

6 November 2018

Check against delivery

**35th Plenary Session of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities
of the Council of Europe**

**Draft Address by Ms Marija Pejčinović Burić,
Chairperson of the Committee of Ministers,
Deputy Prime Minister and
Minister for Foreign and European Affairs of Croatia**

7 November 2018, 2.30 p.m.

Mr President,
Distinguished members of the Congress,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I address the plenary session here today on behalf of the Croatian Chairmanship, [the first time since our accession to the Organisation in 1996]. I would first like to congratulate you, Mr Anders Knape, on your election as President of this important assembly, and wish you every success in your new functions.

I would like to thank Ms. Gudrun Mosler-Törnström for her dedicated and successful leadership of the Congress during the last two years. It was a pleasure to work together with you, dear Gudrun! And, I believe it was for the first time in the history of the Council of Europe, that in the Committee of Ministers [since May 2018], in the Parliamentary Assembly [since June 2018]

and in the Congress [since October 2016], women were in the role of chairpersons.

At the outset, I should like to express my country's appreciation for the close and extensive co-operation that it has enjoyed with the Congress throughout its Chairmanship and especially for the support we have received for our activities in strengthening local democracy. But, I shall return to this later.

Before moving to those specific areas which I consider to be of particular interest to the Congress, I would like to share with you some more general reflections on the current political context in which this Organisation finds itself.

These are, undoubtedly, difficult times. At the European level, at the national and local level and also at an institutional level.

Pan-European challenges or threats are more present than ever: terrorism, cybercrime, corruption, trafficking in human beings, migration issues, to mention just a few.

These indicate the continued relevance of intergovernmental co-operation and the need to bolster multilateralism.

At the national, and indeed at local and regional level, we see a rise in extremism, in radicalisation and in populism.

We see a growing culture of intolerance and xenophobia, the negative symptoms of nationalism; and a deterioration of social ties.

We see a declining trust of citizens in political institutions and democratic processes.

And the Council of Europe itself is now facing political and financial challenges. One of them is the Russian Federation's decision to withhold its financial contribution to the Budget. A decision we regret. I continue to hope that the Russian Federation will reconsider this decision, not only for the proper functioning of the Organisation, but also for the status of the Russian Federation within it and, most importantly, to ensure the continued protection of the fundamental rights of the millions of individuals living within the Russian Federation.

However, we must prepare for all possible outcomes.

Members of the Congress,

Ministers at their Session in Elsinore in May this year discussed many of these challenges facing our Organisation. It was agreed to launch a new series of reforms, known as the "Elsinore process". The aim is to define a common vision of the future of our Organisation. This will focus primarily on its missions, but also address essential issues as its new political horizon, its governance and its interaction with other international organisations. Particular attention will also be given to the sustainability of its funding.

Croatia will continue to give its full support to the Secretary General in this work and to the upcoming Finnish Chairmanship in the preparation for the Helsinki Ministerial Session in May 2019.

I am certain that we can also count on the full support and co-operation of the Congress.

I would like to pay tribute to the Congress for the prompt steps already taken in the light of the current financial situation with regard to further reforms. This is a clear indication of the Congress' commitment to actively contribute to safeguarding the standing and credibility of the Organisation and to be able to deliver.

Against this background, my statement today will cover three areas. Firstly, a few words with regard to regional and local democracy in Croatia and the importance we attach to this question, a priority for our Chairmanship; secondly an overview of our other priorities and finally some brief information with regard to important developments in the work of the Committee of Ministers.

Strengthening local and regional democracy was a first priority for our Chairmanship.

Today, many of us feel that we are living through turbulent times, uncertain times which have given rise to some of the worrying trends I mentioned earlier.

During such times, strong leadership and good governance at local level are particularly crucial. Citizens need to be able to look to their political representatives and be confident that they are equal to the challenges facing them.

That they are aware of the needs and difficulties facing their electorate.

That through vigilance and focused action, they are doing their utmost to respond to those expectations.

Yes, resources are scarce. Yes, responsibilities are heavy.

But action at the grass roots level is nonetheless essential to ensure that the well-being and fundamental rights of citizens are not compromised. I applaud the local and regional authorities here today for the work they carry out in our member States, sometimes under very difficult conditions. We have seen so many examples of your resilience, flexibility and innovation and I can only encourage you to continue in your important work on the ground.

Croatia considers the European Charter of Local-Self-Government a major achievement of this Organisation, not least demonstrated through the fact that it has been ratified by all Council of Europe member States.

I congratulate the Congress on the 30th anniversary of the Charter, the impact and success of which should indeed be celebrated.

For its part, Croatia wishes to strengthen the administrative and financial capacities, autonomy and absorption capacity of local and regional self-government units. To expand their self-government scope of tasks and strengthen their independence in planning, financing and providing services in accordance with the subsidiarity principle.

