47th Congress Plenary Session

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Dear members of Congress,

It is a rare opportunity and a great honor to address an institutional body that talks with the voices of 130,000 local and regional authorities across Europe. The direct access to citizens' concerns and expectations regarding democracy, human rights, and the rule of law that you hold makes your Congress a crucial local and regional dimension to governance.

An American politician -former speaker of the U.S House of representatives - is supposed to have said the famous phrase: “all politics is local”. And as a Greek, I cannot underestimate the value of direct democracy since the ancient Democracy started at the local level, involving all citizens in the “polis.”

Today, I am particularly pleased to celebrate the Congress’ 30th anniversary, and tomorrow, we will mark the 10th anniversary of the Youth initiative, aimed at engaging youth delegates in your work and incorporating their perspectives into debates.

[Youth Engagement for a Democratic Future]

Investing in the future of democracy requires us to actively support youth participation in democratic life and decision-making processes. This was reaffirmed in the Declaration adopted at the 4th Summit of Heads of State and Government last year.

At PACE's June session this year, we stressed the importance of taking young people's views into account to ensure the proper functioning of democracy. We called for the establishment of mechanisms to guarantee that a youth perspective is systematically integrated into our deliberations. Each Assembly committee will appoint a Youth Rapporteur responsible for raising youth concerns in discussions.

Additionally, we have called on national delegations to increase the presence of young parliamentarians. Integrating youth perspectives will enrich our work and address the disconnect between younger generations and political institutions. This will help rebuild trust and ensure the decisions we make are relevant to future generations.

[Challenges to Democracy]

Dear participants, lets talk now about challenges to Democracy. Democracy is not something we can take for granted. It is not a possession we hold forever; it must be nurtured, starting from a young age.

Across Europe, we are witnessing worrying signs of democratic backsliding, which should serve as an alarm. These signs include the erosion of fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of expression, and a weakening of checks and balances. Misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech are on the rise, often accompanied by efforts to silence dissenting voices, including the media and political opposition.

This decline in democratic values is leading many citizens to disengage from politics and lose trust in their institutions. For politicians, especially women, the political climate is becoming more hostile, marked by polarization, personal attacks, and hate speech.

Our Council confronts these challenges daily. Even in countries where leaders are democratically elected, the principles of democracy are under threat.

Events in Europe and beyond remind us that democracy, human rights, and the rule of law — the values that define our European identity — are not secure forever. They require our unwavering determination, wisdom, and courage to uphold.

I welcome the Congress's revised priorities following the Reykjavik Summit, particularly the strengthened monitoring of local democracy and respect for the rule of law. This serves as an important element of an early warning system to signal signs of democratic erosion in our member states.

The new strategy to protect human rights at local and regional levels and reinforce support for the implementation of European Court of Human Rights judgments will also be crucial in addressing these challenges. These actions will help ensure that the Congress remains well-equipped to respond to the threats facing our democracies.

[Ukraine: A Continued Priority]

Talking about threats dear friends, I would be remiss if I did not address the Russian aggression against Ukraine. An issue that has been central to my presidency and remains a top priority for the Assembly I have the honor to preside.

We have focused on the Ukrainian people, advocating for the release of prisoners of war and civilians held in Russia. Particular attention has been given to the plight of abducted Ukrainian children, for whom we have established a Parliamentary Network. We have consistently called for justice

for Ukraine, supporting the establishment of the Register of Damage and a compensation mechanism.

I congratulate the Congress for its work on the Register in Ukraine of which your Secretary General, Mr. Mathieu Mori, informed the conference of State parties last Friday.

Our Assembly was one of the first to call for the creation of an ad hoc international tribunal to address the crime of aggression. We continue to support international initiatives aimed at achieving justice for Ukraine.

The “Core Group” of supporters of the Special Tribunal will meet in November to discuss proposals, with the Council of Europe playing a significant role in these discussions.

The "Cities 4 Cities, United4Ukraine" initiative, which connects Ukrainian municipalities with their European counterparts, is another excellent example of solidarity in action. To date, 365 Ukrainian municipalities have formed partnerships with cities in Sweden, Germany, Poland, and France for example. I encourage even more cities to join this initiative, with the goal of reaching 1,000 new partnerships next year.

