und Regionen einzubeziehen, hat sich als gutes Rezept für wirtschaftlichen Erfolg bewährt. Wir können zum Beispiel feststellen, dass Regionen mit starken lokalen Behörden tendenziell besser dazu geeignet sind, wirtschaftliche Krisen gut zu überstehen. Das Europäische Beobachtungsnetzwerk ESPON zur Verbesserung der Raumentwicklungspolitik hat nach der Finanz- und Wirtschaftskrise, die ab 2007 als Schockwelle auch Europa erfasst hat, die Situation in föderal und in eher zentralistisch aufgestellten EU-Ländern untersucht. Dabei stellte sich heraus, dass - sowohl was die Arbeitslosigkeit als auch das Bruttoinlandsprodukt betrifft – starke sub-nationale Verwaltungseinheiten eine wichtige Rolle spielen für Krisensicherheit und Widerstandsfähigkeit, für die so genannte Resilienz. Länder wie Österreich, die Schweiz, Deutschland oder auch Norditalien sind gute

Beispiele für starke Regionen mit starken lokalen Behörden. Allerdings sind lokale und regionale Entscheidungsträger nicht immer Garanten für den Erfolg. In Irland und Spanien wurden im Zuge der Wirtschaftskrise Fehler bei der Planung und beim Wiederaufbau in den Regionen begangen. Wichtig ist deshalb das gute Zusammenspiel, die Koordination, zwischen sub-nationalen und nationalen Entscheidungsträgern – wesentlich ist auch die Zusammenarbeit über nationale Grenzen hinweg. Doch dazu komme ich noch.

Demokratische Stabilität – und für die ist der Europarat a priori zuständig – zählt, im weitesten Sinne, zu den so genannten weichen Standortfaktoren. Im engeren Sinne geht es dabei auch um das Image und die Weltoffenheit einer Stadt oder einer Region, um Kooperationsmöglichkeiten, Bildungseinrichtungen, Wohnqualität und Umweltschutz. Die so genannten harten Standortfaktoren im klassischen Sinn sind Verkehrsanbindung, Arbeitsmarkt, Steuern oder Förderangebote. Hinzu kommen hier noch technische Faktoren wie Digitalisierung und Verfügbarkeit von Breitbandinternet, die mittlerweile die Wettbewerbsfähigkeit ganzer Regionen bestimmen.

Die zunehmende Bedeutung von weichen Standortfaktoren in Mittel- und Westeuropa wird häufig damit begründet, dass wichtige harte Standortfaktoren überall gleichermaßen vorhanden sind. Aus Sicht des Europarates, der nicht nur Wohlstandsländer in seiner Mitte zählt, sondern auch Länder, die zu den ärmsten auf unserem Kontinent gehören, ist dies natürlich noch Wunschdenken vielerorts.

Gerade deshalb beschäftigt sich Kongress der Gemeinden und Regionen – zusätzlich zu den bewährten Verfahren zur Überprüfung europäischer Standards wie dem schon erwähnten Monitoring der Charta der Kommunalen Selbstverwaltung oder auch der Beobachtung lokaler und regionaler Wahlen in den Mitgliedsländern – mit neuen Mechanismen zur wirtschaftlichen Stabilisierung und Förderung von urbanen und regionalen Gebieten.

Ein Beispiel dafür sind Modelle inter-regionaler Zusammenarbeit in Europa, die in den vergangenen 20 Jahren großen Aufschwung erlebt haben. Zunächst waren es vor allem Regionen mit einem hohen Ausmaß an Autonomie und mit großer Wirtschaftskraft wie Flandern, Katalonien oder das Baskenland, die sich hier engagiert haben. Mittlerweile sind Kooperationen zwischen Regionen verschiedener Länder zu einem zweiten wichtigen Standbein der Zusammenarbeit geworden neben der schon länger bestehenden grenzüberschreitenden Zusammenarbeit von Kommunen und Regionen. Die Rechtsinstrumente des Europarates sind hier richtungsweisend – wie etwa das Dritte Protokoll zur Europäischen Rahmenkonvention für grenzüberschreitende Zusammenarbeit zwischen territorialen Körperschaften. Dies ermöglicht die Gründung von so genannten „Verbünden für interregionale Zusammenarbeit“ und hat damit den Weg bereitet eine neue Generation von Kooperationsmodellen.

Gerade weil wir in diesem Arbeitskreis über unseren europäischen Tellerrand hinausblicken wollen, ist es wichtig Kooperationsmodelle zu propagieren, die den wirtschaftlichen und sozialen Zusammenhalt zwischen Regionen innerhalb und außerhalb Europas stärken.

Lassen Sie mich zum Schluss noch ein Thema aufgreifen, das mir besonders am Herzen liegt und das auch zu den Prioritäten des Arbeitsprogrammes des Kongresses 2017 bis 2020 gehört – nämlich die Situation in vielen ländlichen Gebieten der Mitgliedsländer des Europarates. Bevölkerungsrückgang und Abwanderung junger, gut ausgebildeter Kräfte in urbane Zentren, schlechte Versorgung der verbleibenden älteren Bevölkerung, geringe ökonomische Wettbewerbsfähigkeit, Arbeitslosigkeit, geringe Kaufkraft, baulicher Verfall, Verschlechterung der allgemeinen Lebensbedingungen – das sind nur einige der Phänomene, mit denen wir es hier zu tun haben. Das alles geht oft einher mit einem negativen Lebensgefühl, mit Demokratieskepsis und mit dem Eindruck „vergessen“ worden zu sein. Die Auswirkungen am Wahltag – und nicht nur dort – kennen wir.

Und dies ist auch der Punkt, an dem sich der Kreis wieder schließt zu meiner Eingangsbemerkung: Der Schutz unserer freien, pluralistischen Gesellschaft auf Basis demokratischer Spielregeln, unter Wahrung von Menschenrechten und der Rechtsstaatlichkeit muss unser oberstes Ziel bleiben. Davon hängt alles andere ab – insbesondere die Wirtschaftskraft und Wettbewerbsfähigkeit Europas.

Herzlichen Dank für Ihre Aufmerksamkeit!

(German only)

Gemeinsame Landtagspräsidentenkonferenz - Engagement der Landesparlamente im EU-Ausschuss der Regionen und im Kongress der Gemeinden und Regionen des Europarates -

13 Juni 2017, Bregenz, Austria

Sehr geehrter Herr Landtagspräsident Sonderegger, verehrte Präsidentinnen und Präsidenten der deutschen und österreichischen Landtage, verehrte Delegation der Deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft Belgiens, geschätzte Vertreter der parlamentarischen Direktionen, liebe Kollegen im Kongress der Gemeinden und Regionen des Europarates,

Ich freue mich wirklich sehr, heute vor der diesjährigen Gemeinsamen Landtagspräsidentenkonferenz sprechen zu dürfen – noch dazu vor der prächtigen Kulisse des Bodensees, der - per se - ein sehr schönes Symbol für Grenzöffnung und gute Nachbarschaft zwischen den Ländern darstellt.

Grenzüberschreitende Zusammenarbeit, Austausch von guten Praxisbeispielen über territoriale Demokratie und die Pflege lokaler und regionaler Netzwerke in Europa – damit bin ich eigentlich schon mitten drin in meinem Thema, das sich mit den Aufgaben und Funktionsweisen des Kongresses beschäftigt – und mit dem großen übergeordneten Ziel des Europarates: nämlich der Stärkung von Demokratie und Menschenrechten auf allen Regierungsebenen und insbesondere in den Kommunen und Regionen.

Als ich im vorigen Oktober als erste Frau zur Präsidentin des Kongresses der Gemeinden und Regionen in Straßburg gewählt wurde, habe ich mir vorgenommen, den Bekanntheitsgrad des Kongresses unter den politischen Entscheidungsträgern in den Kommunen zu verbessern. Wir sind als europäisches Sprachrohr der rund 200.000 Gemeinden und Regionen in den 47 Mitgliedsländern des Europarates noch zu wenig bekannt. Wir tun viel Gutes – und sollten auch darüber reden. Gelegenheiten wie diese Gemeinsame Konferenz in Bregenz nehme ich daher sehr gerne wahr.

Was sind nun die Eckpfeiler unserer Arbeit in Straßburg? Da gibt es zum einen den wichtigen völkerrechtlichen Vertrag des Europarates, die Charta der kommunalen Selbstverwaltung. Um der wichtigen Rolle, die die Regionen in vielen europäischen Staaten innehaben, gerecht zu werden, hat der Europarat 2009 auch einen Referenzrahmen für die regionale Demokratie vorgelegt.

Was die Charta der kommunalen Selbstverwaltung betrifft, ist es Kernaufgabe des Kongresses, deren Umsetzung von den Mitgliedsstaaten des Europarates regelmäßig einzufordern. Die beiden Instrumente, die der Kongress dafür zur Verfügung hat, heißen „Monitoring“ und „Wahlbeobachtung“.

Ich habe in den letzten Jahren selbst an zahlreichen Monitoring- und Wahlbeobachtungsreisen in den Ländern des Europarates teilgenommen und kann Ihnen gleich einige Beispiele für die Herausforderungen geben, denen wir hier gegenüber stehen.

Lassen Sie mich zuvor aber auf das große transversale Know-how des Kongresses eingehen, das bei der Bewältigung aktueller Probleme in den Gemeinden und Regionen eine wesentliche Rolle spielt. Wichtige Aktionsfelder in diesem Zusammenhang sind:

- die Betreuung von Flüchtlingen und die Integration von Immigranten in den Kommunen
- die Bekämpfung von Korruption in den Gemeindestuben
- die Eindämmung von Radikalisierung und gewalttätigem Extremismus in den Städten
- oder auch das Management von Dezentralisierungsmaßnahmen und Gemeindereformen.

Die von mir eingangs erwähnten Netzwerke und Partnerschaften in Europa sind wichtige Multiplikatoren bei der Nutzung unseres Know-how. Erst vor zwei Wochen habe ich den Kongress bei einer internationalen Konferenz im griechischen Nafplio vertreten, bei der das Thema Menschenrechte in Krisenzeiten besprochen wurde. Die Flüchtlingskrise ist ein konkretes Beispiel für ganz neue Aufgaben, mit denen die Gemeinden und Regionen heute konfrontiert sind. Der Kongress hat daher schon vor einiger Zeit damit begonnen, der menschenrechtlichen Dimension in der kommunalen Selbstverwaltung mehr Beachtung zu schenken.

Dezentralisierung ist ein anderes Stichwort. Mein Kollege im Kongress Karl-Heinz Lambertz – er vertritt ja hier die Deutschsprachige Gemeinschaft Belgiens – hat im Mai zu einer Konferenz nach Eupen eingeladen, bei der die Mitglieder unseres Kongresses Gelegenheit hatten, mit Experten und Praktikern über territoriale Reformvorhaben in verschiedenen europäischen Ländern zu diskutieren. Dabei kam auch zur Sprache, dass Gemeinde-Fusionen nicht immer und überall die gewünschten Spareffekte auslösen. Die konkreten Erfahrungen, die man zum Beispiel in der Schweiz damit gemacht hat, sind Anlass für uns, dieses Thema im Kongress weiterhin zu behandeln, damit Länder, die gerade im Begriff sind solche Reformen durchzuführen, Fehler vermeiden können.

Besonders hervorheben möchte ich an dieser Stelle auch noch das Maßnahmenpaket des Kongresses zur Bekämpfung von Korruption auf lokaler und regionaler Ebene. Ein weiterer Kollege und sogar zweimaliger Amtsvorgänger von mir im Kongress, der Präsident des Tiroler Landtages Herwig Van Staa, ist Thematischer Sprecher bei uns in Straßburg für den Kampf gegen die Korruption. Der Governance-Ausschuss – einer der drei Fachausschüsse des Kongresses, in denen Berichte zu den inhaltlichen Prioritäten vorbereitet werden – arbeitet zurzeit mit Hochdruck an unserem Anti-Korruptions-Paket. Es wird Empfehlungen für die Gemeinden und Regionen enthalten zu relevanten Teilaspekten wie „transparente öffentliche Ausschreibungen“, „Vetternwirtschaft und Dienststellenbesetzung im lokalen und regionalen Kontext“ oder „whistle-blowing“. Außerdem sind wir gerade dabei, den Europäischen Kodex für ethisches Verhalten lokaler und regionaler Entscheidungsträger zu überarbeiten, um 2018 einen zeitgemäßen Text vorlegen zu können.

Erlauben Sie mir jetzt noch einige Informationen zu den Kerngebieten der Arbeit des Kongresses der Gemeinden und Regionen - die Überwachung der Einhaltung der Charta der kommunalen Selbstverwaltung und die Beobachtung lokaler und regionaler Wahlen, - wir nennen das die „statutarischen Aufgaben“. Auf Basis eines Mandats des Ministerkomitees organisiert der Kongress in regelmäßigen Abständen Besuche in allen 47 Mitgliedsländern des Europarates, um zu überprüfen, inwieweit die Bestimmungen der Charta umgesetzt werden. Im Fokus unseres Bewertungskatalogs sind dabei Fragen, die die finanzielle Ausstattung der Gemeinden betreffen sowie die Abklärung der Kompetenzen verschiedener Regierungsebenen und, nicht zu vergessen, die Qualität des Konsultationsmechanismus zwischen zentralstaatlichen und föderalen Instanzen.

Wie erwähnt, werden alle Mitgliedsländer des Europarates diesem „Monitoring-Verfahren“ des Kongresses unterworfen. Mein eigenes Land, Österreich, wurde zuletzt 2010 beurteilt und einige der dabei erarbeiteten Empfehlungen wurden mittlerweile umgesetzt – das betrifft die bessere soziale Absicherung von Bürgermeister*innen beim Ausscheiden aus dem Amt sowie die Vereinfachung der interkommunalen Zusammenarbeit, die seit 2011 verfassungsrechtlich verankert ist.

Freilich gibt es auch Berichte, die uns weniger Freude bereiten, weil wir feststellen müssen, dass sich die Situation auf der lokalen oder regionalen Ebene nicht wirklich verbessert hat, im Gegenteil. Ein aktuelles Sorgenkind – auch was die Lage in den Kommunen betrifft – ist zum Beispiel die Türkei. Bereits vor dem versuchten Staatsstreich im Sommer des Vorjahres wurde der Kongress auf die dramatische Lage der gewählten Vertreter in der Südost-Türkei aufmerksam, wo eine heftige Zunahme von Verhaftungen und Entlassungen von Bürgermeister*innen zu verzeichnen war. Der Kongress hat 2016 daraufhin eine Fact-Finding-Mission in die Türkei unternommen, deren Befunde in einem Bericht zusammengefasst und von der Plenarversammlung im März verabschiedet wurden. Quintessenz ist die Empfehlung an die türkische Regierung, jene gewählten Vertreter, die unter eindeutig politischen Motiven verhaftet wurden, freizulassen und auch das neue Rechtsverfahren einzustellen, wonach die Zentralregierung Bürgermeister ernennen kann – die anstelle der ursprünglich gewählten Vertreter die Geschicke der Gemeinde führen.

Wir sind gerade dabei auszuloten, inwieweit es möglich ist – nach dem Fact-Finding des Vorjahres – noch heuer eine turnusmäßige Monitoring-Mission in die Türkei zu organisieren. Ich glaube, Sie können sich vorstellen, dass ich persönlich nicht sehr optimistisch bin, was die Kooperationsbereitschaft der türkischen Zentralregierung betrifft.

Trotzdem soll man optimistisch bleiben und es gibt ja auch sehr schöne Beispiele dafür, dass sich die Bemühungen des Kongresses, mehr Demokratie auf lokaler und regionaler Ebene durchzusetzen, ausgezahlt haben. Die Ukraine ist so ein Land, in dem ich selbst wiederholt als Leiterin von Wahlbeobachtungsmissionen aktiv war und wo wir Fortschritte erkennen können. Die Beobachtung von

lokalen und regionalen Wahlen ist, wenn Sie so wollen, das zweite statuarische Standbein des Kongresses und diese Beobachtungen sind wichtig, um das turnusmäßige Überprüfungsverfahren der Charta der kommunalen Selbstverwaltung zu ergänzen. Auch das Mandat zur Beobachtung von lokalen und regionalen Wahlen ist ein dem Kongress speziell vom Ministerkomitee des Europarates überlassenes Recht. Um tatsächlich eine Delegation in ein Land zu entsenden, brauchen wir allerdings stets die offizielle Einladung der entsprechenden Behörden – denn sie müssen den Beobachtern des Kongresses den Zugang zu den Wahllokalen ermöglichen.

Monitoring-Missionen und Wahlbeobachtungen eröffnen den 648 Mitgliedern unseres Kongresses, die alle ein gewähltes Mandat auf lokaler oder regionaler Ebene haben, den einzigartigen Einblick in die politischen und sozio-kulturellen Gegebenheiten der 47 Mitgliedsländer des Europarates. Für die bessere Umsetzung der Empfehlungen, die auf Basis dieser Evaluierungsreisen entstehen, aber auch, wie zuvor erwähnt, in länderübergreifenden Berichten erarbeitet werden, braucht und sucht der Kongress Partner.

Es würde den Rahmen meines Vortrages sprengen, hier konkrete Kooperationsprojekte zu erörtern. Ich hoffe aber, dass es mir gelungen ist, Ihnen die Arbeit des Kongresses ein bisschen näherzubringen, woraus Ideen entstehen könnten, wie wir uns gemeinsam für mehr Demokratie und Menschenrechte in den europäischen Kommunen und Regionen einsetzen können.

Herzlichen Dank für Ihre Aufmerksamkeit!

Ceremony 25th Anniversary of the Association of Ukrainian Cities (AUC) - 30 June 2017, Kyiv, Ukraine

Dear President Poroshenko, dear Mr Klitschko, dear Colleagues, Ladies and gentlemen,

Allow me to start my intervention by thanking you, Mr Klitschko, for your warm welcome here in Kyiv. I am pleased to take part in this ceremony dedicated to the 25th Anniversary of the Association of Ukrainian Cities. It represents an important landmark for local and regional governance in Ukraine, and illustrates the importance of national associations as a driving force for good governance, decentralisation processes and democracy.

We, in the Congress, are proud to say that we are long-standing partners of Ukraine and support the country in its efforts to strengthen local and regional democracy. In this, we have implemented a large number of activities on the ground to strengthen the role of local and regional elected representatives. I would like more particularly to thank you, President Poroshenko, for the support you have expressed to the Congress' work in your letter to our Monitoring Committee, which met this week in Kharkiv to discuss in depth the situation of local and regional democracy in our member States.

Let me tell you that we, in the Congress, welcome the reforms and initiatives that your government, President Poroshenko, together with the Ukrainian parliament have been implementing, with strong support from the Ukrainian national associations. These have introduced new responsibilities and opportunities for local authorities to better answer the needs and demands from citizens.

Ladies and gentlemen,

National associations of local and regional authorities such as the Association of Ukrainian Cities play a key role within their countries. In the Congress, we view them as performing multiple functions as intermediaries and lobbyists, and in safeguarding the European Charter of Local Self-Government. The Charter offers a set of principles on how to organise a democratic and decentralised state, in order to foster local self-government. It provides for the "right of local authorities to associate" and for their respective association to protect and promote their common interests.

National associations serve as a platform to bring together elected representatives and ensure co-operation, in order to bolster local governance and democracy. Being alert to the needs of their members and to the challenges they face, associations serve as a "forum" for local and regional authorities.

Associations are indeed an indispensable stakeholder in the local government system. We need their co-operation and feedback for the implementation of the Congress recommendations. While it is the Congress which monitors the implementation of the principles enshrined in the Charter, national associations share the responsibility for their application.

Moreover, we need them to be the voice of local communities and an advocate for their concerns. We need them to facilitate consultation and to maintain the dialogue between the national authorities and the local authorities. We need them to work on sharing and disseminating good practices, through projects and activities in the field, with the Congress and with other international stakeholders and relevant organisations.

We consider national associations to be the natural partners of the Congress, and we have stressed this in our Congress Priorities for 2017-2020. The Congress is willing to co-operate closely with national associations in line with the needs of their member States, and associations are responding to this call.

The ties we have been building with the Association of Ukrainian Cities will mutually consolidate each other's work and achievements, with the shared objective of strengthening local democracy in Ukraine. The roundtable organised in Kyiv on 9 June, gathering together – for the first time in Ukraine – members of the Board of the Association and of the Delegation of Ukraine to the Congress, is a concrete example of this co-operation. All those present stressed the need for regular dialogue in order to address the interests of Ukrainian municipalities in the Congress, and to promote our work at a larger scale.

