

Chamber of Local Authorities, 23 March 2021

**Speech by Bernd VÖHRINGER, Germany (EPP/CCE)**

President of the Chamber of Local Authorities

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Dear colleagues,

I thank you for your support and confidence.

Please be assured that I will make good use of this mandate to pursue important topics in the interest of the strengthening of local democracy in Council of Europe member States. In the face of unprecedented challenges that lie ahead, new initiatives on pressing future-related issues also need to be addressed. I am ready and committed to do so and I rely on co-operation, as the operational principle, and on your contributions and support for the coming two and a half years.

Most naturally, in my work, I will build upon what has been done in this Chamber over the past years, for example with regard to working conditions of elected representatives and threats for local politicians. This will remain high on the agenda, for example in form of discussions about negative developments on the internet or hate speech on social media. We are talking of violence that starts with words and - regrettably - may result in physical attacks on mayors, councillors and other elected representatives.

If we take a look at the general working conditions in our municipalities, the situation of women in politics and the work-life balance is of specific interest. This is a subject relevant to this Chamber – but also to the Congress at large.

It goes without saying that the overarching question of environment (including a wide spectrum of problems such as climate change, management of resources, energy efficiency or biodiversity) is a topic to be discussed by the Local Chamber. And when I spoke at the beginning about pressing future-related issues, it is the environment that we have to keep in mind, knowing that it is up to the municipalities to implement measures often initiated at the central level.

I do not have sufficient time now to elaborate further on this and a work programme, to be drawn-up for the Local Chamber, will contain the details. Just allow me to highlight three topics that are of specific importance and are also contained in the Congress priorities for the coming years: I am talking about

- new technologies, digitalisation and artificial intelligence in the local context
- about citizen participation and new deliberative democracy tools used at the local level and
- the difficulties to motivate women and men to stand for public office in an atmosphere of tension and difficult working conditions.

All three topics are closely linked to what local democracy and local self-government need:

we have to do what we can, to maintain trust in democratic institutions and the political actors, and to rebuild it where trust has been lost.

Dear Congress members,

How could I finish my speech without a word on the crisis that has taken all of us to our limits. Tomorrow, the Congress will adopt the new report on COVID-19 and its consequences on the implementation of the European Charter on Local Self-Government. Ensuring basic principles at the local and regional level is essential for further democratic stability in all Council of Europe member States. Further reports and debates are to follow, for example on the economic consequences at the territorial level and impact on social cohesion as well as implications of multi-level governance.

In view of the second part of the 40th Congress Session which will be organised in June, my suggestion to this Chamber will be to look, more closely, into the COVID- and post-COVID-situation of urban areas and local centres. COVID-19 provoked profound changes for towns and cities – working from home, unfortunate closure of small shops and companies, consequences on city tourism, local restaurants and the cultural life are topics that will keep us busy, also in the months to come.

With those of you who will become members of the new Bureau, we will meet again tomorrow afternoon and will have the chance to continue our discussions.

As I said, in the composition of the Chamber of Local Authorities, we will meet again in June, during the second part of the Congress Spring Session.

I look forward to working together with you, in this Chamber as well as in cooperation with the other bodies of the Congress, notably the three Committees – Monitoring, Governance and Current Affairs.

Thank you and have a good day.