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Outgoing speech for Xavier Cadoret,
President of the Chamber of Local Authorities, 2018-2021
40th Congress Plenary Session - 23 March 2021

Dear Colleagues,

Before my departure as President of this Chamber, I wanted to take a few moments and look back on what has been achieved over the last 2,5 years. Let me say that I have immensely enjoyed the work we have conducted together. It was a great honor and pleasure for me to serve our Congress during this mandate. Unfortunately, since the outbreak of COVID-19 a year ago, we could not meet in person in Strasbourg. But this is force majeure, hélas....

Prior to becoming President, this Chamber was already dealing with the important issue of “mayors under pressure,” as the working conditions of local elected representatives, in particular of mayors, across member States, had become of great concern to us. In some instances state authorities themselves were involved in creating undesirable working conditions, such as in the case of former Mayor of Chişinău and Congress member, Dorin CHIRTOACA, who in 2017 was suspended by a judicial authority and was replaced by an unelected government official. He was then detained and put under house arrest.

Similarly, the name Layla GÜVEN of the pro-Kurdish People’s Democratic Party, is well known to many of us. She too is a former Congress member, who became member of the Turkish Parliament later. Most recently, in December 2020, she was charged to more than 22 years in prison on alleged terror related charges by a Turkish court.

Last October, the Congress President issued a statement regarding the arrest by Turkish authorities of Congress member Ayhan BILGEN, Co-Mayor of the city of Kars, on the grounds of alleged terrorist links. The Congress has denounced the excessive use of legal proceedings against democratically elected local representatives and their replacement by state-appointed trustees on many occasions.

I am convinced, that the working conditions in countries with tense political situations will continue to remain high on the political agenda of this Chamber, going forward.

However, local elected representatives in well-established democracies may also be jeopardised, for other reasons, while fulfilling their political mandate. Our former Congress colleague and Mayor of Harleem in the Netherlands, Jos Wiene, is an example. In 2018, Jos faced security threats by criminal gangs in his city forcing him to spend six months in a safe-house with 24 hour armed security.

After my election in October 2018, this issue persisted, and - sadly - culminated in the despicable murder of Gdansk Mayor Paweł ADAMOWICZ, in January 2019. I attended his funeral to underline the Congress’ respect for the severity of the situation and intent on addressing it concretely in the Chamber’s work during my tenure.

Participating in the debate “mayors under pressure” during the 36th Plenary Session in April 2019, the new Mayor of Gdansk, Aleksandra DULKIEWICZ, warned her colleagues in the Congress about the consequences of populist policies that endanger local democracy.

During this vital debate many areas of concern were addressed by the speakers most notably verbal and physical threats and hate-speech on social media. This development has become more and more worrying and remains prevalent, in particular, at the local level - so much so that smaller towns and municipalities are attributing the decrease of mayoral candidatures for elections to the difficulties faced in the position.

On a more positive note, our work on new technologies and smart cities has become more relevant. Digital technologies offer new opportunities for more ecologically sustainable, connected, inclusive and attractive cities and territories. Their importance has grown even more amid the Covid-19 crisis. And while there are clear benefits of smart cities in terms of governance, accountability or citizen participation, digital technologies also pose some challenges and risks, such as those related to the use of data and privacy. It is rewarding to know that this issue began as a thematic debate in this Chamber in 2019 and is now well on its way to become a fully adopted report by the Congress that will also include regional aspects of IT.

Last but not least, I am very proud of the work conducted over the last years regarding the City of Mostar. Of course, we are all aware, the Bosnia and Herzegovinian City went twelve years without local elections due to a political impasse that effectively rendered their Election Act unconstitutional. The Congress and this Chamber were hyper-focused on this issue, even joining our efforts with the EU Committee of Regions to jointly create a Reflection Group on Mostar that carried out many visits to the area and drew international attention to this sore point.

Ultimately, a BiH citizen went to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, who ruled in her favour and on 20 December last year the citizens of Mostar were finally able to vote at the local level, an event we celebrated despite the on-going circumstances. As you may know, the Congress carried out a remote observation procedure in Mostar and the Bureau approved the according recommendations. Through a new cooperation project on the use of deliberative democracy tools at the local level, the Congress is currently continuing its presence in Mostar in the interest of stability and a forward-looking approach.

Dear colleagues, these were only a few examples of our work in this Chamber over the last 2,5 years. I hope I was able to demonstrate the wide range of topics we dealt with and the many challenges we faced.

Before I end, I would like to wish heartfelt congratulations to the new President of the Chamber of Local Authorities, Bernd VÖHRINGER. Bernd - I wish you good luck going forward and rest assured that, together with my colleagues, as well as in my new role as Vice-President of this Chamber, you can count on my support.