

21 March 2023

**44th Plenary Session of the Congress of Local and Regional
Authorities of the Council of Europe**

Tuesday 21 March 2023, 17h45

Address by PACE President

Monsieur le Président du Congrès des pouvoirs locaux et régionaux du
Conseil de l'Europe,

Madame la Secrétaire generale de l'Assemblée parlementaire,

Monsieur le Secrétaire général du Congrès,

Chers invités, Mesdames et Messieurs,

J'aimerais tout d'abord, en ouverture de ce discours, remercier le
Président Leen Verbeek de m'avoir invité à m'exprimer devant vous
aujourd'hui. C'est toujours avec plaisir que je participe à vos réunions, car
vous êtes la voix des collectivités locales et régionales de notre continent,
et avez à ce titre un accès direct et privilégié aux préoccupations et
attentes de nos concitoyens. Ayant moi-même été conseiller municipal,
j'ai pleinement conscience de la valeur de ce contact direct et je sais
d'expérience que c'est au niveau local que naît la véritable démocratie.

Permettez-moi également d'adresser tous mes vœux de succès à
Monsieur Mathieu Mori, le nouveau Secrétaire général de votre Congrès.
Nos deux secrétariats, j'en suis convaincu, poursuivrons la bonne

coopération que nous entretenions avec votre prédécesseur, Monsieur Andreas Kiefer.

Je crois en la complémentarité de nos rôles et ma devise a toujours été, depuis mon élection à la Présidence de l'Assemblée parlementaire, qu'ensemble nous sommes plus forts et pouvons accomplir les progrès attendus de la plus ancienne organisation la plus ancienne organisation basée sur un traité en Europe.

Dès 2019, l'Assemblée parlementaire a accepté la proposition énoncée dans mon rapport sur les principaux défis pour l'avenir, appelant à développer des mécanismes de consultation périodique et de coopération permanente entre l'Assemblée parlementaire et le Congrès des pouvoirs locaux et régionaux, afin de donner plus d'efficacité et de cohérence aux décisions et activités du Conseil de l'Europe. Depuis mon accession à la Présidence de l'Assemblée parlementaire, nous nous sommes rencontrés et avons tenu des consultations ensemble, Monsieur le Président, aussi souvent qu'il était nécessaire. Nous avons à l'occasion publié des déclarations conjointes, comme par exemple récemment sur la commémoration du premier anniversaire de la guerre en Ukraine, avec également la Présidente du Comité des Ministres, la Secrétaire Générale du Conseil de l'Europe et la Commissaire aux droits de l'homme.

Je vous ai invité, Monsieur le Président, à la réunion de notre Commission permanente tenue à La Haye début mars et vous avez ainsi pu avoir un échange de vues fructueux avec les membres de notre Assemblée et présenter les priorités de votre Congrès sur la Route vers Reykjavik.

Mr President,

Europe is indeed at a crossroads in its history and if we want the European ideal to survive and thrive, we have no other choice than to rise to the challenges that are facing us, putting our creativity and wisdom together.

The past year has been a test for Europe's multilateral cooperation because of the Russian Federation's war of aggression against Ukraine, but also given the steady decline of trust by citizens in institutions and the demand for a new generation of rights to be urgently and properly addressed.

The Reykjavik Summit should therefore reaffirm our unity around values and commitments, and set out a forward-looking vision for the Council of Europe in this new historic and sociological complex.

For me, the priorities of the 4th Summit should be to:

1. Respond in the best possible way to the consequences of the Russian Federation's illegal and brutal aggression against our member State Ukraine, ensuring the full accountability of the terrorist regime of Russia for its violations of international law.

This should be done by:

- maintaining our full support to Ukraine as long as is needed and helping the country in providing our expertise in terms of rule of law and democracy when the time will come for reconstruction;
- the setting-up of a special international criminal tribunal in The Hague to prosecute the Russian and Belarusian leaders;
- the organisation of an international compensation mechanism, including an international register of damage, in cooperation with the Ukrainian authorities – I was very happy to see that the Secretary

General of the Council of Europe proposed to the member States that the Organisation should play a leading role in the establishment of such a register to record and document evidence and claims of damage, loss or injury.

2. The Summit should recommit member States to a fully-fledged, genuine multilateralism. Each member State's compliance with democracy, human rights and the rule of law is the best protection for its citizens and the interdependence thus created is the only viable solution to lasting peace and democratic security in Europe.

3. The Political declaration of the Summit should also set a forward-looking agenda for the Council of Europe, ensuring that the new generations of rights are protected and promoted. I think here about Artificial intelligence and human rights, but also about the need to secure that a right to a "safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment" be added as a legally binding instrument to our corpus of human rights. The Council of Europe, which has always been a pioneer in terms of human rights protection, has to have the means to promote a contemporary and holistic vision of this new generation of rights. It should focus on devising common replies and establishing new standards to protect human rights vis-à-vis new and evolving challenges.