Yesterday's signature of the Memorandum of Understanding between the Association of Ukrainian Cities and the respective national associations in Georgia and Moldova is another illustration of how we can advance together in the region, co-operate, exchange good practices, and advocate for stronger local and regional authorities.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Allow me to stress once again that the Congress, the associations of local and regional authorities, and their respective national governments, need to work in synergy in order to broaden and enhance the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, boost citizen participation and foster multi-level governance.

Engaging all stakeholders in real dialogue will empower local and regional authorities to effectively contribute to the design of policies which concern their communities. In parallel, engaging citizens as active players in their community is another key element of good governance, which can only result in increased citizens' trust in the public authorities.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Democracy begins at the local level, where citizens can make their voices heard in decision-making processes and where elected representatives actively participate in different tiers of government.

For the Congress, democracy will only flourish with the active involvement of local and regional authorities and their national associations.

The Association of Ukrainian Cities is our respected partner. It has proved to be an influential organisation with a strong capacity to defend local government interests at national and European levels. The increased dialogue between your association and the Congress is promising, and can only result in strengthened Ukrainian local authorities and more effective decentralisation.

The Congress is pleased to take part in this important event, gathering today such a number of mayors from all parts of the country - representatives of both large and small local authorities, some in charge of newly formed municipalities and others responsible for territories in the process of amalgamation.

On the occasion of the 25th Anniversary, I would like - on behalf of the Congress - to warmly congratulate the Association of Ukrainian Cities and its members, and to wish you every success.

Rest assured that the Congress is on your side in the strengthening and promotion of local good governance and democracy.

Thank you for your attention.

Thematic Roundtable on Good Governance in Metropolitan Areas in Ukraine and in Europe - 3 July 2017, Kyiv, Ukraine

Dear Mr Prokopiv, dear Mr Ehnberg, dear Colleagues, Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me begin by saying how grateful I am to be with you today in Kyiv. Ukraine is an integral part of my agenda at the moment: I took part last Friday in the ceremony for the 25th anniversary of the Association of Ukrainian Cities, together with President Poroshenko, and I am attending tomorrow the “Forum for local democracy in Ukraine” that we are organising in Chernihiv.

I would like to thank you, Mr Prokopiv, as it was your idea to hold a meeting on good governance in metropolitan areas as a follow up to the roundtable on capital cities that we held jointly last year. I would also like to welcome the representatives from metropolitan cities, in Ukraine and elsewhere in Europe, who are with us today.

This is an additional proof of the fruitful partnership between the Congress and the delegation of Ukraine. Both within our political dialogue and our project “Promoting local democracy in Ukraine”, we are managing to join our efforts to strengthen local democracy in your country and to strive for further good governance systems. I have no doubt that this roundtable on metropolitan areas will provide ground for even more positive results and co-operation!

Metropolitan areas have been developing rapidly in Europe over the past decades. This trend can also be observed here in Ukraine but not only. The reality of the 21st century is that more than half of the world population now lives in cities. Larger cities are shaping our future, absorbing more and more territory, increasing their political and economic power, and thereby bringing new opportunities for citizens, as well as challenges.

Cities have been and are at the centre of the Congress’ preoccupations. We have long recognised the central role that cities can play in shaping national and international policies. In 1992, just a few years after the entry into force of the European Charter on Local Self-Government, which is our Magna Carta of the rights of local authorities, the Congress adopted, the first urban charter proposing a human rights based approach by stressing that “urban areas must be developed for their inhabitants”.

The Urban Charter was updated in 2008 in the form of a “Manifesto for a new urbanity”, which set out principles of a new urban concept and ensuring modern urban governance with a strong social dimension. This new text conveyed an ambitious and demanding message to all those involved in urban development, a message which 10 years later is still up-to-date.

The Manifesto is an invitation to local authorities to implement the principles of ethical governance, sustainable development and solidarity in their public policies. It builds on our vision for the city to be citizen-oriented, by putting the citizen and their concerns at the centre of public action and ensuring people’s participation in all aspects of community life and development.

Our concern is to develop a sustainable and environmentally friendly city, a cohesive city which ensures integration and equal treatment of all members of the community and their equal access to public services and social rights. The city we want is also the one that catalyses knowledge and creativity, the one that hosts learning and culture of all kinds. It is a city which plays as the launching pad for innovative approaches and experimentation, and which makes full use of cutting-edge technologies and practices, putting modernity to the service of citizens.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Congress has devoted a number of its debates to the question of good governance in cities and in metropolises. More precisely, last October, we discussed and adopted a report on Good Governance in Metropolitan Areas.²

Metropolitan areas are our engines of economic development: they are becoming richer, more productive and more innovative. They are attracting international flows of labour, capital, goods, services and knowledge. As a result, these areas are increasingly becoming centres of political, economic and cultural activity. With the growth of metropolitan areas, we are also seeing the rapid development of their rural hinterlands: people are moving out of the city in search of more affordable housing and better quality of life.

But we are not only witnessing a change in the political, economic and cultural development of these metropolitan areas: we are also seeing rapid changes in their governance, with an increasing role being played by non-governmental and non-elected actors.

This new nature of governance, complex and multi-layered, brings new challenges to traditional forms of representative democracy and raises important issues with regard to the ability of metropolitan areas to remain responsive to the needs of their citizens.

With this in mind, the Congress report, that I mentioned earlier, calls on local authorities in metropolitan areas to work together with the metropolis to ensure a clear division of roles, tasks and responsibilities. It invites metropolitan authorities to guarantee democratic accountability and legitimacy as well as citizen participation. We encourage Council of Europe member States to facilitate the development of appropriate multilevel governance structures for metropolitan areas.

This is the big challenge that we will be discussing today: developing suitable governance structures for metropolitan areas, and ensuring that those structures guarantee democratic accountability, legitimacy and citizen participation.

With the experience of so many cities here today, both from Ukraine and from the rest of Europe, with my colleagues from London, Berlin and Munich and with our experts, we will be able to discuss in depth the division of powers and competences between city and district councils, and debate the role and responsibilities of local and regional elected representatives in fostering good governance practices and transparency.

In the Congress, we believe that metropolitan areas need appropriate governance structures and a large degree of autonomy to function effectively. These areas need to be empowered to fulfil their core tasks, such as the co-ordination of transport, strategic planning and economic development, which need to be decided and agreed by local stakeholders, in the principle of subsidiarity, and not imposed by central governments.

Due to their size and strategic importance, the governance of metropolitan areas requires careful co-ordination between several tiers of government, including national, regional and municipal authorities. Maximum transparency in the decision-making processes and robust consultation procedures are also essential.

To conclude, I cannot stress enough that citizen participation in metropolitan areas is key to improving the democratic accountability and legitimacy of decision-making processes. All new governance structures should be democratically accountable and not involve any erosion of local democracy.

We all here share the same aims: to support the decentralisation process towards local and regional authorities, to meet our citizens' expectations and to tackle today's challenges in a responsible and efficient manner.

Today's roundtable is an excellent opportunity for us. I am looking forward to following your discussions and exchange of experience. I am convinced that they will inspire us all.

Thank you for your attention.

² Report CG31(2016)17final, Resolution 407 (2016) and Recommendation 392 (2016) on local governance in metropolitan areas, debated and adopted by the Congress on 21 October 2016.

Forum for Local Democracy in Ukraine - Opening of the Forum - 4 July 2017 Snovjanka, Ukraine

Dear Mr Melnychuk, dear Mr Ehnberg, dear colleagues, Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you, Mr Melnychuk, for your warm welcome in Chernihiv region. I am pleased to be here today, in Ukraine, and to have the opportunity to exchange with so many Ukrainian mayors, local councillors and young local leaders.

I have met already some of you, last November in Strasbourg, at the occasion of the World Forum for Democracy. And now, here we are, this time in Ukraine, for our own "Forum for local democracy". It is the first time that the Congress is organising such an event, and we are glad that it is happening in Ukraine.

The Congress' action in Ukraine is two-folded: on one-side, we make sure to nurture a continuous political dialogue with the national authorities, and on the other side, we implement bottom-up activities with local and regional elected representatives, as well as with their national associations. In both cases, positive results have been achieved.

It is important for the Congress to stand next to its Ukrainian partner on its path to genuine decentralisation, in line with the principles of the European Charter for Local Self-Government. Several reforms to strengthen local democracy have been implemented by the Ukrainian authorities since 2014. Those reforms introduced new responsibilities and opportunities for local elected representatives to better answer the needs and demands from citizens.

However we should remember that genuine decentralisation does not entail only changes in legislation. It requires local and regional authorities to receive specific capacity-building, and it requires the diffusion of accurate information on reforms towards all stakeholders of local governance and towards citizens.

With this in mind, the Congress developed specific activities for mayors and councillors in their roles as leaders for change and everyday actors of local democracy, activities that you have all been part of. Decentralisation is a common trend among European countries. We may come from different places, but as local and regional authorities we face the same challenges: How can we strengthen democracy in our communities? How can we provide better services to citizens? How can we enhance trust at the local level? How can we engage citizens?

This is why the Congress is keen on implementing a methodology of peer exchanges. By gathering mayors and local councillors from different countries, we enable them to debate on an equal footing, to share their experience and to exchange good practices. We share a common understanding and we can help each other out.

I do not forget the young local leaders that are also here with us today. It is important for the Congress to also focus on young people engaged in social and political activities at the local level, as we strongly believe that all community residents, and in particular the younger generation, should have a say in matters that affect them. It is inspiring to meet so many young people that are willing to strengthen their engagement and are committed to induce change in their communities.

We all are committed for change in our cities. We, in our respective countries, but also we, in the Congress, when we gather in Strasbourg to debate on topical issues linked to local and regional democracy. We share the same objective: improve the lives of citizens by implementing good local governance. There is one important actor doing the link between the discussions held in the Congress and the situation on the ground here in Ukraine. This actor is the delegation of Ukraine, which is represented by several members today: Mr Prokopiv, Mr Atroshenko, Mrs Tsymbaluyk. As the President of the Congress, I am particularly pleased to have such a proactive delegation among our ranks. Your members have always been involved in the activities organised in Ukraine, and have been eager to present the results of these activities in the Congress. I look forward discussing with you today.

This Forum for local democracy is yet another occasion to gather together and to reflect on topical issues that concern all of us in Europe. Representative democracy is currently going through a crisis: citizens are asking to be further involved; they want their elected representatives to be closer to them. It is crucial for us, local and regional authorities, to answer their expectations. So, how do we go from here? What can we do, concretely, to answer their demands and to enhance governance at the local level?

What are the means to include the largest range of citizens in a democratic and effective manner? How can local and regional authorities engage in an inclusive and constructive dialogue with young people for a successful partnership? How to ensure equal opportunities for women and men at local level? Which measures can be taken at local level in order to strengthen a renewed, creative and inclusive decision-making process?

These are only a few of the questions that will be debated during the upcoming days. I am sure that we all have ideas, examples and opinions to share, whether we come from Ukraine or from elsewhere in Europe. I believe that we will feel inspired by those discussions and exchanges of experience.

I look forward myself to share my views with all of you, and I have no doubt that this Forum will nurture many ideas and will make all of us feel inspired when we will return to our communities!

Thank you for your attention.

**Forum for Local Democracy in Ukraine - Roundtable “Women in local politics: participation, inclusion and engagement” -
4 July 2017, Snovjanka, Ukraine**

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

Today I am here to share my experience as a woman politician, but before introducing myself more in details, I would first like to give you some insight in the work of the Council of Europe and of the Congress in increasing the representation of women in local political life.

Promoting gender equality is a constant feature of the work of the Council of Europe and of the Congress; as achieving equal representation between women and men in the political sphere and in our societies remains a persistent challenge.

We are all aware that women are still seriously underrepresented in politics and continue to face difficulties in becoming involved in equitable numbers, either at national, regional or local level. This was also reiterated by the two previous speakers. In addition, even when they are elected, we notice a difference of treatment between women and men: women are often given the responsibility of very specific topics, such as health issues or education, while other subjects, deemed as more important, remains within the spectrum of men's responsibility.

Within the Council of Europe, the Committee of Ministers recommended, in 2003, all member States to achieve a 40% minimum representation of both sexes in political decision-making bodies, and to develop specific actions to enhance women's participation in politics. This Recommendation became a turning point in the support for a balanced participation and representation of women and men in political and public decision-making.

The Congress followed this lead, and adopted, in 2004, a resolution to push member States to adopt strategies for gender mainstreaming at local and regional levels. Indeed, this is a key point I would like to emphasise: people usually go into politics at the local level and then move up. If women are not properly represented at the local level, we will not achieve parity in parliaments and governments.

Several texts promoting gender equality have been debated and adopted by the Congress since then, until the most recent one, adopted last October: “Women's participation in public life at local and regional levels: good practices in member States and Congress action”. This Resolution advocates for sustainable gender equality in local and regional political life, proposes actions to enhance women's political participation, integrates the concept of gender budgeting, and proposes the development of gender-disaggregated statistics to monitor the gender distribution within decision-making bodies.

The issue of gender-disaggregated electoral statistics to regularly monitor women's representation and participation in politics is crucial: without data, we cannot measure it; if we cannot measure it, we cannot improve it.

Several actions and methods can be implemented to promote the participation of women in politics. Mentoring is for example one of them, as was presented by Ms Sandager previously. Member States should also modify their electoral law and work with political parties in order to give incentives for them to introduce more women on their party list, and better positioned.

The implementation of quotas is another example of what can be done. This type of measures is not a solution in itself to the issue of representation of women in politics. It also does not work everywhere. For example, in Sweden, there was no need for quotas as most political parties themselves have produced zipper lists (alternating the sexes on the party list), achieving a balanced representation in political parties and in elected councils.

The Congress itself decided to apply quotas for the national delegations. I am happy to say that, looking at the 2008-2015 period, the introduction of quotas has turned out to be a true success story for women's representation in national delegations and as presidents and vice-presidents of the Chambers and

Committees in the Congress. In the current mandate (2016-2020), women constitute 65% of the executive of the Congress. And as I already told you, I was elected in October 2016, as the first woman President of the Congress.

My carrier in politics started way before my participation in the Congress.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Many problems remain. Change may require time, but one thing is clear: engaging with women at the local and regional level is the starting point to secure the participation of women at all levels of government. We need proactive local and central governments and determined political parties to work for ensuring women's presence at local and regional government levels.

We need to continue our work to strive for a more balanced representation, aiming in the longer run for parity.

Thank you for your attention.

20 Anniversary CALRE Seminar - “A role for the regions in a Europe in transition”- 24 July 2017, Oviedo, Spain

Mr President,
Ladies and gentlemen,

The theme of this conference captures all too well the essential point of the challenge we face: Europe in transition. The whole world is indeed in transition today, after being “frozen” for almost 50 years by the Cold War with its bipolar “clarity”.

The end of this bipolar world set in motion political, economic and social forces of transformation, posing new and daunting challenges, and inspiring new theories and visions of development. After his famous “The End of History” in the 1990s, American political scientist Francis Fukuyama was obliged to write a new piece, “The Future of History”. Already at the end of the last century, British political scientist Hedley Bull wrote about an “Anarchical Society” in which sub-State and non-State actors play an increasingly important role on a par with national governments. French historian Pierre Rosanvallon ponders on how to build a society of equals based on the principles of singularity, reciprocity and commonality. There is much discourse today about a post- Westphalian world where the nation-State, protected for almost four centuries since the Peace of Westphalia, is now disappearing.

Against this background, what would be the role of regions in the European transition – and in particular, self-governing regions such as those represented by CALRE? This year’s White Paper of the European Commission offers five scenarios for the future of

Europe – all of which dealing with relations between member States, and none specifying the role of regions and local communities. Yet the new, emerging world order is clearly evolving towards a system of multi-polar distribution of powers, a system that we in Europe have known for quite some time as “multi-level governance”. This aspect, however, is regrettably missing from the Commission’s White Paper.

On balance, the Council of Europe’s annual reports on “State of Democracy, Human Rights and the Rule of Law”, by its Secretary General Thorbjørn Jagland, set forth a complementary vision of the future Europe – a vision based not on the economic integration of nation-States but on a broader notion of democratic integration and democratic security of our societies, a Europe inclusive not only for member countries but first and foremost for European citizens that are in the centre of public policies.

This vision stresses the importance of decentralisation and dialogue on regional devolution as an essential component of a balanced distribution of powers and therefore enhanced democratic security. It puts forward measures for strengthening human rights protection and supporting integration and inclusive society as an effective response to the current threats of populism, migrant crisis and terrorism.

Finally, this vision identifies fair representation and participation of citizens as key to good democratic governance and a remedy against the feeling of alienation, which fuels the rise of populism.

The regions, as well as local authorities, have a crucial role to play in shaping and implementing these measures. Increasingly, they are taking on the responsibilities for competences that have been traditionally seen as the prerogative of national governments – in the areas of democratic governance, the rule of law and delivery of human rights. The regions with legislative powers are spearheading this process, not least because their legislative assemblies – you, dear participants – are capable of adopting regional measures even ahead of national authorities.

For decades, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities has been the driving force for strengthening the principles and institutions of local and regional governance on our continent, developing the local and regional dimension of European conventions and implementing provisions of those treaties at the grassroots, as well as promoting greater responsibilities for human rights protection at the community level. The European Charter of Local Self-Government, now complemented by its Additional Protocol on citizen participation, remains the key international convention and reference text for the devolution of power. As part of our work on human rights over the past decade, we have recently adopted the Congress

Human Rights Action Plan and launched the preparation of a Human Rights Manual for local and regional authorities – a practical tool for addressing human rights challenges in our communities.

In this work, we are driven by the conviction that today's challenges can only be successfully addressed in societies and communities that are inclusive and participatory, where human rights and the rule of law are strong and well anchored.

Achieving this, however, involves not only clearly defined competences, resources and power-sharing between different levels of government, not only effective mechanisms of citizen participation, and not only inclusive policies and measures for advancing integration and combating prejudice and discrimination. These are crucial, but the success of such measures also entails, probably as a starting point, active citizenship on the part of community residents. A well-built house without tenants is empty; public action without engaged citizens is idle. Education for active democratic citizenship is therefore just as important. Regions and local communities are the level where citizens learn their first democratic experience, and where direct interaction between citizens and authorities is possible and brings tangible results – much as they represent platforms for innovative practices of citizen engagement. They are also the space where different community groups interact and dialogue with one another, and where fostering intercultural relations and improving understanding of diversity are the most relevant.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Even in its best-case scenario of “more Europe for all member States”, the Commission's White Paper acknowledges the risk of alienating parts of society which feel that the EU lacks legitimacy. Building a bridge, through regional representation, with integrated and inclusive communities based on citizen participation and protection of citizens' human rights will serve to address this risk. This means that regions, and especially regions with legislative assemblies – your regions – must be involved even more in policy making at European level, to provide the legitimacy that is currently lacking.

I would like to conclude by referring to the once-popular slogan, “The nation-State is dead – long-live the region!”. Well, the nation-State is not exactly dead, but it is evolving rapidly under the pressures of globalisation. There are forces pulling back towards isolationism and the pursuit of narrowly defined national interests within a traditional nation-State of the past. And there are forces that are propelling Europe forward, towards a transformed and different State of the future, where national interests are seen as best served through the integration of the entire continent, and where resources are pooled to meet the needs of citizens and their communities regardless of their location on the European map.

I know I will be probably preaching to the choir when I say that the second vision is much more inspiring. To us in the Congress, the future Europe must be as much a Europe of Regions, a Europe of Communities as a Europe of national statehoods. This is the vision we are defending, and I am confident that it is shared by all of us present here.

I thank you for your attention and very much look forward to our discussion.

Conference on Women in local politics - 26 September 2017, Tunis, Tunisia

Dear Minister, dear participants of the conference,

I am very pleased to be here today and to speak to you, as President of the Council of Europe Congress of Local and Regional Authorities. I would like to thank our Tunisian partners, the Ministry for Family and Women and the Ministry of the Environment and Local Affairs, for taking the initiative of organising this Conference on the topic of gender equality. This topic lies at the heart of the issue of fundamental human rights.

Who is the Congress within the Council of Europe? When I say we I mean the Congress

We are a political assembly that brings together local and regional elected representatives from the 47 member States of the Council of Europe, representing 200.000 local and regional authorities.

We are a platform where mayors, councilors and representatives of the local and regional level can share ideas, exchange best practices and work together with the conviction that local and regional democracy is the foundation of any democratic state, for the benefit of our citizens. And I hope that in the future you can join this assembly in the frame of our status of partner for local democracy.

