

County Donegal, Ireland, 30 August 2022

Speech by Andreas Kiefer, Secretary General

Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, Council of Europe

Check against delivery

(ca 2200 words – 14 minutes)

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am very glad to have the opportunity to speak here today at the Summer Academy of the Assembly of European Regions and to represent the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities. The Congress was established to anchor pluralist democracy and citizen participation at the level closest to the citizen – in municipalities, cities and regions, in their municipal councils and regional assemblies, parliaments and governments. Our elected members work as an organ in the Council of Europe, Europe’s oldest international organisation defending democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

I thank the hosts of Donegal for providing the framework in a combination of formal sessions and opportunities to discuss and exchange informally.

I am very pleased that this summer school is taking place in Ireland, while this country holds the Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers¹ of the Council of Europe. So, it is the right place chosen at the right time!

[Irish Presidency]

Let me quote some aspects from their priorities under the title “*Hear Our Voices - Promoting Participatory Democracy & Youth Engagement*”:

“Ireland’s second Presidency priority is rooted in an abiding belief in the power of deliberative democracy and the necessity of youth participation. ...

This year, Ireland marked the centenary of our state’s independence, an occasion which have cause to reflect on the struggle for democracy, and how it must be renewed and defended by each successive generation. The Council of Europe has long led in promoting the rights of children and youth, pioneering a myriad of vital training and inclusion programmes across the continent. Through the Presidency, Ireland will draw on this expertise to engage with and listen to young voices, the future of our democracies. At the same time, in countering illiberalism, Ireland will share its national experience, above all with Citizens’ Assemblies, in promoting participatory democracy, while seeking to learn from others.”

...

“Ireland believes that civic education is key to the success of diverse democracies.”

¹ See <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cm/cm-chairmanship> and the priorities: [https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?Reference=CM/Inf\(2022\)14-rev3](https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?Reference=CM/Inf(2022)14-rev3)

I am sure that Minister of State Jack Chambers will present the Irish Presidency priorities more in depth when he addresses you on Thursday afternoon.

[“Reflect modern identities and expectations in constitutions and anthems”!]

I very much look forward to an exchange of views with you on what it means to build a Europe for the next generation and therefore on the key role that you, the younger generation, have in this process. I am not in favour of an approach that the next generation “will inherit the planet”. “Inherit”, in my view suggests that you get something about which someone else has decided and it will be yours without you being able to determine, shape and make choices. It is, therefore, this very involvement and the processes we – the older and the younger generations - must address jointly.

This discussion about your expectations and wishes is of utmost importance against the background of what we see in Europe today. The Council of Europe, which I represent, was created in 1949 on the ashes of World War II. It was created to make sure that the “Never Again” philosophy is embedded in European society and that Europe becomes a family of democracies based on the rule of law and protection of citizens’ rights with independent and transparent monitoring bodies. Unity in diversity, based on the agreement on and commitment to these values, and visible in different identities: local, regional, national and European. These identities are not contradicting, they are complementary and can reinforce each other. Therefore, it is high time to express these modern and contemporary elements of identities also in symbols, which express the identity in a very formal way, such as in constitutions and statutes and in our different national and regional anthems.

Constitutions and anthems contain the essentials of how a country or a region wants to be and sees itself. Constitutions formulate legally, anthems add the emotional dimension.

National and regional constitutions have been frequently amended in the last years and now include references to social cohesion, citizen participation, the environment and sustainability. Now, there is a “European step” to take!

Let me refer to the example of my home region: In 1999, the Salzburg Land constitution was amended to include new state goals. It is now the task of the Land to ensure a development taking into account the economic, social, health and cultural needs of its population, while also taking responsibility for future generations.

And I believe Land Salzburg is one of very few regions in Europe which has a reference to Europe in its constitution. Art 1 para 3 reads: *“As a region, Land Salzburg takes part in European integration and in cross-border and interregional cooperation.”*

You, young people, with your outreach also via social media, could start a campaign in your regions to add a verse on the European dimension in your regional anthems addressing being embedded in our common European values. Anthems, if they want to be meaningful, must be brought into the 21st century addressing the key issues people living today consider important. This could be done by a competition among young people organised by your regional youth councils or regional ministries for youth. I am sure, there is a lot of creativity across European regions to write lyrics adapted to each region, just as different and individual as the anthems themselves

are. If this first step is successful, national anthems could be addressed in a second step of a bottom-up initiative.

At an earlier occasion, I proposed to add a verse in each national anthem of Council of Europe member states referring to this European identity, which complements the national and regional identities. This could also be an occasion to analyse the wording of verses in national anthems, which sometimes glorify battles and war and therefore are absolutely inappropriate in a 21st century Europe.

Identities are important and we can see this demonstrated impressively by our Ukrainian friends in the difficult times they are going through. In my view, this aspect of “common ground”, of identity, expectations, and values, fits very well in the debate of this Summer Academy, “A Europe for the Next Generation”. Identity based on values is the over-arching roof that unites us. Under this roof all the other policy fields, which you will address in the coming days, can develop.

