

Speech of Ms. Gudrun Mosler-Törnström, President of the Chamber of Regions of the Congress of the Council of Europe

General Assembly of the Conference of European Regional Legislative Assemblies (CALRE)

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***Friday 7 November 2014 morning Session:
“International attendees’ presentations on the main aim and functioning of the international organisations invited”***

(10 minutes)

Dear Presidents, dear Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like, first of all, to thank Ms Pilar Rojo Noguera for having addressed this invitation to the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe. “The Congress” that I **represent** today and that I have the pleasure to **present** to you.

[Congress – the voice of local and regional elected representatives in Greater Europe].

The Congress contributes, at local and regional level, to the main objectives of the Council of Europe, which are to ensure that human rights, democracy and the rule of law are effectively guaranteed for all European citizens and for as many residents as possible.

The Congress is a political assembly composed of 636 elected politicians – mayors, governors, councillors, members and presidents of regional parliaments – representing the 200 000 local and regional authorities of the 47 Council of Europe member states. It is the voice of local and regional elected representatives in the Greater Europe.

Many members of CALRE regions work in the Congress. As a matter of fact, in most delegations members of regional parliaments are more numerous than representatives of regional governments. For example, in the case of Spain, our host country, the six members and the six substitutes in the Congress' Chamber of Regions come from the parliaments of the Comunidades Autónomas; and in Germany, 16 of 18 members come from the Landtage.

However, not all the possibilities for active participation and contribution from European regions are used. I would welcome it if more rapporteurs from regional parliaments were involved in monitoring missions and in the thematic work of the Congress.

[Improving democracy by monitoring the European Charter of Local Self-government]

The Congress' main objective is to promote devolution through the transfer of political powers and financial resources to the municipalities and regions and to ensure that policy decisions are made at the level closest to the citizens. We seek to guarantee civic participation and foster a positive perception of local identities. Within the current era of globalisation, we strive to give grassroots democracy the place it deserves, to take decisions and to be held accountable for them by the people we represent.

Improving the quality of local and regional democracy is our major task. The institutional core mission of the Congress is the monitoring of the situation of local and regional democracy in member states, which is carried out via the assessment of the application of the European

Charter of Local Self-Government, opened for signature in 1985 and which is now ratified by all 47 Council of Europe member States.

In concrete terms, the Congress draws up reports on the implementation of the provisions contained in the Charter by the national governments and/or by the regional authorities, and adopts recommendations addressed to the governments concerned.

With a view to fulfilling this task, over the last two years, we have visited and analysed 4 countries where members of the CALRE are located: Italy, Spain, Belgium and the United Kingdom. Another CALRE country, Finland, is in our work plan for 2016.

Since 2010 we have made our monitoring exercise more effective and more comprehensive for all member countries. We have revised our Rules of Procedure, which are now more detailed and provide more transparency and fairness, ensuring a more reliable monitoring activity. We have moved towards an intensive political dialogue with national authorities. Many governments after the Congress' monitoring visits have removed all or part of the reserves which they had formulated upon signing the Charter.

This is very encouraging and shows the relevance of the Congress' approach to this issue, based on constructive, albeit critical, dialogue.

It is in this spirit that we decided to go one step further by opening, in 2012, with governments who are ready to do so, a post-monitoring exercise that allows us to discuss the practical implementation of the Congress' recommendations, with the involvement – of course – of local and regional authorities of the country, which are directly concerned.

The main outcome of the post-monitoring procedure is a roadmap agreed by all counterparts and which provides a timeline to implement the Congress recommendations.

[Observation of local and regional elections]

As the watchdog of local and regional democracy throughout Europe, the Congress also has the mandate to observe local and regional elections in Council of Europe member states.

The entire electoral process as well as its conditions (the political system of the country, the legal conditions, the role of the media, the election campaign and the post-election situation) are essential for genuinely democratic elections.