With the Jasmine Revolution of 2011, Tunisia has opened a new era. Tremendous changes have occurred since 2011, from the adoption of a new constitution in 2014 and holding of legislative elections to the territorial reform and the recent process of decentralisation of power – a process that brought us here today.

The recent postponement of elections is an unfortunate delay in the democratic process, and we strongly hope that local elections will be held in the beginning of next year, in order to bring democracy to local communities. These steps are crucial to the development of local and regional self-government in this country.

We are convinced that our cooperation with Tunisia is of mutual benefit to communities and citizens on both shores of the Mediterranean, where local and regional authorities share the same concerns and can learn from each other's experience. We are here today to speak about gender equality.

Why is the Promotion of gender equality as a new impetus for democracy of such an importance?

Engaging all members in the society and ensuring the participation of women is a fundamental requirement because a society cannot be free and democratic if the liberty and dignity of half of its members are not guaranteed and upheld. When I speak of equality I am speaking about equality in the law BUT also equality in practice in reality. Today I am here to represent the Congress, but If you allow me I want to share my experience as a women politician and give you some personal background.

Since 20 years I am in politics on different level - local, regional, European. I am married, mother of 3 children (now grown up), 2 grand children. During those 20 years a change in attitudes towards 2 women in politics has taken place in my country Austria, as well as in other European states. But, there is still a long way to go. In many countries, women are still underrepresented in parliament and government.

Where are the obstacles?

For centuries, politics was men's business, working conditions in politics are adapted to the world of men, for women and their interests a significant disadvantage. To break up fossilised structures and to change them take time and patience.

To break up this culture of none parity, we in the Congress are through positive experiences in our member states convinced, that the grassroots level offers better chances for changes and the participation of women as members of municipal or regional councils, mayors or presidents of regions.

This is also a level where women can become directly involved in a day-to-day administration of communities.

We may not forget that the local level is the level political talents can develop and grow. Too few women are detrimental to the political landscape in each country.

That causes a great deal of lost potential for the society. Often women govern with a different experience than men. Women contribute a different outlook on public affairs, addressing them in a more pragmatic, not in an overly politicised way of “politicians”. Women become more easily than men active of a cause, and are much less inclined to play “political games”.

What should, what can be done?

Gender equality is on high of the Council of Europe’s agenda, as a fundamental requirement of democracy and governance: an open society cannot work if half of the citizens is not represented and involved at all levels.

When we talk about fair representation and participation of women, setting minimum quotas can be part of the solution, as an intermediate stage. However, the enforceable quota in itself is not enough. We need to ensure qualitative and meaningful contribution of women that goes beyond figures. Political parties in particular must give priority to supporting women candidates that represent the concerns and experiences of their communities. The Congress also encourages the setting up of women’s networks, which is of crucial importance for multiplying political efforts of women.

I am pleased to say that we in the Congress practice what we preach and set the example. The Congress itself has set the requirement that women must represent at least 30% in each of its 47 national delegations – a requirement with which all countries must comply since 2008. This has turned into a success story for women’s representation in national delegations and in leading positions. I am the first woman president in the over 60 years history of the Congress. In the current mandate 2016 – 2020 women constitute 65 % of the executive of the Congress. Filling seats in the delegation is one thing; giving women real power as chairs of committees and Presidents of Congress Chambers is another objective and I can personally attest that we are achieving it!

We have adopted several texts promoting gender equality. The recent one, adopted last October: „Women’s participation in public life at local and regional levels: good practices in member states and Congress action“. You can download the report from the Congress website and there is a paper version in your file.

Another issue that will be addressed during this Conference is the negative attitude that women sometimes have to face, be it from the media or from their male colleagues, which leads to a lack of interest of women in politics. Not only do we have to change rules and legislations: I believe it mainly has to do with changing culture and mentalities.

Indeed, the only reason for the persistent unequal treatment is our historical culture, stereotypes and prejudice built over centuries of inequality – prejudice that has become part of our culture and our thinking. Only strong commitment of all forces of society and positive examples set at all levels of governance can change this fact.

**30th World Day for the Eradication of Poverty Ceremony in memory of the victims of extreme poverty -
17 October 2017, Strasbourg, France**

Dear President, Ladies and gentlemen,

Poverty is not just the problem of the people suffering it but the problem of society as a whole. It is not just the problem of some of our citizens but the problem of all of us. Nobody can feel unconcerned when in our States hundreds of thousands of children live under the poverty line, when in our cities entire families live on the street.

Poverty hinders access to food, housing, education and health services. These services are within the competence of local governments which are the closest public authorities to the citizens. In that respect, we, as local and regional elected representatives, have a responsibility and an essential role to play in combating poverty.

Local authorities need to develop policies to stop vulnerable groups such as single women, children or other disadvantaged groups from falling into “chronic” poverty. An important step in this direction is promoting sustainable economies; we need to prioritise caring for people and nature.

In its debates and resolutions, the Congress draws attention to the fact that poverty and deprivation in turn create obstacles to the full enjoyment of human rights, whether civil, social, cultural or political.

The Congress also calls on national governments to adopt a multi-level governance approach, support local and regional action and systematically consider any consequences for human rights and especially social and economic rights affecting women, men, children and more generally vulnerable groups when framing macro-economic policies.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Council of Europe defends a European model of human rights and being protected against poverty is a basic human right. The Congress brings a local and regional dimension to the policies undertaken by the Council of Europe. It identifies the actions needed to combat poverty at the local and regional levels, including by identifying good practices and by providing examples of strategic actions to be taken by local and regional authorities.

The fight against poverty must mobilize our energies and our efforts. It must be carried out at all levels of governance. In the end, it is not only the well-being of our citizens but also, more broadly, the social cohesion of our societies that depends on it.

Thank you.

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

Following my election one year ago in October 2016, I underlined, in this very Assembly 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 the process of peaceful and citizen-centred 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 stability of the international community and of Europe with it.

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

However, this picture of the dangers threatening us should not make us forget what we owe to the process of European construction, both in its integration dimension and its intergovernmental cooperation aspects. The 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, in March of this year, and the preparation of the 70th anniversary of the Council of Europe are opportunities to take stock of the historic advances that have taken place over the past decades: the emergence of a European citizenship, the development of harmonised regulatory and legal spaces, 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?

Dear colleagues,

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.

**1298th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies - Exchange of views with the Ministers' Deputies -
25 October 2017, Strasbourg, France**

Dear Ambassadors, dear Secretary General, dear Deputy Secretary General, Ladies and gentlemen,

It is now twelve months since I was elected President of the Congress on 18 October 2016. At the start of our 33rd Session last week, I had an opportunity to take stock of this past year. But let me reassure you – I am not going to repeat the details of that statement.

I would, however, like to share with you the point that neither the situation in the world nor the situation in Europe has improved in recent months. I am referring both to a certain form of insecurity that is pervading multilateral relations and to the development of internal crises affecting some of our member states. At the same time, the economic and financial crisis, the migrant crisis, terrorist attacks and the rise of populism have continued to pose a threat to everything we, Europeans, have put in place over the past seventy years.

This situation is really exceptional and requires us to have a clear vision of the kind of future we wish to build together. We must have the courage to tackle all these challenges facing us.

Let us take the example of terrorism, from which no town or city, large or small, is spared. The local and regional authorities that the Congress represents have, thanks to their proximity to ordinary citizens and realities on the ground, a major role to play in effectively combating this scourge, in terms of both prevention and enforcement. Central governments are working hand in hand with local and regional authorities to address this particular threat. It is this cooperation between all levels of governance that should serve as a model for managing all the crises that are threatening us.

I think of the separatist tendencies that are emerging here and there. They are currently running high in Spain, but other member states are not immune either. You probably followed the debate which we had last week on the situation in Catalonia, during which members of the Congress made it clear that, in their view, dialogue was the only option. In a modern democracy, constructive dialogue between central government and regional entities is essential. But our members also reaffirmed the need for everyone to abide by the rules of the game, and in particular our constitutions, without which the rule of law would be just an illusion. Our conviction is that a modern democracy naturally functions within an institutional legal order that is binding on all parties.

In the Congress we have long advocated the need of having strong regions in Europe. But we have never believed that weak nation states could provide a solid foundation on which to build Europe. We do not want devolution at the price of a fragmented Europe, and I was pleased during our session to see that our members were unanimous on this point.

Many years ago, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe had the wisdom, the political vision, to equip itself with an assembly of local and regional representatives that is unique in Europe. In our institutional environment today, where powers and responsibilities have been redistributed between the different levels of governance, this has been a wise strategic choice, but you, as representatives of the national governments, need to make use of this asset.

Local and regional representatives hold some important trump cards. Not only do the territories we represent make their own policies within the scope of their powers, but these territories are also the places where many of the policies decided at national level are implemented. So it is with the representatives of these territories that a robust, on-going dialogue needs to be maintained, to seek together solutions that will ensure the security and stability of our societies.

This institutional co-operation between the different levels of governance, which we are working to develop throughout Europe, is already a reality here at the Council of Europe. We can see it at work in the relations between the Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly. In this regard, I would like to mention the report of Mr Nicoletti, adopted by the Assembly two weeks ago, which suggests that the

two statutory organs of the Council of Europe engage in a joint procedure to harmonise their rules governing the participation and the representation of member States in their bodies. The Congress fully supports this suggestion and is ready to contribute. Institutional cooperation can also be seen in the close ties forged by the Congress with the Parliamentary Assembly and of course with your Committee. In our view, this co-operation and political dialogue are essential.

Ladies and gentlemen, the mission of the Congress is to contribute to strengthening local and regional democracy in our member States. Fulfilling this objective presupposes that sufficient resources are allocated to our activities. I would like to remind you that our share of the Organization's regular budget has decreased in recent years. Some governments have already expressed their conviction that a return to 3% of the Organisation's budget would be necessary for the Congress to carry out its missions and I would like to thank them for this.

As Former President of the Parliament of Salzburg, I know how difficult budget discussions can be. I would just like to say, without any pretence, that local democracy deserves this organization to devote 3% of its budget to this work. This would be a reasonable share, which would provide a solid foundation for our work.

Next March, in Tunisia, there will be the first local elections in the history of this country. The observation of these elections will unfortunately not be possible only on the regular budget of the Congress. We will thus need to use voluntary contributions from your States to fulfil this mission. The stakes are high, since the Congress, and more generally, the Council of Europe, are invited to accompany this historical democratic transition with the clear support of our member States.

This is one example of the value of providing the Congress with the means it needs, not to develop peripheral activities, but to contribute to the Council of Europe's main objectives.

This is the roadmap that I have set myself and I count on your support to carry it out.

Thank you.

Forum on local democracy in Armenia - 10 November 2017, Yerevan, Armenia

Prime Minister Karapetyan, Minister Lokyan, [Deputy Minister Terteryan,] [President of the Communities Association of Armenia, Mr Yeritsyan,] [Ambassador Gasser of Switzerland,] dear participants of the Forum, Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to be here today and to open this Forum on Local Democracy in Armenia, a first of its kind.

First and foremost, my congratulations to the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Development, and the Communities Association of Armenia, for their joint initiative to mark the National Day of Local Self-Government, and to celebrate local democracy in this country, by holding this Forum.

As President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, I am delighted to see the central government and territorial authorities joining their efforts and working together on strengthening local and regional governance – because in a democracy, governing a nation is not a matter for only one branch or one level of power. Democratic governance is a matter that concerns everyone – parliament, government, the judiciary, local and regional authorities, civil society and indeed all citizens. But as far as territorial self-government is concerned, constant dialogue and consultations between central and local authorities are of crucial importance. We in the Congress strongly hope that this Forum will give the necessary momentum to such dialogue, and will become an annual tradition for this country.

Not many countries celebrate local self-government as a National Day. By doing so, and by launching today a public debate and an open discussion on decentralisation, Armenia demonstrates its commitment to bringing democracy to its local communities – because decentralisation means, first and foremost, empowering communities, engaging citizens in democratic processes, and bringing the responsibility for governing, and for responding to the needs of citizens, to the level closest to them.

Armenia has shown this commitment when it ratified, in 2002, the European Charter of Local Self-Government and, in 2013, its Additional Protocol on citizen participation – and when it adopted, in December last year, a comprehensive law on local self-government, as part of the ambitious reform of the local self-government system in this country.

As part of these efforts, the Territorial-Administrative Reform in Armenia, has been in progress for more than two years now, leading to changes in the country's territorial structure. The Council of Europe Congress, our assembly of local and regional elected representatives from 47 European countries, has been following closely this process – both as part of our monitoring procedure and through our co-operation activities here in the field. In June last year, my predecessor, Congress President Jean-Claude Frecon, who sadly passed away last December, and Minister Lokyan signed a road map on implementing Congress recommendations for improving local democracy in Armenia, adopted in March 2014. We see the law on local self-government, and related laws, in particular concerning local finances, as important steps in putting this road map into practice.

At the same time, the Congress insists on two crucial issues that are part and parcel of the well-functioning local self-government. First, it is the Congress position that the reform of local self-government must necessarily include decentralisation of competences and finances to the local level – decentralisation that must accompany territorial reform. We cannot ensure responsible governance of local communities without giving the responsibilities, or competences, to local authorities required for carrying out their tasks. And we cannot expect these responsibilities to be fulfilled without proper financial and budgetary autonomy at local level. In fact, the European Charter of Local Self-Government sets out as one of its key principles that the transfer of competences must be accompanied by the transfer of financial resources matching those tasks. In this regard, I am pleased to see those two subjects chosen as the key themes for this Forum.

Second, and equally important, is the necessity of regular consultations between central and local authorities on the issues of common concern, which I mentioned at the beginning of my speech. The right of local authorities to be consulted on decisions directly affecting them is another key principle of the Charter of Local Self-Government. In fact, taken together, competences, finances and consultations represent the three most recurring issues that the Congress has to deal with in monitoring local and regional democracy in European countries. We strongly hope that this Forum will create a necessary dynamic for advancing and making progress on those issues in Armenia.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As I have said, the Congress has been working closely with the Armenian authorities not only in the context of its monitoring activities. We have also been contributing actively through our co-operation projects on the ground, aimed at strengthening skills and competences of local elected representatives, fostering dialogue between citizens and local authorities on community development issues, and supporting the Communities Association of Armenia in building its capacities.

As part of this latest project of providing institutional support to the Communities Association, the Congress has also contributed to the organisation of this Forum. On behalf of the Congress, I would like to thank the Government of Switzerland, and Ambassador Gasser present here, for the generous financial support to this project. I would also like to thank the Ministry and the Association, in particular Deputy Minister Terteryan as well as Association President and fellow Congress member Emin Yeritsyan, for their co-operation in advancing the project's objectives and turning the idea of holding this Forum into reality.

I should also express my gratitude to the elected representatives and experts, representatives of the government, local authorities, civil society and international organisations who are participating in this Forum. This event is taking place not only in the context of the major reform of the governance system in Armenia, but also against the background of two significant milestones. Last year, in 2016, we celebrated the 20th anniversary of local self-government in this country. This year, we are marking the 20th anniversary of the Communities Association of Armenia, a union of this country's local authorities.

Twenty years is an important yardstick, and an occasion both to take stock of the accomplishments and to chart out a course for the future, towards decentralisation, towards stronger local self-government for the benefit of Armenian citizens. As we mark the National Day of Local Self-Government in Armenia today, I am convinced that your insights and your contributions to the discussions at this Forum will help to advance the agenda for decentralisation in this country.

For our part, I would like to reaffirm that the Congress remains a committed partner of Armenia in this effort, closely engaged with the Armenian authorities in strengthening local democracy in your country.

I wish this Forum every success.

1299bis meeting of the Ministers' Deputies - Transfer of the Chairmanship of the Committee of Minister from the Czech Republic to Denmark - 15 November 2017, Strasbourg, France

Dear Ministers dear Ambassadors, Ladies and gentlemen,

In a very fruitful exchange of views in this very room three weeks ago I recalled the Congress's determination to contribute to the defense of the common values of the Council of Europe and the democratic stabilisation of our continent – together with the hundreds of Congress members who represent more than 200.000 local and regional authorities all over Europe.

The handover ceremony that brings us together today is an opportunity to reaffirm the Congress's will to actively participate in a concerted manner within the Council of Europe for jointly achieving the objectives of the Organisation's activities.

The Congress, as Council of Europe entity representing the local and regional level, is ready to contribute to such co-ordination with national governments, with representatives of national parliaments and with other entities of the Organisation like the Commissioner for Human Rights and wishes to pursue its efforts with the incoming Danish Chairmanship.

The pooling of experience, responsibilities and efforts at all levels of governance, which we promote at the institutional level, is a reflection of what we defend on the ground, in our member States.

Over the years, decentralisation has progressively gained in importance in Europe and central governments have granted increasingly additional competences and responsibilities to local and regional authorities. Such elected politicians now exercise great influence on the social, economic and democratic development of our societies. I would like to reiterate here that local and regional authorities have important cards to play since they develop their own policies within their competences and, at the same time, also implement many of the policies decided at the national level. It is therefore with the representatives of these authorities that we must maintain a strong, ongoing dialogue, to find together the answers that will ensure the security and stability of our societies.

Ladies and gentlemen, Excellences

Allow me to thank the Czech Chairmanship for the openness and co-operation it has shown towards the Congress, which has resulted in numerous exchanges with the national authorities. I would like to thank, in particular, Minister Zaoralek for our many fruitful exchanges and Vice-Minister Mlsna who participated in our October session. The representatives of the local and regional authorities took also much of their time for the Congress as shown by our Bureau meeting in Brno last June.

Minister Zaoralek, the Czech Chairmanship has been one that was based on the spirit of openness and respect towards the various entities of the Council of Europe. It is now coming to an end and I have no doubt that this spirit will continue with the Danish Chairmanship, which begins today.

Dear Minister Samuelsen, dear incoming Chair, on behalf of the Congress, I wish you all the best for the next six months. We will certainly have other opportunities to interact with you and the Congress would be happy to welcome you to our March 2018 session.

Thank you for your attention.

Conference of the European Forum for Urban Security (EFUS) - 17 November 2017, Barcelona, Spain

Panel 2, The commitment of local and regional authorities for inclusive and sustainable security - Adoption of the Manifesto and Crossed perspectives

1. The place of local and regional authorities in global governance and how to recognize it?

- growing urbanisation – cities and regions are increasingly important actors on the global stage – engaging more and more in international diplomacy – an increasing share in resources – responsible for an increasing share of public services
- the worlds larger metropolises (more than a hundred of them) are far bigger and more powerful than most of the countries represented in the United Nations – and yet they have no direct representation in most international institutions. This has got to change.
- last week the Governor of California visited the European Parliament to talk about the Paris Climate Agreement & went to Bonn for the Conference of Parties to the agreement (COP 23). California is bigger than most European states.
- the Congress of the Council of Europe has been actively campaigning to get regions with legislative powers represented in Council of Europe intergovernmental activities
- the Congress is unique amongst international organisations as being a political assembly with a remit to take up all matters of interest to local and regional democracy – debate and make policy recommendations through its elected representative
- in recent years Congress has done much to improve its political dialogue with the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe – the main executive body. This could be a model for other international organisations

2. The priorities in urban security and how to balance them (e.g. everyday violence/violent extremism)?

- local authorities have a special role – because of their proximity – in identifying people at risk
- a priority is to bring all actors together and ensure that national and local actions are well coordinated
- we must guard against erosion of human rights in the name of improving security
- one area to work on is to ensure that popular events (festivals, concerts, sports events) have enhanced and adequate security
- important too to keep all the citizens involved (public meetings, citizen panels) - public trust is an important factor.

3. What is the place of fundamental rights and social cohesion in urban security policies?

- All international conventions on human rights note that “every person has the right to liberty and security”.
- Certain collective attitudes go hand in hand: inclusion pairs with acceptance and cohesion; exclusion pairs with rejection and insecurity. Inclusion requires respect for individual rights and also for participative democracy; safety and security requires an environment where the rule of law prevails and access to social rights is ensured.
- From the local authorities' perspective, and that of the Congress, to achieve these goals, elected representatives must base their action on compliance with human rights and non-discrimination, when developing policies for the safety of their citizens.
- We have long learned that achieving public order through repression will not solve the problem by itself. Doing it in a just way is important.
- Safety in our streets from violence is of course an issue: we have all watched in horror the attacks on our cities: Barcelona, Paris, Manchester, Nice...

- The safety of our citizens requires our attention on how to diminish the risk of attacks on the population, using all means available to us from local police work to including new technologies.
- However, our reflection and action must focus on what local political leaders can do best: bring people together around an idea, raise awareness, create the conditions for social dialogue, promote citizen initiatives, give greater responsibility to residents in neighbourhoods and generally build capacity to work together locally.
- This can be done only convincingly if our actions have fundamental rights as their starting point. We must believe in these rights ourselves.

