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25th Anniversary Ceremony of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and the European Committee of the Regions

European Parliament, Paul Henri Spaak building – Hemicycle – Brussels, Belgium, 27 June 2019

Mr President,
Members,
Dear friends and colleagues,

On behalf of the Congress, I would first of all like to say how happy we are to celebrate this 25th anniversary with you here today.

On a more personal note, as both President of the Congress and Vice-President of the Committee of the Regions, I am very proud to see our two institutions brought together for this occasion.

It is no accident that the European Committee of the Regions and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities are celebrating this anniversary together. It is because there is an undeniable complementarity between our two institutions and an intense co-operation that we have constantly bettered over the years. And if our two institutions have the same age - 25 years already! – it is not entirely coincidental either. This corresponds to the birth of an awareness, the awareness of the role and importance of local authorities.

Initially, the governments had conceived Europe and European co-operation solely in intergovernmental terms but, fairly rapidly, the need to involve the local dimension in the process of European co-operation and integration was felt.

Within the Council of Europe and its Parliamentary Assembly in particular, leading politicians of the day committed to a local and regional dimension. By as early as 1953, the Parliamentary Assembly had set up a "Special Committee on Municipal and Regional Affairs" and it was on 12 January 1957, that the first sitting of the Conference of Local Authorities was held under the chairmanship of Jacques Chaban Delmas, French Prime Minister and Speaker of the National Assembly. However, it was really the Summit of Heads of State and Government, meeting in Vienna in 1993, which approved the "creation of a consultative organ genuinely representing both local and regional authorities in Europe". Between that first sitting in 1957 and the adoption in 1994 by the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers of the resolution instituting the Congress in its present form, there was a lengthy process of persuasion aimed at the central governments and European organisations.

Along similar lines, it was thanks to pressure from the regional authorities in the European Union to have more of a voice in European affairs that the Treaty of Maastricht set up the European Committee of the Regions and allowed the member States to be represented on the Council of the European Union by ministers of their regional governments.

As our two institutions mark an important anniversary, the Council of Europe also celebrates 70 years since its creation. Now, seven decades later, the role of local and regional authorities in the institutional architecture of the member States is more crucial than ever. The importance of local democracy in our States is beyond all doubt, as it enables each and every citizen to feel concerned, involved and able to subscribe to shared values and the institutions representing them.

The effort to win people over to our cause launched a few decades ago has yielded very tangible results as our assemblies perfectly illustrate – you, the European Committee of the Regions, and we, the Congress. One decisive step forward was the adoption of an obligatory text, the European Charter of Local Self-Government, now ratified by all 47 member States of the Council of Europe. In its preamble, the national governments defined local democracy as one of the main foundations of any democratic regime.

There is still some way to go though, before people fully realise the key role played by local and regional elected representatives in our democracies. In its work to monitor the situation of local democracy, the Congress observes here and there recurrent signs of central authorities resorting to certain forms of authoritarianism, seen for example in attempts to recentralise, a lack of consultation or reluctance to grant local authorities the necessary resources to fulfil their tasks.

We must therefore carry on our struggle and continue to ardently champion municipalities and regions and those who embody them. It is this struggle that brings us together. We share the same challenge of championing local democracy and public policy in Europe. We fight under the same banner, even though our operational capacities are not the same. Your means are those of the European Union, and those of the Council of Europe are, obviously, distinctly more modest.

In the Congress our vocation is to build local democracy from the bottom up. Our statutory role comprises missions on the ground, whereas your role is to advise the member States and also the institutions making up the European Union. Two distinct and equally important roles, each of us occupying our own niche with our own prerogatives and resources to work towards the same end: what the governments call *subsidiarity* and I prefer to call *shared democracy*.

This sharing of roles and prerogatives between central governments and intermediate levels, which we uphold on a daily basis, will be decisive for the democratic future of Europe. We know that, today, there is a whole host of threats to the cohesion of our continent. You know them well, they are called populism, the rise of extremism, insubordination shown to politicians and institutions and abstentionism in elections, and they constitute the most substantial challenges faced by Europe since the end of the Second World War and the development of multilateralism. The 2018 indices of Eurobarometer are conclusive: only 36 to 38% of citizens still trust their national governments and parliaments, while local authorities enjoy a level of confidence of 50%. It is in this context of disruption and doubt, at a time when our citizens' trust of public institutions seems to be crumbling, that local and regional authorities remain a solid anchoring point, which needs to be used to cement our societies more strongly.

We are convinced that the problems and challenges we face today can no longer be dealt with at just one level; they highlight the need for consultation, for concerted efforts and complementarity, the need for a continuum between the different levels of authority. Democracy must be shared between the different levels of governance and, to that end, it is indispensable to recognise local and regional democracy once and for all as an essential pillar of our democratic system.

Mayors and municipal councillors, as local elected representatives, are the representatives of public authorities who are the closest to citizens. We say to central governments: make use of this closeness, capitalise on the community's trust in their local authorities and use their networks and the institutions that represent them to revive and reinforce democracy.

Through their experience and that of the municipalities and regions they represent, our two institutions are well placed to continue to contribute to this long-term endeavour, as they have done for 25 years. Our anniversary is an opportunity to remind us that we, like governments, are responsible for advancing the project of a democratic, open Europe that listens to its citizens.

Thank you