

**36th Session of the Congress – Strasbourg, France, 2 – 4 April 2019**

## Elements for the Communication of Gunn Marit HELGESEN, President of the Chamber of regions

*Check against delivery*

**Strasbourg, France, 3 April 2019**

Dear colleagues,

Yesterday, in the plenary session, we debated the Congress contribution to the Ministerial Session of the Committee of Ministers in Helsinki. We rightly laid stress on the challenges of the current situation in Europe and its impact on our societies – which is to say, on our local and regional communities.

But we have also stressed that these communities and their elected representatives – we, dear colleagues, our towns, cities and regions – can and must become the springboard for democratic renewal. The high level of trust that our citizens place in us gives strong hope for territorial democracy – democracy which is in proximity to citizens' needs and concerns.

It is clear that regions in Europe have a crucial role to play in the process of this renewal. But it also means that the questions that we are asking in our contribution for the Helsinki meeting, these questions equally apply to our regions – to us, elected politicians in regional councils, regional parliaments and regional governments.

These questions are:

- -How can we restore the political link with citizens where it has been damaged – and citizens' trust where it has been lost?
- How can we safeguard democracy where it is being threatened?
- How can we repair the social fabric where it has come apart?
- Most importantly, the key question: "How to live together today?"

For the regional level, this means not only addressing the challenges of diversity and integration within our territories that are becoming increasingly multi-ethnic, multi-confessional and multilingual;

And not only responding to the challenges of migration phenomena, which we discussed in this Chamber on several occasions, most recently during the last session in November.

In a broader sense, this also means re-examining the relationship between the regional and national levels within a State, which is often coming under strain today.

We also have to address the relations between the regional and local levels within our territories – these, too, are being impacted by today's transformations; and of course, the relations among regions themselves – in many cases, the changes we are facing today have affected the traditional economic and social ties between regions within States and created new ties between regions beyond national borders. This development presents new opportunities but also new challenges.

Addressing these issues necessarily requires raising the key questions of citizens' trust in regional governance, of solidarity and of territorial cohesion – as crucial factors for regional development and for reaffirming the role and place of regions in European development overall.

Last year, we took up the question of upholding regional identity within a State – which is matter of great importance for “living together”. Most members who took the floor stressed the need for respecting the constitutional framework – but also the need for better dialogue between the region and the State, and a better redistribution of resources between regions.

This debate, but also the current situation, clearly show the importance of having the region's voice heard today by the State and within the State. This means re-examining the existing mechanisms for dialogue and consultations – are they sufficient?

Is the territorial representation in the second chamber of Parliament enough, or do we need new forms, and new mechanisms, for regional representation and dialogue? I believe that this should be the subject of renewed discussion in our Chamber – and in our member States.

The dialogue between the region and the State is indeed crucial for the vitality of our democracies, especially at a time when the nationalist agenda and rhetoric are often built around the region and focus on regional identity as a catalyst for dissent. This dialogue is even more important for addressing legitimate concerns of regions.

Some of those concerns are rooted in the lack of territorial cohesion, which was the second problem raised during our debate in this Chamber. We took up this matter during our previous session in November, focusing on the need for improving mechanisms of financial equalisation – where the key role belongs to the State.

But equally important for territorial cohesion are relations between regions themselves – which, as I have said at the beginning, have been affected by the ongoing changes. It has been said on many occasions that inter-regional co-operation plays an important role in reducing regional disparities – and this is a subject matter that deserves our close attention. The experience of macro-regions could be of great use in this regard.

As a step in this direction, at our next session we hope to debate a report on cross-border taxation, and to discuss the role of inter-regional co-operation along so-called “cultural routes” in promoting traditional regional products and crafts, and cultural identity, to foster regional development.

But of course, citizens’ confidence that their communities – territories where they live – will continue to be the sanctuaries that provide protection and opportunities for self-fulfilment, this confidence remains key for the success of any of our efforts.

Regions continue to be the crux of cultural references for our citizens, giving them reassurance in the face of today’s global transformations. We must use this capital of trust to strengthen citizens’ engagement in regional processes, involve them in making decisions on future regional development and indeed in co-designing regional governance together with them.

This is why at this session, we will be discussing the concept of Open Government – a range of measures, procedures and mechanisms to make regional government more transparent, inclusive and accountable.

Dear colleagues,

To conclude, and to sum up, I am convinced that what our regions need today is re-designing and renewing their relationships both with the State and between each other, as well as relationships with their local communities – as a way of becoming more accessible to citizens and more in touch with citizens’ needs, in order to provide better public services.

Modern times also offer modern tools to help us achieve those objectives –

- the use of ‘mini-publics’ as part of Open Government to fine-tune priorities for community development;
- the use of digital tools for e-governance – and why not consider the concept of Smart Region after the concept of Smart City;
- or the use of the existing experience with intercultural models for defining common and unifying objectives for various cultural groups, to foster common regional identity and purpose.

As it was debated yesterday in the plenary session, this renewal must be based on a new socio-territorial pact with the State, to give a new momentum to territorial democracy and to regional development in particular.

Our task is to make sure that our regions fully contribute to this momentum of renewal.

Thank you