During its Chairmanship, Croatia has therefore encouraged the sharing of experiences and knowledge about local self-government reform and the strengthening and build-up of the capacities of local and regional institutions. With a view to finding the best possible solutions, a conference was held in Dubrovnik in May on the topic of strengthening local and regional self-

government, with special emphasis on decentralisation and cross-border co-operation. Croatia will continue to support the Congress in its work, in pursuit of our common vision of local and regional self-government accountable to its citizens and functioning as a driver of economic and social growth of the community.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The fight against corruption has been a second top priority for our Chairmanship. Corruption undermines the confidence of citizens in our democratic institutions, hinders economic development and goes against the values we adhere to. I therefore welcome the theme chosen by you for this 35th session which is “*Integrity and ethical behaviour of local and regional elected representatives*”. This is a challenge faced by all European countries, at all levels, and is closely linked to the responsibility of political representatives towards their electorate. Integrity and a commitment to stringently upholding the rule of law is essential if we wish to keep the trust of our citizens in democratic institutions and in those who represent them.

In this regard, your debates this morning covered a wide range of topics: “the European Code of Conduct for all persons involved in local and regional governance”; “a Code of Conduct for Congress members – a revision of the Congress Rules and Procedures”; “Conflicts of interest at local and regional levels” and finally “Transparency and open government”. This clearly shows the commitment of the Congress to fighting and preventing corruption and the Committee of Ministers will examine with interest the results of these discussions.

For its part, the Croatian Chairmanship, in co-operation with the Group of States against Corruption, or GRECO as we all know it, organised a high-level conference last month on “Strengthening transparency and accountability to ensure integrity : united against corruption”. Around 200 participants during the two-day Conference worked on the additional anti-corruption guidelines, with the aim of promoting national anti-corruption mechanisms and public transparency. The outcome of the Conference is a Declaration on Launching a Network of Corruption Prevention Authorities, sponsored by the Croatian, French and Italian anti-corruption authorities. The Declaration also promotes systematic collection, management and exchange of information and good practices between national anti-corruption bodies. The document is open for signature to all interested national public authorities active in fighting corruption, and we are very glad to note that 17 countries have already signed the Declaration.

I would also take this opportunity to recall the work underway by the European Committee on Democracy and Governance (CDDG) to develop guidelines on public ethics at all levels of government, taking into account the findings of GRECO as well as the Committee of Ministers’ Recommendation (2000)10 on Codes of Conduct for Public Officials. The CDDG has also been entrusted with updating the 2004 Handbook of good practice on public ethics at local level, and with carrying out a feasibility study on the preparation of a Council of Europe indicator framework to identify trends with regard to public ethics and to allow member States to assess their performance.

The fight against corruption thus is not only a priority for the Chairmanship, but certainly also for the Committee of Ministers; it will remain high on the agenda of this Organisation.

Turning to our third priority: the efficient protection of rights of national minorities and vulnerable groups. In this area, Croatia wished to promote the realisation of the special rights, both individual and collective, of national minorities and, more generally, of other vulnerable groups in particular the Roma.¹

One of the greatest challenges for Roma is the transition from education to employment and in this context, a conference “From Education to Employment of the Roma” focusing particularly on the transition of youth at the crucial period of their lives was held in Croatia on the Brijuni Islands on 25 and 26 September.

To improve the situation of Roma communities, commitment and engagement from all levels of government are required, but it is particularly crucial at the local and regional level. The Congress has been a valuable partner of the Committee of Ministers over many years in promoting and protecting of the rights of Roma and Travellers. I would particularly like to pay tribute to the significant work carried out by the European Alliance of Cities and Regions for Roma Inclusion, an excellent example of the value of concrete and practical initiatives at the grassroots level. I would strongly encourage other municipalities and regions to join in this co-operation framework.

¹ The term “Roma and Travellers” is used at the Council of Europe to encompass the wide diversity of the groups covered by the work of the Council of Europe in this field: on the one hand a) Roma, Sinti/Manush, Calé, Kaale, Romanichals, Boyash/Rudari; b) Balkan Egyptians (Egyptians and Ashkali); c) Eastern groups (Dom, Lom and Abdal); and, on the other hand, groups such as Travellers, Yenish, and the populations designated under the administrative term “*Gens du voyage*”, as well as persons who identify themselves as Gypsies. The present is an explanatory footnote, not a definition of Roma and/or Travellers.

In this respect I noted with interest the seminar on Roma inclusion at the local level which took place in Tirana, Albania, on 11 October 2018, where the

prospect of creating a national Albanian network of mayors for Roma inclusion was discussed.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would now refer to a few of the more important questions which continue to be the focus of attention by the Committee of Ministers over the last months.

