

**High-level political conference on the margins of the 4th Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe Member States
“Embedding democratic values at grassroots level”
Reykjavik, Iceland – 15 May 2023**

Speech by Leen Verbeek, President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities

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Opening session

Dear Minister,

Dear Deputy Secretary General

Dear Mayor,

Dear President of the Icelandic association,

Dear Representatives of European associations and institutions,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me first express my most sincere gratitude to Mayor EGGERTSSON and the City of Reykjavik as well as to the association of Icelandic local authorities and its Chair Heida Bjorg HILMISDOTTIR for having co-organised this conference with us.

Let me also warmly thank Minister JÓHANNSSON and Deputy Secretary General BERGE for supporting our conference by their participation.

Meeting here in Reykjavik today is highly important and symbolic. Because Iceland is an example of both decentralisation of powers and of leading local initiatives in the field of the environmental protection and energy transition.

And also because we are two days away from the 4th Summit of the Council of Europe hosted by the Icelandic Presidency of the Committee of Ministers. A 4th Summit taking place, eighteen years since the previous one in Warsaw, in the context of a continent shaken by the war against Ukraine.

In this regard, this 4th Summit will be historical. It will allow member States not only to reaffirm their commitment to the values and missions of the Council of Europe but also to strengthen their ties in the face of the large-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation and its subsequent expulsion from the Organisation. The Summit will also serve as the starting point in the process of ensuring accountability for crimes committed in Ukraine, with the creation of a Register of damages.

For the Congress, the Summit will be doubly historic: Firstly, our political assembly was created by the first Summit in Vienna in 1993, exactly 30 years ago, which considered that one of the bases of a democratic society is the existence of a solid and effective local and regional democracy. Endowing the Council of Europe, an intergovernmental cooperation organisation with a political assembly of Local and Regional Authorities, was courageous and visionary.

As a result, today, some 130,000 local and regional authorities of our continent are represented by the Congress within the Council of Europe. And through them, the intergovernmental work carried out by the Council of Europe is firmly rooted in the life of local and regional communities.

Today, local and regional authorities are an integral part of the system of checks and balances on our continent.

Secondly, the 4th Summit will be an opportunity to reaffirm support for the crucial role of local and regional democracy in embedding democratic values at the grassroots.

We all, here in this room, know how much local and regional elected representatives contribute to underpinning democratic security in Europe. The multiple crisis our continent has recently faced have shown everyone how important the mitigating role our local and regional levels is in challenging times.

Therefore, we are confident that the Heads of States and Government will seize the opportunity of the 4th Summit to express a strong, renewed commitment to grassroots democracy within a system of strong multi-level governance.

The Congress has regularly contributed to the preparatory work for the Summit and has adopted an ambitious recommendation in March. Through this active participation, we intend to encourage the member States to make greater use of the second political Assembly within the Council of Europe and to make greater use of the huge asset represented by local and regional authorities in transmitting the work and values of the Council of Europe to the level closest to the citizen.

To respond more efficiently to the democratic challenges our societies are facing, we propose concrete action including the strengthening of the Congress' assessment of the situation of local and regional democracy, based on the European Charter of Local Self-Government and complemented by regular work of observing local and regional elections, as well as the enhancement of activities on human rights. This will be discussed further today in our two sessions.

Dear colleagues,

Let me stress that this work we propose to fulfil will be done together with you, the European associations and institutions of local and regional authorities, because you are our natural partners in this common mission of embedding democracy at the grassroots.

Later, at the end of the conference, we will sign a joint Call for Action which shows how deeply committed and linked we are in our work. I would like to warmly thank you for being here today and sharing your views and perspectives with us and eventually, for signing this joint Call with us.

Thank you for your attention.