4. What is the manifesto's relevance's vis-a-vis the UN sustainable development goals and other international frameworks?

- The UN Sustainable Development Goals are a good summary of what is needed to create cohesive societies; citizens enjoying full rights with their basic needs satisfied through services that respect all life on earth.
- The European Convention of Human Rights is more focused on individual human rights but again it highlights basic rights required in a democratic society.
- The manifesto feeds into these frameworks and goals by insisting on freedom, justice and safety and by promoting active participation of citizens, cooperation between public authorities and civil society including private businesses, and defending security as a fundamental tenet of sustainability.
- Bad practice examples from all over Europe show one thing clearly: there is no hope of achieving a democratic, peaceful society if the rights of some members of that society are not respected.

**9th Plenary session of the ARLEM – Debate on “Women's empowerment in the Mediterranean region” -
21 February 2018, Giza, Egypt**

Co-presidents, Participants of the Conference,

I am very pleased to be here today and to speak to you, as the first woman President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe. Gender equality and empowerment of women do not only lie at the very heart of the issue of fundamental human rights, they are also prerequisite for a fair, peaceful and sustainable world.

Let me give you some information about the Congress.

The Congress is a political assembly that brings together local and regional elected representatives from the 47 member States of the Council of Europe, representing 200 000 local and regional authorities.

We are a platform where mayors, councillors and representatives of the local and regional level can share ideas, exchange best practices.

Cooperation frameworks such as ARLEM provide an excellent platform for bringing into the spotlight important issues and challenges facing local and regional authorities on both shores of the Mediterranean.

The Mediterranean should be seen as a bridge bringing us together, a basin for fruitful exchanges and meetings between people on its shores. We should never forget that we all face the same challenges.

This conviction led us to the creation last year of a South-Med Partnership Programme, aimed at establishing a privileged dialogue between European local elected representatives and their counterparts in South-Mediterranean regions, in particular in Morocco and Tunisia.

The uprisings in South-Mediterranean countries in 2011 have opened a new era in the region in this respect. Let me tell you how pleased I am to see here your Vice-President Mr Boudra. We are working with him in order to give Morocco a status of Partner for Local Democracy in the near future. We know Morocco has an ambitious perspective of reform in this field.

Women were part of these changes and made their voices heard to call on for more democracy and social justice, for fair and open systems that would respect and enact their rights within the society.

Let me clearly state that the issue of women's participation is not specific to this area, nor is it to Europe. It is a global issue as reflected in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 5, aimed at 'achieving gender equality and empower all women and girls'.

I read the ARLEM report on women's empowerment in the Mediterranean region very carefully and the core message underlines the significant influence of the local and regional level in changing the living conditions for women.

I want to focus on the dimension and importance of the political participation of women at local and regional level due to our practical experience in our member countries.

Engaging all members in a society and ensuring the participation of women is a fundamental requirement because a society cannot be free and democratic if the liberty and dignity of half of its members are not guaranteed and upheld. When I speak of equality, I am speaking about equality in the law BUT also equality in practice.

Today I am here to represent the Congress of the Council of Europe but if you allow me, I would like to share a bit of my own experience as a woman politician and give you some personal background.

I have been involved in politics on different level - local, regional, European for 20 years. I am married, mother of 3 children and grandmother of 3 grandchildren. During those 20 years, a change in attitudes towards women in politics has taken place in my country, Austria, as well as in other European states. But, there is still a long way to go. Women are still underrepresented in parliament, in government, in economy, in the media...

Where are the obstacles?

For centuries, politics was men's business. The focus on problems in society has been adapted to a world of men. This is a significant disadvantage for the whole society and its interests.

To break up this culture of no parity, we have to start at the grassroots level, which offers better chances for changes.

We may not forget that the local level is the level where political talents can develop and grow, giving an opportunity to open the national level.

What should, what can be done?

Gender equality is high on our agendas and in particular on the Council of Europe's agenda.

When we talk about fair representation and participation of women, setting minimum quotas can be part of the solution, as an intermediate stage. However, the enforceable quota in itself is not enough. We need to ensure qualitative and meaningful contribution of women that goes beyond figures. Political parties in particular must give priority to supporting women candidates that represent the concerns and experiences of their communities.

The Congress practices what we preach and sets the example. The Congress itself has set the requirement that women must represent at least 30% in each of its 47 national delegations – a requirement with which all countries must comply since 2008. This has turned into a success story for women's representation in national delegations and in leading positions. I am the first women President in the over 60 year's history of the Congress. In the current mandate 2016-2020 women constitute 62,5 % of the executive bodies of the Congress, and more than 40 % of national delegations. Filling seats in the delegation is one thing; giving women real power as Chairs of committees and Presidents of Congress Chambers is another objective and I can personally attest that we are achieving it!

The only reason for the persistent unequal treatment is our historical culture, stereotypes and prejudice built over centuries of inequality – prejudice that has become part of our culture and our thinking. Only strong commitment of all forces of society and positive examples set at all levels of governance can change this fact.

points to conclude:

Providing girls with equal opportunities

Equal access to education services for both girls and boys is of utmost importance everywhere. In my country, Austria, it is only in 1919 that girls were admitted to public high schools. Only through fair education can we ensure that girls are fully aware of and enjoy their rights and possibilities in all aspects of the society. I believe local and regional authorities have a great part to play in this regard by promoting gender-sensitive civic education and actions geared to the elimination of gender stereotypes.

Yet fair access to education is not enough: in many countries indeed, educational level of women is higher than that of men but this is not reflected in their accession to high-responsibility jobs. This is part of what many describe as a glass ceiling, preventing women and girls to seize the same opportunities as men do.

Role of women in countering terrorism : women's 'added value' to fight radicalisation

Women are also mothers, wives and sisters who can help preventing the spread of extremist ideologies and countering growing terrorism. This is why we have to empower them and to involve them in the policy-making, for the benefit of the communities.

The historic changes in the southern Mediterranean area offer great opportunities for democratic transformations, for building fair and prosperous societies based on shared human values and the democratic principles of pluralism and equality. These opportunities must not be missed in particular for women, and we, European politicians, must act and are willing to do so as good neighbours and share our positive experiences in making these principles work.

Dear Co-presidents, dear participants,

I am convinced - Women change the way politics are done – and we need strong empowered women to implement this change.

Thank you for your attention.

34th Session of the Congress - 27 March 2018, Strasbourg, France

Dear colleagues,

As I open this session, I believe we are all entering a very serious period in the life of our organisation and, as a result, that of our Congress.

If we failed to see how new, and in many respects completely unprecedented, the situation is compared to what we have experienced in the past, this would condemn us to accepting our fate in the future rather than taking charge of it now. The true merit of politics, which comes in for so much criticism these days, lies in looking forward, planning ahead and taking action to change the course of events.

That is why I should like to use these few minutes allotted to me as President to try and describe, as clearly as possible, the situation we are in, to analyse the repercussions for our institution and to outline approaches which will enable us to find appropriate solutions to the problems.

Each time he opened one of our sessions, my predecessor, Jean-Claude Frécon, warned of the dangers building up in Europe. None of the threats which he described has been dispelled. On the contrary, if we consider the electoral dimension of the crisis alone, we can see from election to election the continuing upsurge in what is called populism. The overall picture of our democracies seems to be becoming gradually gloomier and gloomier. Today, however, I am not going to talk to you again about the general crisis affecting our societies. I am going to talk about a particular consequence of the crisis which affects us directly and has a significant impact on our own operation. That crisis is primarily budgetary in nature, and I will come back to that. However, apart from the budgetary and financial dimension, the crisis also has a political dimension which seriously affects our institutional role, our ability to act and indeed what we stand for.

Let us look, for a moment, at the budgetary crisis. It is older than it would seem: it started when the governments of our member states decided to apply the death knell of “zero nominal growth” to the Council of Europe’s budget. The effect of that decision has been to cut our budget every year by a sum corresponding exactly to the inflation rate in our countries. The application of a policy of that kind over several budgetary cycles has drastic consequences and, as Thorbjørn Jagland has so aptly said, erodes the organisation’s capacity to fulfil its mandate.

At the end of last year when the 2018 budget had already been approved, this policy of the member states was compounded by Turkey’s decision to go back to being an ordinary contributor to the Council of Europe’s budget only two years after asking to become a major contributor. This decision came in a context that had already been made difficult by Russia’s failure to pay two thirds of its contributions in 2017.

Let us all be very clear: this budgetary situation - which is difficult to say the least - has political causes and political consequences: the member states no longer recognise the Council of Europe’s political role in the way they should. And some are even calling into question its political standard-settings and monitoring activities. Against a background of this kind, the budget has become an influencing variable used to persuade us to lower our standards. That is why I am referring more to a political crisis than a financial one. And it is that political crisis which we must respond to.

As members of the Congress we must, however, understand that the structure of the Congress budget probably makes us more vulnerable to the crisis than any other institution in the Council of Europe. Each one of us represents institutions and authorities which, on their own, cannot contribute in any way to funding our presence and our activities in the Congress. That is the way things are and it is not being called into question by anyone.

The situation is different for our parliamentary friends who meet in this same chamber. But do so at the expense of their national parliaments, which provide the relevant funding. Our local authorities and

regions do not have that direct relationship with the Council of Europe which would require them to fund our participation in the Congress.

This different relationship has a practical consequence: most of our operating budget goes on reimbursements, in other words, our ability to meet here in this chamber today. If in future, in keeping with what we have been doing on a trial basis at the start of this year, we have to go on making cuts in our budgets, we will be bound to reduce our reimbursements (for monitoring, elections observations and all meetings) and hence also the actual operation of our Congress. This would mean, if we do not react, fewer committee meetings, fewer sessions and sittings of the Chambers and fewer monitoring missions. That effectively means less Congress, less influence of the local and regional dimension in the organisation's work and, very quickly, marginalisation of a kind that will be detrimental to our political role and detrimental, throughout Europe, to local and regional self-government which is one of the vital components of our democracies.

And that will come about all the quicker since the modest target share which we have called for in the organisation's budget, namely 3% of the general budget, not only has not been achieved but is actually moving further away every year. We are now at 2.66% of the budget approved for 2018. In an organisation that is intergovernmental by definition, it is not easy to make the voice of local and regional authorities heard.

Yet that is the target which we must set ourselves. The target is, of course, a budgetary one, with the figure of 3%, but it is, above all, a political one. Political, because for more than 60 years within this institution, our mission has been to bring forward the proper balance of powers between central government and local and regional authorities which is such a vital asset for our democracies and our societies.

Dear colleagues, I don't think anyone is going to come and look at us compassionately and offer us ready-made solutions. That is the tough law of politics. It is up to us to re-examine the way we operate, our structures and our rules so that we are able ourselves to cope with the difficulties which are appearing on the horizon and which will, perhaps, compound those affecting us already.

The budget which was approved in December 2017 for the Congress has been cut by almost 10%, as regards both our operation and our Secretariat's payroll, where several posts have been frozen. That is why we have had to take drastic precautionary measures such as shortening our session, postponing several conferences, scaling back our monitoring programme and reducing the number of election observation exercises. If other cuts had to be made, as our operations currently stand, we would have to take steps that would have an even more painful impact on how our assembly operates. That is why our motto must be to change and not to be changed.

Given the seriousness of the situation, the Bureau has therefore set up a steering group consisting of the three presidents, the four political group presidents and the Secretary General and the Director to look into options for far-reaching reform of the way we operate so as to make our budget more sustainable. All possible avenues for reform will be looked into without any taboos, with the sole objective of restoring the means needed for the Congress's independence and safeguarding its ability to act. This strategic steering group will report to the Bureau which, as executive body, will decide on the extent and shape of the reform to be proposed to us because, in the final analysis, it is you who will have to decide in plenary.

I intend to work hard so that we can submit a set of proposals to you at our next session in November. After the adoption, I hope, of a draft reform of our Congress, we will then have to go to the Committee of Ministers, which alone can approve a change in our statutes. This is a cumbersome procedure but there will be extensive debate, firstly, in the Congress, in the Bureau and at the plenary session and then in the Committee of Ministers, which I will address in a few weeks' time to explain our approach.

What is most important as we navigate these stormy waters is for us to be able jointly, openly and transparently to analyse our difficulties and agree appropriate solutions together. The worst outcome for us would be having decisions imposed on us de facto which failed to preserve our key responsibilities, in particular our monitoring and election observation activities. I can assure you that I will work as hard as possible with my colleagues on the Bureau to complete this process, which will demand political imagination and, still more, courage from us.

We will take decisions which will probably be difficult and will demonstrate our political maturity in so doing. As an intergovernmental organisation, the Council of Europe is lucky, and I am not afraid to use the word, to have an assembly representing local and regional authorities in its midst. That sends out a strong signal of our approach to good democratic governance, which is not possible without those authorities. We must rise to the challenges facing us and, through our determination and our willingness to reform, preserve the voice of local and regional authorities, without which our citizens' daily lives would be more difficult and the standard of our democracy would be seriously undermined.

Thank you.

Signature of a revised co-operation Agreement with the Committee of the Regions 27 March 2018, Strasbourg, France

Dear President of the Committee of the Regions, dear Karl-Heinz, dear members of the Congress, Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to welcome you, Karl-Heinz, in your capacity as President of the European Committee of the Regions, amongst our ranks today.

Next year, both our institutions will celebrate their 25th anniversary. This will mark 25 years of working together to advance territorial democracy on our continent, to drive forward decentralisation and to guarantee the respect of local and regional competences across Europe.

Most importantly, it will be 25 years of our joint efforts to build citizens' confidence in territorial governance, their trust in local and regional politicians, and their commitment to democratic values and institutions at local, regional, national and European levels.

The revised Co-operation Agreement which we will be signing today is a testimony to these common goals and aspirations of our two institutions, and a symbol of our teamwork to make them a reality. It is also a testimony to what has been achieved over these past decades: today, the importance of decentralised governance enjoys strong recognition across our member States, and local and regional democracy is firmly embedded in Europe as a landmark feature of this continent's democratic development.

Decentralisation reforms have been carried out, or are under way, in many countries today, and the Congress contributes to implementing them in the field through our co-operation programmes in Ukraine, in Armenia, across the Eastern Partnership in general, and further afield in the neighbouring regions such as the South Mediterranean. For the work of the Committee of the Regions with the local authorities of these countries – in Joint Consultative committees and Working Groups - the Congress provides the findings of its monitoring activities and election observation missions. This is a good example for the complementarity of the work of the two institutions.

Our two institutions have built close co-operation and practical synergies within the Conference of Regional and Local Authorities of the Eastern Partnership and within the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly, known as CORLEAP and ARLEM.

At the latest meeting of our High-Level Group, in January, we identified thematic priority areas for co-operation, to address the pressing needs facing our local and regional authorities: integration of migrants, fight against radicalisation, strengthening good local governance and combating corruption, and improving human rights delivery in our communities.

However, our debate today is taking place in the context of growing challenges to local and regional self-government, against the background of increasing pressures that sometimes reach a breaking point, at a time when the future of the European project itself is subject to much discussion in a search for possible ways forward.

In Europe and beyond we identify two trends: more decentralisation in some countries and strengthening local and regional authorities in others like the establishment of new elected structures at regional level like recently in Finland. Both the Congress and the Committee of the Regions support a system of multi-polar distribution of powers, a system that we in Europe have known for quite some time as “multi-level governance”. The Committee of the Regions has been actively promoting this over the years.

This aspect of respect for responsibilities not only at European and at national level, but also those of local and regional authorities, however, is regrettably missing from the current debate on the future of the European Union.

We hope that the Committee of the Regions will use its role and position to put it on the agenda of the EU institutions as they discuss convergence and cohesion in Europe with a view of taking the citizens along on the way to develop a common Europe.

The Congress, for its part, stands ready to contribute through its on-going dialogue with the member States here in the Council of Europe.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Over the years since our initial Co-operation Agreement was concluded, the Congress and the Committee of the Regions have established a genuine and solid partnership in pursuing common objectives.

However, today's situation compels us to seek even better synergies, greater complementarity and more effective convergence of efforts for a more tangible impact – and not only between our two institutions. The situation also calls for consolidating our partnership network with the European associations representing local and regional authorities. Many Congress members and members of the CoR hold offices in these associations – an excellent basis for co-operation, shared priorities and complementarity of work.

I am very pleased that Presidents of two European associations are participating in the work of this Congress session: Ana Luisa PEREIRA LUIS, President of the Conference of Regional Legislative Assemblies of Europe (CALRE), and Stefano BONACCINI [bona-CHEE-ni], President of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR). Last year, during our October session, we welcomed Magnus BERNTSSON, President of the Assembly of European Regions (AER).

But I should also mention of course EUROCITIES, and the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR), and the Conference of Peripheral and Maritime Regions (CPMR) – which all contribute to our common cause of building a Europe based on values, resilient to populist movements, responsive to the needs of the people and respectful of the competences of regions, cities and municipalities – and who have their specific identities and thematic profile.

The leadership of the Congress and of the CoR are ready to look for new approaches and mechanisms to ensure greater political engagement in addition to the excellent working relations among the respective secretariat and bring more synergies to our co-operation, focusing on the core challenges Europe – both the Europe of the 47 and the Europe of 28 – is facing.

I therefore welcome the initiative of Karl-Heinz Lambertz to organise an exchange between the Presidents of the Committee of the Regions and the Congress with the Presidents of the major European Associations to join forces, to identify common priorities and to see which institution or association and network is the most adequate to achieve our political goal and to implement concrete operational activities.

I am confident we all share the conviction that local and regional governance remains the most viable dimension of European democracy today. Keeping this vitality, and making this dimension ever stronger remains our core mission, our common mission.

Together, we shall rise to this challenge.

Thank you.

**The Economist conference - “Governance and regional arteries for growth:
Europe’s momentum - Greece’s impetus” -
11 May 2018, Loutraki, Greece**

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here today. Let me begin by telling you who I am and what this Congress is that I represent. It is possible that some of you have not come across either the Congress or the Council of Europe. The Congress is one of the political organs of the Council of Europe and functions – within the Council of Europe framework - as the voice of local and regional authorities in Europe.

The Council of Europe is an intergovernmental organization set up at the end of the Second World War to promote human rights, democracy and the rule of law among its members. It is older than the European Union and has always had a wider membership. Currently we have 47 member states and Greece, like Turkey, has been a member since 1949, the first year of our existence.

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities is a political assembly composed of two chambers, the Chamber of Local Authorities and the Chamber of Regions – of which I was the President before I became the President of the Congress.

Let's be clear what we mean when we talk about regions, regional governance and regional democracy. For us, the region is a sub-national entity, the first tier of government below the national government. While other people talk about regions as groups of national states, such as Euroregions, or the “Euro-region” of states which use the Euro as their currency, or again the Western Balkans, for us the region is a subnational unit. So today we are in the Peloponnese region – and discussing the special identity of that region, its role, its special resources and its relationships with other governments both inside and outside of Greece.

Much of our work in the Congress is focused on some key legal texts, such as the European Charter of Local Self-Government – an international treaty ratified by all 47 Council of Europe states, which was the first international legal instrument to protect the principles of local government. It sets out some key principles for the functioning of local democracy, which our member states have agreed to respect and apply. A lot of our work is devoted to ensuring that national governments to this – by activities that we refer to as our monitoring activities.

We also have an important text called the “Council of Europe Reference Framework for Regional Democracy” – which is not a treaty as such – but still a text that our national governments have agreed to apply – and which looks at the specific issues of regional democracy and regional governance.

National governments often take the attitude that all power and all decision-making resides with them and that it has always been this way and always will be. Meeting here today, in Southern Greece, we can recall that democracy was not always the system of nation-states that we have today. It grew out of a system of city states. Our regions have roots and identities that go back much further than the nation states that they now belong to.

We need to understand and grasp this fact if we are to make the most of our regions, and to enable them play a full role in the development of our territories. Our regions are real actors, each with its special history and identity. They are not artificial creations.

In recent years we have seen some dramatic developments in the role of regions is changing. We recently produced a report charting the trends and prospects of inter-regional cooperation in Europe³, proposing some initiatives for deepening bilateral and multilateral cooperation between regions.

When we look at the 47 member states that make up the Council of Europe, many of them are quite small, too small in fact, to consider introducing a regional level of government. At the other end of the scale, we

³ ‘Inter-regional cooperation in Europe : trends and prospects. 2014, Rapporteur: Stewart DICKSON

have what are known as the “Four motors of Europe” (Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes of France, Baden-Württemberg of Germany, Catalonia of Spain and Lombardy of Italy). Each of these regions has an economy that, if we measured it against our 47 member states, would put it in the top 15 European economies.

