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# Communication by Leendert Verbeek, President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities

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Dear colleagues,

When we met here last March, we had started to live in a new reality. War returned to Europe, with its tremendous humanitarian, social, economic and human rights consequences.

While we are meeting in this hemicycle today, bombs, missiles and drones are being fired on Ukrainian cities, destroying vital infrastructures and killing civilians – women, men, children, in the streets, in their houses, at school or on the marketplace.

The Russian Federation’s war against Ukraine has escalated in recent weeks and nothing seems to be able to stop the Russian President locked in a spiral of crime and destruction.

His recent manoeuvres to deprive Ukrainian citizens of energy and heating resources when winter is coming is a further demonstration of cruelty and criminal behaviour.

So let us be very clear: the Russian Federation’s war against Ukraine is an attack on all the principles and values we stand for and a blatant breach of international and humanitarian law.

President Putin’s decision to illegally annex the occupied territories in the Ukrainian regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, after the holding of the so-called referendums has no legal value under international law and will never be recognised by the international community.

The Congress is unfailingly committed to the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Ukraine, within its internationally recognised borders and we will continue to extend our unwavering support to Ukraine and its people.

I would like to warmly welcome our colleagues from the Ukrainian delegation who managed to be present today and who show their constant commitment and dedication to our work despite the very difficult situation they face in their hometowns and country.

At the same time, we are also encouraged by recent Ukrainian military successes which resulted in regained territory in the east and the south of the country. We will have the possibility to exchange with President’s Zelensky (TBC), Minister Chernysov and Mayor Klitschko during our debate this afternoon.

Continued political, military and economic support to Ukraine by the community of democratic nations is vital. We can contribute at our level by providing material help and advice to Ukrainian cities and I look forward to our debate where initiatives taken by our cities and regions in this regard will hopefully be described. With all our means, individually or collectively, we can help cities and regions in Ukraine to resist the brutal aggression and rebuild what is being destroyed.

Dear colleagues,

Session after session, we meet in this Chamber to discuss the crises we are experiencing and the challenges we face. In recent years, our societies have indeed gone through a succession of major unprecedented crises which have generated a global imbalance and a new geopolitical reality.

While war, armed hostilities, inflation, energy crises, economic and financial crisis, climate change and distrust in politics are causing anxiety and social upheaval among our populations, we are trying to bring responses at our level, through our fieldwork, through the resilience of our communities and through our will to defend our model of society.

Our role at the frontline is essential, both in the everyday life and in exceptional situations such as the COVID 19 pandemic. We must not waver in our convictions and our determination. We must continue to persuade national governments and parliaments to include local and regional elected representatives in their reflections on the main orientations to be given to our societies and the policies to be pursued in this regard. We must continue to claim that multilevel governance is part of the solution.

At the European level, we contribute to defending and promoting our common values and the model of liberal democracy on which we have built our societies. Within the Council of Europe, we provide tools and results with our statutory activities based on the European Charter of Local Self-Government, with our cooperation activities and our thematic contributions.

We represent the local and regional dimension of the work done by this Organisation and we continue to call on its member States to make better use of the asset represented by the Congress’ network of elected representatives.

The ongoing reflection on the future of the Council of Europe is the right moment to give new impetus to multi-level co-operation which represents a formidable lever for the development of good governance and the revival of democracy.

Later this morning, we will hold a debate on this important question of the future of the Council of Europe and the role of the Congress therein. I will therefore not develop this question further and will come back to it at the opening of the debate.

Let me just share my conviction that the singular and unique voice of the Council of Europe must be nourished, that its means must be consolidated, that its work in close cooperation with other political organisations must be reinforced, and that the Organisation, more than ever, needs a renewed political commitment from its Member States to pursue its core mission.

That is why I strongly support the organisation of a 4th Summit of Member States, so that Heads of State and government confirm their strong attachment to the Council of Europe and its values.

Dear colleagues,

On the occasion of the International Day of Democracy celebrated on 15 September, I had the opportunity to state once again that the crises we are going through highlight the urgent need to further strengthen the democratic resilience of societies, the need to defend democratic values, to continue the work of strengthening democratic institutions and processes at all levels of governance, and to engage citizens in order to regain their trust.

These crises are also a strong reminder that the work of building democracy is never finished and, above all, that it can be interrupted at any time.

They should remind us that now is not the time for the division or multiplication of structures but rather for political commitment, convergence of efforts, strengthening of cooperation, determined defense and promotion of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, in order to move forward, as suggested by the Secretary General of the Organisation in her latest report.

Thank you