

1400th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies

Statement by Leendert Verbeek, President of the Congress

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Strasbourg, France, 31 March 2021

Mr President,

Thank you for your kind words and congratulations upon my election as President of the Congress.

Dear Permanent Representatives and Observers to the Council of Europe,

Dear Secretary General of the Council of Europe,

This is my first speech to you in my capacity as President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities. I look forward to many more opportunities for formal and informal exchanges in the coming two and a half years.

Please let me present myself: my name is Leen Verbeek. Currently I serve as King's Commissioner in the Kingdom of the Netherlands. For much of my professional life I served in public offices and in civil society organisations. Since 2010, I am an active member of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities. During that period, I have participated in many monitoring-missions, conducted factfinding-missions in member States, was spokesperson on radicalisation, was member of the Bureau of the Congress, was Chair of the Monitoring-Committee of the Congress for four and a half year and as such participated in meetings of the Venice-Commission. In doing so, I have seen first-hand the unique role of the European Charter of Local Self Government in protecting and developing local democracy on the European continent and serving as an inspiration beyond.

I think the Congress can be proud of its achievements throughout the years. We have given advice to the Committee of Ministers, to national governments, to the national associations of local and regional authorities and to many individual municipalities, cities and regions. In return, mayors and councillors share their needs, experiences and their good practices.

The Congress is an indispensable platform of dialogue and exchange of knowhow for the whole Council of Europe and the Organisation should make best use of this pool of know-how. The Committee of Ministers, I am sure, will analyse the recommendations of the Congress and of the Parliamentary Assembly how to overcome the current crisis, to defend democracy human rights and the rule of law and to improve the performance for future crises. In the spirit of multi-level governance, the Committee of Ministers must – and I trust it will - make best use of the synergies, the Council of Europe can produce in uniting the capacities and joining the forces of the parliaments, of the local authorities and of the intergovernmental structures.

Before and during the crisis, we, in the Congress, have implemented reforms and constantly improved our working methods of our monitoring and election observation activities. The willingness to listen, the willingness to discuss and not avoiding difficult topics and the willingness to find a compromise are characteristic for the Congress.

Last week we had the first part of our 40th session. This was a renewal session for the Congress. New members were welcomed and the elections for the different positions were held^{1,2}

The current pandemic has impacted significantly our work in the Congress as indeed it has impacted the work of the rest of the Council of Europe. The restrictions to meet in person discussing relevant topics, severely limited our possibilities; despite efforts to ensure business continuity and to continue fulfilling our mission in these challenging times. 2021 could be a turning point and be a herald for renewal and opportunities. Crises such as the health or the financial crisis lead to a reevaluation of the key role of public authorities in protecting the population. Regional and local authorities are closest to the citizens and know their needs in everyday lives. Mayors and councillors must stand next to our citizens, protect their human and civil rights, preserve democracy and guarantee their security. We have to be alert on those situations where democracy and constitutional values, civil and human rights are at stake or in danger. Especially in times of crisis, the values of the Council of Europe must be guarded.

In my acceptance-speech last week, I called upon Turkey³ to remain in the Istanbul convention. For the sake of Turkey and its people, for the sake of the Council of Europe and for the sake of the international legal system and multilateralism. The Council of Europe has been characterised as a treaty-based organisation; one built on charters and conventions, which are closely linked to the fundamental values of the Organisation. The Istanbul Convention is paradigmatic in that respect.

Last week, the Congress adopted its priorities for the new mandate⁴. The Congress will focus the next 5 years on promoting:

- Resilient societies through effective responses to health crises, such as the Covid pandemic;
- Democratic societies, focusing on representative democracy and citizen participation;
- Cohesive societies, by reducing inequalities;
- Sustainable societies, focusing on environmental issues and climate action and,
- Digital societies, focusing on digitalisation and artificial intelligence.

The Congress' work on these thematic issues are a concrete contribution of local and regional authorities and the Council of Europe itself to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The priorities of the Congress are fully in line with the Strategic Framework of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe which put the emphasis on environmental and social sustainability, digital revolution, as well as citizen engagement in a democracy.

I consider that the quality of our work is the best argument in the difficult debates to come. It's the quality of our reports that can convince our partners. I have called upon all members of Congress to speak about our work, to be ambassadors of our Congress, so that we can achieve our goals in the years to come. I call upon you, dear Ambassadors, to provide the conditions for the mission of the Congress and provide it with the resources its needs!

I am very concerned about the fact that the financial resources of the Congress have been reduced by nearly 15% over the last years and its staff resources by nearly 20% in the same period. We will continue to contribute to the overall efforts of the Organisation in facing its budgetary challenges. But we also strive to a return to a 3% share of the budget and in the short term it would be essential to unfreeze the two post currently frozen. This is the only financially sustainable means to ensure that the Congress can deliver on its statutory mission⁵.

¹ See: [The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities elects its new leadership - News 2021 \(coe.int\)](#)

² See: [Leendert Verbeek elected as the President of the Congress - News 2021 \(coe.int\)](#)

³ See: [Statement of the President of the Congress on Turkey's announced withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention - News 2021 \(coe.int\)](#)

⁴ See: [Congress adopts its priorities for 2021-2026 - News 2021 \(coe.int\)](#) and Congress Resolution 465 (2021)

⁵ See: Congress [Recommendation 454 \(2021\)](#)

Dear Ambassadors,

The challenges which citizens on the European continent face can only be addressed at multilevel governance. The current health crisis has shown it and the post recovery period will show it even more clearly. That is why the Congress is so important in the overall approach of the Council of Europe. We must all play our part and take our responsibility. We belong to the same European family with the same goals and values.

Mr President,

I was pleased that Minister Roth, on behalf of the German Presidency of the Committee of Ministers, addressed the Congress last week⁶ with his clear commitment, statements and replies. Yes, we noted, his origin as a politician at the municipal level.

I am looking forward to participating in the ministerial session and I am looking forward to working with you all, dear Permanent Representatives of the member States of the Council of Europe, in achieving our common goals and safeguarding our common values.

Thank you for your attention.

⁶ See : [German Minister for Europe Michael Roth addresses the Congress - News 2021 \(coe.int\)](#)