[Multiple crises: learn lessons and defend values]

Yet today, “Never Again” is happening again. There is the terrible war of Russia against Ukraine going on in Europe that touches and impacts all of us. Against the background of this and many other challenges – the pandemic, climate change, migration, economic and social problems – we see polarisation of society and rising extremism, fuelled by hate speech and fake news. We witness a growing loss of confidence in the ability of politicians and institutions of governance to respond adequately to these challenges and to citizens’ needs. In addition, we see scepticism against science, a declining culture of discourse, which is being reduced to “right” or “wrong”, to a loss of the understanding of complexity and a trend to indignation and tides of criticism on social media instead of an open and respectful competition of ideas and views and the possibility to agree to disagree.

We need to understand what went wrong and not to repeat the same mistakes going forward, not to perpetuate the errors when building a Europe for the next generation. We need to go back to the origins of the European project and restore the unity of purpose and the unity of values in our common mission. The “Never Again” philosophy was rooted in renouncing violence and embracing diversity– and most importantly, in the respect for one another, including diversity of opinions, that is increasingly challenged in the clash society of today.

We need to re-engage dialogue and civic debate within society, to make sure that the extreme stops being the mainstream. Democratic institutions need to be “reinvented” with citizens’ involvement – with youth involvement – to make sure that citizens have constant access to governance, not limited to elections alone, and that no one feels excluded from decision making.

You, young people, are our hope for making this happen, our hope for the future of Europe. This future is built today by you – because you are also the present of Europe.

Towns and villages, cities and regions are best placed to engage young people directly in decision-making and democratic processes, so that our communities become stronger, more inclusive and more resilient to future challenges.

[Congress’ “rejuvenating politics” initiative]

In the Congress, we understood early on the importance of making the younger generation part of governance, and we have been advocating for youth participation for decades now. Already thirty years ago, in 1992, the Congress adopted the European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life, which was further revised in 2003.

And on the first of June this year, we celebrated the 10th anniversary of the Additional Protocol to the European Charter on local self-government on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority, which also covers young people rights and responsibilities.

Participation means engaging with young people on an equal basis. Acknowledging this, the Congress launched nearly a decade ago an initiative to involve young people from Council of Europe member States as Congress Youth Delegates, participating in Congress activities equally with Congress elected members (although without the right to vote). This initiative became part of our strategy for “rejuvenating politics”.

I am happy to welcome two of the Congress Youth Delegates here with us today. They will participate in various debates later in the programme, so they will tell you more about their involvement in the Congress work and the youth programme.

Our Youth Delegates can take part in all of our Congress sessions and committee meetings, give their opinion on all our documents and actively contribute to the relevant reports and debates, just like Congress members. The Congress is the only international organisation to do so!

Youth participation has become a recurring thematic subject on the Congress agenda.

In 2021, the Congress adopted a report on youth work and how local and regional authorities can help strengthen it. Together with youth delegates, we translated this report into youth-friendly language in the form of a flyer.

In March of this year the Congress adopted a report on the future of youth in rural areas, drawing attention to the challenges faced by young people growing up in rural communities and how local and regional authorities can ensure a better future for them. The co-rapporteurs were Aida Jalilzade (Azerbaijan) and James Moloney (Ireland).

Moreover, the Congress also encourages local authorities to involve children in sustainability policies. A booklet for children called “How to make your town a better place” was also adopted in March of this year to encourage local authorities to involve children more in their communities.

[Honest involvement – as of now!]

Youth work comes in many shapes and sizes and does not fit into one single mould. It has to be adapted to local needs, culture and context. There is no single recipe for building quality youth policies, but there are commonly agreed best practices, tools and guidelines that help build inclusive and resilient communities.

It is only by working with young people and involving them in decision-making on important agreements and goals, such as the Paris climate agreement and the UN 2030 Agenda, that we can overcome such difficult times and build prosperous, resilient, democratic societies.

Dear colleagues,

I hope that the ongoing European year of youth will pave the way for a more participatory and active involvement of young people in European regions, by creating more sustainable, inclusive, green and digitally transitioned regions.

Local and regional authorities can, through their policies and action, promote youth participation. This is a responsibility, but equally an opportunity. And it is very important to point out that this is not charity. It is not about kind politicians providing for helpless youth. Youth work gives back much more to us than we put into it.

In building a Europe for the next generation, we must give the young people a place at the forefront. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities will continue to work diligently in this direction. In its priorities for 2021-2026, this Congress committed to promoting the participation of citizens in decision-making in Europe's towns, cities and regions. We all agreed to give in particular young people, as the future generation, a voice.

The Congress also committed to contributing to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, or SDGs. We expressed our will to build sustainable societies for our citizens.

I think that these priorities are mutually reinforcing.

After all, what better way to implement the Sustainable Development Goals and ensure a sustainable future, a Europe for the next generation, than by involving this next generation?

I am happy you all are here, and I look forward to our discussions and to exchanging with you during this Summer Academy.

Version: 26.8.2022