These regions are increasingly using their power – which we sometimes refer to as soft power – to conduct international diplomacy of their own, setting up their own embassies, developing their own cooperation programmes. National governments of smaller states often come to their door seeking new cooperation agreements.

This is not just a European phenomenon. If we look at some of the States in USA, such as California, we see the same phenomenon, and also to some extent in countries such as China and India. The world is changing, whether we like it or not, and powerful regions are part of the new pattern and will be part of the future.

At the same time, we have the growing phenomenon of regional nationalism. What is happening in Catalonia, and with the recent referendum in Scotland, is a healthy reminder that our regional boundaries – which are often relatively recent – are not set in stone – and might one day change again. Our world is in a state of constant change. The challenge for us is to ensure that the core principles of democracy and peaceful existence are respected and developed – and that when change comes, it does so according to the will of the people and with the maximum of political dialogue.

A few years ago we produced another key report on regions with special status⁴. What we have in Europe, which is surely unique and a source of strength, is a huge variety of constitutional arrangements.

Within our national states, we have many cases of asymmetric regional government, which are formed by historical factors and bring about collective representations and identities created on specific portions of the space – sometimes these are islands, sometimes regions with special histories and identities, such as Vojvodina in Serbia. They remind us that there is no “one size fits all”, when it comes to regional government structures.

We maintain that the solution to many of today’s regional conflicts lies in finding an appropriate constitutional arrangement that takes into account the specific context, history and identity of the region. We have many good examples of such “special status” regions in our member states and we are ready to work with any government to share this expertise and experience in addressing current regional tensions. The answer lies in dialogue and negotiation, never in violence.

Let me make a special plea for “regions with legislative powers” – as we have in my country Austria. In the Congress, we promote the principle of subsidiarity and are convinced of the benefits of giving the local population the maximum say in how they manage their public affairs.

One way to do this is to increase their powers and responsibilities, powers to raise their own taxes, ensuring that they have the resources to match their competences. Another way to achieve greater subsidiarity is to increase the powers of regions to introduce local or regional legislation, to meet the specific needs of their territories. When it comes to promoting the general welfare and development of our regions and their citizens, legislative powers can serve as a powerful and effective weapon.

So, when we come to looking at the relations between national and regional authorities, what lessons can we draw from our experience? First, a message to our national authorities: the division of powers between national and regional authorities works best when it takes account of the specific identity and needs of each region.

The diversity of our local and regional authorities is a fact of life and also something to be celebrated. Our democratic institutions need to respond and adapt to that diversity rather than seek 'one size fits all' solutions.

⁴ “Regions and territories with special status in Europe”, 2013. Rapporteur: Bruno MARZIANO

Regions can and should be our strategic partners, the key to the development of our societies, for our social, economic and cultural future. A certain degree of regional autonomy is an effective way to bring power and the citizen closer together. The strengthening and deepening of our regional democracy is a crucial element in the development of our territories as a whole. It requires mutual respect as well as dialogue and consultation between all levels of government.

Appropriate and effective institutions are essential if we are to develop our cities and regions for the benefit of our citizens. A clear definition of delegated powers, with resources to match and effective mechanisms for each level of government to consult each other and to develop a real dialogue are key conditions for our regional governance structures.

Effective citizen participation in the decision-making process at all the levels of governance will also enhance its credibility and ensure that policies are tailored to people's needs.

We need to continue to explore new strategies to maintain effective and legitimate democracy at all levels of governance. We need to pursue a system of territorial democracy that is modern, open, and active at all levels. If we are to achieve sustainable development and the welfare of our populations, mutually supportive and participatory regional democracy should be our priority.

We need to learn, to recognize and value the distinctive role that each of us and each level of government has to play. We need to work as a team, knitted together and embracing all the diverse of our societies. Together we can and will move forward, not as competitors, but as partners.

Thank you.

**Conference on Safeguarding Democratic Institutions within a Europe in crisis:
Challenges and Responses -
11 May 2018, Nafplion, Greece**

Ladies and gentlemen,

Over the past years a certain form of insecurity pervaded multilateral relations and we saw internal crises starting to affect some of our member states.

This is due to various factors among which the consequences of the economic and financial crisis, the migrant situation, the rise of violent extremism and radicalisation, the rise of populism but also to the fact that people feel excluded from democratic processes and do not see democratic institutions as serving citizens' needs or protecting citizens' interests any more.

What strikes me above all in the current situation is the difficulty for our institutions to find appropriate and sustainable solutions. The inability of the European Union and national governments to agree on a coherent common policy to deal with the influx of refugees is a burning example of this lack of success.

The failure to provide appropriate responses to such a daunting challenge can lead to destabilisation and risks to put the whole democratic culture of our societies in danger. There are already worrying trends in this regard in a growing number of countries. Nationalist and xenophobic parties are making gains by challenging elites and exploiting public anxieties over migration.

We can see also from election to election the increasingly low voter turnout, the increasing disinterest and even the growing mistrust directed against national politicians, against Europe and against European institutions. The European project itself is rejected by many citizens, across our Member States.

The problem of corruption - acute at all levels of government and in all the countries - also contributes to the general feeling of suspicion and mistrust. The importance of this issue is clear as there is a strong link between the behaviour of elected representatives and the quality of governance and the trust between constituencies and their elected representatives.

Across the continent, new dividing lines have also been formed, with their potential for fragmentation of what has been built over the past decades (separatist temptations of large regions like Catalonia, Brexit, etc...).

In some of our Member States, the idea of decentralisation and local autonomy are called into question by the central governments: elected mayors are arrested and replaced by civil servants, powers are transferred to the central government on the pretext of saving money – and this list can continue.

The challenges we meet are testing our ability to move forward together and to take along our citizens. Democracy cannot be imposed from outside. The question is: Can we safeguard the democratic structures of our societies in an atmosphere of de-democratisation in Europe and in the world? And if so-how?

Safeguarding democratic institutions means making them more accessible to citizens and involving citizens in decision making.

The local and regional level, the level of proximity to citizens, fits perfectly this purpose: local and regional authorities bear key responsibilities in the daily lives of citizens and the functioning of our societies. They are a stabilising factor.

In the Congress we are convinced that local and regional authorities and politicians have an eminently strategic role to play in our States and in our societies.

What we need is not less but more democracy?

Strong local and regional authorities with clear powers and appropriate resources can make a significant contribution to addressing challenges ahead, help ease tensions and contribute to stability and more democracy.

To exercise their duties and responsibilities in serving the citizens, local and regional authorities must be given a proper political and legal framework and sufficient means.

In many fields, the coordination between various government levels is an important dimension in protecting citizens against threats and finding solutions to their problems. The local authorities are best positioned to share with the national level the citizens' concerns, and the local experience in addressing these concerns, thus contributing to shaping national policies.

I am convinced that local and regional authorities must be made full partners in addressing the current challenges and drafting national policies. They should be closely involved in decision-making processes at national and at European levels. Participatory democracy is best practiced at local level, and local elected representatives still enjoy the highest levels of citizens' trust among politicians – when compared to national or European levels. Greater citizen participation also means greater transparency in governance, which becomes more open to citizens' scrutiny and control.

What the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities does?

The Congress represents within the Council of Europe the voice of the European towns, cities and regions, all in all more than 200,000 authorities, which are all crucial contributors to the social and economic development of our member States.

The Congress defends the principles of subsidiarity and decentralisation of power, proximity of democracy to citizens, accountability, good governance and active citizenship at the grassroots.

The Congress is a monitoring body responsible for preparing assessment reports on the situation of local and regional democracy in the member States and the implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government by their governments. The Charter is an international treaty which entered into force 30 years ago and now ratified by all 47 Council of Europe member States.

The monitoring of local and regional democracy enables a constructive political dialogue with the authorities at all levels in member states. The Charter, and the Congress as the monitoring body for the Charter's implementation, insist on the importance of regular dialogue and consultations between local, regional and central authorities. Through its activities and its cooperation programmes, the Congress supports this dialogue and contributes to establishing or strengthening consultations frameworks and mechanisms.

A post-monitoring procedure can be implemented at the request of the authorities of a member State which has been the subject of a monitoring accompanied by recommendations on how to improve or develop local and/or regional democracy.

Numerous legislative reforms and other positive developments have been set in motion by member States on the basis of the Congress monitoring mechanism, which includes the monitoring of the Charter, the observation of local and regional elections and the implementation of cooperation programmes in member States.

The Congress bases its work on the good practices in the municipalities and regions. The sharing of experiences is an important aspect of its action, which is often built on peer-to-peer activities. Some concrete examples:

- **In Albania**, the work of the Congress resulted in the agreement between the government and the association of local authorities establishing a Consultative Council.

- **In Armenia**, the project with local communities brought together local residents and councillors to discuss regularly community development issues in the format of townhall meetings – a practice never heard of before – and resulted in a practical toolkit on the organisation of citizen participation at local level.
- Projects implemented across the **Eastern Partnership countries** – Moldova, Ukraine, Armenia and Georgia – produced country-specific **Handbooks on Transparency and Citizen Participation** and a **Tool Guide on the management of change** to help local elected representatives better fulfill their mission..

Also in the field of thematic activities, the Congress has developed tools and initiatives to help local elected representatives better respond to specific challenges. Let me give you just two concrete examples:

In the **fight against violent extremism**, the Congress launched in 2015 the “Alliance of European cities against violent extremism”. This alliance serves as a platform to exchange on initiatives in combating the causes of radicalisation, taken by various European cities. Three Summits of Mayors have been organised so far to discuss and exchange experiences in this regard.

To promote **Human Rights at local and regional level**, the Congress launched in 2015 a Human Rights Action Plan which comprises among others a **Handbook on Human Rights**. This Handbook is a series of manuals setting out examples of good practices already conducted in many European cities in promoting human rights at local and regional level. The series will cover different groups or topics such as refugees, asylum seekers and migrants; Internally Displaced Persons, Roma and Travellers; LGBTI people etc.... The first Handbook will be adopted during the November 2018 Session.

In conclusion, let me to repeat that I am deeply convinced of the importance of the role of local and regional authorities in facing the current challenges. Local and regional democracy is an essential dimension of democracy. The contribution of local and regional authorities to the proper functioning of democracy is essential.

National Governments often take the attitude that all power and all decision-making resides with them. But we know, also from our experience in the field, that the population in European countries tend to trust local governments more than central governments. There is a key lesson out of this: **It is impossible to implement a policy nationally if its implementation fails locally.**

128th Session of the Committee of Ministers - 18 May 2018, Elsinore, Denmark

Ministers, Ambassadors, Ladies and gentlemen,

In the Congress, as a political assembly, we attach great importance to the dialogue with the governments of member states. We are engaged in a political dialogue with you, Ministers, with your deputies in Strasbourg, with ministers for local government during our plenary sessions and in your capitals during every activity that we undertake, particularly during our missions to monitor the implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, to observe local and regional elections or when we implement Council of Europe Action Plans.

The European Charter of Local Self-Government is one of the Council of Europe's major treaties and has been ratified by all of our 47 member states. Central governments recognise the pre-eminent function of democratic local and regional self-government as a political force in our states. Local and regional authorities are an indispensable element of the checks and balances of our European model of society.

These politicians work together in the Congress to add the local and regional dimension to the Council of Europe's *raison d'être*. I would like to commend you, Ministers, on the Recommendation on participation of citizens in local public life adopted on 21 March 2018. This Recommendation to member states contributes to strengthen trust in and credibility of the democratic institutions and helps to build inclusive societies. So local and regional authorities can better counteract populism which seeks to limit debate, delegitimise dissent and reduce political pluralism.

Today, Ministers, you have taken several important decisions and the Congress will contribute to the implementation of these decisions wherever there is a local or regional dimension; wherever mayors and councillors, presidents of regions and regional parliaments can contribute:

In this context I would like:

- to refer to the Secretary General's report on the "Role of and threats to institutions" and stress that democratic institutions in municipalities, cities and regions are fully concerned as well.
- to remind you that the Congress' outreach to over 200.000 local authorities is an asset that can and should be used when taking decisions about the future of the Council of Europe; .
- to highlight the Congress' contribution to the Organisation's human rights component with its guidelines for the implementation of human rights at local level.
- And to mention the co-operation with the European Union where the Congress joins forces with the Committee of the Regions, focusing in particular on migration and integration issues, to make best use of synergies and avoid duplication.

In the Congress we will continue our work in the most effective way possible. That is why, given the Council of Europe's current financial situation, we have decided to undertake a large-scale reform of our working methods, our structures and our rules, so that we can rise to the challenges facing us. We have adopted stringent cost-saving measures and launched a major reform that should safeguard our institutional role – to enable us to deliver on the expectations of the member states – and to make our budget more sustainable.

Although the initiative for this new reform has been imposed on us by the difficult situation in which we find ourselves, we are resolutely committed to using it as a chance to bring about a tangible, positive transformation. This process will require political imagination and courage, because we will doubtlessly be forced to make tough and painful decisions. Nonetheless, we are convinced of our ability to turn the crisis into an opportunity.

I am not afraid to tell you that the Council of Europe is lucky to have an assembly representing local and regional authorities in its midst: because the role of local authorities is essential for a good development of our societies and our communities! This institutional commitment sends out the strong signal that its member states believe that good democratic governance is not possible without local and regional

authorities. The Congress therefore values its statutory role and appreciates being able to contribute to the debate in this Ministerial Meeting.

I would like to thank those countries, who publicly support the need for the necessary funding of the Congress and its work, notably Germany and Slovenia. Let me invite you, Ministers, to support the reform which the Congress will propose later this year in order to enable us to continue to deliver.

Thank you.

Meeting of the Executive Bureau of the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) - Gender equality - Equal opportunities for all - 24 May 2018, Strasbourg France

Gender equality is a fundamental matter of human rights, democracy and social justice. In the Congress, which is a body of elected representatives, we are particularly sensitive to the political representation aspect of it.

Achieving equal representation between women and men in the political sphere is proving to be a persistent challenge, in spite of all the committed work done for decades. I was elected as the first woman President of the Congress in 2017. This is a fact I am proud of but I also realise that it has taken too long, given that our assembly has existed for longer than a quarter of a century.

This difficulty in achieving equal representation is true for all levels of government. Women are still largely underrepresented in local and regional councils. Most of the time, people enter into politics at the local level and move up. It is on the ground, as mayors and councillors that they develop their political profiles. We must make it possible for women to be present in big numbers at local level politics if we wish to achieve parity in national level parliaments and governments.

To achieve progress, to break the glass ceiling, solutions for enhancing women's participation in political life exist. But they are not straightforward; they involve a variety of parameters.

One of them is the implementation of quotas, which is an efficient way to achieve this goal, especially with financial penalties in case of non-compliance. It is a solution which does not make everyone happy and some countries have opted for other solution.

I would like to give our own Congress as a positive quota example. Within the space of less than a decade, with measures firmly applied, we substantially increased the number of women in our national delegations and in high political posts. Due to a 30 per cent quota requirement, from 2011 to 2016, we managed to increase the percentage of women from 31% to 42%. As to high political posts, today, women constitute 65% of the executive of the Congress.

At the UCLG Global Conference of Local Elected Women held in Paris in 2013, the Congress had drawn attention to the need that it is leadership which will make a difference in achieving equality. I can only repeat this observation.

**Meeting of the Executive Bureau of the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) - High-Level Dialogue: Linking Global Goals with the New Urban Agenda implementation -
25 May 2018, Strasbourg France**

Mr President, Excellences, Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to take part in this high-level dialogue as President of the Congress of the Council of Europe.

It is a pleasure because as we discuss linking Global Goals with the new Urban Agenda, as we discuss contribution of the local action to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, the motto “Think globally – act locally” rings ever more true.

It is a pleasure because this discussion represents an opportunity to join efforts between the UCLG, a global actor representing local authorities worldwide and a long-standing partner of the Congress, and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities representing more than 200,000 territorial communities of Europe. We both share common values and the ambition to develop and defend local governance.

Improving urban governance has been a key concern of the Congress for almost three decades. It is not surprising: more than half of the world’s population now lives in cities, and the city has become the major fact of the organization of our territories. Yet this urban “explosion” has caused numerous imbalances and serious collateral damage: firstly on the quality of our environment, and then the social fabric itself. In this too rapid expansion, our cities have often sacrificed the quality of collective life – falling victim to social segregation, financial segregation, generational segregation, and so on.

This is why, in 1992, we adopted the European Urban Charter, which established a series of principles for the social organization of the city. We sought to identify basic urban rights of the inhabitants, which must be acquired “without discrimination of age, origin, beliefs, social status economic or political, physical or mental handicap”.

In 2008, the Congress updated this text by adopting “Manifesto for a new urbanity: European Urban Charter II”. This new Charter has laid down four ‘ambitions’ to foster a new model of urban governance:

- building a “town for the people” centred on serving citizens’ needs and involving citizens in finding solutions to address those needs;
- building a sustainable and environmentally friendly town;
- building a town which is a symbol of modernity, knowledge and creativity;
- building a town of social cohesion, which actively combats division, exclusion and discrimination.

This “new urbanity” expresses the conviction that our mode of urban development must change. Our cities today need to regenerate. This marks the need to amend our policies. But the word ‘urbanity’ in French also means the good quality of relations between people, the concern of the other person in interpersonal relations. We, local authorities, must put the citizen at the heart of our action and at the heart of our cities.

Our cities have their own economic dynamics, but they also embody the inequalities that divide our societies. This is why we need urban policies aimed at promoting greater solidarity and inclusion.

This is especially true today, against the challenges of integration of migrants, fight against radicalisation and violent extremism, and fostering dialogue for diversity and inclusion in our cities. Local and regional elected representatives, as political leaders, have a central role to play in shaping how the society will react to these challenges.

This will require a strong political will and positive leadership that aims to respect the human dignity and rights of all. In the Congress we have developed Guidelines to combat violent extremism at grassroots level and a Toolkit for local authorities to use when organizing interreligious and intercultural dialogue with this purpose in mind.

Our policies must make the city accessible to all, especially in the areas of education, health, culture and housing. The essential condition to ensure such accessibility for all is social diversity.

Diversity is an advantage; yet ensuring that trust and solidarity among citizens of different backgrounds holds strong is not easy. Managing diversity means building shared spaces, offering to all residents opportunities to engage across difference and work towards common goals, while cultivating a pluralistic, inclusive identity with strong common civic values.

Segregated spaces cannot promote such solidarity between social groups, generations and people with reduced mobility – however, our cities, by the effects of concentration, are pathologically unequal. Only a strong political will can restore solidarity – and this political will must exist at all levels of governance. If we do not meet these challenges, our cities will lose their cohesion and quality of life. In short, without inclusion, no cohesion. This is the doctrine of our Urban Charter II.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We can trust our cities. They are a unique asset for our economies and for our societies. They should belong to their inhabitants; they are a collective good. They have the capacity to contribute to the prosperity of all. For their balanced development, it will take political will and long-term vision.

In these turbulent times, let us pool our efforts so we can provide our citizens with inclusive, safe and stable environments.

**Conference of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, “The use of languages by local and regional authorities” -
31 May 2018, Balvanyos, Covasna County, Romania**

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

It is a great pleasure and a privilege to be opening this conference, on such an important subject, in such a distinguished company. A great pleasure to be here in Romania, in such a beautiful setting – and a big thank you to our hosts. Thank you for giving us this marvellous opportunity to discover your region.

The subject that we are here to discuss – is a big one. A subject that comes up frequently in our work in the Congress. Language. Language diversity. Language goes so much to the heart of what we do. In Europe we have such a rich heritage of languages, something that we are rightly proud of. It is surely a source of our strength. We're also here to celebrate 20 years of the coming into force of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, one of the key treaties of the Council of Europe, and a treaty which we in the Congress played a big role in bringing it into existence.

We are here to encourage more of our member states to sign, ratify, and make use of this valuable legal instrument and salute the work that Romania – which is a party to this treaty – has been doing in this respect. So why do language issues come up so frequently as problems and sources of conflict in our work?

This is a question that we hope to shed light on today. But our focus will not just be on the Minority language charter, it will also be on ‘our charter’, the European Charter for Local Self-Government, for which the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe has given us the responsibility for overseeing the implementation.

Language issues have featured in several recent complaints that we have received with regards to the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, even though it does not contain any provision that expressly mentions languages or minority languages.

Yet, Article 7.1 provides that “the conditions of office of local elected representatives shall provide for free exercise of their functions” and the right of citizens to participate in the conduct of public affairs is referred as democratic principle in the Preamble.