When speaking about the concrete consequences of climate change, I think that you, as local and regional representatives, are the best placed to see the direct effect on our territories, on our agriculture, on our nature or following on from natural disasters such as fires or floods.

4. Last but not least, decisions taken at the Summit should endeavour to counteract the backsliding of democracy and the growing loss of trust

towards institutions by citizens through an increased dialogue with civil society representatives and by reinforcing local democracy.

I also think that we should pay greater attention to better involve young people and have a youth perspective mainstreamed throughout our activities.

To counter democratic backsliding, particular attention should be paid to enhancing citizens' trust in democratic processes. The Council of Europe should make greater efforts to strengthen good governance, enhance the quality and professionalism of the public administration and reinforce local democracy, as these sectors all play a decisive role in shaping people's trust in public authorities.

The Parliamentary Assembly, through its report on the 4th Summit by Ms Fiona O'Loughlin, suggested having *democracy checklists* to identify the essential criteria which govern a well-functioning democracy – based on the Convention on Human Rights and the case-law of the Court but also the Venice Commission and the European Committee on Democracy and Governance (CDDG).

In order to prevent rather than to cure, it also suggested having *early warning mechanisms*, where also the input of the Congress as the specialised body of local and regional democracy would be beneficial. Suggestions from our Assembly included:

- A *democratic resilience initiative* which, building on the work of existing bodies and mechanisms will monitor democratic developments in our member States and form the basis for early warning and enhanced political dialogue to help member States address situations of concern.

- Enhancing the exchange of *best practices* in all areas relating to democracy and democratic governance.
- Strengthening the Council of Europe activities related to *confidence building* measures and *conflict prevention*, including in its civil society and cross-border cooperation dimensions.
- In general, strengthening the early warning/rapid reaction capacities of existing CoE mechanisms. But early warning mechanisms should also go hand in hand with the effective capacity to react promptly at political level in order to have an impact in the countries concerned sooner rather than later.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Just over a year ago, on 16 March 2022, the Russian Federation ceased to be a member of the Council of Europe as a result of its unacceptable, unjustifiable and unprovoked war of aggression against its neighbour, Ukraine.

The PACE has maintained pressure on the Russian authorities since then, adopting numerous reports dealing with the war. During our next April session, there will be a debate under the urgent procedure on the displacement or transfer by force of Ukrainian persons, and in particular children, to the Russian Federation. One of the main issues covered in the debate will be the fate of forcibly displaced or transferred children from Ukraine to the Russian Federation or the Ukrainian territories currently under the *de facto* control of the Russian Federation, and the need to ensure the establishment of a rapid mechanism to safely repatriate these children to their rightful homes.

I welcome the declaration on the anniversary of Russia's war against Ukraine that you just adopted and which mentions these crimes.

I would also like to pay tribute to the key role played by local and regional stakeholders, with their courage and resilience. When the time comes for reconstruction, they will be at the forefront for rebuilding the country and we must support them. Sound democratic institutions, respect for the rule of law and compliance with democratic standards, together with stronger European integration are the best guarantees for the democratic security of the country, and Europe as a whole.

I would like in particular to outline the Cities4Cities/United4Ukraine platform initiative, established under the Congress' patronage, and creating long term partnerships between cities from Ukraine and other European cities and regions in delivering aid and support. Whenever possible during my working visits in member States of the Council of Europe, I encourage cities to join this platform.

Equally relevant are the cooperation activities implemented by the Congress as part of the project "Strengthening multi-level governance, democracy and human rights at local level in Ukraine"¹, aiming to strengthen the dialogue, partnership and consultation between different levels of government; enhance collaborative governance and citizen participation in line with the principles of local democracy and open government.

¹ Within the Council of Europe Action Plan for Ukraine "Resilience, recovery and reconstruction" for 2023-2026.

Despite our resolute will and common actions, much remains to be done, and there is no time for complacency. We have to stand united around our values in the face of the extraordinary challenges we have to address.

Let me finish with a quote from the intervention at our April 2022 Session by Italian President Sergio Mattarella:

“If we pursue common goals, in order to ‘win’ it is no longer necessary for someone else to lose. We all win together”.

Only through this genuine and meaningful cooperation will we manage to make it possible for Europe to be the vast area of democratic security which was called for by the Vienna Declaration which concluded the 1st Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe in 1993.

Now we are together on the Road to Reykjavik.

I conclude here my intervention and I am happy to take questions.