With regard to political developments, in August this year we marked the 10th anniversary since the outbreak of the war in Georgia – a conflict that unfortunately has still not been resolved. As Chairperson of the Committee of Ministers, I took the opportunity to express my deepest sorrow and support for the victims of the conflict, as did many colleagues from across Europe. Many used the occasion to reiterate member States' unequivocal support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders, and to call on the Russian Federation to honour its obligations and commitments in accordance with international law. This issue remains a priority for the Committee and is a standing item on the agenda of the Ministers' Deputies.

This year marks also the 10th anniversary of the Geneva International Discussions (GID), which remains an important forum of discussion on issues of common concerns in the region. Throughout the years, the Geneva International Discussions have contributed to improved stability and accountability on the ground. A key achievement has been the establishment of the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanisms (IPRMs) and the related hotlines, which enable local security actors to quickly address incidents on the ground. My hope is that a constructive approach by all participants will allow this unique format to fulfil its

mandate. The Council of Europe supports the efforts of the Co-Chairs to facilitate this process.

At the same time, the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine has entered its 5th year. Despite diplomatic efforts, there has been no tangible progress in the conflict settlement and the conflict continues to cause loss of life and other types of human suffering, thus impairing the human rights protection granted and guaranteed by the European Convention on Human Rights.

I understand that the security situation remains unfortunately tense in Donbas – in the two regions of Luhansk and Donetsk. I hope that the Minsk agreements will be fully implemented by all actors and that on-going efforts to establish an international peacekeeping mission to the Donbas will be successful. We note that a number of countries, including Council of Europe member States, indicated recently that they would be ready to take part in such a peacekeeping operation.

A primary challenge in Crimea remains the inability of independent monitoring mechanisms of the Council of Europe to exercise their mandate, including having access to the peninsula, in order to conduct an independent assessment of the human rights situation and alleged violations. Work in this direction has so far proven difficult, but it must continue.

While the Council of Europe itself is not directly involved in the conflict settlement agreements, humanitarian issues, such as the release of detainees and prisoners, remain pertinent. Our principles on Ukraine cannot

be compromised, as has been made clear in several Committee of Ministers decisions on the situation in Ukraine, including Crimea.

Finally, I should like to mention the issue of migration and refugees. This topic remains high on the agenda of the Committee of Ministers, which continues to hold regular exchanges with Ambassador Tomáš Boček, Special Representative of the Secretary General on Migration and Refugees, with regard to his fact-finding missions in member States. In September, Ambassador Boček reported on the progress made in the implementation of the Council of Europe Action Plan on Protecting Refugee and Migrant Children in Europe (2017-2019), adopted by the Committee of Ministers in May 2017.

The activities carried out under the Action plan - which takes a transversal approach in addressing the challenges faced by member States - have a special focus on unaccompanied and separated children aiming at ensuring access to rights and child-friendly procedures, providing effective protection from violence and enhancing integration of children who would remain in Europe. In this respect, and in the many other aspects related to the reception, welcome and integration of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants, the crucial role of local and regional authorities is frequently underlined.

This is clearly an area where local solutions go hand in hand with international co-operation. Whilst many decisions are taken at the international level, it is usually at the local level where the impact of these decisions is felt. Ensuring basic material rights to migrants and refugees such as access to housing, to health, to education, more often than not fall to local and regional authorities.

Ensuring social integration and non-discrimination of migrants and refugees is also a complex responsibility. Even more so when faced with communities which are hesitant, and sometimes even hostile, in their attitude towards this vulnerable group of people. But it is up to public authorities to lead by example, by always putting the protection of individual fundamental rights at the heart of all policies.

You are key players in making the European Convention rights a reality on the ground and the Convention system needs you, mayors and councillors, more than ever. I was very pleased to receive the brand new human rights handbook of the Congress which includes a lot of examples of good practice and should also be used by national authorities, when they implement their respective national human rights action plans.

This is all the more important given that despite nationalist or isolationist trends, the phenomena of migration, mobility and globalisation are here to stay and will continue to impact our societies. We must be firm in upholding our values.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I stated at the outset that we are faced with difficult times. And we are all rightly and justifiably concerned by the current situation.

However, as one well-known British prime minister once said, “*Difficulties mastered are opportunities won*”.

Our prime concern now is to master those difficulties and identify those opportunities. We must ensure that this Organisation can adapt to complex and rapidly changing realities. It must be flexible, innovative and firm in its action and able to respond swiftly and efficiently to the challenges faced by our member States.

This calls for efforts from all levels of government, including local and regional authorities and all sectors of this Organisation. The Committee of Ministers counts on the continued support of the Congress during the difficult months ahead. I remain convinced that our joint efforts will continue to bear fruit, if we stand firm on our convictions and persevere together in our common objectives.

Thank you for your attention, and I look forward to responding to your questions.