The point here is to see the practical side of the Charter, and to understand languages as tools for democratic participation.

In several of our monitoring visits, we have face situations that might go against these provisions.

In some European communes, local councillors cannot, by law, comment in their language on a point on meeting agenda of a local council, even though the majority of local residents is of the minority language. In such circumstances, do they really enjoy their right to participate effectively in the meetings and decisions of assemblies, of which they are members? Can they really carry out a meaningful mandate?

Similarly, when members of a linguistic minority cannot express themselves or communicate with local and regional administrations in their own language, they are not really able to take part in local affairs, or to use public services in an effective way, in particular in the field of social services.

Our main interest in the Congress, is on local and regional government, local and regional democracy – and how best to meet the needs of our citizens at the local and regional level. So for us, an important issue is surely that our citizens know and understand and can fully participate in the life of their neighbourhood, town, city and region. And to participate you need to be able to communicate. Language is at the heart of that. That is why we have so many interpreters with us today.

Let me end by wishing us all a fruitful conference, full of rich exchanges, in which we really do communicate, and listen to each other, and demonstrate that our different languages can open up new horizons for us and enrich our world.

**CEMR conference Equality, Diversity and Inclusion - Opening plenary session,
“Setting the scene for a fairer future” -
11 June 2018, Bilbao, Spain**

➔ First intervention:

Answer to the question: “Should there be a common European approach for equality, diversity and inclusion strategies?”

In my opinion there is only one possible answer: a clear yes!

All over Europe we can witness how extreme right wing parties enter parliaments, how radicalization gains ground, how hate speech and rejection of others is recklessly expressed.

I admit that fighting for our goals is not becoming easier.

But we have values which can bind us and for which we can work together: Respect for human rights, for diversity and equality and our belief in solidarity.

These are the common guiding principles that have brought together countries around the idea of a larger Europe in the Council of Europe.

To get us through these challenges facing us, we need concerted action at this larger European level more than ever.

➔ Second intervention:

Presentation of the Congress of Local and Regional authorities and its activities in the field of equality, diversity and inclusion

Mr President, Dear Colleagues, Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure and an honour for me to take part in this high-level discussion today.

The CEMR is a long-standing partner of the Congress. I appreciate this opportunity for thinking together and exchanging opinions and experiences on equality, diversity and inclusion.

Europe is going through turbulent times. We are facing several crisis situations, including war at our borders, migration, radicalisation, and political discord.

At a moment when we need to defend democratic principles to guide our actions in order to overcome these challenges, our societies are fragmented and fragilised by a lack unity and cohesion.

Urgent action and strong responses to make our societies more resilient are necessary and not just at the international or national political levels but also at the local and regional levels.

The Congress has addressed this through its recommendations to Council of Europe member States to take action and promote respect for diversity, intercultural and interreligious dialogue and the early integration of migrants. We also developed a Toolkit with the purpose of informing and supporting local authorities in the organisation of intercultural and interreligious activities.

Apart from these urgent issues, we have long-standing social problems that require long-term solutions and continuous work.

Achieving gender equality is one such area of work. At the Congress, we are particularly sensitive to the political representation aspect of it. Achieving equal representation between women and men in the political sphere is proving to be a persistent challenge, in spite of all the committed work done for decades.

There are many solutions of course and in the Congress we opted for the quota solution to increase women's representation and I must say that for us it worked: Between 2011 and today, with the application of a 30% quota for the underrepresented sex, we managed to increase women's representation in our national delegations to 42%. In our executive body women now make up more than 50% of the members.

In 2017, I was elected as the first woman President of the Congress. This is a fact I am proud of, but I also realise that it has taken too long, given that our assembly has existed for longer than a quarter of a century.

Another area of long-term work is the inclusion of Roma and Traveller people. In 2013 we have set up a "European Alliance of Cities and Regions for Roma Inclusion" to unify our efforts for Roma Inclusion. Today the Alliance has 130 participating cities and regions from 29 different countries.

I would like to bring to your attention our newly adopted Handbook on Human Rights which is a selection of examples for achieving better integration of specific groups of people who need particular attention.

I conclude by reiterating what I said at the beginning: We need more solidarity and cohesion in our societies to face the current challenges.

➔ **Third intervention: reaction to the result of the poll on women in decision making (2 mn)**

Thank you Ms Sanchez,

Let's just have a close look at the results. The majority of participants thinks that (*--- depending on the result of the poll ---*)

- women should be more represented in decision making /or
- women are underrepresented in decision making /or
- there should be quotas on women in decision making positions / or
- we need to find measures to enhance the number of women in decision making

You will not be surprised to hear that I, as a woman and a decision maker, strongly share this opinion. Yet, unfortunately we are still far away from an equal share of decision making positions between men and women.

Let me take the example of my own country, Austria. In Austria, we have 2098 municipalities and that means that we have 2098 mayors. Let us have a look at how many female mayors we have: Out of 2098 mayors only 146 are women.

Now let me tell you a story about this: In Austria we have certain first names, which are quite popular such as "Josef". And out of the 2098 mayors, we have 148 mayors who are called "Josef".

That means that in Austria we have more mayors called "Josef" than women leading our municipalities!⁵ Well, for me, that shows that we have a lot of work ahead of us. But let's not lose hope. The poll result shows that there are strong tendencies to change this.

Of course it is not the fault of the Josef. I am sure that many of them strongly support us in our fight to raise the number of women in decision making positions. That support is important. But the crucial point is that we need to think how we can achieve that. Local level politics is a significant starting point for women who wish to take responsibility in public life and decision making. We should do all in our power to provide women with the ways and means to get in there. I hope we will have an opportunity to talk more about this today.

Thank you.

⁵ Source: derStandard.at (2016): <https://derstandard.at/2000040591721/Neue-Serie-Wir-sind-Dorfkaiser>

CALRE Second Standing Committee - 28 June 2018, Brussels, Belgium

Dear Madam President, dear members of the Standing Committee, dear colleagues, Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure indeed to have the opportunity to speak to you today. I would like to thank this Committee and in particular President Ana LUIS for the invitation to address you on behalf of the Council of Europe Congress of Local and Regional Authorities.

Our two assemblies share a long-standing relationship of partnership and co-operation, which led to the signing of our co-operation agreement in September 2010. Since then, our partnership has gained a new momentum, with your Presidents addressing plenary sessions of the Congress, and Congress representatives contributing to the work of your General Assembly, your working groups and other activities organised by CALRE.

For example, only over the past year,

- I had the pleasure of taking part in the Seminar on the 20th Anniversary of your Assembly in Oviedo last July, and to contribute to the debate on the future of Europe and the role of regions – a very important theme in the current political context;

- in November, Secretary General of the Congress Andreas KIEFER participated in your General Assembly in Seville;

Just last March, we welcomed your President Ana LUIS during the Congress plenary session; I should say that we very much appreciated her contribution to the debate on regional identity and integrity of the State in the Congress Chamber of Regions.

On this occasion, the President and I met to discuss how to take our co-operation forward to a new dimension and build synergies between our two assemblies, that enjoy a natural connection indeed: many of the Congress regional members are also members of a regional parliament – for example, from Spain, Germany, Italy and Austria and from our non-EU partners in Switzerland.

I was myself President and Vice-President of the Landtag of Salzburg, and understand first-hand the challenges and importance of the work of regional legislatures.

Members of regional parliaments represent a natural bridge between our two institutions, and the Congress can only benefit from their active participation in its work.

From a practical point of view, this bridge can be strengthened if CALRE more actively proposed its members from regional parliaments for participation in the Congress Chamber of Regions, including as Chamber Vice-Presidents – in this regard, I should mention that the Congress will be holding elections of its leadership at its next session in November. The political groups in the Congress are currently negotiating scenarios for the future and I would like to see more members from regional parliaments as Vice-President of the Chamber of Regions or in the Committees. It has been too long that for example the Spanish delegation has not participated in the Bureau.

The Congress can also benefit from the contribution of CALRE and its member parliaments to its monitoring of the situation of regional democracy in European countries that are also CALRE members – for example, next year we envisage monitoring missions to Austria, Belgium, Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom and Portugal. We would appreciate the input of your regional parliaments to our reports and recommendations in order to add their specific views on the functioning of democracy and the respect of the European Charter of local Self-Government. Many of the regional parliaments are the legislators for laws and policies for the municipalities.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The challenges faced by our regions today are the same whether they belong to CALRE or the Congress, and it is not surprising that our assemblies share many areas of common interest. A comparison between the current priorities and work plans of CALRE and the Congress shows that we can indeed coordinate and join efforts, and better target our co-operation, in a wide range of thematic activities of your ten working groups and the Congress' three committees.

One such area is addressing the challenges of migration and integration of migrants and refugees. The Congress has been active in this field for more than two decades, beginning with the proposal of the Council of Europe convention on the participation of foreigners in public life at local level in 1992, and, more, recently, adopting recommendations on better access of migrants to regional labour markets and on the reception and integration of migrants by local and regional authorities. I should add that this year, the Congress adopted a manual of good local and regional practices in protecting the human rights of migrants, and will adopt in November a recommendation for border regions facing migration phenomena.

Citizen participation in regional decision making, and addressing the “disconnect” and distrust of citizens in the mainstream politics is another area of our common concern. The current rise of populism is largely fuelled by this feeling of exclusion from democratic processes and institutions among our citizens. The Congress has accumulated a wealth of experience on this subject over the years – which also addresses the participation of women, young people, migrants and minorities.

Closely linked to citizen participation is the question of fostering intercultural dialogue in our communities and promoting understanding of the advantages of cultural diversity among our citizens. This topic remains high on the Congress agenda for many years, and we have many recommendations and practical tools to show for it, elaborated and published over decades. I should add that since 2007, the Congress has also been organising the European Local Democracy Week – an annual event that brings together citizens and local and regional authorities to boost joint decision making, and I can only invite your regions to join it.

Promoting cultural diversity and inclusive citizen participation are the subjects that can hardly be separated from the use of regional or minority languages in our communities – an area of the most recent Congress focus. Last October, we adopted a report on the implementation of the European Charter of Regional or Minority Languages in our regions; only last month, in May, the Congress' Governance Committee held a conference on regional and minority languages, in the preparation of its report on the use of these languages by local and regional authorities.

Your Assembly is also very active in this area, which presents itself very well for our closer co-operation. In this regard, I look forward to the presentation later today of your initiative on the occasion of the European Day of Languages.

I can also mention of course the issue of gender equality as another area of our common interest, and I have already referred to the subject of women participation at regional level. This only illustrates what I said earlier – that there is a great potential for synergies between us, and that both our institutions can benefit greatly from contributing to each other's working structures, taking into account each other's recommendations, “comparing notes” between our rapporteurs and coordinating our positions.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Before concluding, I would like to stress the importance of adapting our institutions in order to meet the current challenges facing us, in the context of the on-going debate on the future of Europe, European institutions, and the role of regions in this future landscape, given the complex relationship between the State and the region.

In this regard, I would like to inform you that the Congress has launched a reflection on reforming its structures and working methods, which we hope to carry to fruition before the end of this year.

But even as we reform our institutions to meet the current and future challenges, we cannot be fully successful if we do it alone. As much as co-operation between the Congress and CALRE is important, so

are the partnerships with other institutions and associations working to advance local and regional democracy on our continent.

We need a truly functional co-operation network in Europe. This is why the Congress signed at its last session in March a revised co-operation agreement with the European Committee of the Regions; we are pleased that CALRE had done the same, and I very much look forward to the address by the Committee of the Regions at this meeting.

I am convinced that the time is right to bring all institutional partners at one table to set common priorities and reinforce each other's action. I hope that next year, the year of the 25th Anniversary of both the Congress and the Committee of the Regions, will be a good occasion to do so.

Meanwhile, I would like to see my participation in this Standing Committee as a step in this direction, and to thank you once again for this opportunity.

**High-level political Forum on sustainable development - Local and Regional Governments' -
16 July 2018 , New York, United States of America**

Panel 3: The importance of integrated territorial planning to achieving SDGs

Mr President, Excellences, Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour to address you on behalf of the Council of Europe and its Congress of Local and Regional Authorities. The Congress is an assembly of grassroots elected politicians representing 200 000 territorial communities in 47 European countries, whose primary mission is implementing the European Charter of Local Self-Government across the continent, in defence of the rights of local and regional authorities through permanent dialogue with national governments.

I would like to thank the participants for presenting interesting examples of integrated territorial planning, and to underline several key principles that we believe must be the basis of our action in achieving Sustainable Development Goals through integrated community development in a broader sense:

First, the discussions have reaffirmed that achieving SDGs is a shared responsibility of all levels of government – national, regional and local. The final objective of SDGs is improving the well-being of our citizens and of the communities where they live. It is impossible to implement a policy nationally if its implementation fails locally. National governments must therefore establish a constant dialogue with regional and local authorities on implementing SDGs, through proper consultation mechanisms.

In this respect, I would like to highlight the “Police Lab” initiative that the Council of Europe has launched in the frame of its Intercultural Cities network, to set-up a platform for dialogue, co-operation and co-creation of inclusive integration policies targeting all levels of governance.

Secondly, local and regional authorities must have proper autonomy of action and decision making to achieve SDGs – which includes proper competences, financial and budget autonomy, and freedom to make decisions on the use of local resources and planning local development. In Europe, this autonomy is ensured through the Charter of Local Self-Government, whose principles have inspired similar instruments elsewhere, including the International Guidelines on Decentralization and Access to Basic Services for all, adopted by UN-Habitat.

Thirdly, citizens must always remain at the heart of our action for achieving SDGs. Local and regional authorities bear the primary responsibility for addressing citizens' needs, as the authorities closest to them. We must therefore engage our citizens in local decision making on the issues of community development. Citizens must be co-owners of the decisions on integrated territorial planning and the use of resources of their communities. Citizen participation mechanisms must be created, involving all groups of local residents, which is the only way to achieving SDG 11. That's why the Local Self-Government Charter was complemented nine years ago with a Protocol on citizen participation.

Also ten years ago, the Congress adopted a **European Urban Charter: Manifesto for a new urbanity**. The Charter has laid down four 'ambitions' to foster a new model of urban governance, as the basis for integrated community development and territorial planning:

- *building a “town for the people” centred on serving citizens' needs and involving citizens in finding solutions to address those needs;*
- *building a sustainable and environmentally friendly town;*
- *building a town which is a symbol of modernity, knowledge and creativity;*
- *building a town of social cohesion, which actively combats division, exclusion and discrimination.*

I am convinced these key points should be the core of our message to national governments.

And the final point in conclusion: our discussions have reaffirmed once again that SDGs are closely interlinked, and their implementation calls for an integrated approach. Achieving SDG 11 requires good

local governance and democratic institutions supporting it – which is SDG 16. It also requires full and equal participation of women in the process, in the spirit of SDG 5. This is also the approach of the Council of Europe, which identified these SDGs as priority for its contribution.

Thank you.

**Round table on Current Issues on Local Self-Government Lecture at the Academy of Public Administration -
11 September 2018, Minsk, Belarus**

Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to thank the organisers for this opportunity to discuss with you the role and place of local communities in a new system of multi-level governance which we are seeking to build in Europe. Indeed, the consequences of the economic crisis and the shortcomings of the existing democratic system on our continent compel us to look for a new model of governance which would better respond to citizens' needs and expectations.

One of the key features of this new, multi-level model is the clear delimitation of competences between different levels of government, based on the principle of subsidiarity. This principle establishes that the responsibility for public services should be transferred to the level where these services can be delivered most efficiently, and entails a transfer of competences from the national level to regional and local authorities, thus allowing for the decentralisation of power towards the level closest to the citizen. In the context of the European Union, the principle of subsidiarity is applied in the delimitation of competences and deciding whether action should be taken at European, national or subnational level, from the viewpoint of its effectiveness and efficiency.

The principle of subsidiarity was established for the first time in history by the European Charter of Local Self-Government, a cornerstone treaty for local democracy adopted by the Council of Europe in 1985. The Charter lays down the legal basis for decentralisation and the development of local self-government on our continent, and as such represents the foundation for the system of multi-level governance as well.

The core mission of the Council of Europe Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, which I represent in my capacity as President, is to monitor the implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in the 47 European countries that have ratified it to date. I should state briefly that the Congress is a political assembly of local and regional elected politicians from 47 member states of the Council of Europe, representing more than 200,000 grassroots communities of our continent.

In my intervention today, I would like to present monitoring activities of the Congress as well as our key findings with regard to the situation of local and regional democracy in Europe.

I would like to begin by presenting in greater detail the Charter itself and the monitoring mechanisms of the Congress, then speak about the main conclusions we can draw from our monitoring activities, and finish by our current efforts to ensure better reception of the Charter in domestic legal systems and to create a single, unified space of common standards in the field of local democracy in Europe.

[European Charter of Local Self-Government]

Ladies and gentlemen,

The European Charter of Local Self-Government is a key Council of Europe convention that can be compared to a Magna Carta for local communities. It was opened for signature on 15 October 1985, and entered into force on 1 September 1988. It has been ratified by the 47 member states of the Council of Europe. Last week we celebrated the 30th anniversary of its entry into force.

The basic purpose of the Charter is to define the common European standards of local democracy, and to entrench and protect the most important rights of local authorities. Essentially, the Charter affirms the role of communities as the first level for practising democracy. It has established, for the first time in history, that citizens have a right to manage themselves a substantial part of their public affairs. The Charter requires that this right of citizens to local self-government be embedded in domestic law or in the Constitution in order to guarantee its effective implementation. Furthermore, the Charter lays down the principle of subsidiarity, which I have already mentioned, ensuring a transfer of competences to local authorities.

Secondly, the Charter sets out the principles of the democratic functioning of communities. It stipulates that local governing bodies must be democratically elected, must have their own administrations and financial autonomy, and must be able to exercise their duties without interference from any other authority, national or regional.

The Charter guarantees the conditions of office of local elected representatives, their ability to exercise their functions freely, and their right to form associations. It establishes a number of safeguards to protect the rights of local communities, such as:

- local boundaries cannot be changed without community agreement;
- the supervision of local authorities' activities must be defined by law and address only the legality of local action, not the expediency of local decisions;
- local authorities must be consulted on all matters affecting them;
- and they must have the possibility of judicial recourse to defend their interests and protect their rights.

The Charter stipulates in particular that local authorities must have their own financial resources, sufficient to fulfill their duties. Local financing must be a matter of national policy, and the government must guarantee this principle of financial autonomy, either through transfers from national funds or by allowing local authorities to raise taxes. Local authorities must be allowed to borrow from domestic markets, and the government must also help weaker communities through equalisation schemes. Finally, this principle means that the transfer of competences from a higher level must be accompanied by the transfer of matching financial means, necessary to carry out the tasks. This is a guarantee against the so-called unfunded mandates – an issue which is especially problematic in the context of the consequences of the economic crisis.

On 16 November 2009, an Additional Protocol on the right to participate in local authorities' affairs was adopted to supplement the text of the Charter. The citizens' right to participate in the conduct of public affairs is a democratic principle enshrined in the Preamble to the Charter. The Additional Protocol details this right as the right to seek to determine or to influence the exercise of a local authority's powers and responsibilities. Its purpose is to bring within the scope of the Charter the right of any person to participate in the affairs of a local authority.

The adoption of the Additional Protocol is the first step in our current efforts to broaden the application of the Charter by improving direct democracy at local and regional level. This first step was complemented in October 2011 by the Congress' recommendation on increasing citizen participation at local and regional level in Europe.

Another direction for broadening the Charter's application is to lay stress on human rights. The work of local governments in a decentralised system has a wide range of human rights implications through public service provision, allocation of public resources, etc., and the Congress is now emphasising the crucial role of local and regional authorities in ensuring conditions for the full exercise of human rights in their communities.

These examples show that the range of common European principles of local self-government is not closed, nor is it a final set of rules but actually a living material which is continuously developing. So the mission of the Congress is not only to monitor the compliance of what was requested years ago, but rather, to improve the application of these principles and standards.

I would add that improving and strengthening the Charter's application is of particular importance in the current time of the economic crisis, when we are witnessing, on the one hand, tendencies for recentralisation of competences by national governments and, on the other hand, for desolidarisation among different tiers of government and among local and regional communities themselves. Both undermine the balanced distribution of power and the good functioning of local democracy, whereas the implementation of the Charter restores the positive trends for decentralisation.

[Mechanism of the Charter's implementation]

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me now turn to the mechanism of the Charter's implementation.