Here again, on the basis of the findings of its observation missions, the Congress addresses recommendations (to national governments) and resolutions (to local and regional authorities) which aim at strengthening democracy at the grassroots' level. These recommendations then serve as the basis for concrete Council of Europe action plans in the member states concerned.

[Co-operation activities]

I would now like to give you some information on co-operation activities presently carried out by the Congress:

In Albania, we have been implementing, since 2013, a project on “Strengthening local government structures and co-operation of local elected representatives”, with a special focus on building a unified

platform for dialogue and co-operation between local and regional elected representatives.

In Armenia, we are implementing 2 projects: the first one (“Support for the consolidation of local democracy in Armenia”) started one year ago and the Congress is responsible for a line of Action on strengthening the leadership capacities of local elected representatives; the second one (“Institutional Support to the Communities Association of Armenia”) starts this month, and aims at reinforcing the operation and capacities of the Association of Local Authorities in the country.

In Ukraine, the Congress is contributing to the “Immediate Measures Package” set up by the Committee of Ministers in May 2014. In this framework, a Congress delegation observed the partial local elections in May, a high level visit to Kyiv and Odessa took place in July, and a post-monitoring exercise is being implemented with the Ukrainian authorities.

In addition, a series of seminars for young local leaders is being organised with the objective of raising the awareness of young community leaders to local and regional democracy principles and encouraging a new generation to stand for the next local elections in spring 2015.

Furthermore, the Congress has proposed co-operation projects to be implemented in the framework of Action Plans which the Council of Europe has recently adopted for a number of member States, in particular Azerbaijan, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova.

Last, but not least, the Congress is contributing to the Programmatic Co-operation Framework for the “Eastern Partnership”, signed in April 2014 between the Council of Europe and the European Commission, through

a project entitled “Strengthening institutional frameworks for local governance”.

This project, which aims at supporting the ongoing process of reform of local government in participating countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) and promoting ethical behaviour by locally elected representatives in the region, will start in January 2015.

[Regional democracy]

As we are here together at a Conference of European **Regional** Legislative Assemblies, a pertinent question you may wish me to answer is: What is the Congress doing to promote and protect **regional** self-government?

As a matter of fact, while the principles enshrined in the European Charter of Local Self-Government apply first and foremost to local authorities, the Charter stipulates that they may also apply to regional authorities where these exist.

However, the magnitude of regional development in Europe justifies a specific instrument to address the issues of regional governance.

For this purpose the Congress has strongly contributed to the process which led to the adoption of a fundamental text (the “**Reference Framework on Regional Democracy**”) by the Ministers responsible for Local and Regional Government at their Conference in Utrecht (Netherlands) in November 2009.

This “Reference Framework” provides principles concerning the democratic structure of regional authorities, their organisation, competences and own resources, their place within the state, their relations with other authorities, and their relations with citizens.

The “Reference Framework” is an important source of inspiration for countries which decide to establish or reform their regional authorities; and it is also a reference text on which the Congress relies when monitoring the situation of local and regional democracy in Council of Europe member states. However, it remains a political document, as there was no majority, among the national governments represented in the Committee of Ministers, to adopt a legally binding instrument on regional democracy, as is the case for local democracy through the European Charter of Local Self-government.

The Congress has also continued its work on regionalisation in Europe through an important report on “Regions with special Status” adopted in October 2013 by the Chamber of Regions. Another very relevant report on “The state of regionalisation in Europe” is currently being prepared by our Governance Committee and will be submitted for adoption to the Chamber of Regions in 2015.