PACE has recognized the essential role of local authorities in addressing the humanitarian consequences of the war. The Cities4Cities platform, supported by the Congress, has been instrumental in coordinating efforts to meet the needs of Ukrainian cities and regions.

I will now briefly refer to other Political Priorities of PACE starting with:

Artificial Intelligence**,** that is one of the most pressing challenges we face today since a lot of awareness is raised concerning the impact of AI on democracy. AI can offer tremendous benefits, but it must remain a tool that assists human capabilities rather than replacing human decision-making.

The Assembly’s opinion of the Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence in April was a significant step toward addressing the potential risks AI poses to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.

The new AI Convention, opened for signature during the Lithuanian Presidency, offers an important framework for regulating AI’s impact on society. We must ensure that AI is used responsibly, balancing the need to mitigate its risks with the benefits it can offer. Monitoring the implementation of this Convention in national legislation will be crucial to prevent AI from undermining democratic values.

A constant challenge is of course the ***environment*****:** The global environmental crisis remains an urgent priority.

Climate change is already having devastating effects —rising sea levels, worsening desertification, and water scarcity— all of which increase the risk of conflict and forced migration. I am sure that if not all of you the most have already a lot o problems to solve at cities or regions you are elected, because of tremendous environmental changes.

The PACE has long called for greater protection of human rights for people displaced by climate-related disasters. In 2021, we adopted resolutions calling for a paradigm shift in international law, recognizing a healthy environment as a basic human right.

The Council of Europe is now working on a strategy to build on its existing legal frameworks and determine the best approach to protect the environment and address climate-induced migration.

I commend the Congress for its work in this area, particularly its efforts to promote a "green" interpretation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government. Your initiatives, including revising the European Urban

Charter and developing the third volume of the Human Rights Handbook for Local and Regional Authorities, which focuses on sustainable development, are especially important.

Before I close my speech I would like to speak about some other Priorities like ***gender inequalities*****.** We must continue to work toward eliminating social, professional, and economic disparities between men and women.

The Istanbul Convention, which aims to combat violence against women and domestic violence, must be ratified by all member states. While some countries have not yet ratified the Convention, and others have withdrawn, we remain committed to this vital cause.

I know that the next topic to which I am going to refer touches sensitivities of most of you. It is ***migration*** that also remains a significant priority.

Local and regional authorities are on the front lines of managing migration challenges while respecting human rights and maintaining social cohesion.

The Assembly has long advocated for a consistent legal framework to combat the smuggling of migrants and ensure their human rights are protected. The PACE has long been working on this issue, including recently by expressing its concern at the lack of consistency in the legislation of member states aimed at combating the smuggling of migrants, and proposed that the council of Europe should draw up an instrument on this issue.

In our resolutions, we highlighted the role of local authorities in the area and I think that you, as representatives of local and regional authorities, know better than anybody else what it means in practice to finding a right balance between treating migrants in a way respecting their human rights and dignity, and managing the citizen’s expectations and needs.

Lastly, it is also a priority for me to work toward increasing the ***visibility*** of the Council of Europe. Not for the sake of visibility alone, but so that our work is taken up and multiplied by governments, parliaments, civil society, and citizens. I call on all of you to work together to increase the visibility which will make the Council and all related institutions more important to the every day life of our citizens.

[Conclusion]

Dear colleagues, let me conclude my speech by summarising in a few words my own political philosophy.

As in any parliament, battles are fought within the Parliamentary Assembly, and perhaps in this Congress as well, but our weapons are not bullets, they are merely the words that combine to create arguments. Sometimes I know that words hurt just as much and can be used to break our opponent's spirit. Let us remember that words too are often the best, sometimes the only way to heal wounds.

Disagreement should bring us to the discussion table, not the battlefield.

Let us talk about the words that bind us together.

Let us try to get back to their original meaning.

Let us not forget that we are here for the oppressed and not for the oppressors.

Thank you.