This implementation is ensured, first and foremost, by the fact that all those countries which have ratified the Charter are bound by its provisions. The Charter requires compliance with a minimum number of principles that form a European foundation of local democracy. States undertake to respect this core of basic principles to which no reservation is possible, such as:

- the right of citizens to participate in managing public affairs;
- the key rights of communities to enjoy autonomy and self-government, elect their local bodies and to have their own competences, administrative structures and financial resources;
- or the right to judicial recourse in case of interference from other levels.

Through these core principles, the Charter seeks to ensure the compatibility of the diverse structures of local communities in the Council of Europe member states.

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities makes sure that these principles are observed. We do so through our monitoring activities, which the Congress has been carrying out since 1995. Since that time, we have produced more than 100 reports with recommendations to national governments. In June 2010, we revised our rules of procedure for monitoring, to make this exercise more regular, more objective and transparent, and more geared towards an effective follow-up and assistance to the authorities of the country. As a result, the Congress has established the pace of monitoring each country at least once every five years, with an average of 10 to 12 country missions per year since 2010.

The Congress has developed several monitoring tools. One of them is the so-called regular country-by-country monitoring, which involves regular visits to the country by Rapporteurs of the Monitoring Committee of the Congress.

Another instrument of monitoring is the observation of local and regional elections. The Congress has been observing local and regional elections in member states, and recommends action to improve electoral frameworks and processes. Our election observation covers the whole legal framework for elections and the entire electoral process, to provide a comprehensive picture of the situation. Since 1990, the Congress has carried out some 100 missions, to observe local and regional elections in member states.

Yet another available procedure is the fact-finding mission in response to alleged violations of the Charter. In addition, other instruments and tools of the Congress are the direct dialogue with national governments on specific issues and post-monitoring assistance to address issues of concern, of which I will speak later.

[Monitoring visits and country reports]

I would like to say a few words specifically about our country reports and monitoring visits.

Monitoring visits have a more or less standard procedure. The Congress sets a schedule (timetable) to prepare a specific country report and sends a delegation to the chosen member state, for one or two visits. During these visits, the delegation usually meets:

- government ministers
- members of national and regional parliaments
- local and regional elected representatives (councilors, governors, mayors)
- representatives of the associations of local and regional authorities
- justices of constitutional and supreme courts
- national, regional and local ombudsmen
- representatives of civil society or stakeholders' organisations

After the visits, a draft country report is prepared, which is circulated among the interested partners, who have the possibility to present their own views and comments. The reports are then discussed and approved in the Monitoring Committee. Finally, the Congress debates these reports in plenary sessions,

and adopts recommendations highlighting the shortcomings and proposing measures to improve the legal framework as well as the administrative practice in order to comply completely with the Charter. These recommendations are transmitted to national governments through the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. The governments are then invited to report to the Congress on the implementation of the recommendation. This usually takes the form of an exchange of views between government officials and Congress members during subsequent plenary sessions.

[Conclusions from monitoring]

The experience gained during monitoring allows us, on the one hand, to take into account the diversity of methods and practices in implementing the Charter. On the other hand, this experience enables us to recommend optimal solutions and good practices suitable to the specific national settings. In addition, the interpretation by constitutional courts of the Charter provisions and legislation in the light of the Charter create the case-law which is crucial for the rule of law at the grassroots.

For some quite recent examples, as a result of monitoring, the Estonian government has renewed its dialogue with local authorities, and Slovenia, Malta, Switzerland have ratified the Additional Protocol to the Self-Government Charter on citizen participation. Finally, changes were made in Russia to return to direct elections of governors in most regions, which was one of our main recommendations in our recent monitoring of that country.

If we are to draw lessons from this experience, I would emphasise the following recurrent points that are raised in Congress recommendations:

- the proportionality between local competences and available resources;
- a lack of consultations with local authorities, provided for under two articles of the Charter: Article 4.6, specifying that local authorities must be consulted, insofar as possible, on all matters of direct concern to them in due time and in an appropriate way; and Article 9.6 providing for consultations on the allocation of financial resources (in this regard, the Congress has just debated a report on the subject of consultations during its October session);
- a third recurrent issue concerns matters of administrative supervision of local authorities by higher levels;
- finally, a lack of the effective right to legal recourse, which in practice is often hindered by the existing filters (such as the requirement to lodge a legal complaint through a government agency) and which has been aggravated especially in this time of crisis.

As to the general experience of monitoring visits, among the most common problems revealed by them, I could mention

- a lack of clear delimitation of competences, including shared competences;
- insufficient local financing: for example, one of the recent trends has been the disproportional allocation of financial burdens among the central and local governments;
- ineffective coordination mechanisms in central/local government relations;
- a lack of frameworks for or instruments of citizen participation in local public affairs.

And finally, if we look at the most typical Congress' recommendations, they often contain proposals

- to establish appropriate structures and procedures in providing public services;
- to improve the cooperation and coordination mechanisms between the central and local levels;
- to provide for local government associations to have a voice in the preparation of local government budgets;
- to provide guarantees for equal access to public services without discrimination against national minorities, as well as a system for the quality control of public services; and
- to set up independent complaints' mechanisms available for local citizens.

[Follow-up and post-monitoring]

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are fully aware that for this monitoring to be effective, we need to make sure that our recommendations are implemented. In order to improve the follow-up to its recommendations, the Congress is currently developing post-monitoring co-operation programmes with both national and territorial authorities, aimed at overcoming the existing problems and putting our proposals into practice.

Through our monitoring and election observation, we have entered into substantial and targeted dialogue with authorities in the countries concerned, and are participating in Council of Europe Action Plans for Albania, Armenia and for Ukraine, ensuring the implementation of its local and regional dimension.

We have also begun preparing post-monitoring specific to our recommendations, with first seminars on the subject taking place in June and September this year. While we are fully aware that post-monitoring could be a long-term process, especially in complex national situations, what is important is to make sure that this is a continuing process, leading to concrete results.

A “road map” to implement our recommendations would serve as a kind of insurance or guarantee, a contract to apply our proposals in the long term. Thus, we see post-monitoring as a partnership in which we do not simply make recommendations but also provide a continuing support and expertise through the political dialogue initiated during monitoring visits. We are convinced that the most substantial follow-up could be achieved only through regular contacts and discussions with the country’s authorities following these visits.

[Reception of the Charter in national legal systems]

Complementary to post-monitoring, the Congress is also working to make sure that the Charter provisions are properly incorporated into domestic law and legal systems of member states – what we call the “reception of the Charter into domestic legislation”. We are convinced that this process is of fundamental importance for the good functioning of local democracy in European countries.

The reception of international treaties into domestic law is a very complex subject, in part due to the wide variety of legal systems in Europe. It should be admitted that additional complications come from the fact that some of the Charter’s provisions are still rather vague, and it is sometimes very difficult to directly apply certain provisions. The question also arises whether the Charter can be used and quoted directly by national courts to base their judgments. Again, this will depend on the variety of traditions in our member States. It is not our goal to change these traditions, but we insist that appropriate measures are taken in each country to make sure that the Charter should take a proper place in relation to the legal mechanism for reception of international law in member States.

The most direct way to make the Charter’s provisions more effective is through the recourse to national courts. Whatever the receiving system of international law in a country, once the Charter is ratified, the country is committed to abide by its letter. Therefore, the violation of one of its articles can be alleged in court either on the basis of the Charter itself, or based on the law derived from it. Therefore, it is always possible to appeal to a domestic court in case of an alleged violation of a principle laid down by the Charter. But the prerequisite is that, on the one hand, local authorities are properly informed about the Charter and its guarantees and, on the other hand, their right to legal recourse – guaranteed by the Charter – is effective in practice.

[Lifting of reservations and prospects for the future]

Ladies and gentlemen,

Finally, I would like to touch upon future prospects in relation to the Charter’s implementation.

As I have said at the outset, our objective is to create a single, unified space of common standards in the field of local democracy in Europe. The European Charter of Local Self-Government establishes the minimum core of basic principles contained in the 20 compulsory paragraphs of the Charter that are

binding on all member states. However, beyond this minimum core, states are allowed to make reservations to the other paragraphs of the Charter when ratifying it. Today, these reservations represent an obstacle to the harmonious application of the Charter's principles. This prevents us from being able to create a common legal space, in which common legal standards of the Charter could be applied across the continent. For this reason, one of the Congress' priorities today is to have these reservations lifted, and to make sure that we have, so to speak, a 100 per cent Charter.

We began by analysing the grounds for such reservations in the first place, and are pursuing efforts to change the circumstances that were used as justification for reservations, and to convince member states to lift them. Monitoring missions are very useful here, in order both to understand the current situation and to advise the countries in question to rethink reservations they have entered.

We are pleased that these efforts are beginning to bear fruit. The analysis of the current situation shows that the number of reservations has decreased from 121 to 93 today, with Croatia and Slovakia withdrawing 10 reservations each, Cyprus - 1 reservation, Latvia – 3, and Malta - 4 reservations.

The countries that have entered the largest numbers of reservations are Turkey (10 reservations), Monaco (10 reservations), Liechtenstein (8), and Austria, Georgia, the Czech Republic, Montenegro, Serbia and Switzerland (6 each). These countries alone account for almost two - thirds of all the reservations entered (64 out of 93).

The Congress will continue to pursue its efforts in this regard.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This concludes my comprehensive presentation of the Congress work on consolidating and strengthening the legal basis for local democracy in Europe, and I thank you very much for your attention.

Round table on Current Issues on Local Self-Government - 12 September 2018, Minsk, Belarus

Dear Mr Popkov, dear participants, Ladies and gentlemen,

I am particularly delighted to have this round table organized under my presidency/chairmanship of the Congress since my predecessor, Jean-Claude FRECON, who sadly passed away almost two years ago, and who came here in Minsk in 2013, would have been very pleased to participate in this event today.

This round table is a very good opportunity to establish the groundwork for a better decentralization in Belarus and to strengthen our cooperation in the field of local democracy.

We do not have a ready-made recipe but we come with some relevant and substantial principles.

Belarus has already anchored local self-government in its constitution which demonstrates a political will to establish local self-government in the country. We stand ready to support your country in its further steps towards more decentralization. Since yesterday, when we held an exchange of views at the Academy of Public Administration and today in this round table, this is the spirit in which we have worked yesterday and today. And once I am no longer president of the Congress, I hope that my successor will pursue this work in the same spirit of cooperation.

Decentralization is not an ideological position. At the Congress we are convinced that local self-government is a modern and efficient solution for the management of our territories. The complexity of public management requires a clear distribution of competences in order to allow every level of governance to be efficient; it is our practical conception of multilevel decentralization inspired by our experience and that of our 47 member States which have all ratified the European Charter on Local Self-government.

The provisions of the Charter have the merit of being adaptable to very different situations. This treaty should be seen as a means of encouraging States to develop their legislation in order to guarantee the right to participate in the management of public affairs.

The Charter's text represents a compromise made between member States made at a fixed point in European history. However, our societies and the way they are governed change every day. Participatory democracy, e-government, fast communication, quick flows of information and new global issues have an influence on the daily life of our communities. It goes without saying that this has an impact on the relations between the State and local institutions. Some new concepts might need to be taken into account and some of the Charter's concepts may need to be developed further. The synergies between the member States contribute to making these developments possible, based on their own interpretation of the Charter and on their own experiences and good practice.

The Charter plays the role of a kind of "local authority constitution". However, our national constitutions match with our national system, and as regards the Charter, while local self-government is part and parcel of the democratic fabric of Europe, it has to be adapted to the varying national conditions and traditions. It does not try to impose a particular model of local government.

Local self-government is a sophisticated process and it requires a certain degree of political maturity. It demands of the central government something that is, one could say, almost unnatural: willingness, over a wide range of matters, to step back, and to let others take responsibility. Some governments in Europe still find that hard to accept. However, at the same time, local government continues to be at the interface with most of their citizens' basic needs. Given what is at stake for the citizens, governments too have a major responsibility for providing an effective framework and adequate means for local authorities to play this crucial role.

Perhaps we can say today that since the 47 member States of the Council of Europe signed and ratified the Charter, we have reached this degree of political maturity, even if - let us be honest- a lot remains to be done to improve local self-government in all our countries. The signature of a treaty is one thing, its implementation is another, we are all aware of this.

Since 2010, the Congress has undertaken to assess, on a regular basis, the situation of recommendations addressed through the Committee of Ministers to the States adhering to the Charter. This enables the Congress to identify, in the form of a horizontal study, those areas of the Charter that member States find most challenging and to assist them in fully complying with their commitments in relation to local and regional democracy. The latest reference period for identifying these recurring issues spans from 2014 to 2016 and includes monitoring reports adopted during that time.

As a result of this evaluation, the Congress has identified four recurrent issues, namely:

- the inadequacy of financial resources for local and regional authorities;
- the restricted definition, allocation and exercise of local competences;
- the lack of consultation on the part of central government;
- and the absence of direct applicability of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in domestic legal systems.

These recurrent issues can be seen as symptomatic of a broader trend towards (re)centralisation in member States. This tendency may take many forms, ranging from legislative nationalism - and the refusal of some courts to apply directly a number of Council of Europe Conventions, among them the European Charter of Local Self-Government - to the absence of flexibility granted to local governments in budgetary matters.

Through the monitoring of the Charter, the Congress' recommendations may usefully serve as an advance alert system to the Committee of Ministers with regard to developments in some member States which may include risks both to territorial self-government and international cooperation.

This study on recurring issues also shows that even if we reached this political maturity I was referring to a minute ago, we still need to improve our democracies and for that purpose we need to maintain synergies and to learn from each other, from our good practice but also from our failures. And in that respect it is essential to share our respective experiences.

This is why we are here today and I very much look forward to the work we will accomplish.

Thank you for your attention.

Second Eurasian Forum - Opening of the event - 20 September 2019, St.Petersburg, Russian Federation

Madam Chair, Excellences, Ladies and gentlemen,

I am very pleased to address you today as the first woman President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities – an assembly of local and regional elected representatives from the 47 member States of the Council of Europe, including – since 1996 – the Russian Federation.

Over the past decades, we have seen a spectacular rise of women playing a more active role in all spheres of society, a rise in women's influence and impact on the global agenda. Today, the questions of women's participation and representation, of equality between women and men remain firmly among top political priorities. This Forum is taking place against this background, and all of us present here are a testimony to these far-reaching changes.

On behalf of the Congress, I would like to thank the Organising Committee and personally its Chair, President of the Federation Council Valentina MATVIENKO, for this initiative and the opportunity to share our experience in advancing women in politics.

Ladies and gentlemen,

With their unique perspective and approach to dealing with the challenges facing us, women can make a tremendous contribution to global security and sustainable development, acting at the local, regional, national and global level. However, much work is still to be done to remove barriers to realising the full potential of women and achieving their equal participation.

In the Congress, we are convinced that the local and regional level is key to advancing women and women's agenda. Being the closest to citizens, it is the level where the bias and misperceptions can be changed more easily through personal example and practical experience. It is also at the grassroots where women, as mayors, governors and councillors gain their political experience and develop their political profiles. This is why the local and regional level is often a stepping stone for women's national career. I welcome today so many women participating in this Forum that started their road to success in local and regional communities. Some of them are heading delegations of their countries to the Congress and have been elected Congress Vice-Presidents – such as Governor of Vladimir Region from Russia Svetlana ORLOVA and Councillor of Antalya from Turkey Gaye DOGANOGLU.

For the Council of Europe and its Congress, fair and equal participation of women and men in public life is fundamental to democracy. And while the biased perception of the women's role in society is proving to be a persistent challenge, the steady increase in women's presence in all spheres of life shows that the stereotypes can and must be changed through the fascinating examples of women's accomplishments. It is very important that this positive experience is shared, and that women learn from and support one another, through their cooperation and networking. This Forum is an excellent platform for such dialogue.

However, firmly applied positive measures are equally important for breaking the glass ceiling. I am pleased to say that, due to a 30 per cent minimum requirement enforced since 2008, we in the Congress have substantially increased the number of women in national delegations and in high political posts within the space of less than a decade. Over the past five years alone, the representation of women in national delegations rose from 31% to 42%, and women constitute today 65% of the Congress executive leadership.

We are convinced that if we do not reach a high representation of women at the local level, we will not achieve parity in national parliaments and governments. However, the implementation of quotas to ensure the presence of women in elected councils is not the only option. Some countries achieved a balanced representation in the political parties, which have a large influence in the composition of decision-making bodies and in creating conditions to facilitate women's progress in political work.

And of course, advancing women must not be a matter for women alone. It is a matter for the whole society – not just its better half. It is extremely important to see more men as advocates of women's cause – which is one of the topics of the World Forum for Democracy, organised by the Council of Europe in November this year, under the aptly chosen theme "Gender Equality: Whose Battle?". I invite you to take part in these debates.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to conclude by stressing again that engaging with women at the local level is the surest way to secure their participation at all levels of government. We need proactive local, regional and central governments and determined political parties to work for ensuring women's presence in political life at the grassroots. We also need media to present a non-biased image of women and their role to change the stereotypes. And we need more platforms for dialogue, cooperation and networking among women – but also between women and men.

I thank you for your attention, and look forward to our discussions.

The Second Eurasian Women's Forum - Debate on "Female Governors: Strategy of Regional Performance and Growth" - 21 September 2018, St. Petersburg, Russian Federation

Dear colleagues,

Thank you for giving me the floor in this important debate. I would like to thank in particular the Governor of Khanty–Mansi Autonomous Okrug, Natalia KOMAROVA, for this invitation.

The question of women in political life is central in the democratic cultures we have been building over the past decades. It is also central to expanding women's contribution to building peace and security, and developing a just and barrier-free society based on the respect of human rights – a theme on our agenda today.

When I entered political life some twenty years ago, it was still rare to see a woman in a high-level political office. But times have been changing. As the first woman President of the regional parliament of Salzburg AND of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, I have a first-hand experience of this change – as, I am sure, have all of you.

Today, as women are becoming more present and visible in politics, we need more dialogue and cooperation among us to advance the female agenda and harness the women's potential. The Council of Europe Congress, with its Chamber of Regions and Chamber of Local Authorities, offers a platform for such experience-sharing and mutual support, open to women elected locally or regionally in Europe. Let me stress that the President of the Chamber of Regions is also a woman – Gunn Marit HELGESEN, County Councillor of Telemark in Norway.

I am very pleased that we will be launching today the process of establishing a Eurasian Association of Women – Regional Leaders. We need such associations and networks to support women active in politics, business, science, in social and cultural spheres, and to increase their number. Let me give you one concrete example of women supporting women:

- Simone Susskind, a member of parliament of the Brussels-Capital Region in Belgium. She runs an initiative called „Women leaders of tomorrow“, where elected women prepare female candidates in Morocco and Tunisia for local and regional elections. From the 34 candidates, that took part in her training in Tunisia last year, 12 were elected into political offices in the municipal elections in May 2018.⁶

Supporting such ideas and initiatives will help us bring to all spheres of society a **female perspective**, our unique vision and approach to dealing with problems and challenges.

Both women's *presence* and *perspective in politics* have a tremendous impact on the way policies and strategies are designed and implemented, and I look forward to hearing from your experiences and opinions today.

Thank you.

⁶ <http://simonesussskind.be/2014/on-our-way-to-2018-2021-aim-launches-the-second-phase-of-the-program-women-leaders-of-tomorrow-tunisia/>

XXXII. General Assembly of the Icelandic Association of Local Authorities - Opening of the General Assembly - 26 September 2019, Akureyri

Dear President, dear Minister Jóhannsson, dear members,

I am very pleased to be for the first time at the opening of the General Assembly of your National Association. I would like to express my special thanks to President HALLDÓRSSON for having invited me to join you in the beautiful city of Akureyri. M. HALLDORSON whom we know very well at the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities as the head of the Icelandic delegation and the President of the European Conservatives & Reformists Group in the Congress.

Two years ago in September 2016, my predecessor at the Congress, Jean-Claude Frécon, paid an official visit to Iceland. He met with representatives of your national and local governments but could not attend the General Assembly of your Association. I am glad to take over this dialogue only two years later with you here today.

Your association was created right after World War II and it now comprises all local authorities in the country. It has been actively involved in the Congress since the ratification of the European Charter of Local Self- Government in 1991. You and we, in the Congress, have, already, a long history of cooperation.

Your delegation in the Congress is a very active one. I already mentioned your President but I would like also to praise the active role played by Aldis HAFSTEINSDOTTIR in our election observation missions, by Gunnar Axel AXELSSON as Rapporteur on local democracy in San Marino and by Bjor BLONDAL, as Rapporteur on the local democracy in Lithuania but who, unfortunately, left the Congress delegation recently.

I am glad about this strong cooperation between your Association and the Congress. I am glad in particular because national associations of local authorities are so important to us; they are key partners for our Congress. We maintain an on-going dialogue with them, holding regular exchanges – such as this one.

