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Dear Mayor,

Dear colleagues and participants,

It has been a long trip to join you from my home country Greece, but I am delighted to be here with you today. Not only am I happy to discover the beautiful city of Cordoba – where I can see a hint of Athens (TBC) – but I felt it important to follow-up with the work of the OIDP after having attended the conference in Valongo last year.

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities which I represent today is one of the two political assemblies of the Council of Europe. So, allow me to briefly introduce this Organisation, the oldest of the European continent.

Indeed, the Council of Europe was created on 5 May 1949, right after World War II, to ensure that its horrors will never be repeated and that the European countries could reconcile. The ten founding states (*Belgium, Denmark, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom*) engaged in promoting democracy, human rights and the rule of law, followed, after a couple of months, by four more (*Turkiye, Greece, Iceland*) including Germany.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 opened the way to the accession of central and eastern European countries and the Federation of Russia in February 1996. In 2022, the Council of Europe comprised all the European States except Belarus.

In March 2022, when Russia launched its large-scale war of aggression against Ukraine, the Council of Europe decided to expel the country.

Given this new geopolitical context, the Council of Europe felt it necessary to bring its member states together to reaffirm their commitment to common values and standards. The 4th Summit of Heads of State and Government took place in Reykjavik in Iceland in May 2023.

There, the leaders of the 46 member States adopted the *Reykjavik Principles of Democracy* which stress the joint responsibility of national, local and regional authorities in strengthening democracy and good governance at all levels.

They also recognised grassroots authorities as being part of the system of checks and balances which contributes to the democratic stability of the European continent.

By recalling this important European milestone, I wish to underline that democracy is not something obvious that we inherit—it is something we build, protect, cherish and must commit to.

We all know about the many challenges democratic societies are currently facing, be they economic, geopolitical, environmental or societal.

We are living in an era of rapid change and growing uncertainty, in a world marked by a complexity of developments and mistrust. The digital age, in particular, while opening doors for greater civic participation, has also become a battleground of misinformation and polarisation.

In such troubled times, it is essential to remember that local democracy is a crucial pillar of democracy. Without a strong efficient local democracy there can be no solid democratic societies.

Local democracy is the cement of society. It is at local level that direct contact is possible between the elected representative and the citizen. Furthermore, many powers can be better managed at local level than by any other level of government. Local autonomy ensures that power is shared not just vertically but also partly horizontally.

Cities and regions are not just administrative units; they are the places where values, human dignity, equality, inclusiveness, and dialogue take tangible form in everyday life.

How are we, in the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, supporting local democracy?

Firstly, the Congress bases its work on a legal reference text, the European Charter of Local Self-Government, a Council of Europe treaty which has been ratified by all member States.

The Charter lays down standards for protecting the rights of local authorities and requires the member states to comply with several principles.

We carry out a regular country-by-country monitoring of the implementation of these principles by the States. We establish a constructive political dialogue with their authorities and adopt recommendations to the State concerned which are discussed during the Congress' plenary sessions.

Unlike other Conventions of the Council of Europe, the Charter is a convention ratified only by Council of Europe member states. We are currently exploring ways of making the Charter better known beyond Europe's borders and of extending its benefits to other regions of the world. It is more important than ever for Europe and its institutions to strengthen ties with regions that share their values.

Secondly, the Congress supports local democracy by carrying out cooperation projects and activities. These projects are implemented in the field for specific member states or on specific themes. They are funded by member states or the European Union. In 2024, the Congress provided assistance with reforms and capacity building in twenty-one European countries.

Thirdly, the Congress is implementing a whole range of other activities intended to increase the quality of local democracy and support local authorities in fulfilling their duties. Let me mention the missions to observe local and regional elections (I was recently part of the Congress delegation that observed the local elections in Finland) and the new human rights' strategy aimed at promoting a culture of human rights at the local and regional levels.

The preparation of thematic reports also helps addressing subjects of common interest. The adoption of such reports during plenary sessions provides the opportunity to discuss and share good practices, formulate recommendations and conceive innovative policies in various areas.

All in all, what we do, in the Congress, is to support and promote good local governance. Because the quality of local governance has a direct impact on the quality of life of our citizens in their communities.

Dear colleagues,

Democracy is not perfect, but it is the best system we have. Why? Because it is about people.

And despite many long-standing and new challenges, democracy endures. Why? Because it is built on the resilience of our societies and communities.

Local democracy is an essential pillar of democracy and requires the involvement and participation of citizens. We should not underestimate the power of proximity. It is the closeness of local governance that can restore trust and rebuild democratic confidence.

It is in the local context that we see hope translated into action, rights upheld in concrete terms, and community spirit given form. While we witness rising political tensions, social fragmentation, and challenges to mutual trust, we also see inspiring examples of civic engagement, innovative governance, and steadfast leadership at the grassroots level.

I would like to praise the OIDP's work in showcasing, supporting and promoting such examples. This is also what we aim to do at the Congress.

With our European Local Democracy Week, we invite municipalities, regions, national associations, other stake holders across Europe, to open their doors to citizens and communities and talk about democracy in the field, in real terms. Not as an idea from textbooks, but as something that shapes concrete every-day life decisions about schools, public transport, environmental policies, social care... etc.

We offer them the opportunity to report on their activities, to share them with other communities and give them a greater visibility at the European level.

We also strongly promote the participation of young people in public life.

In 2014, we launched the 'Rejuvenating Politics' initiative. It means that, every year, the Congress invites one youth delegate from each of the Council of Europe member states to take part in its work. We offer them the opportunity to participate in our debates and to carry out grassroots projects aimed at promoting youth participation in their country.

We are currently also in a process of revising the Council of Europe Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life. The Charter contains principles, best practices and guidelines to enhance youth participation at local and regional levels. The revision of the Charter will ensure that young people are included in democratic structures and processes and have their voices better heard.

Dear colleagues,

The Congress is promoting participative democracy throughout its work. Because we are convinced that the active participation and involvement of all citizens is essential if we are to build more democratic, caring, stable and prosperous societies.

I am very pleased that the Congress can follow your work in this area more closely. I very much look forward to hearing about all the initiatives and activities which have been promoted by the Observatory over the past year.

I also hope that we will be able to develop our cooperation in the future.

Let us work together to promote a real grassroots democracy, a democracy of proximity, where consultation, dialogue, participation and involvement are the keywords, where policymaking and life-shaping projects for communities are the result of a collaborative effort.

Thank you for your attention