

36th Session of the Congress – Strasbourg, France, 2 – 4 April 2018

Reflection on the future of the Council of Europe – Congress contribution

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Strasbourg, France, 2 April 2018

Speaking notes

(6.5 minutes)

Gunn Marit HELGESEN

Dear colleagues,

Earlier today, in his communication, the Congress President has referred to the current situation of the Council of Europe, and the initiative of the Finnish Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers to discuss the future of this Organisation during the Ministerial Session in Helsinki, on 16 and 17 May.

This discussion will be an important step in the reflection process launched by the Chairmanship of Denmark during the Ministerial Session in Elsinore, on 18 May 2018, when passing the Chair to Croatia. As the Congress President has indicated, in November last year the Croatian Chair of the Committee of Ministers invited the Congress to contribute to this reflection process.

The Congress Bureau has tasked the Presidents of the two Chambers, President Xavier CADORET and myself, to prepare a draft contribution which you have before you today.

Allow me to present some key points which guided us in preparing this contribution.

First, we took it as an undisputable fact that the future of this Organisation is inseparable from the future of European democracy – the very democratic system that the Council of Europe has been building over the past 70 years, a system based on the strong institutions of democratic governance, the human rights protection mechanism and the common space of the rule of law.

Given the challenges faced by our democracies, this mission of the Council of Europe is as relevant today as it was 70 years ago. In fact, at the Committee of Ministers' meeting in Elsinore, the question of the future of this Organisation was directly linked to the need for responding to current challenges to democratic security in Europe – which was the key item on the meeting's agenda.

Secondly, we looked at the current context, the tasks at hand – the challenges facing us. I am pleased to say that our assessment coincides with the evaluation of the situation presented by Council of Europe Secretary General Thorbjørn Jagland in his report "Ready for Future Challenges – Reinforcing the Council of Europe", also prepared for the meeting in Helsinki and released today.

As does our contribution, Secretary General Jagland emphasises the severity of the challenges facing Europe and the deterioration of democratic security on the European continent, "as our standards are called into question in multiple member states", and the rule of law is "regarded as an obstacle to action". The Secretary General refers to the deeply worrying deterioration of freedom of expression in Europe over recent years, the stress on judicial independence which threatens to erode the separation of powers, the negative impact of austerity measures and the multiplication of "new social and political movements initiated by citizens who feel let down by the system".

We are convinced that these challenges reflect changes in our society that are global and system-wide in nature. Some of them are the result of phenomena that are beyond the Council of Europe's mandate – such as citizens' feeling of insecurity due to climate change or the impact of globalisation. But the key issues that can and must be addressed are indeed within our remit: restoring the political bond with citizens; their confidence in the capacity of politician and institutions to respond adequately to citizens' needs and concerns; and the social fabric that holds together our societies.

We are pleased in this regard with the emphasis placed by the Council of Europe Secretary General in his report on the need to guarantee Europeans the opportunity of a decent and dignified life, with the right to housing, health care, and education, and to work and family life – calling such rights "the glue that holds our societies together". We argue, and my co-rapporteur Xavier CADORET will say more about it, that local and regional elected representatives, with their proximity to citizens and the high level of citizens' trust that they still enjoy, have the primary role

and responsibility for delivering these rights in our communities and upholding the cohesion of societies.

Our third point is that the challenges, which are systemic in nature, require a response that is also system-wide – democratic renewal of the system, which Secretary General Jagland calls “renewed momentum”. It is our conviction that the Council of Europe, that has the intergovernmental, interparliamentary and local and regional institutional dimensions, is best placed to lead in this renewal.

It is also our conviction that the local and regional level is the springboard for this renewal, and that the Congress, as the representative assembly of the territorial dimension within the Council of Europe, must play the key role in this process.

My co-rapporteur Xavier CADORET will complete this presentation.

Thank you.