National associations are important because they contribute greatly in the whole process of devising the policies and priorities of the work of the Congress. They are consulted when the Congress is preparing its future priorities. They participate in the selection process of the members in the national delegations and they provide members support in their work in the Congress. They roll out our activities in the Member States and give them more visibility. They can also act as “whistle-blowers” to report on a situation that could which could be problematic.

[The European Charter of Local self-Government]

National Associations represent at national level the local and regional authorities to which the Congress gives a voice at European level. We offer the national delegations from 47 Member States a platform to express themselves, to exchange and take initiatives. The Congress is unique as it is the only political Assembly which represents local and regional elected politicians from all European countries - except Belarus. We are proud to represent more than 200,000 grassroots communities all over the continent.

The primary mission of the Congress is to monitor the implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in the member States. The Charter is the Council of Europe's main legal instrument for strengthening local democracy across the European space and we welcome the fact that it has today been ratified by all 47 Council of Europe member states.

The Charter enshrines some fundamental principles for the good functioning of local governments, such as the need for properly defined powers and responsibilities, and adequate financial resources as well as the conditions of office of local elected representatives, their ability to exercise their functions freely and their right to form associations.

We believe that local authorities, as the principle suppliers of local public services, should have the fullest possible autonomy in how they carry out their functions. Proper consultation is another key principle of the Charter. Local authorities need to be consulted by national governments on all issues and policies that affect them and for this; there need to be robust and permanent consultation mechanisms in place, so that they can contribute to all such decision-making in good time.

Being a consultation partner for the national authorities is one of the most important functions of a national association. I know that this is well the case in your country.

[Monitoring of the Charter]

To monitor the implementation of the Charter, the Congress pays regular visits to the Member States. Since 2010, our objective is to monitor each country at least once every five years. The reports produced after each visit are adopted during the plenary sessions of the Congress.

Two monitoring visits have already been conducted in your country. The second one took place in June 2016. The report and recommendation prepared after this visit were adopted during the Congress plenary session in March 2017 in your presence, Minister. I am particularly happy to say that the report underlined the generally satisfactory level of local democracy in your country. It praised recent developments fostering local self-government, in particular the involvement of local authorities in national decision-making as well as increased inter-municipal co-operation and citizen participation in local authorities.

Let me stress also that the Congress Rapporteurs stated in their presentation that – I quote - “Iceland could be shared as an example of good practice among the members-states of the Council of Europe”.

Of course, some possible enhancements were identified also, as in every country. The rapporteurs drew among others attention to the need for clarification of the division of responsibilities between central government and local authorities. But believe me, in the current situation, where the idea of decentralisation and local autonomy are called into question by the central governments of several European countries, where elected mayors are arrested and replaced by civil servants, where powers are transferred to the central government on the pretext of saving money – the situation of local democracy in Iceland is a real success story!!.

In this debate during the Congress Session, Minister, you said you would apply yourself to have Iceland ratify as soon as possible the **Additional Protocol on the right to participate in local authorities' affairs** adopted by the Congress in 2009. This protocol is intended to bring within the scope of the Charter the right of any person to participate in the affairs of a local authority. I am very pleased to underline today that you have kept your word since your country ratified this Protocol in May 2017.

We believe that involving citizens in decision making processes is essential. It is the key for building trust and confidence between the citizens and their elected representatives and, in doing so, for safeguarding our democratic institutions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Local democracy has not yet reached the same level in all our Member States. If we want to achieve concrete improvements in this regard, we need to ensure the follow up of the Congress recommendations and make sure that they are implemented by the Member States. To that end, we have developed post-monitoring programmes with both national and territorial authorities, aimed at overcoming the existing problems and putting Congress proposals into practice.

But we do not simply make recommendations; we also provide a continuing support and expertise through a direct and regular political dialogue. We are convinced that the most substantial follow-up could be achieved only through regular contacts and discussions with the country's authorities.

Our comprehensive approach includes missions to observe local and regional elections and cooperation programmes designed within Council of Europe Action Plans. The observation of local elections aims at ensuring the integrity of electoral processes. The cooperation programmes include the sharing of experiences between local elected representatives of a given country and their counterparts in other

countries. Mr Blondal, whom I mentioned earlier, for instance, participated in our cooperation activities in Armenia and his involvement may lead to cooperation between your Association and the Communities Association of Armenia. This is a very good example of concrete work which is being done in the field.

Our work also includes the designing of tools and initiatives to support local and regional authorities in providing quality services to their citizens. Let me give you two concrete examples:

- *In 2015, following major terrorist attacks in several European cities, we started to work **on combatting violent extremism and radicalisation at grassroots level**. We launched a Strategy containing guidelines for public action as well as the foundations to establish an **“Alliance of European cities against violent extremism”**. This Alliance serves now as a platform to exchange on initiatives in combating the causes of radicalisation, taken by various European cities. Three Summits of Mayors have been organised so far to discuss and exchange experiences in this framework and the fourth one will be organised next year.*

*We also devised a **toolkit** in 36 languages to inform local and regional authorities more effectively about combating radicalisation, about intercultural and interreligious dialogue, about democratic citizenship and inclusive societies, in order to help them organise intercultural and interreligious activities.*

- *In 2015 also, we decided to further promote **Human Rights at local and regional level** and we launched a Human Rights Action Plan. This Plan comprises among others a **Handbook on Human Rights**, which is a series of manuals setting out examples of good practices already conducted in many European cities in promoting human rights at local and regional level. The series will cover different groups or topics such as refugees, asylum seekers and migrants; Internally Displaced Persons, Roma and Travellers; LGBTI people etc.... The first Handbook will be adopted during the Congress plenary Session in November 2018.*

Dear colleagues,

I mentioned earlier some of the worrying trends which can be observed in Member States and are impending over the development of local democracy in Europe. By the many challenges we are currently facing - I should mention also the consequences of the economic and financial crisis,- the issues of migrants, the rise of violent extremism and radicalisation, the rise of populism etc...- it is, in my view, all our societies and the democratic culture of our societies which are being put at risk.

We know that many of these issues require quick responses at national level but also long term strategies and measures to be mostly implemented at local and regional level. The role of local and regional authorities has grown over the years and they have now become important players in the elaboration and implementation of national and European policies. They are also unavoidable when it comes to maintaining cohesion, security, social stability and equality in societies.

The Congress is convinced that local and regional authorities, that you have an eminently strategic role to play in helping our States and our societies facing the current challenges. Strong local and regional authorities with clear powers and appropriate resources can make a significant contribution to help ease tensions and contribute to stability and more democracy.

Your country is a good example in this respect. We all know how hard it was hit by the 2008 economic and financial crisis. The crisis had severe consequences not only for Icelandic population, but also for Icelandic municipalities. And yet, your national and local authorities were able to deal with this major crisis and its economic and social consequences without undermining local self-government. I would like to congratulate you all on this success, which would probably not have been possible without a high quality of dialogue and cooperation as well as important and joint efforts by all levels of governance.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In the Congress, we know that it is here, in the national associations, that we have the best chance to develop our work to improve our towns and cities and the lives of our citizens.

I hope that my presentation today, to your Assembly, has allowed you to better know and better understand the Congress, its work and especially its commitment alongside local and regional elected representatives.

I am confident that we will pursue our dialogue and cooperation in the future. You can count on the support of the Congress in this regard.

I thank you for your attention. I wish you a fruitful meeting.

International Forum of Women's Leaders, Belarusian State University - Minsk, Belarus, 25-26 October 2018

Madam Chair, Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,

I am very pleased to address you today as the President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities – an assembly of local and regional elected representatives from the 47 member States of the Council of Europe.

Just a month ago, I was invited to speak at the 2nd Eurasian Women's Forum in St. Petersburg. I would like to give you the same message that I presented there. In fact, this is a message that accompanies me ever since I was elected the first woman president of the regional parliament of Salzburg and even more since I was elected the first woman president of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities.

Over the past decades, we have seen a spectacular rise in women playing a more active role in all spheres of society, with influence and impact on the global agenda. This is a great achievement. Nevertheless, the question of women's active participation at all levels of leadership and equal representation remain firmly on the agenda and is a top political priority.

This Forum is taking place against this background, and all of us present here are a testimony to these far-reaching changes. On behalf of the Congress, I would like to thank the organisers and Vice-Rector of Belarusian State University, for giving us this opportunity to share our experience in advancing women in politics.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are here to talk about leadership. With their unique perspective and approach to dealing with the challenges facing us, women can make a tremendous contribution to global security and sustainable development, acting at the local, regional, national and global level.

However, much work is still to be done to remove the barriers we face to reach our full potential and achieve equal participation.

In the Congress, we are convinced that the **local and regional level is key to advancing women and women's agenda**. Being the closest to citizens, it is the level where the bias and misperceptions can be changed more easily through personal example and practical experience. It is also at the grassroots where women, as mayors, governors and councillors gain their political experience and develop their political profiles. This is why the local and regional level is often a stepping stone for women's national career.

Although the visibility of women in politics is constantly evolving and even female Heads of States, although small in number, are far from being exceptional today, we need to understand that a fair distribution of political responsibility must occur on all political levels: The international level, the national level, the regional and the local level.

It is not enough to accept a small outstanding number of women in high political positions as a satisfactory contribution to equality. Rather we must aim for a real equal distribution of responsibility.

When we take a look back, the past decades have achieved a cultural re-thinking of gender roles in all states in Europe. Barely more than 100 years have passed since the first legal right for voting was given to women in a handful of states.

Although a biased perception of the women's role in society is proving to be a persistent challenge until today, the steady increase in women's presence in all spheres of life shows that we were very successful in fighting these stereotypes by showing the fascinating examples of women's accomplishments. It is very important that this positive experience is shared, and that women learn from and support one another, through their cooperation and networking. This Forum is an excellent platform for such dialogue.

Processes need time to evolve and seep into the cultural understanding of a society. However, we do not have to wait and see. We have methods to incite and fasten this process. One way of doing so is by implementing quotas.

They may not be suitable for all occasions but I am pleased to say that, due to a 30 per cent minimum requirement enforced since 2008, we in the Congress have substantially increased the number of women in national delegations and in high political posts within the space of less than a decade. Over the past five years alone, the representation of women in national delegations rose from 31% to 42%, and women constitute today 65% of the Congress executive leadership.

Let me stress that I don't see quotas as the secret formula for parity but they have proven to be effective. At the Congress we asked for 30 per cent presence for the under-represented sex and we got 42 per cent. Once the quotas were in place, we witnessed that moving towards the 50 per cent mark became much easier.

We know that there are other concepts that have proven to be effective likewise. Some countries achieved a balanced representation in the political parties, which have a large influence in the composition of decision-making bodies and in creating conditions to facilitate women's progress in political work. The essential experience is that, with the right method, we are able to accelerate the process towards equality many times over. In the case of the Congress we saw an increase by 12 per cent in only a decade.

To conclude I would like to add one more thought. Of course, advancing women must not be a matter for women alone. It is a matter for the whole society – not just its **better** half.

It is extremely important to see more men as advocates of women's cause. We also need media to present a non-biased image of women and their role to change the stereotypes. And we need more platforms for dialogue, cooperation and networking among women – but also between women and men. Ladies and gentlemen,

Change is slow and progress is not guaranteed but one thing is clear: engaging with women at the local level is the surest way to secure their participation at **all** levels of government. We need proactive local, regional and central governments and determined political parties to work for ensuring women's presence at local and regional government levels.

I thank you for your attention, and look forward to our discussions.

Belarus – Ukraine Forum of Regions - Gomel, Belarus, 26 October 2018

Dear participants of the Forum,

It is a pleasure to address you today on behalf of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, and I would like to express our gratitude to the authorities of Belarus for their invitation and this opportunity to meet friends from Belarus and Ukraine.

I am especially pleased to be here today because this Forum is a platform to promote direct co-operation between regional authorities of Belarus and Ukraine – co-operation across borders, co-operation for better governance of communities, which means for improving the lives and well-being of citizens.

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities is there for exactly the same purpose: we are all about direct co-operation between local and regional elected representatives and their communities across the entire European space, across the borders of the 47 member countries of the Council of Europe. The Congress is an assembly that brings together elected representatives between 150 000/200 000 territorial communities in Europe – local and regional, urban and rural, big cities and small towns and villages. The Congress is a forum where these representatives can have a dialogue between peers and share their experiences and practices of governing their communities.

We are the local and regional assembly of the Council of Europe.

As you know, Ukraine is a member of the Council of Europe, Belarus not yet, but I hope one day Belarus will join our family.

Our key mission is to improve local and regional self-government in Europe. And of course, direct co-operation between communities is a crucial tool including this transborder co-operation, which helps to improve the social and economic well-being of the regions involved, foster their development and reduce the disparities between them.

We strongly believe that! We know that! We know it from our experience with inter-regional and cross-border co-operation in Europe. Within the European Union alone, there are more than 70 Euro-regional territorial groupings of this kind.

This is why I welcome this initiative, this Forum, as an important step towards creating cross-border co-operation mechanisms between your two countries, Belarus and Ukraine. Over the years, the Congress has adopted a wide range of recommendations for improving cross-border co-operation, and we stand ready to offer our expertise to those who are interested. The Council of Europe as a whole has established a legal framework based on a convention on transfrontier co-operation: The Madrid Convention.

This Convention provides the possibility for territorial communities to enter into direct co-operation across the border. We are very pleased that Ukraine ratified this Convention in 1993.

And as I speak about the need to direct co-operation between communities, I need to underline the importance of constant dialogue with central authorities. This dialogue is needed to address the obstacles to cross-border co-operation – from harmonising national legislations and to making easier administrative procedures for cross-border transactions.

In general, dialogue between national governments and territorial authorities is indispensable for all matters of concern to communities – because local and regional self-government is a shared responsibility indeed.

This is why I am so pleased to see today representatives of the national governments participating in this Forum, in this dialogue. And this is why the fact that the Presidents of both countries will welcome this Forum in the afternoon is of great importance.

I would like to conclude by stressing once again that we need direct cross-border co-operation between communities today to improve the well-being of our citizens. In the Congress, we welcome this important step taken by all the regions of Belarus and Ukraine involved in this process.

The Congress is currently implementing a project aimed at strengthening local governance and associations of local authorities in Ukraine, under the Council of Europe Action Plan for this country, and we will be happy to integrate a cross-border co-operation component into our project activities.

We are also preparing a project in the field of local self-government under the new Council of Europe Action Plan for Belarus, where we also look forward to opportunities to strengthen cross-border co-operation, working together with national, regional and local authorities of Belarus.

I should add that we in the Congress have been very much inspired by our recent exchanges and a round table on local self-government in Minsk last month, and this Forum gives us even more optimism and enthusiasm for our future co-operation.

President LUKASHENKO invited me personally when I met him in Minsk on 11 September this year. I would like to thank him for this initiative and I am confident that this Forum will give the necessary momentum to the positive dynamic of cross-border co-operation between Belarus and Ukraine, and I wish you every success in your work.

Thank you.

35th Session - Presidency of the Congress 2016-2018: activities and achievements Strasbourg, France, 6 November 2018

Dear colleagues,

My mandate as President of the Congress ends today and I am pleased to address you one last time to take stock of these two exciting years.

It is true that a two-year term passes quickly. The role of the President is primarily to facilitate the work of the Bureau and the Session and to promote exchanges between members in order to achieve results in a cooperative spirit and atmosphere. This is an important part of the job, which I gladly carried out because I am deeply convinced that dialogue and exchange are the keys to success.

The role of the President is to ensure the quality of the work and the exchanges held. It is not always easy to communicate and to understand each other in an assembly made up of 47 national traditions and cultures, but the most important thing is that everyone feels listened to and that political debates are conducted in an atmosphere of mutual respect. This is what I have tried to do and I think we did achieve a real quality of listening and debate.

Another aspect of the post is to convey the political message of the Congress following and building upon those of previous Presidents. It is precisely this continuity that guarantees the proper functioning of our Assembly. The policy we have been following for ten years is to focus on where our competences lie, our core business if you will. We strive to concentrate on what we know and where we know we can achieve results. It is this pragmatic policy that I have defended with all of my interlocutors. I believe that the Committee of Ministers has appreciated this pragmatism and I want to take this opportunity to commend the support of our ambassadors, whose help is essential for the Congress.

It is this pragmatic policy that allows the Congress to contribute effectively to the local and regional dimension of the Council of Europe's activities.

I believe that the Congress is now widely recognised for its strategic and its operational contributions to the Organisation. This is due in particular to the monitoring of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, our reference text. The Congress has set itself the goal of not only ensuring the implementation of the Charter, but also of making it a truly dynamic, living document that inspires territorial policies throughout Europe. Therefore we also proudly celebrate the entry into force of the Charter 30 years ago, on 1 September 2018!

How have we obtained recognition of and respect for this text? By being present on the ground - for the monitoring of course, but also for the observation of local and regional elections and co-operation programmes. Admittedly, the Charter is not fully respected everywhere, but it has become a benchmark text and a goal to be reached for the member States. I am proud to have been able to contribute to this collective work.

I would like to dwell for a moment on the role of national associations of local and regional authorities, which are our key partners. I took care to maintain a permanent dialogue with them and to participate in their General Assemblies whenever possible. I have never forgotten that they are the ones that allow us to reach all of our communities directly. It is with them that we have the best chance to develop our work to improve our cities and the lives of our citizens. I want to thank them for the tremendous work they carry out and which only they can do in discussing and working with our national governments.

Finally, on a more personal note, as the first woman to be elected President of this Assembly, I have been keen to raise the profile of gender equality and the place of women in politics, in our communities and in international organisations.

In October, at the last session of the Parliamentary Assembly I took part in an event alongside the President of the Parliamentary Assembly, Liliane Maury-Pasquier, and the Chair of the Committee of Ministers Marija Pejčinović Burić, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign and European Affairs of Croatia.

It is, I believe, the first time in the history of the Council of Europe that the chairmanship of the three political entities of the Organisation has been held by women. Things change, lines move! But we must continue to lead this fight for equality, and we must lead it together with men, because it is a fight that concerns us all.

I would like to share an anecdote with you: there was a poster hanging on the wall in my office here in the Council of Europe, with photos of every President of the Congress since the very beginning in 1957. They are all men, without exception. And then, just at the end of this long line of men, there is a picture of a woman, me!

My dear colleagues,

I will leave the Congress in a few weeks - I decided not to stand again for election in my region of Salzburg - but I would like to leave you with a message for the future, the future of this assembly: please ensure, and I am addressing all members of the Congress but also all the political groups, please ensure that this poster hanging in the office of the President shall, in the future, include the picture of just as many men as women. It is up to those of us who encourage women's involvement in politics everywhere in Europe to set an example by starting with our assembly.

My dear colleagues, this is not intended as a political legacy, it is, rather an invitation for our Congress to move towards a future where gender equality will no longer be just a promise but rather a commonplace reality of our daily lives. And I would wish that, in the future, it will be the norm to have a regular rotation between genders for the post of Congress President.

This is the message I want to leave you at the opening of this session. The Congress has been a true pioneer with regard to parity, it is now up to us to confirm this political will and to put it into practice.

I thank you for your support and for your never-failing dynamism in the service of our communities and our citizens.

Gudrun Mosler-Törnström was elected President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe in October 2016.

She started her political career in 1999 when she became a member of the Regional Parliament in Salzburg, Austria. In 2004 she was elected Vice-President of the Regional Parliament and from 2009 to 2013 she was municipal councillor in Puch, Salzburg, Austria.

The year 2009 also marked the start of her commitment at European level, first as a member of the Congress and then, between 2010 and 2016, as head of the Austrian Delegation. From 2010 to 2012 she was Vice President of the Monitoring Committee and from 2012 to 2014 she was Head of the Socialist Group in the Congress. In 2014, she was elected as President of the Chamber of Regions and first Vice-President of the Congress.

She has acted as head of delegation and rapporteur in numerous monitoring missions (Lithuania, Azerbaijan, Sweden, Greece, France) and election observations (Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan).

Throughout twenty years of political commitment at the regional level and ten years at European level, including two years as President of the Congress, Gudrun Mosler-Törnström has strongly supported local and regional democracy as an essential part of democracy.

The compilation of speeches she delivered as President of the Congress between 2016 and 2018 gives an overview of her active and personal commitment.



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The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 47 member states, including all members of the European Union. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities is an institution of the Council of Europe, responsible for strengthening local and regional democracy in its 47 member states. Composed of two chambers – the Chamber of Local Authorities and the Chamber of Regions – and three committees, it brings together 648 elected officials representing more than 200 000 local and regional authorities.

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