

**40th session of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe**

## **Communication by Leendert VERBEEK, President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities**

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Dear colleagues,

The crisis we have been undergoing for more than a year now has amplified the social, economic and political challenges and the divisions within our communities and society as a whole.

It has further weakened citizens' confidence in democratic processes and, in some countries, the pandemic has put democratic values and human rights at stake.

More than ever, the crisis has confirmed the need for strong and credible governments at all levels.

As local and regional elected representatives, we are the closest to the citizens and our role is pivotal in responding effectively to the crisis. It will continue to be so in the post-crisis recovery.

This grassroots democracy needs to be strengthened.

This was my message at the Hamburg ministerial session of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe in May which I attended together with the heads of all the Council of Europe institutions.

The session resulted in the adoption of important decisions for the future of the Organisation as a whole and the role of the Congress was highlighted as a unique player in its institutional architecture.

Indeed, our Congress has an essential role to play in this regard.

The priorities we adopted at the part-session in March show our determination to play our part.

Since then, I have had meetings with the presidents of the chambers and the committees to discuss the implementation of these priorities as we strive for synergies and efficiency.

I have also had meetings with the Secretary General of the Council of Europe and have discussed co-operation in this respect with the President of the Committee of the Regions, and, within the Council of Europe, with the President of the Parliamentary Assembly and the President of the Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations of the Council of Europe (INGOs) as part of my endeavour to join forces to ensure that cities and regions are fully equipped for post-crisis recovery and that their voice is heard in the dialogue with national governments.

This is fully in line with the need to combine the principles of multilateralism in the Council of Europe and of multi-level governance within member states.

I will pursue in this vein with the member States of the Council of Europe just as I will rely on all national delegations to the Congress.

To achieve our aims we also need commensurate resources, hence, our recommendation on the Congress budget which we also adopted in March and my call to the heads of delegations to approach your national authorities in the context of the budgetary process of the Council of Europe.

I raised this important issue this morning in the Bureau meeting and I repeat this call to you now.

I am convinced that if we join our efforts to persuade our governments of the relevance of the Council of Europe for the protection of democracy, human rights and the rule of law and the importance of the Congress in contributing to the local and regional dimension of these rights and values, we will succeed in getting support for our very legitimate claim and having the necessary decisions taken in the Committee of Ministers.

Dear colleagues,

While we hear some good news on the health front about the progress of vaccination and good results in the fight against the pandemic, we also continue to witness worrying developments on the social and political front.

I would like to raise my concern about recent developments in Belarus, which do not go in the right direction of the values of the Council of Europe.

We recently received an invitation from the Belarusian authorities to participate in an event organised by the Belarus Institute of Strategic Studies, a pro-government research centre, addressing local self-government reform as part of the constitutional reform in Belarus.

I should like to refer to the statement of my predecessor as President of the Congress in this respect and stress that while we must commit to promoting the principles of the ECLSG we must also avoid being instrumentalised and rather promote wide consultation including civil society and NGOs such as the Lev Sapieha Foundation.

As you can see, the wide thematic spectrum of the Congress' work requires our full commitment. This session is a good example of raising important topics and of discussing them with member States and with the Secretary General of the Council of Europe.

Let us continue to work together to achieve our goals!