

Dear Ms. Dervišagić, dear Lejla,

Dear Mr. Vöhringer,

Dear Mr. Raičević, Mayor of our Host City,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When my dear colleague Lejla,

the representative of the Council of Europe in Montenegro,

proposed me, just two weeks ago,

to participate in this opening ceremony,

I immediately said Yes,

because I deeply believe in the importance of this institution,

the Council of Europe, ...

**... which, today more than ever,
is *the* stronghold of democracy, of human rights,
rule of law and of good governance
in our region, a region which stretches way beyond the EU.**

**And apart from its political bodies,
and the Court of Human Rights,
it is the Council of Europe's many incorruptible expert bodies
that make the Council so precious.**

**I believe most Montenegrins know
about the Venice Commission and about Moneyval –
institutions that provide invaluable input
into Montenegro's dynamic reform process.**

And I am sure this is true for other countries of the region as well.-

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We firmly believe

**that democracy is *the* form of government
that protects the rights of citizens most effectively
and provides the best framework for societal prosperity.**

**But those who believed that this was a truism,
obvious to everyone,
are increasingly being proven wrong – unfortunately.**

**In many countries, including my own country, Germany,
an increasing number of citizens believe that democracy is a fake,
that those at the top of government or in Parliament
do what they want anyway,
and that they are by no means acting in the best interest of the
people.**

**Such an alienation between citizens and their democratically elected representatives is dangerous for the acceptance of the democratic system,
and it is dangerous for the preservation of societal coherence,
and for the functioning of the state itself.**

**And, let us not forget,
there are political actors around the world
who do not believe in cooperative approaches,
who divide the world in friends and foes,
and who work tirelessly
to weaken those whom they perceive as foes,
through disinformation and fake news,
through instrumentalization of political and societal actors,
through attempts to delegitimise democratic systems and
processes – trying hard to undermine democratic countries and
societies from within.**

So, how to counter such trends and hostile acts? –

**By bringing democracy closer to the citizen,
by making the positive impact of democracy tangible for the
people,
by bridging the gap, - which is perceived as growing -,
between the citizens and the political leaders.**

I think in this endeavour the Council of Europe is leading the way.

**Please let me quote from a recommendation
of the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers,
adopted in September last year. The Committee stated**

**“... that *participation* of all citizens is at the very heart of democracy,
that citizens who are committed to democratic values,
mindful of their civic duties and active in public life,
are the lifeblood of any democratic system, and
that dialogue between citizens and decision makers is essential for democracy,
as it strengthens trust, the legitimacy of democratic institutions
and the effectiveness of their actions”. -unquote-**

**In this single sentence, Ladies and Gentlemen,
we find the basis for the Council of Europe project we are
launching today,
a project on “Promoting deliberative democracy ...” .**

**If we believe in a bottom-up approach
to strengthen, and further develop, democracy,
- and in Germany, we do -
then the “Congress of Regional and Local Authorities”
of the Council of Europe
seems the logical forum to strengthen participative democracy.**

**Because it is the locally elected representatives,
who are in the most regular, close and direct contact with their
respective constituencies.**

**So, we are very happy
that the Centre of Expertise for Good Governance,
at the Congress,
given its many years of experience in this field,
will be implementing this project. -**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The somewhat lengthy title of this project has *two* components – “promoting deliberative democracy”, but also “*innovative* approaches to citizen participation”.

And this second component is key to the success of your joint efforts, I believe.

If we want to renew the enthusiasm of our citizens for the beauty of democratic participation

we cannot just continue trotting along the old beaten paths.

And we cannot rely solely on theoretical concepts.

Rather, experiments, new, creative, even courageous approaches are needed.

Duly elected, or appointed, representatives and officials need to find, and accept, new ways to allow themselves to be questioned by citizens, and to enter into direct dialogue with voters so as to learn from them what really bothers them and what solutions they have to propose.

There is no rulebook on how to do this, at least as far as I know. In many cases, “trial and error” is the way to proceed.

But there *is* already a lot of experience available, about what has worked well, and what has proven less successful.

So, the mix of expert advice and exchange about best practice among the practitioners, i.e. those who bear responsibility at the local level, seems to be particularly useful.

This is why my government has not only successfully advocated for a reinforced overall budget of the Council of Europe in last year's negotiations.

But it has also granted a voluntary contribution for this project, in the firm belief that

the Congress of Regional and Local Authorities, and its Centre of Expertise for Good Governance, are bodies particularly well placed and qualified, to promote progress in the participation agenda – across the Council of Europe members, but, in particular, in South-East Europe.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me end

**by thanking the organisers and implementers,
and all participants,
to jointly tackle this important task.**

**It is my hope and wish that this project will offer you
a conducive framework to enhance skills and knowledge,
to share experience and, thereby, support each other,
and, then, later,
to courageously proceed in trying out new formats and innovative
methods, always with the overarching goal
to ensure that your citizens get effectively involved in,
and fully embrace, and appreciate,
the democratic approach
that we all believe is the best way to govern our countries.
Thank you very much for your attention.**