

Summit of mayors – City Hall, Barcelona, Spain, 15 November 2017

Speech by Gunn Marit HELGESEN (Norway, EPP-CCE), Vice-President of the Congress

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Opening session

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Dear Mayor,

Dear participants,

I am delighted to welcome you today as Vice-President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe. First of all I would like to thank our host, the Mayor of Barcelona, for enabling us to hold this event in Barcelona, a city which sadly has its own recent experience of violent extremism, a fact which adds urgency and poignancy to our discussions today.

As we remember the victims – and their families – of this attack, just a few minutes from here, we are obliged to recognise that such acts of violent extremism are not isolated events, but have become a regular occurrence in the developed world. And we have to face the fact that this threat is likely to be part of our daily lives for some time to come.

This is why we are here today. Solidarity, co-operation and collaboration between actors at all levels is required, to reduce the risks of such attacks and protect our citizens against all risks of violent extremism. This conference provides us with an opportunity to discuss steps that we as locally elected representatives can take, to identify the causes, look for solutions and implement the policies necessary for the safety and well-being of our citizens.

In our previous meetings, our approach to radicalization focused on the prevention of acts of violence. It is now three years since we began our work and the frequency of attacks is not declining. I suggest that it is time to take stock. We need to rethink our approach to radicalisation and violent extremism.

Of course, as we have stressed during last two summits, a multi-agency approach is essential, a good practice that has to be continued. However we have also seen over the time, that prevention is not enough, and I think that we need to focus more on protecting our communities.

As local and regional elected representatives, we maintain close relations with our citizens. The actions that we take at local and regional level have a direct impact on their lives and especially now their safety. Our proximity enables us to more effectively detect and help individuals at risk of being radicalized and identify trends in our communities that increase the risk of such developments.

However we can't face this issue alone. We need to work together, in all our cities and regions and at all levels of government, not only to pool our resources but also to exchange views and good practice.

This is why we are gathered here today - to listen to each other, to gain insights into how others deal with the same issues, and by that to improve our practices and subsequently the situation and approach towards radicalization in Europe as a whole.

We need to recognise that much of the radicalisation that we encounter has its roots in poor integration, which also constitutes one of our focus points today, in our second session - "Strengthening communities to prevent polarisation and violent extremism". Radicalisation is too often a reaction to social exclusion. We do not need to go far to find this problem - it is present right here in so many of our communities.

We must find ways to move people away from a risk of radicalisation and alienation, to help and encourage them to fully integrate into our communities. We need to build bridges instead of building walls. As local authorities we have a chance to be close to our citizens and we should take advantage of that. We have the advantage of this proximity. We can respond quickly and effectively at the local level – and then share our experiences with others as we will be doing today.

As mayors you have a crucial role in our work against radicalization. You know your cities and you know what good practices and programs can tackle the radicalization issue most effectively. We need to act locally but at the same time think internationally.

As at previous summits, this conference will end with the endorsement of a declaration - the Barcelona Declaration. You should have received a copy of the draft and we would of course like to hear any comments that you may have regarding this text.

I invite you to make full use of this opportunity by actively participating in both sessions, and taking advantage of the diversity of backgrounds and approaches represented by mayors and experts from the many countries that are present here today.

I wish us all a successful conference!