[Other reports under preparation of interest to CALRE members]

Allow me to mention some other fields in which the Congress is preparing reports for the next years:

– **Criteria for standing for local and regional elections.**

(Co-rapporteurs: Oleksiy GONCHARENKO, Ukraine (R, SOC)
and Viacheslav ROGOV, Russian Federation (L, ILDG)

This report will examine the rules and sometimes the limitations imposed on citizens in member States, in order to stand as a candidate for election, and will make recommendations on how to ensure competitive, free and open elections at local and regional level;

– **Principles, frameworks and procedures for modifying autonomy statutes within domestic law.**

(Rapporteur: Karl-Heinz LAMBERTZ, Belgium (R, SOC)

In responding to demands for increased regional autonomy, some European states show greater flexibility than others in negotiating and introducing constitutional changes. The Congress will examine this issue to identify the reasons why some systems and political cultures are better able to cope with such changes.

I am happy that our colleague Karl-Heinz LAMBERTZ has volunteered to be rapporteur for this important report.

– **Conditions of office of local and regional elected representatives:**

(Co-Rapporteurs: Tracey SIMPSON-LAING, United Kingdom (R, SOC) and Frida JOHANSSON METSO, Sweden (L, ILDG)

This report will analyse best practices as regards the conditions of office of local and regional elected representatives paying particular attention to the situation of pay and working conditions, insurance, immunity from prosecution, personal liability, limitation of mandates and disclosure of interests;

– **E-media: game changer for local and regional politicians**

(Co-rapporteurs: Leo AADEL, Estonia (L, ILDG) and Annemieke TRAAG, Netherlands (R, ILDG)

This **E-democracy** report will examine how use of e-media is changing the work of local and regional representatives and show good examples of local and regional authorities that are using such media to improve citizen involvement, citizen participation, and citizen contributions to policy-making.

As you see, the Congress is working on a lot of relevant issues for the functioning of democratic institutions and I invite you, presidents and members of regional parliaments, to ask your respective Congress members to regularly report to your parliament about their work performed in Strasbourg. In addition, a detailed activity report presented by the Secretary General of the Congress to the Committee of Ministers is published twice a year and is well worth reading.

[Co-operation with CALRE and its members]

The Congress has signed co-operation agreements with all major associations of European regions. CALRE is, of course, among them, and we consider our partnership as a priority.

We had the pleasure of welcoming Ms Rojo Noguera at our Chamber's Bureau meeting in September and at the 27th Session of the Chamber of Regions on 14 October.

CALRE has signed a co-operation agreement not only with the Congress (in 2010), but also with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (in 2008). Both agreements specify that high-level meetings between the Presidents and Secretariats should be held at regular intervals. I believe we have to build on this opportunity and work together on a more permanent basis. We can and should deepen our well-established co-operation in areas of common interest.

I already mentioned several areas which could be considered as joint priorities by the Congress and CALRE, and I would like to add the important topic of promoting ethics and preventing corruption at local and regional level, as a follow-up to the thematic debate in which Ms Rojo Noguera participated three weeks ago.

The common immigration policy for Europe, suggested by the CALRE Standing Committee, is also of great importance: local and regional authorities are on the front line for providing refugees, asylum seekers and migrants with assistance.

This topic includes a strong human rights dimension. We could explore the possibility of establishing co-operation between CALRE and the Congress on possible ways of promoting the respect of human rights at territorial level by regional parliaments.

Citizens' participation could also be a subject on which CALRE and the Congress could join forces. The European Local Democracy Week, which takes place every year in October, and was devoted in 2014 to participatory democracy, is an excellent opportunity for that.

Finally, good governance at local and regional level is and will remain one of our main priorities. We could explore the possibility of organising a joint event on this subject, knowing that the Congress and CALRE give particular relevance to preventing corruption and promoting ethics and transparency in territorial administrations.

The Congress would be happy to make creative and innovative policies and actions of regions with legislative powers available for the many other regions that exist in Council of Europe member States.

As newly elected President of the Chamber of Regions, I am strongly committed to giving a new impetus to our co-operation with CALRE and with all the European regional parliaments over the next two years. And I am looking forward to continuing the close co-operation with the new CALRE Presidency in the same spirit of partnership as we did with the Galician presidency in 2014.

I thank you for your attention.